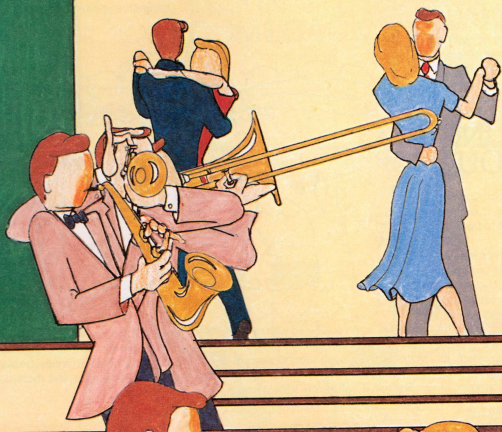


# JELLYING AT



# GAEBLER'S

by Jeff Truesdell



**HORTLY AFTER THE LI-**brary closed at 9 p.m., the Campus crowd of the 1930s headed toward Conley and Gentry Avenues and the big-band sounds of Gaebler's Black and Gold Inn.

Women in wool skirts and sweaters swept through the door with smartly dressed men in sweaters and ties. In the black-and-gold-trimmed wooden booths that cluttered the restaurant, couples slowly nursed their cherry Cokes until the bands of Charlie Fisk, Eldon Jones or Count Solomon swung into action. And the dancing began.

Dancing at Gaebler's meant climbing a short flight of stairs to the "poop deck." A city blue law forbade dancing on a restaurant's main floor, even though that's where the bands often were located.

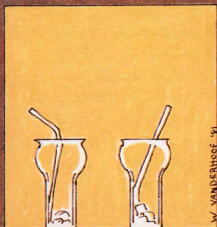
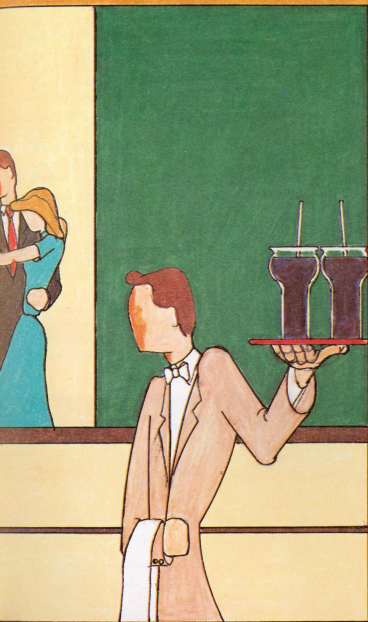
The Black and Gold Inn, and Gaebler's adjacent Dining Car that shared the same kitchen, were Campus institutions popular for the friendly atmosphere and hospitality promoted by owners and proprietors Fred and Olinda Gaebler. A bridge partner who was eager to sell Fred a dining car first urged him to go into the restaurant business in the late '20s.

"If you can fry an egg and boil water, you can run a restaurant," Fred was told. He accepted the challenge, and in 1929 opened the Dining Car in Columbia. The diner operated 24 hours a day "because Fred threw away the key when he opened the place," says his nephew, Ed Gaebler, BS BA '38, who now lives in Columbia. Two years later, the Gaeblers opened the Black and Gold Inn.

The Inn was one of several "jelly joints" near Campus. A "jelly date," requiring 20 cents for two Cokes, usually lasted as long as the band continued to play.

For some student musicians, performances at Gaebler's were the start of a career.

Jazz trumpeter Yank Lawson, a Trenton, Mo. native, was among those who played Columbia "jelly joints" in the early '30s. For scores of others, the afternoon and evening appearances (for which musicians received \$1 a day) helped get them through college. Columbia was "known throughout the Midwest as a place where musicians could work their way through school," recalls Eddie Gibbons of Columbia, a retired photographer. As a high school student in Ottumwa, Iowa, Gibbons first heard band performances being broadcast



from Gaebler's over KRFU radio 150 miles away. A horn and coronet player, Gibbons eventually came to Columbia and found work in a band led by Red Tourney. Bands generally comprised more than a dozen musicians, and prospective performers actively were sought. "We used to recruit musicians like they do football players today," Gibbons says. "Arriving musicians often were housed above the KRFU radio office on Ninth Street and earned their board working in local restaurants. All they needed to raise was their college tuitions."



#### FEW STUDENTS DEVELOPED

their musical talents into careers. Instead, Gibbons says, the groups tended to produce a lot of doctors and lawyers. "It's amazing how few of them were music majors," he says. "Most just used it as an avocation to get through school. Most were smart enough to stay out of it."

