Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: Whether it's the hillbilly stereotype or the backwoods myth, it's a fact that there are plenty of misunderstandings about the Ozarks and Ozarkers.

Last week on the Missouri State Journal, we highlighted how historian Dr. Brooks Blevins set out to write a comprehensive history of the Ozarks about six years ago in an effort to present the most complete portrait of the region. That project resulted in a trilogy. A History of the Ozarks, Volume 1: The Old Ozarks was published last summer. A History of the Ozarks, Volume 2: The Conflicted Ozarks came out this summer. Volume three is in the works. I'm Emily Yeap.

Blevins is the Noel Boyd professor of Ozark Studies at Missouri State University. He joins me again today to continue the discussion about volume two of his book.

Brooks Blevins: Volume two ends basically by looking at the Bald Knobber story, not only as an extension of the Civil War but how the Bald Knobbers become this sensational story that makes newspaper headlines across the country and helps start to define the sort of hillbilly Ozark image that will come to dominate the 20th century in the Ozarks.

I found that to be a good segue from the war era into the cultural Ozarks, which will deal much more with imagery and stereotypes and things like that. You can really point to the Bald Knobbers there in the 1880s and the press that they received as one of the very, very early instances where outsiders are writing about the Ozarks and sort of portraying the Ozarks as this place of backward, dangerous, unreligious people. It really kind of feeds into what will become the hillbilly stereotype in the 20th century.

Emily Yeap: The thing Blevins found most surprising in his research for volume two was how brutal the home front was and how dangerous it was to be in the Ozarks as a civilian during the Civil War.

Brooks Blevins: There were places in the Ozarks where just almost everyone left before the war was over. It was that bad. Especially the last year or so, the war just became a kind of starving time for people who were left behind, for women and children, many of whom had lost their husbands and their fathers in the war.

One of the saddest stories that I came across was, about a year after the war had ended, a young man from Indiana came through the Ozarks on a cattle drive from Texas to Chicago. He wrote his reminiscences of this cattle drive, and he talked about encountering women and children living in caves in the Ozarks. They had lost their homes. They'd probably been burnt by guerrillas. They literally didn't have clothes. They had taken just scraps of material and pinned them together with thorns to cover what they could of them, and they were almost starved. This was after the war had already ended. It was just a reminder of how terrible the war was. It's very easy to get drawn into the romance of the Civil War, and battles, and generals, and all this kind of stuff, but underneath it was just a terrible, divisive conflict that took generations for the region, for the nation to get over and teaches us a lot about civil warfare, in general, that we still see today. There are so many parallels between what happened here in the divided Ozarks, and what we see happening around the world in the 21st century.

Emily Yeap: What would he like readers to take away from volume two?

Brooks Blevins: I hope they get a sense of how crucial the war era was to the development of the nation, to the development of the region. I hope they're able to do that by following the lives of a lot of people that they had never heard of, because one of the things I try to do is find interesting human stories of heretofore obscure people that really speak to the experience of the Civil War and the aftermath of the war in the Ozarks and remind people that these were people like us who were going through all this stuff. Their stories speak to us more than 150 years later.

Emily Yeap: Volume three, which should be published by late 2021, picks up in the late 1800s and continues to the present day.

Brooks Blevins: For volume three that I'm still writing, I really concentrate more on what I call the cultural Ozarks. The part of this Ozarks region where people identify as Ozarkers, identify themselves with the region, because there are parts of the physical Ozarks where people don't really consider themselves part of the Ozarks.

Emily Yeap: Volume two is available for purchase online. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.