Empty Pockets, Full Life

An agriculture student survives and thrives during the Great Depression.

Story by William Shrader, BS Ag '35, MA '41

Illustration by Chuck Pyle

The conditions under which we went to school at the University of Missouri from 1931 to 1935 were different enough from what current students encounter that some may question the honesty of this account, but rest assured that the way I tell it is the way it was.

I arrived in Columbia from Hayti, Mo., in mid-August of 1931 with $8 and some change as my total assets. Within a day or so I lined up a job that included room and board with Miss Howell (Auntie Bee) at 1208 Paquin St., one block north of the White Campus. The reason this job was so easy to get turned out to be because it was one of the least desirable jobs in town. As my basic set of chores, I took care of the yard, waited on tables for 20 or so boarders, washed dishes and fired the furnace. In addition, I painted woodwork, scrubbed and waxed floors, and was generally kept busy any time Auntie Bee could catch me. She was raising and putting through college three orphan nieces and one nephew, and she also had a school-age niece under her wing. All of us, including Auntie Bee, worked equally hard.

I then got lucky and landed a job for a week or so with the city of Columbia digging trenches at the wonderful salary of 40 cents an

hour. This was the highest salary I had ever earned, and it was the highest I was to earn for the next three years.

I also made rounds at various ag school departments looking for work. I asked about jobs at the dean's office, but without luck. One of the boys rooming with Auntie Bee worked at the veterinary department. He heard they were going to take on another boy, so I went out to the vet building and asked a Dr. Durant about the job. He asked if I had talked to the dean. I said, "Yes," but I didn't mention that the dean had not sent me to the vet department. Dr. Durant said they would give me a trial and turned me over to Dr. Uren, who took me into the operating room and showed me a very large piece of very ripe beef. He explained that it was from a cow that had fallen off a cliff, broken her hip and lived for a month or so after the accident. He wanted to see how much the broken bone had knitted. My job was to separate the meat from the bone so that he could study the break. The day was hot and the meat was high, but I wanted the job, so I stayed with the putrid mess for the rest of the day. Eventually, the odor was so bad that Dr. Uren lost interest in checking on me. He finally said that we would put the mess in a barrel of water and let it soak for a while. I worked there for the next three years, and those bones remained in the same barrel of water where I left them. The next day, the dean sent out a boy for the job I had started. Since I was already on the job and didn't scare off easily, they let me stay.

The job at the veterinary department was my salvation. I found the work interesting, varied and frequently challenging. The main problem was not that it only paid 22.5 cents per hour, but that all of the undergraduate workers were limited to 100 hours a month on the clock. Within a few weeks I was assigned as laboratory assistant to Dr. Cecil Elder, a research scientist working mostly on swine brucellosis, or Bang's disease. In addition to keeping the lab clean, I made agar and prepared sterile test tubes and petri dish cultures. Within a year or so, I was running cultures through guinea pigs, swine and back on petri dishes. One of the challenging jobs was collecting colostrum from Hampshire gilts. In plain language I had to milk a young sow as soon as she gave birth and before she nursed her piglets. I had been collecting blood samples from this group of sows, so they had learned to dislike me. Sows are protective of their piglets, and you get close to them at this time at your peril. The solution to my problem was to know as much about pigs as the pigs did. When a noose is attached to a pig's upper jaw, the pig pulls back. I leaned into the pig pen, and when the sow came at me with mouth open, I lassoed her upper jaw. Then I snubbed the lasso around a post, and while she reared back on the lasso and screamed to high heaven, I jumped into the pen and collected a few squirts of the precious milk. I wouldn't try this trick now.

My first year at the University passed in a blur of work and classes. Auntie Bee and I never became firm friends, but we

did develop some mutual respect. She learned how far she could push me before I rebelled against doing more work for no extra pay, and as I came to understand her financial problems, I became more tolerant of her demands. The nieces and nephew and I became close friends. The non-orphan niece and I were the same age, and we shared the chore of washing supper dishes for the boarders. We sometimes studied together, and I took her to the big ag school social occasion, Barnwarmin'. I think it likely that, if either of us had known how to handle the preliminaries, we might well have had an affair. As it was, we never got beyond some rather heavy breathing.

