



# 'Can't Never Did Do Anything'

By Karen Farrar

For some parents the problem of getting 10 children through college on a modest family budget would be insurmountable. But Ray and Wilma Skelton, a farm couple from Southwest Missouri, took on the task in the positive and unruffled manner common to them. Now, the job is completed.

**AT COMMENCEMENT THIS SPRING** the 10th Skelton child was graduated from college, the ninth from the University of Missouri-Columbia. It is a remarkable accomplishment by any criterion and perhaps a record at Mizzou for one family. At Brenda's graduation ceremonies in May in the Hearnes Building, the Alumni Association paid tribute to the Skeltons by making them honorary members.

Ray and Wilma Skelton could not rely on a planned college fund. And they did not constantly emphasize "getting that degree." Instead, they demonstrated a lifestyle of lots of hard work — and lots of love — and one of the mother's favorite words-to-live-by: "Can't never did do anything."

"Mom and dad never demanded that we go to college," daughter Lou says, "We just were expected to go . . . I've tried to figure out what they did or said to make us feel this way . . . They felt we had the opportunity to go and therefore we would."

The background of the parents helps one appreciate their efforts even more. Ray was one of 10 children born and raised on a farm near Eagle Rock, Missouri. Because the distance to the nearest high school would have required him to board away from home — a financial burden for the large family — he was able to receive only an eighth grade education. But he loved learning, and chose to go through the eighth grade more than once. Wilma, also raised on a Missouri farm, was able to attend high school, though she and her sister had to ride horseback five miles to and from school each day for two years. After graduating, she taught school one year and then attended one term at Southwest Baptist College at Bolivar.

After their marriage, the couple lived six years in the logging woods of southern Oregon and northern California, where he worked as a timber feller and she was a substitute elementary school teacher. In 1942, they bought the family farm near Eagle Rock and moved back with their children, at that time consisting of three boys. They purchased a herd of dairy cows and operated a dairy farm for 25 years, later converting to beef cattle.

**MOONLIGHTING ALSO WAS PART** of Mr. Skelton's workday, first as an independent contract trucker, 10 years as a maintenance worker at nearby Roaring River State Park, and, for the past 15 years, as a rural mail carrier. Besides the endless child-raising tasks (for a long time using a wringer washer and wood stove), Mrs. Skelton tended a huge garden,

canned and froze the vegetables, kept chickens, assisted with the beef and pork butchering, and even worked as a cook for six years at the local grade school. But they still found time to participate in community affairs, serving on the school board and helping with 4-H projects.

Growing up in such an atmosphere is not likely to produce lazy children. Besides being assigned regular farm chores, all worked at available outside jobs in the summer to save money for school.

**DAD WAS BOSS** of the family and maintained firm discipline. "When we didn't feel well and would start to complain," says Wendell, "dad would say, 'Why don't you work up a sweat and you will feel better.' It was difficult to admit, but his advice usually was well taken." Brenda, smiling, remembers one of her mother's favorite punishments for misbehaving was making them pull weeds.

None of them was allowed to smoke or drink, and, you didn't miss church! It was a must at least twice on Sunday and usually once on Wednesday. "To this day," Maurice says, "none of us smokes and most do not drink alcoholic beverages. Parents can have a great influence on their children. . . ."

They remember "laughter and conversation we shared while shelling fresh peas from the garden. . . going wild gooseberry picking, and the taste of fresh hot pie piled with ice cream . . . the smell of laundry dried in the sun . . . hunting for eggs in the barn . . . mother tucking us in bed at night and saying 'I love you.' . . . delicious home-cooked meals . . . the daily homemade bread . . . mom drawing water from our well and heating it for our Saturday night baths." And, fetching in the wood, and getting up at 5:30 each morning to milk the cows (by hand until the first milking machine was bought in 1950).

"I think mom spoiled each one of us — fixing our favorite food when we didn't like what everyone else was eating, always having a snack when we got home from school, always staying up or getting up when we got home late to be sure everything was okay," Maurice reminisces.

Beverly recalls "how daddy would always come and apologize to us when he thought he had been too rough. (It really takes a big person to do that.)"

"We never suffered or did without anything we needed because of the large family. When money was tight, my parents would do without things they needed for themselves, or the house or the farm,"

says Lona. Beverly remembers them buying a piano for \$50 so the girls could take lessons.

