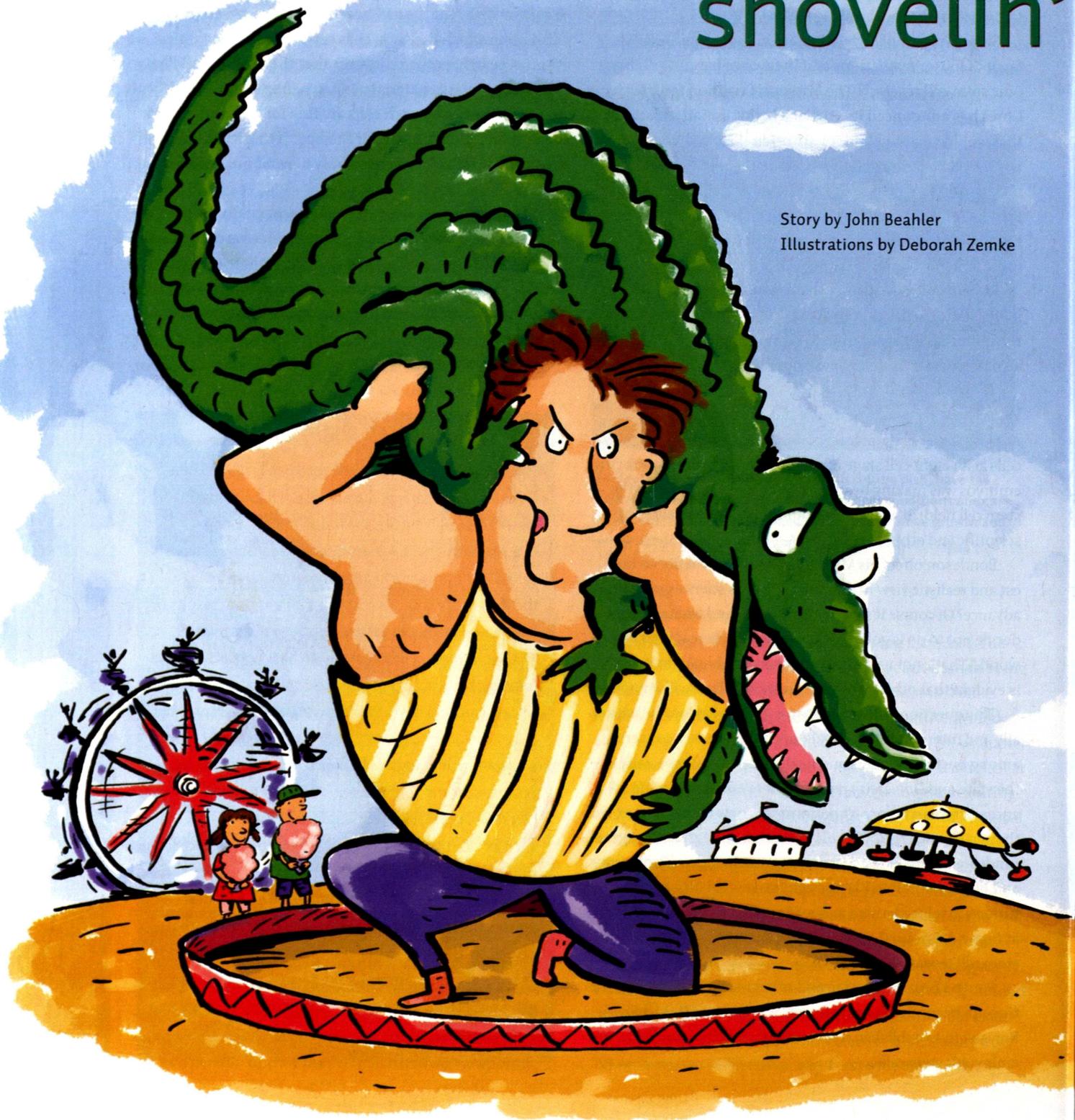


Wrestlin' gators, flippin' shovelin'

Story by John Beahler

Illustrations by Deborah Zemke



burgers, pushin' cigs, manure

and other ways to work your way through school

Thousands of Mizzou grads can thank Allan Purdy for helping them keep body and soul together as they slogged their way toward a degree. Purdy, BS Ag '38, MA '39, was assistant to the dean of agriculture for many years and later was the campus director of financial aid. In both jobs, he helped financially challenged students find the work and scholarships they needed to stay in school.

