



How Missouri Became the "Show-Me State"

Missouri has had many nicknames through the years, but the one most widely known is the "Show Me State." No one knows exactly when or where the expression originated. Much of the credit for popularizing the term, however, goes to Congressman Willard Duncan Vandiver of Cape Girardeau County.

Vandiver – a scholar, writer and lecturer who served as a U.S. Representative from 1897 to 1905 – used the expression during an 1899 speech in Philadelphia. Vandiver bore a strong facial resemblance to another famous Missourian, Mark Twain, and was noted as a colorful orator. Speaking to Philadelphia's Five O'Clock Club, he questioned the accuracy of an earlier speaker's remarks, saying:

"I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me."

The expression soon caught the public fancy, portraying Missourians as tough-minded demanders of proof.

Some have suggested other origins for the phrase. About 1897, one version goes, hundreds of free railroad passes were issued to people connected with the Missouri legislature. The conductor, when told that passengers on the train had passes, would insist, "You've got to show me."

Another version dates to 1898, shortly after the start of the Spanish-American War. About 60,000 soldiers were stationed in Chickamauga Park in Tennessee. Gate guards were from St. Louis and soldiers were told that anyone claiming to have passes to town would be stopped at the gates, for the guards were from Missouri and had to be shown. The "Show Me" expression also appears in songs and poems published in the late 1890s.