



## **New “Mysterious Mountains” podcast plumbs the depths of WV folklore, fiction**

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Charleston, WV — “Evil cannot be victorious.”

It sounds like a line of dialogue from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, but it’s actually a professor of British literature who teaches at a university on the French-Belgian border, talking about...West Virginia detective fiction? Dr. Suzanne Bray is a guest on the third episode of *Mysterious Mountains*, a new podcast produced in-house by the West Virginia Humanities Council. Its mission: explore the “imaginary landscape” of West Virginia as it’s been brought to life through the decades in folklore and genre fiction.

“There are days when I wake up and I can’t believe part of my job involves interviewing people like this,” says Kyle Warmack, who oversees direct programming at the Council. While the Council’s grants and programs support much traditional work in the humanities all over the state, ranging from museum exhibits and lectures to documentary films, *Mysterious Mountains* was conceived as a lighter journey into the West Virginia of the imagination.

“There’s a lot of talk about tourism as a new economic opportunity for the state,” says Warmack, “and I think the imagination is a key factor often overlooked in these conversations. Look at the way tourism took off for New Zealand after the *Lord of the Rings* movies came out. What sets apart *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter* from any Six Flags, if not the chance to participate in an imaginary world we’ve seen only in our minds? Places that draw us into a fictional world can sometimes be the most impactful.” *Mysterious Mountains*, he says, is a celebration of those parts of West Virginia.

That’s a lot to tackle in a podcast, of course, so it’s divided up into “seasons” that focus on particular themes or authors. The first twelve episodes, which began releasing in February 2021, resurrect the cattle-herding, mystery-solving *Uncle Abner* stories of Melville Davisson Post (1869-1930). Perhaps one of the highest paid authors of his day, and frequently published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, Melville Davisson Post was born outside Clarksburg, attended WVU, and practiced law in Wheeling and Grafton before his writing career took off. He and his wife later built a Swiss-style chalet outside Clarksburg with its own polo field.

Each episode of the first season includes an audiobook-style reading of one of the *Uncle Abner* mysteries, wherein the towering, devout, Abraham Lincoln-esque figure of Abner ferrets out crime

and wrongdoing on the rough Harrison County frontier in the 1850s. Murders, thefts, buried treasure, even a family of Scottish aristocrats in a mysterious manor house—it's all there.

It wouldn't be a West Virginia Humanities Council project without an educational component, however. "That's where we get to dig in deep," says Warmack. "We broke down some of the most fascinating topics in the stories and started calling experts on those subjects."

The result is a wide-ranging journey. In episode two, "An Act of God," Warmack interviews Dr. Ian Hancock, one of the world's premier scholars on Romani history and culture. "The story features a character who's a 'gypsy,'" Warmack explains, "and though I knew that the Romani people, for many of whom the word 'gypsy' is considered a slur, have been misrepresented in literature and film for a long time, I had no idea how deep it went until I spoke to Dr. Hancock." Dr. Suzanne Bray, the professor in France mentioned earlier, was already a fan of the Uncle Abner stories and wrote a paper about them in 2015. Her interview focuses on the similarities between Abner and the Old Testament prophets.

Most of the interviews range across West Virginia itself, however. The Council worked with Crystal Wimer of the Harrison County Historical Society on more than one episode. Stan Bumgardner, editor of *Goldenseal* magazine, contributes history on Scots-Irish immigration to Appalachia for "The Concealed Path"; Dr. Lynn Linder of West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon talks about the origins of detective fiction in "The Riddle"; and Sean McCracken, creator and host of the popular *Unsolved Mysteries*-style YouTube Channel "Mysterious WV" shares the process of researching crimes in one part of "The Mystery at Hillhouse," to name a few.

Warmack says the sky is the limit when it comes to future seasons. The Council is currently exploring future episodes on the West Virginia ghost stories collected by famed folklorist Ruth Ann Musick, author of "The Telltale Lilac Bush" and "Coffin Hollow." He can neither confirm nor deny that a future season might focus on cryptids like Mothman and the Flatwoods Monster.

The podcast is available online at [mysteriousmountains.podbean.com](http://mysteriousmountains.podbean.com), or interested listeners can search for *Mysterious Mountains* in several major apps like Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Pandora, Audible, and iHeartRadio. Several libraries in Brooke, Gilmer, and Mason counties have made episodes available as part of their Dial-a-Story programs.

For more information visit [www.wvhumanities.org](http://www.wvhumanities.org) or contact Kyle Warmack at 304-346-8500 or [warmack@wvhumanities.org](mailto:warmack@wvhumanities.org).

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*The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit institution, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. With the support of the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector, the Council's mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia.*