At the end of one school year, a student checked with Purdy to line up a loan for next fall's tuition. "He told me he might not need the loan because he planned to work over the summer, but it would depend on what kind of job he got," Purdy says. "That fall he stopped by to tell me he wouldn't need a loan after all. He said he'd found a pretty good job over the summer.

"I said, 'Oh, really? What kind of job did

you get?' He said he got a job wrestling alligators at a carnival and made real good money. I told him, 'Well, I certainly hope you won most of the time.'" Not many MU students could boast a résumé that colorful. For most, juggling school and a job only seemed like wrestling alligators.

Federal student loan and grant programs have been around since the '50s and '60s. Before that, Depression-era students scraped by with help from the National Youth Administration, a New Deal agency that paid students 25 cents an hour for 30 hours of work a month. But for many students, summer jobs and part-time jobs during the school year are the only way to keep the wolf from the door.

College towns and colleges have always been fueled by student labor. Columbia and Mizzou are no exception; both town and gown rely on a student workforce to keep things humming. And, just like the actual workaday world, student jobs cover the spectrum from riding a gravy train to enduring dead-end drudgery.

Anyone for a pig-ear sandwich?

Elaine Viets, BJ '72, knows all about working a dead-end job. Viets, a longtime syndicated columnist at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, moved to Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., a few years ago and started a new career writing mystery novels. The heroine in her best-selling *Dead-End Job* series is on the lam from the law, working in a series of dreadful jobs to stay under the police radar.

Viets researches those novels by working the same jobs she describes in her books. So far, she's worked in a bookstore and in a bridal shop for women willing and able to spend \$250,000 on a wedding. As a telemarketer, she has been cursed from coast to coast for pushing a septic tank cleaner.

As a journalism student, Viets had the truly dull job of proofreading telephone books. "I kept falling asleep over those long, gray columns of small type," she says. "I drank enough coffee to start my own Starbucks."

Viets had an equally soporific job reading Missouri Supreme Court briefs. "My favorite was the case involving the pig-ear sandwich man," she recalls. "He did not have pig ears — he sold sandwiches made out of pig ears. I actually ate one. They're crisp like pork rinds and pretty good with barbecue sauce."



Smoke up, Mizzou

Bob Skole's student job is still on his conscience. Skole, BJ '52, was the campus representative for Chesterfield cigarettes. He was the smoke-'em-if-you-got-'em guy who passed out packs of Chesterfields at campus dances, football games and student hang-outs such as The Shack, where George C. Scott, Arts, Journ '53, was a regular recipient. At the time, it seemed like an innocent way for Skole to pad his résumé and stretch his monthly GI Bill check. It wasn't until later that he realized the dark side of his work.

"The real job was to get students hooked on the damn things," Skole says. "But what did we know in the early 1950s? Sure, everyone knew cigarettes were 'coffin nails,' and they'd stunt your growth. I never smoked the disgusting things myself, but wouldn't doctors have warned us — instead of appearing in tobacco ads? And would corporations lie to us? We didn't know. We didn't know. What a lousy excuse."

His *mea culpa* hit home when Skole read John Grisham's *Runaway Jury*, in which the hero's parents are dying from lung cancer after getting hooked on cigarettes at MU. "Good grief! I could've done it," Skole says. "Please Mr. Grisham, say it's truly fiction."

This job stinks

Dick Taylor, BS Ag '58, DVM '62, still works 60 to 70 hours a week at the Howard County Veterinary Service, his busy veterinary practice in Fayette, Mo. Working long hours is a habit that took root during his days at Mizzou in the 1950s. To help pay his college expenses of about \$800 a year, Taylor worked at various times in the engineering library, bused tables at Memorial Union and at local restaurants, and sold programs at basketball games.

