ABOUT THE SPEAKER

John C. Fisher studied geology at Southeast Missouri State University and at the University of Missouri in Columbia. From 1973 to 1999 he owned and operated diversified row crop and vegetable farms in Dunklin and New Madrid counties. In 2000, Fisher began freelance writing full time. He has written four books, two of which were coauthored with his wife, Carol. Fisher has coedited one volume of the Missouri Folklore Society Journal and has written numerous magazine articles about Missouri history, agriculture, horticulture, and food history.

AVAILABLE PRESENTATIONS

FROM SWAMPLAND TO FARMLAND: TRANSFORMATION THE SOUTHEAST MISSOURI LOWLANDS

At the beginning of the twentieth century, much of the southeastern Missouri counties of Butler, Scott, Stoddard, New Madrid, Pemiscot, Dunklin, and Mississippi were covered with virgin forests including oak, hickory, gum, and cypress. This region has been described as being a frontier behind the Frontier. A network of railroads enabled the lumber from these forests to be taken to markets but what remained was vast wetlands which contained fertile soil that was inaccessible for agriculture until it could be drained. A group of landowners followed their vision of draining this vast swampland by forming the Little River Drainage District in 1907 into what became the largest drainage project in the world. Within two decades, the swampland was converted into one of the richest agricultural regions in the nation. In this presentation John Fisher shows how this massive transformation of the region occurred. Fisher further shows that not only did the geography change, but social change also occurred as new crops such as cotton were introduced requiring a new system of labor provided by sharecroppers moving from traditional cotton growing areas of the South.

THE 1939 SOUTHEAST MISSOURI SHARECROPPER DEMONSTRATION

The drainage and clearing of the lowlands in the Missouri Bootheel during the first two decades of the twentieth century opened thousands of acres of new land for agriculture. Simultaneous with this, the boll weevil had devastated cotton production in the traditional cotton growing regions of the South. The boll weevil had not made an impact in the Bootheel yet thus thousands of sharecroppers migrated into the region looking for farms where they could continuing sharecropping cotton. Plummeting prices in the 1930s reduced cotton profitability making the life of the sharecropper even more difficult. Unintended consequences of government programs left many sharecroppers without housing. Their plight led to the formation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and eventually to a roadside demonstration in 1939 along highways 60 and 61 in Scott, New Madrid, Pemiscot, and Mississippi counties that drew national attention. Author John Fisher shows what events led to this demonstration and the eventual outcome for both the sharecropper and landowners.

SPEAKER CONTACT INFORMATION

- Email: fisherjohnc@yahoo.com