
MIZZOU

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Alumni Profile

Mining time

When Brad Belk came to Mizzou in 1973, he was a directionless kid. A friend advised him to take art history courses so he could sleep during the slide shows.

brad belk Brad Belk, director of the Joplin, Mo., Museum Complex, found his love of history and artifacts when he took an art history course as a student at MU. Photo by Nicholas Benner.

“I went in without wanting to learn, but it changed my life forever,” says Belk, who now oversees thousands of artifacts in the Joplin, Mo., Museum Complex. He credits professors David Thelen and Osmund Overby with the revelation that led to his life’s career. “It wasn’t what they said so much as how they said it. It was as though they were speaking directly to me, like I was included somehow,” Belk says. “I got consumed with wanting to know more.”

Gov. Matt Blunt presented Belk, BA ’78, with a Governor’s Humanities Award in 2006 to recognize his contribution to the heritage of southwest Missouri.

He approaches history just like his professors: by including others. “I’ve been designated the community’s historian, but we are all historians. We all have the responsibility to document our past.”

For someone who studies times past, Belk puts a lot of effort into the present. Some recent projects include the history book, *Best of Joplin*, whose manuscript he completed in just six weeks; a documentary on Route 66 for Ozarks Public Television; weekly feature articles for *The Joplin Globe*; a Web site, complete with maps, detailing the history of mining in southwest Missouri; and more than seven books on regional history.

The Joplin Museum Complex is an eclectic place. A miniature circus, a mammoth tooth, minerals and cookie cutters share space in the complex.

Belk rescued the 1,000-piece National Cookie Cutter Collection in 2003 when it lost its Indiana home. “It’s a fun thing,” Belk says. “We’re not tipping the scale of controversy with it, and it makes 400 ladies who belong to the cookie cutter collectors association very happy.”




Center stage, though, are the minerals that made Joplin the largest zinc mining area in the world around the turn of the last century. Trolleys rolled by the present museum site, carrying workers to the mines in southwest Missouri and adjacent states.

Once at the mines, workers rode buckets into deep shafts to remove the valuable minerals by hand, one shovelful at a time. The wealth they brought to the surface made Joplin a lively center of commerce, from opulent hotels to rows of saloons.

“Joplin is still vibrant today,” says Belk, an unabashed booster. The town boasts 13 sites on the National Register of Historic Places. He is especially proud of its new city hall, built as a Chicago-style department store in 1910. “It’s not selling ladies’ lingerie, men’s shoes or kitchen utensils anymore,” he says, “but it’s still serving the public today.”

Belk continues to mine the past for connections to modern life. “History is a tough pill to swallow if you don’t make it relevant to your life. You have to have a relationship with it.” — *Kathy Love*

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