Thanks to his sister, who was a nurse at the student health clinic, he was even called in occasionally to stand suicide watch over students with emotional problems. "Those nights provided a good time to catch up with homework," Taylor says. He also combined work and romance when his future wife, Joyce, joined him in cleaning doctors' offices in the old Professional Building across from Middlebush Hall. "We used to have a 'Friday night date.' That was our time to spend together," says Joyce Taylor, BS HE '61.

Like many farm kids who attended MU, Dick Taylor soon found that the ag school was always looking for another strong back to pitch in at its research farms and to help out with the livestock and poultry

operations. At first, that meant odd jobs like filling silos at the University dairy, cleaning barns and feeding the cows.

Then a professor offered him a plum assignment: feeding baby calves in the dairy herd. It involved teaching tiny calves to suck the milk off his fingers and then, once they got the hang of that, to lap it from a bucket.

"The job was the envy of the student farm laborers. No matter how long the work took, it paid for four hours daily at the maximum student wage of 75 cents," Taylor says. "I could usually run from my room, feed the calves and run back in an hour, for a total of two hours a day. Boy, I made \$3 a day for two hours' work."

There was one complication that wasn't mentioned in any job description. The barnyard odor on Taylor's clothes banished him to the FarmHouse fraternity's basement, where there was a separate shower and a "stinking clothes closet" for his manure-spattered work clothes.

High times, low rent

For some MU grads, their college jobs grew into avocations that nudged them toward future careers. Dave Para, BA '77, Grad '79, and his wife, Cathy Barton, are now full-time



musicians who tour the country performing traditional music from their home base in Boonville, Mo. The two met during their college days in Columbia, when Para was a part-time impresario who booked musicians for the Chez Coffeehouse.

The Chez, which was run by the Presbyterian Campus Ministry, was a laid-back, alcohol-free oasis of live music just north of campus on Hitt Street. Until it closed last year, the Chez was an alternative to Columbia's bar scene, and a cadre of student workers ran the operation in exchange for free rent in cramped quarters at the ministry building.

Para discovered the Chez's lively music scene when he was an MU freshman dabbling in what he calls the "major-of-the-month club." The Chez was a breath of fresh air, he says. "It was always filled with people and musicians hanging out, getting to know each other and listening to music. I thought that was just great."

Then he found out that a room in the Chez was opening up. Para applied, passed muster with the other residents and moved in for the next four years. "It was an amazing deal," he says. "I literally paid \$40 a semester to live there, and I think that

was just for a share of the utilities."

Of course, you get what you pay for. Para's room had just enough space for a bed in what was once a stairwell closet. "If you closed the door, it was completely pitch-black," he remembers. "There was about 5 feet of headspace. I lived like a hobbit in there."

There were other perks, though. On a busy weekend night, while customers listened to music on the stage and downed Russian tea, mocha java and ice cream sodas in the coffee house, there might be three or four separate jam sessions going on throughout the Chez.

Para's job was to find enough musicians to play pro bono for the four one-hour gigs each Friday and Saturday night. That could be difficult, and Para usually turned to a file of index cards with names of potential performers.

That's how he met his future wife. Cathy Barton, a Stephens College student, was right near the front of the index under the B section, and she almost always agreed to perform. "My experiences at the Chez really carried forward," Para says. "Those were good times; the Chez was a major development for me."

Jack-of-all-media-trades

Because Mizzou draws so many future journalists, Columbia's airwaves are awash with MU students learning the ropes of the broadcast business. Bill Mund, BA '64, started out in the J-School but switched to radio and television production in the speech department after he discovered the small television studio the department had on the fourth floor of Jesse Hall.

At one point, Mund held down two jobs in addition to his school work; he was a disc jockey and talk radio announcer on KFRU and a cameraman and jack-of-all-trades for Mizzou's KOMU-TV. "I ran the camera on the Esther show [*Of Interest to Women*], a cooking and ladies' program, and the 10 o'clock news strip," Mund says. "I also built sets, did some booth announcing and made extra cash washing Esther's dishes and scraping grease pencil off the weather board."

All of it was great hands-on experience that prepared him for a full-time radio job right after graduation, says Mund, who retired after a career in advertising and lives in Webster Groves, Mo. "I wouldn't trade my Mizzou experiences 'on the job' — or my career, for that matter — with anyone." ■

