New Fall Exhibitions at the State Historical Society Depict Social, Racial, and Cultural Landscape of the American South from 1920s to 1950s

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COLUMBIA, Sept. 13, 2022 – The State Historical Society of Missouri, in collaboration with the Missouri School of Journalism, invites the public to view a new exhibit, Mr. Pruitt’s Possum Town: Trouble and Resilience in the American South, open now through Nov. 5. The free exhibition is sponsored by the National Endowment of the Humanities and curated by Berkley Hudson, an associate professor emeritus of the University of Missouri. Seventy-five of the exhibition’s photos are on display in the State Historical Society’s Art Gallery, while another 25 images can be viewed at the Reynolds Journalism Institute on the University of Missouri-Columbia campus.

The main exhibition focuses on photographs produced during the lengthy career of photographer Otis N. Pruitt, who spent his professional life in the small, segregated town of Columbus, Mississippi. Hudson and several of his childhood friends, who grew up in Columbus, acquired the collection. In recent years, with the help from journalism school students and faculty, Hudson has researched some 88,000 negatives that Pruitt made from the 1920s through the 1950s.

“We realized this was the history of our part of the American South, in visual form,” said Hudson. “The photos depict a range of stories from joy, sorrow and suffering to hopefulness and resilience.”

To tie Mr. Pruitt’s Possum Town to Missouri’s history, the State Historical Society has mounted a related exhibition of artworks from its own collections, Picturing Missouri Sharecroppers: Finding Counterparts to Pruitt’s Images in Missouri. This smaller exhibit presents images of rural southeast Missouri produced by St. Louis Post-Dispatch editorial cartoonist Daniel Fitzpatrick and photojournalist Arthur Witman. On assignment, they documented the Sharecropper’s Protest of 1939 as well as life in the community of Coppelville, a rural Missouri cooperative created to provide homes and farmland to former tenant farmers who participated in the protest.

“The complex issues of race and class in small town America that the Pruitt exhibition explores are intimately tied to Missouri’s history,” said Joan Stack, art curator for the State Historical Society. “Both exhibitions reflect the social and racial inequality rural Americans have faced in the 20th century, as well as the resilience of people who have persevered and challenged the status quo.”

The public is invited to visit the exhibitions during regular visitor hours at the SHSMO Art Gallery Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. and each Saturday from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. Learn more at SHSMO.org.

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High-Res images of attached photographs are available upon request

Photo captions:

#1 Mr. Pruitt’s Possum Town: Trouble and Resilience in the American South exhibit at the State Historical Society of Missouri Art Gallery, August, 2022.

#2 Woman sitting on porch steps. Photograph by O.N. Pruitt. Courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.

#3 Sharecropper protest along Highway 61 in Southeast Missouri, 1939. Photograph by Arthur Witman, SHSMO Photograph Collection.

CONTACT: Beth Pike, Communications Director, State Historical Society of Missouri. Office: 573-884-7904; email: PikeBe@shsmo.org