

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, circled, goes on an Alpha Tau Omega hayride with Alpha Chi Omega Little Sister Esmeralda Mayes, BJ '34, sitting to his left. The photo was published in the 1931 *Savitar*. Williams also enjoyed reading poetry to Mayes on her sorority house steps.



# Tennessee Williams at Missouri

By ALLEAN HALE

THE MOOD WAS JOVIAL when Williams, shown with former Chancellor John Schwada, received an honorary doctor of humane letters from Mizzou in 1969. But the playwright startled his audience at the awards dinner, stating that the School of Journalism should be shut down. "You can't teach people to write," he declared. Williams' constant companion, inset, was "Gigi," a Boston bull terrier.



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Photo from the University of Missouri Archives. Inset photo by Paul Bower/Columbia Missourian

**"OFF I WENT,"** to the University of Missouri, in the charming town of Columbia," wrote Tennessee Williams in his *Memoirs*. It was the fall of 1929. He was 18.

Typically, his mother accompanied him to select a suitable boardinghouse for a genteel Southern Boy, son of a Daughter of the American Revolution and grandson of an Episcopalian rector. That first night in Columbia, Williams—in the most atypical gesture of his life—wrote a letter proposing marriage to his childhood friend, Hazel Kramer. If she had said yes, would Thomas Lanier ever have become Tennessee?

Williams came to the University already thinking of himself as a writer; his practical aim, a degree in journalism. At 16 he had won a \$5 prize from *Smart Set* magazine in a contest titled, "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?"—citing his "own unhappy marital experiences" as the basis for his essay.

He was not the normal fraternity material in the jazz days of Mizzou. But he soon pledged Alpha Tau Omega and moved into its new house, through the intervention of his father, an executive of the International Shoe Co. who set great store by fraternities, manly sports and military training.

Williams was an enthusiastic, if disconcerting, pledge. He never had a clean shirt for dinner and was caught borrowing items from empty rooms. He ignored the list of suitable dates and brought a blacklisted blonde to a formal dance. He was untidy, absent-minded and an oddball, according to Elmer Lower, a friend, classmate and fraternity brother. "The boys made fun of him because he didn't fit in," says Lower, who would later serve as president of ABC News and dean of the School of Journalism.

Still, his Columbia years were perhaps the most normal in Williams' life. And he recalled his three years at the University of Missouri as "the happiest time of my life." He went jelling and juking at Campus joints, attended dances at Stephens College and triple-dated with roommate Harold Mitchell and Lower, who says Williams was fun but shy. "We had to get the girl for him."

**HE LEARNED** to dance The Fish, played golf, bought riding breeches and took equestrian, which seemed more romantic than infantry. ROTC was required for male students and the uniform for the weekly march around Francis Quadrangle was blue jackets with white trousers. "Out of 1,000 people, 999 would have on white pants," says Lower. "Then there would be one pair of legs wearing blue." That was Williams.

Lower also recalls Williams' brief career in wrestling. The fraternity, despairing of his ever gaining the required points for activities, forced him to enter the intramural competition as a 115-pound flyweight. With two farm boys also entering the field, he posted a sign on the bulletin board: "Williams Ultimatum: Liquor! Liquor! Must have liquor for my bout with the aggressive agrarians." Despite Prohibition, his brothers obliged.

Ignorant but wily, Williams embarked with zest and, with the help of a bye, made it

to the finals. He lost there, but his intramural debut earned more points for the ATO house than it won in basketball. He earned the nickname, "Tiger Williams."

As a student, Williams had 18 negative hours for absence from military class his first semester and 36 his second, yet he was sufficiently attentive to stay in the University three years. He was admitted to the School of Journalism his junior year, but did not take to his only newswriting assignments: the obits and the livestock report. He preferred the death notices, but on one occasion, he "buried the dean's wife instead of the dean."

He signed up for Modern Drama, taught by Robert Ramsay, but apparently paid no heed to the professor's rules for writing a good play. "A good plot resembles a snake with its tail in its mouth," Ramsay would say, encouraging students to bring their stories full circle.