The second niece of the orphaned family had not finished college in 1931. Even so, she taught for part of the winter at Eminence, Mo., a small town deep in the Ozarks. She was a proper young lady but could not resist telling one story on herself after she returned to Columbia. When she attempted to learn the names of the children in her class, one little boy said his name was Bill. She asked him what his daddy's name was, and he said, "Big Bill." She then asked if anyone ever called him anything but Bill. The little boy swelled up, got red in the face and said, "Them kids up Hoot Owl Holler calls me raggedy assed Bill, damn their souls to hell." She said she entered him in the roll as William Rags and went on about her business.

Auntie Bee's establishment was one of the last of the Collegetown rooming-boarding house combinations. The house had three stories and a basement, which included the kitchen and dining room. The rooms rented for $8 a month per boy, with two boys in each room and just one double bed. Some roomers ate there, but most of the boarders were graduate students, instructors and secretarial help who lived in the neighborhood. I do not recall the price of the meals, but 35 cents for dinner would be a good guess. The food was not bad. Neither was it very good. It was plentiful and wholesome.

The roomers occupied the two top floors with a bath on each floor. At least eight persons shared each bath. This was the first time I had lived with indoor plumbing, and it seemed quite fine to me.

The one constant in those Depression years was change. Within the year, Auntie Bee gave up on the boarding house but continued to run the rooming house. I still worked for my room but had to find

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money elsewhere for food, as the $22.50 a month from the vet department would not stretch far enough. Dr. Durant ran a private small-animal clinic, and I helped him on the weekends. I performed odd jobs: fired furnaces around the neighborhood, did electrical wiring — about which I knew absolutely nothing — helped an antique dealer refinish furniture, and much more. None of the jobs was permanent, and none of them paid more than 25 cents per hour.

The enrollment in the University was about 3,500, with about 300 in the ag school. There was an active Ag Club and a strong feeling of comradeship. It would have been impossible for most of us to remain in school without our mutual assistance. There were only a few months during the next four years in which I was not completely broke at some time. When you had to have money to eat, you borrowed it from friends. If you had money and someone needed it, you loaned it. These loans were always repaid as promised. I do not recall a single instance in which a student defaulted on a loan to another student. There may have been some who did not pay up, but those characters would not have lasted long. Fewer than one student in 20 had a car, but many more had bicycles. These bicycles were loaned to friends at times but were never locked and never stolen. Stealing from fellow students simply was not done. We stole from the University with abandon, however, especially if the material was in any way edible.

The byproducts of research were one of our principal food sources. At one time I had an apartment with four boys. I worked at the vet building and kept my eye out for old hens that had been used for research but were no longer needed. There were also some spare eggs. One of the boys worked in the horticulture department and kept us supplied with fruit. Another boy worked in chemistry and had access to ethyl alcohol. The fourth boy was the most valuable — he had money. Not much, but he could be depended on to have a little cash when the rest of us were stony.

I will not attempt to detail all of my moves or jobs. I recall at least nine moves in the 1931 to 1935 period. My principal job problem was that I repeatedly took on more jobs than I could handle. The most notorious result of this failing occurred in the summer of 1933. When school closed that spring, I did not have a full summer job, so I took the position of houseboy at a sorority house that remained open during the summer. I had a nice room, a private bath and a private entrance. The drawback was the usual one. The housemother felt that I should work at least six hours a day for the room. I worked the amount of time that I had agreed and ignored the other requests. One of the tasks for which I had been hired was to keep the large house supplied with hot water. My job, in those days before natural gas, was to heat the water by keeping a coal fire banked in the huge steam-boiler furnace. A valve diverted the heat to the hot water tank and prevented the steam from getting into the house heating system. The system worked fairly well, and with proper firing of the furnace, it required attention no more than twice a day.

