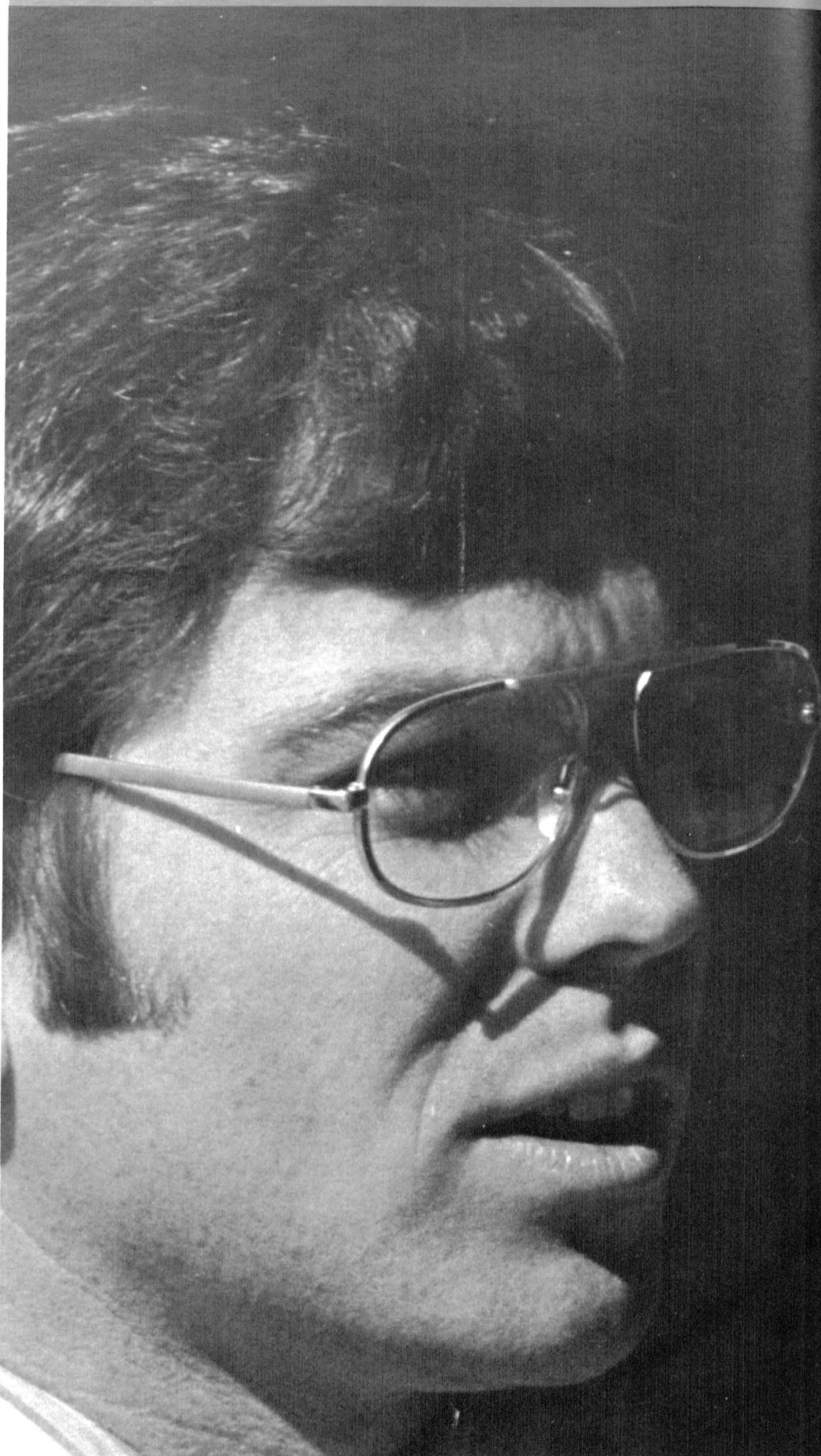


The Youngest Curator

By SUE ANN WOOD



As MSA president, he saw the Curators as remote.

Six years ago, when Bill Thompson was president of the Columbia Campus student body, he thought of the Board of Curators as a remote but powerful group that often acted without regard for his or any other student's viewpoint.

Now that Thompson is himself a Curator—at age 28 the youngest in the Board's history—he understands a bit better why Curators have a difficult time staying in touch with campus opinions, although he is trying hard to do just that.

In a recent interview in his office at a St. Louis stockbrokerage firm, Thompson tried to analyze how his perceptions of the Board have changed since his student days at Mizzou.

"If I thought the Curators were removed from campus realities," he said, "I guess I still feel that they—we—are. But now I do see some of the reasons why. For example, the unbelievable amount of things we get to read between Board meetings—administrative staff reports, letters to the Board and staff, reams of written material. Sometimes I wonder if it's necessary for us to read everything we do. The Board just cannot be a full-time administrative group, and I don't think we're supposed to be. But it is important that we know what is going on."