Gibbons recalls that Fred and Olinda Gaebler were "like godparents" to the musicians who played in their restaurant. The couple often kept track of former students who made it as professional performers, including one group that frequently played engagements in Kansas City. "Whenever that group of former students was at the Muehlebach Hotel, Fred and Olinda went to Kansas City to have dinner and visit with them," Ed Gaebler says. "They just wouldn't think of having them that close and not seeing them."

The interest the Gaeblers took in their customers, mostly students, contributed to the popularity of the Black and Gold Inn. From her vantage point behind the cash register, Olinda knew everybody that walked in the door by name. "If you were in there once and she learned your name, she'd be able to call you by name until you graduated or flunked out of school, the one or the other," nephew Ed says. Her well-known expression, "Ain't you et yet, dearie?,"

From its opening in 1931, the student hangout remained popular even after Gaebler's was sold in the 50s to become the Italian Village and, later, the

Huddle. The late-30s' crowd pictured are, left to right, Jack Frye, Max Baird, Harold Bourne, manager W.L. Capers, Herndon Hale and "Woolfie" Wolfert. The hangout closed on Halloween 1967.

The location now is a University parking lot.

uttered dozens of times each day, were words of welcome to anyone who entered.

Restaurant prices were pared to meet students' needs. In the mid '30s, seventy-five cents bought the restaurant's most expensive filet mignon dinner, complete with soup, salad, drink and dessert. Years later, in 1946, Fred rejected Ed's suggestion to raise the cost of a \$1.25 T-bone steak because, he said, "Every college student's got the right to a steak dinner once in a while."

Gaebler's also was the place where financially pressed students could cash a check. Fred maintained a drawer full of bounced checks that accumulated dust while he waited for students to come up with the money they owed. In the meantime, he frequently cashed additional checks for them. As a bounced check began to age, Fred usually asked the student to write an updated one that was generally as bad as the first, just more recent. The liberal check cashing policy served to further endear Gaebler's to the student population.



IN AT LEAST ONE OCCASION, Ed discovered that his uncle's policy served to further subsidize an education. A Kansas City, Kan.,



printer told Ed that upon his graduation from the University, the Black and Gold Inn was holding \$400 worth of bad checks in his name.

"I never had trouble cashing a check," the Kansas told Ed. "I'd go in there on a date for dinner on a Sunday evening and write a check and they knew it wasn't any good when I gave it to them." The student paid back the debt once he got a job after graduation, but told Ed that he was indebted to the Gaebler's for their assistance. "That \$400 financed my last year of school," he said. "I never would have finished if it hadn't been for them."

"They put more people through school than any single operation in this city," says Dr. William Taft, who just retired as associate dean of graduate studies in journalism. Taft wore the waiter's uniform during his two years as a journalism student in the early '30s.

The restaurant also served more conventional meals and had facilities to seat at least 200 people at its busiest times. "On Sunday nights," when a large portion of the customers were townspeople, "we probably turned the house over three times," remembers Ed Gaebler, who waited tables during the mid-'30s and returned for six months in 1946 to help manage the Inn.

The restaurant, known by many students as the unofficial student union before the Memorial Union

was built in 1952, usually dealt with large crowds, however, because none of the dormitories and few of the local rooming houses had dining facilities. Breakfasts and lunches at Gaebler's were handled in spurts as classes broke out and a new crowd rushed in to replace the one that was running out the door.

Football and Homecoming activities drew especially large crowds, comparable to post-game celebrations at Harpo's today. "On football Saturdays they were lined up for a block and a half to get in," says former waiter Harry Freed, BS BA '42, of Hastings, Neb. To Ed Gaebler, a football Saturday meant a wild dash to the inn after the final gun, because upperclassmen prohibited younger students from leaving the game early.



**W**E'D LEAVE OUR SEATS AND walk around the stand to the north end of the stadium above the M and watch the last play of the game," he says, "and then we'd just run like hell until we got to the Black and Gold Inn and get our jackets on and rush outside, and they'd already be streaming in the door. That place would fill up in five seconds."

While the restaurant catered to the appetites of hungry diners, the afternoons and evenings were primarily controlled by the "jellying" crowd. Cokes with cherry, chocolate, lemon, lime and other flavorings were made the old-fashioned way at the soda fountain along the right wall just inside the front door. Ice cream concoctions also were available, as well as the house specialty, Black and Gold Pie, which blended chocolate and vanilla pudding with a cracker crumb crust.



**F**OR A TIME, COKE PRICES varied; for 5 cents, students could purchase a Coke from the soda fountain, but if they wanted to be served at their booths, the cost was 10 cents. The price was later set at a standard 10 cents, although it made little difference to the students who carried the soda trays to the tables. Little, if any, tip money was pocketed by the waiters.

"Someone did leave a 5-cent tip one time," Taft says, "and the *Missourian* did a story on it." □