Feeling his lack of a better education, Mr. Skelton was an avid reader, always striving to improve his vocabulary and knowledge of national affairs. This attitude was adopted by the entire family, and they made good use of the county library bookmobile.

The youngsters were expected to study hard and bring home good grades from Eagle Rock grade school (a one-room building when the first two boys were there) and Cassville High School, 13 miles away.

This expectation carried forward into college, as Keith relates: "Following eight brothers and sisters who received so many honors and such high grades made it hard — my parents thought it was only normal to be on the Dean's Honor List every semester."

And the high grades did help make college financially possible. "Most of us had some kind of scholarship the first year or two of college, and were very pleased we were 'putting ourselves through school,'" Maurice says. Grants and loans from the University's Financial Aids Office provided additional help, and several worked in various departments in the Campus work-study program. Others found part-time jobs such as painting, doing lawn work, or washing dishes. Then, during summer vacations, all had full-time jobs, doing waitress, sales or secretary work, or odd jobs at Roaring River State Park.

And, when the going got rough, there were contributions from home. ". . . my parents never questioned my need. They took it for granted that I needed the money or I wouldn't have asked," Lona says.

The family's selection of Mizzou had its roots in the high school experiences of the oldest child, Wendell. His favorite teacher, Vester Wilson, was a graduate of the University (BS Agr '41) and encouraged Wendell to go there, arranging a job for him in the dairy production lab. He also received a Curators and Sears Roebuck scholarship his freshman year. From then on, Mizzou seemed to become a tradition.

**CAMPUS EXPERIENCES** were related by older brothers and sisters. "The MU tee shirts, with tigers, which we loved, were gifts from our brothers," says Lou. "It seemed the only place to go," and "I never really considered doing anything else," are typical comments.

The graduates' reflections of Campus life are not all of hard work. Some of their favorite memories

The Skeltons: (From the left) Ray and Wilma; Brenda, BS HE '77; Lowell, BS CE '63, MS '64; Wendell, BS Agr '59; Keith, BS FW '75; Beverly, BS Ed '65, MS '66; Maurice, BS Ed '63; Lou, BS Ed '74, M-Ed '75; Judy, the KC grad; Lona, BS HE '70; and Carolyn, BS Ed '67.

are: "the freedom of dormitory and rooming house life" and "the panty raids and finals food"; "jogging in Brewer and Hearnes"; "studying in the stacks at the Library and being scared half the time"; "a great student fellowship at Memorial Baptist Church"; "B.S.U. services, picnics, hayrides"; "wonderful house mothers"; teachers who were "wonderful, dedicated people"; "Saturday afternoon football games"; and of course, "the normal amount of movie going, dating, etc.

**THE GRADUATES HAVE SCATTERED** now to their jobs in different cities. Wendell lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and is employed as production and procurement manager for Pauly Cheese Company. Lowell has been with Fruin-Colnon Corporation, an industrial contracting firm, since graduation and is presently serving as a project manager for a large construction project in Kansas City. He is married to a Mizzou graduate, Norma Adams, BS HE '65.

Maurice is a science teacher at Cross Keys Junior High in Florissant, Missouri. Beverly, a former preschool teacher, now enjoys being a full-time wife and mother to her two young children and plans to return to teaching when they are in school. Her husband is Larry Pochop, MS '64, PhD '67, a professor at the University of Wyoming. Carolyn taught junior high school in St. Louis County in 1967-68, and presently lives in Bernie, Missouri, where she works in the Western Auto Store partly owned by her husband, Jerry Buttry, and cares for her two children. Lona, of Joplin, is also mother of two children and married to John F. Bass, BS BA '70, an assistant national bank examiner.

Lou is teaching a junior high learning disabilities class and coaching girl's track in Chillicothe, Missouri. She is married to attorney Robert Cowherd, AB '73, JD '75. Keith is living in Bolivar and working as a wildlife technician at Stockton Lake for the Missouri Department of Conservation. Brenda received her degree in home economics journalism and is interviewing for jobs in the communications field. Judy, the maverick, was graduated from St. Luke's School of Nursing in Kansas City, and now lives with her family in Springfield.

**FOR 21 YEARS**, Roy and Wilma Skelton have had children in college. Now with 13 grandchildren growing up, who knows? The Skeltons still may have more Commencements at Mizzou. □



