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OUR M ON THE HILL

By Steve Shinn

The big, stone M at Faurot Field will be 50 years old this fall. Except for the events of the past few months, the anniversary might have gone unnoticed. In fact, the big, stone M may be lucky to be having a birthday at all. But some landmarks spark an intense pride, apparently. No one talked much about his feelings about the M — that is, no one talked until its future was threatened by a proposed seating expansion. In December the Board of Curators approved the addition of seats at the north end of the stadium — the home of the M. Alumni and student reaction was both spontaneous and overwhelming. There were several reasons why many preferred expansion at the open, south end, but almost all protestors mentioned the big M.

“What gives the Curators the right to tear out our beautiful block M at Faurot Field?” wrote one recent graduate. And from an older Tiger fan, “who has lived for years with the poorest dressing rooms, refreshment stands, and restroom facilities in the Big Eight Conference, I implore you to save the stadium’s one redeeming feature (not counting the press box) — our Big M.”

The Curators reversed their decision. Somehow, the big M had quietly become an important part of Mizzou’s heritage.

Over the years, little has been written about the stadium landmark. No legends have emerged that would give it the same status as the Columns. The only incident anyone can recall involving the M was before a Missouri-Nebraska game — probably in the 50’s — when a group of pranksters changed the M to an N on Friday night. Groundskeeper Olen Thornton and a group of young boys whom he promised free admission to the game that afternoon worked feverishly Saturday morning to restore the M before game time. Few fans ever knew of the near catastrophe.

But the big M on the hill has become a tradition, nonetheless. And like all good traditions, the facts surrounding it are difficult to come by. People don’t always remember happenings of a half century ago quite the same way. Even the contemporary accounts don’t agree on several details. Articles in the *Columbia Missourian* and the *Missouri Student* (predecessor to the *Maneater*) disagreed on several points, including the size of the M, the number of persons involved and the day it was built. But such little dif-

ferences don’t really hurt. Tradition can’t be burdened by facts.

This we know for sure: The first game was played in Memorial Stadium in 1926. The M was constructed before the first home game in 1927 from rock left over from the blasting required to shape the stadium. And we know that the late 20’s were a time of great school spirit. Every freshman automatically was a member of the Thundering Thousand, a pep organization led by the legendary professor, Jesse Wrench. Before each home football game, the group assembled at the Columns and marched to the stadium “in lock step.”

In reviewing the October 1 game with the Kansas “Aggies” (won by Missouri, 13-6), the 1928 *Savitar* yearbook reported: “The ‘Thundering Thousand’ followed the Razzers around the field. Five hundred freshmen joined hands and encircled the cinder track in a single line while the band played ‘Ole Missouri’ in the center of the field. The pennants of all the Missouri Valley fluttered and danced above the stadium on a long line at the open end of the gridiron. . . . A huge stone M — the work of the Frosh the night before — loomed up white and threateningly against the embankment. The Missouri jungle beast — The Tiger — awoke from his long slumber of a year’s duration. . . . The 1927 season was on!”

The reporter for the October 6, 1927 *Missourian* was almost poetic in his description of the construction: “It was tradition in the making. Ninety feet high it stood against the north rim of the stadium. Seventy-five feet from east to west it reached. Wooden frames marked it out. Within the frames, brown and green tufts of grass stood up.

“First it
rained freshmen,
and then it
rained rocks.”

“Then the freshmen came over the rim of the stadium, and the rocks came down the rim of the stadium. First it rained freshmen, and then it rained rocks — but always freshmen and always rocks. The sun was blotted out. The air was white with rocks. Cries arose from all sides; not ominous cries, but cries of eagerness. ‘Yea Tigers! That’s the fight! Bring on your rocks.’”

The October 11, 1927 issue of the *Missouri Student* was somewhat more subdued: “Six hundred freshmen moved approximately 300 tons of loose

rock Wednesday afternoon and built a gigantic M at Memorial Stadium. . . . No prison-hardened crew of rock crushers ever made little ones out of big ones better or faster. . . . It was an opportunity that comes once in a long time to a university, and almost never to a freshman class — that of establishing a permanent new tradition.

“Assembling in military formation at Francis Quadrangle under the direction of Colonel M.C. Kerth [the ROTC commander], the freshmen listened to a short talk by Student President Hartley Pollock and gave some yells. About 5 o’clock, the Razzers escorted them to the stadium. [The Razzers was an honorary pep organization. Its president for 1927-28 was Irving Fane, now a University Curator.]

“The outline of the symbol rapidly filled with stone.”

“The frame outline of the symbol, 130 feet high and 150 feet wide, rapidly filled with stone as the black-and-gold-topped youths began their work. [John Burks, stadium maintenance coordinator, recently stepped off the M. He found it to be 95 feet high and 90 feet wide at the base.] . . . First in a disorderly mob and then in a systematic series of human ‘rock lines,’ they quickly moved into place the large mass of rocks scattered about. . . . Shortly after 6 o’clock, the entire 5,875 square feet of the letter had been covered. . . . C.L. Brewer, director of athletics, and President Pollock are to make arrangements for spraying a surface of gold and black paint on the letter.”

As far as anyone remembers, the M never was painted black and gold. It was whitewashed from the beginning. Pollock, now a St. Louis lawyer, also recalls that the ROTC was more involved in the project than the contemporary accounts indicated, and that members of the sophomore class, who, with the freshmen, were required to belong to ROTC, voluntarily took part in the M project in lieu of an ROTC drill.

This is somewhat borne out by Garth Landis, now a St. Joseph lawyer and a sophomore in the fall of '27. “I remember helping build the M,” says Landis, “but since I’m more allergic to work than anybody, I’m sure I didn’t volunteer.”

Pollock also contacted William T. Tiffin, of Clearwater, Florida, and George Schmick, of Rolla, two of

the engineering students who — together with the late Gene Stalker of Kansas City — staked out the M. Tiffin related that their first effort flared too much at the bottom, causing them to “reshoot” the initial to give it the appearance it has today.

Until World War II, members of the freshmen class traditionally repaired and whitewashed the M each fall. When 24 and 25-year-old veterans appeared on Campus as freshmen, hazing generally came to a halt. One didn’t send a veteran of Iwo Jima through a paddle line or force a survivor of D-day to white-wash a huge stone letter.

Olen Thornton, who was in charge of maintaining the stadium for the 30 years prior to 1975, recalls that fraternities took over the task at that point. The whitewashing of the M was considered such an honor that — shades of Tom Sawyer — fraternities sometimes made arrangements to perform the task a year in advance. Then came Vietnam, and many students lost interest in many traditions. Thornton’s crew, together with paid student workers, handled the job for two or three years.

Now, tradition has returned. For the past three years, a new fraternity, Pi Kappa Phi, has repaired and whitewashed the M. The fraternity hopes to make it a permanent project, says their public relations director Jerry Bennett.

The project requires some seven or eight barrels of whitewash (that’s 15-16 sacks of lime), brooms and buckets. “After a while we get tired using the brooms,” says Bennett, “and we just slosh it on. Some of our Little Sisters always help, and we may end up painting pictures on each others’ backs. The whole deal takes about 2½-3 hours. We have fun.”

They’re also maintaining a tradition that holds considerable meaning for many persons.

“One of my fondest memories of coming home was the Big M.”

When it looked as if north-end expansion would destroy the M, Allen D. Bronz of Florissant, Missouri wrote Chancellor Herbert W. Schooling:

“At the close of World War II, one of my fondest memories of coming home was not the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, but flying over Columbia and seeing the big, beautiful, white Missouri M shining in the autumn sun.” □