Announcer:

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

Emily Yeap:

The Ozarks – a region that covers much of the southern half of Missouri, a large part of northern Arkansas and parts of northeast Oklahoma and southeast Kansas – is a fascinating area.

Historian [Dr. Brooks Blevins](https://search.missouristate.edu/people/brblevins) has researched, taught and written about the Ozarks for years.

Last week on the Missouri State Journal, he talked about his trilogy on the history of the Ozarks, including the final volume that came out recently. It’s titled “[A History of the Ozarks, Volume 3: The Ozarkers](https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/?id=72geh2gf9780252044052).”

Blevins, the Noel Boyd professor of [Ozarks studies](https://www.missouristate.edu/areastudies/ozarksstudies/default.htm) at Missouri State University, is back with me again today. He offers more insights from his book, particularly what today’s Ozarks looks like.

Dr. Brooks Blevins:

That’s a really important part of the book. For the most part, I kind of save that for the conclusion. I tried to save as much room as I could because the conclusion is, in a large part, sort of looking at the 21st century Ozarks and how it’s changed and how it’s different from so much of what I talk about in the rest of the book.

Especially in the last 30 years, we’ve seen tremendous demographic changes certainly in specific parts of the Ozarks, especially the parts of the Ozarks that have the poultry industry, for example, have seen unprecedented demographic changes in terms of the number of Hispanic people and migrants coming in who work at the poultry plants, the Marshallese in northwest Arkansas. We've seen people from Asia, from Africa come in. What was incredible to me in this conclusion, I started running a lot of numbers of demographics of public school systems in both Missouri and Arkansas and you’ve got school districts now in northwest Arkansas where white students are the minority. And where 30 years ago, these same school districts were well over 90% white. And in southwest Missouri you have examples that aren’t quite that stark, but you still have school districts that are at least 1/3rd and close to half non-white today.

Emily Yeap:

The demographic change is more than just racial and ethnic makeup.

Dr. Brooks Blevins:

It’s broader than that. Even before the 1990s when this kind of racial demographic change started to take effect, the Ozarks became a magnet for people from across the United States to come and retire or to come and vacation and then they decide to move here. And so, really since World War II, you’ve just had this massive wave of newcomers, and there’s no way to do the math and figure out if people with roots in the 19th century Ozarks still outnumber people who don’t have roots in the 19th century Ozarks, but I would say they almost certainly don’t today because of these waves of retirees and Midwestern people who moved in for various reasons, people who have come here for jobs, northwest Arkansas, southwest Missouri, the sort of oasis areas of the Ozarks have been major job producers since World War II, and especially Fortune 500 companies have done that.

I spent a lot of time thinking about what it means to be the Ozarks, who the Ozarkers are now, who they're going to be 50 years from now, and what all this demographic change means for identity and who identifies with the Ozarks and how people from outside of the Ozarks identify us. I’m pretty sure that most of the country still thinks of the Ozarks as a place where the Beverly hillbillies come from or just that kind of rural place that’s almost all white and never changes and that kind of thing, but that’s not the Ozarks that we see today overall. You can still find that Ozarks in rural places, but by and large, the story of the Ozarks is constantly changing and it’s going to look a lot different now than it did 50 something years ago when I came along.

Emily Yeap:

While the book highlights the uniqueness of the Ozarks, it also has one underlying theme.

Dr. Brooks Blevins:

For most of the 20th century and even in the early 21st century, we made so much of this kind of supposed uniqueness and otherness of the Ozarks that we often obscure the fact that the Ozarks is very much a part of the United States. It’s just a regional variation on a national theme and we shouldn’t forget that we have much more in common with people in other parts of the United States. You can still find these little unique stories in the Ozarks to talk about, but it’s still very much an American story and we’re just one part of that quiltwork United States that we’ve got.

Emily Yeap:

You can purchase volume three online at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/History-Ozarks-Ozarkers-Brooks-Blevins/dp/0252044053) or [University of Illinois Press](https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/?id=72geh2gf9780252044052).

I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer:

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.