Soon after I took the houseboy job, I

got a chance to work as much as I wanted for cash at the field crops department. I also had a chance to move into an apartment with a friend for essentially no rent, which was all the place was worth. I wanted out of my houseboy job but was reluctant to leave the housemother without someone to take over my duties. At this stage of affairs, another ag student showed up. The student, Bill B., was a nice, rather naïve lad who was known to be a little too trusting for his own good. I took him in, showed him the nice room and convinced him that the houseboy job was exactly what he needed. I showed him how to work the hot water supply, introduced him to the housemother and quickly moved out. It was July of one of the hottest years on record, with temperatures frequently above 100. About midnight of the day I moved out, Bill showed up at my room out of breath and frantic. According to him, the place was about to blow up. I threw on some clothes, and the two of us ran back across town to the sorority house. When we were within a block of the place, we heard a roar of steam and soon saw clouds of steam rolling out of the sorority house basement. Bill had opened the draft on the furnace, and when the safety valve on the furnace let go, he panicked and opened the valve that let steam into the upstairs radiators. I ran down into the furnace room, closed the furnace draft, shut off the valve that allowed steam upstairs, took a look at the 40 girls out in the yard in their nighties and left. I haven't been back since.

My new roommate was Ernie Wagner, captain of the University track team. He had a fondness for beer and cigars, and he dreamed of becoming rich by growing hybrid seed corn, which he eventually did. The last time we were together, he was driving a Cadillac and smoking a one-dollar cigar. In 1933 his more pressing need was for beer. He took our usual method to supply this desire; he stole equipment and supplies from the University and made his own. The beer bottles blew up from time to time, so we had to keep them in a trunk to protect ourselves from the shrapnel. We could safely open a bottle only by putting on a slicker and going into the shower.

There was really very little drunkenness among my friends, but one tale of overindulgence can best be told here. Late one summer, Papa and Mama arranged to take me back to Columbia. As soon as the date was set for my return, I sent Ernie a card alerting him to hide his beer. Unbeknownst to me, he had let a friend run off a batch of beer at our place. Ernie came home and found my card in the mailbox stating we would be home that day. He went around back of the house to our basement apartment and found his friend in the last stages of bottling his beer. The amateur brewer had not only spilled a large amount on the floor, but he also had run out of bottles before he ran out of beer. When Ernie came in, he was trying to salvage the last of the batch by drinking it through a garden hose. Ernie poured the friend and the last of his beer out the door and started cleaning up. The place smelled like a brewery. Ernie scrubbed the floor with hot water and soap. It still smelled. He scrubbed again with no apparent effect. Strong measures were needed. Ernie recalled that we had bought a large can of talcum powder to use on our prickly heat but had discarded it because of its strong odor of lilac. He found the can, sprinkled the powder liberally on the floor and scrubbed again. That is when we arrived. The aroma of green beer and cheap lilac perfume was quite unique. I had a fairly good idea as to what had happened, and I expect that Papa identified at least some of the bouquets. If Mama knew what they were, she never let on.

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It is possible that she was so shocked by the dump we were living in as to be numb to details. Although it qualified as substandard quarters for a dog, the apartment was as good as what many students were living in during those years of the Great Depression. It was not surprising that the health of many students broke. Tuberculosis was far too common.

The education that we received both in and out of the classroom has been invaluable. The availability of schools such as the University of Missouri allowed a much more productive life for many of us than otherwise would have been possible. ✻

About the author: For 15 years after graduating from MU, William Shrader first worked on soil surveys in Missouri, Texas and California, and then assessed the quality of surveys in Missouri, Illinois and Iowa. Shrader, now 89, retired as professor emeritus after 30 years at Iowa State University and lives with his wife, Dorothy Heckman Shrader, BJ '35, BS Ed '47, in Hermann, Mo. This story is part of a memoir he wrote for his grandchildren.