Ramsay also encouraged students to enter the Missouri Workshop's dramatic arts contest. In 1930 Williams won sixth honorable mention with a play called *Beauty Is the Word*. Another play from his Mizou days was *Hot Milk at Three in the Morning*, a social drama with kitchen-sink realism and a tough working-class character who foreshadows Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *Hot Milk* evolved into Williams' first published play, *Moony's Kid Don't*, and its view of the human condition as entrapment is one the playwright never changed.

**AMONG THE TREASURES** in the University archives are two stories Williams wrote for the Mahan Story contests sponsored by the English department. "Something by Tolstoi" is an ironical piece and "Big Black, a Mississippi Idyll" is violent. Both treat sexual passion in a sophisticated way. In "Big Black," Williams found his territory; it is the only one of these early works that has the Southern dialect and cadence that became his hallmark.

Whether he was the boisterous fraternity boy of his *Memoirs* or one of the shy characters of his stories, Williams was not conspicuous at Missouri. His picture appears in the 1931 *Savitar* among the ATO's, but his name is not on the Missouri Workshop programs. His entries won none of the Mahan literary prizes in poetry, essay or short story. Only Ramsay seemed to have recognized his ability, citing Williams as one of three outstanding literary students from St. Louis and encouraging him to try to sell his stories.

Short, young-looking for his age, a dreamy youth, Williams already had developed an anonymity that shielded him all his life. He was attracted to girls in those days and has written that not until he was 27 did he realize he was a homosexual. Though he records crushes on males, he did not recognize them as gay. After he failed ROTC consistently for three years his father, disgusted by this record, pulled him out of school in 1932 to return to St. Louis and work in a shoe factory. Williams later graduated from the University of Iowa.

In 1947 after the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, President Frederick Middleburgh invited Williams back to Campus, saying the University would be honored if the author would play the part of Tom in its coming production of *Menagerie*. This may have brought a chuckle to the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, who received 13th honorable mention in the last playwrighting contest he entered at Mizzou.

He did not come, but in June 1969 he accepted the invitation to receive an honorary degree. Unfortunately, this was during his "stoned age," and he came to the podium something of a shambles, accompanied by his brother, Dakin.

Full circle, just like Ramsay's snake, Williams was seen slipping a bottle under his scholastic robe—for courage, as in his bout with the agrarian 39 years before. He refrained from using it, but in a rambling speech at the awards dinner startled his audience by declaring that the School of Journalism should be shut down. "You can't teach people to write," he said.

**FOUR MONTHS LATER** the weary playwright, all possible awards and honors of the theatre behind him, entered St. Louis' Barnes Hospital in a drug-induced breakdown. But he survived to write for 14 more years before he died Feb. 25, 1983, at age 71. He left behind him a body of work that distinguishes him as one of America's greatest and most prolific playwrights. In one awesomely creative period from 1944 to 1961, he turned out *The Glass Menagerie*, *Summer and Smoke*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Gat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Night of the Iguana*. All have played thousands of times all over the world.

Williams' portfolio includes at least 26 characters, place-names and situations drawn from Mizzou and Columbia.

In "The Field of Blue Children," Myra looks out "across the small university town with its buildings and trees and open fields . . . the dome of the administration building like a snow peak in the distance." This piece, published in 1939, was the first to which Williams signed the name, Tennessee.

Springdale Gardens, formerly located on West Broadway, was immortalized as "the confectionery" in *Orpheus Descending* and as Moon Lake Casino in *Summer and Smoke*. Its paper lantern flickered again in *Streetcar Named Desire*. In that play, Williams used his roommate's name for Mitch. The young ladies of Baptist Female College (the original name for Stephens College) appear in *Night of the Iguana*. And in *Camino Real*, the delightful character Esmeralda is likely named for Esmeralda Mayes, an Alpha Chi Little Sister, to whom Williams would read poetry on the Omega house steps.

His plays enabled him to leave a \$10 million estate. Generations of other young writers will benefit from the scholarship funds he endowed. And it was at the University of Missouri where one of the world's great dramatists began his transition from poet to playwright. □