Thompson also reads the student newspapers from all four campuses and the Columbia daily newspapers in order to keep up with student issues and "what everybody else is reading" about the Curators and University matters.

People now are more aware of the Board's actions.

He believes that press coverage of Board meetings, all across the state, is much better than it was when he was a student, so that people are more aware of what the Board is doing. And he believes this is a good thing. Missouri's new "Sunshine Law," requiring open meetings of all public and governmental bodies, is something Thompson welcomes.

"I was concerned at first," he admitted, "because I thought we needed privacy in committee meetings to express our views openly on some sensitive matters. But then I decided that committee meetings should be open, just as the corporate Board meetings were.

"Most of the times that we've gotten in trouble, it's when something was done in a closed session. If the press and public had been present and heard all the discussion, they probably would have understood why we took the action we did."

Once-a-month visits leave little time for seeking out students.

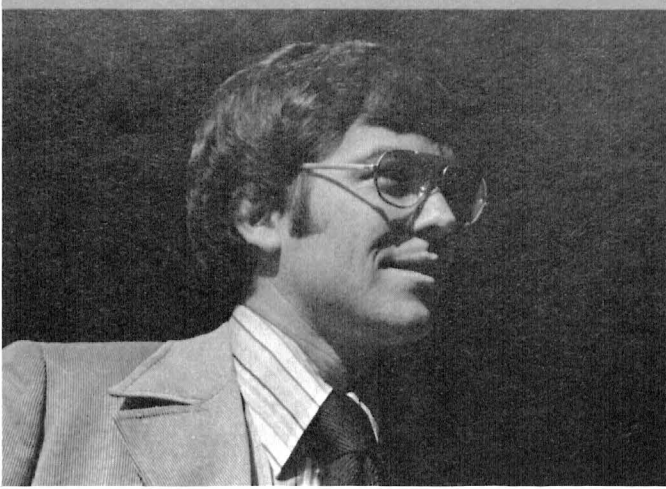
The great amount of time Board members spend in meetings was a revelation to Thompson after he became a Curator early this year. It's another reason why Curators have little time to get out on the campuses to tune in to student views, he noted.

"We're only on a campus once a month usually arriving on Thursday for afternoon committee sessions. I'm on the Finance Committee. We meet all afternoon, then have some kind of formal social gathering, such as a dinner with the chancellors, some faculty members and sometimes a few students. On Friday we start with an executive session to discuss personnel and other matters (exempted from open meetings under the Sunshine Law) and in the afternoon we have the corporate board meeting. Then we usually head for home."

Thompson, who has attended every Board meeting since becoming a Curator, likes to arrive in Columbia early for private, informal get-togethers with students or faculty members he has invited to join him, maybe at Harpo's for a beer.

"I try to select people in a wide range of activities," Thompson explained, when asked how he picks the persons for these informal sessions. "Maybe I'll read an editorial in the student newspaper and pick up the telephone and call the editor to ask him to tell me more about the subject... Or I'll call a fraternity president, or a professor in engineering, or business, someone I know or know of.

"We can talk about things like intervisitation, or Gay Liberation... things that are not likely to come up at a chancellor's dinner when we're all wearing coats and ties."



St. Louis alumni “korner” Thompson regularly.

Thompson likes to keep in touch with University alumni too, and has continued to be an active member of the St. Louis Alumni Board since his appointment to the Curators by Governor Christopher S. Bond. The only change is that the St. Louis group now have a “Kurator Korner” where they regularly give their colleague the benefit of alumni wisdom.

Bill Thompson’s leadership ability was first recognized by his classmates at Affton High School, who elected him their student body president.

But in high school, student government interested Bill less than football. Although he was only 5-9 and weighed about 145 with his shoulder pads on, he was the team quarterback and ran up a highly successful record.

“I wasn’t big,” he grinned, “but I was quick, and I tried to outwit the bigger ones.”

Dreams of playing college football faded when he realized that “Dan Devine wasn’t beating down my door,” so he turned his thoughts to academic pursuits. For a while he considered studying medicine, then decided on civil engineering. He took the five-year extended engineering program at UMC and found time for plenty of extracurricular activities.

“It was the pre-student-power-student-activism era on Campus while I was there, from 1963 to 1968,” Thompson said. “There was still a lot of rah-rah feeling. Students were involved in Campus activities, but the outside world was pretty far away. Those of us in ROTC knew we might go to Vietnam, and the other guys knew they probably would be drafted and go there, but it wasn’t a big issue yet.”

His Alpha Tau Omega fraternity brothers elected him chapter president in his sophomore year. Then he got interested in Campus politics, feeling the need for a two-party system to replace the then single-party domination of Missouri Student Association offices.

So Thompson and several friends formed a new party and put up a slate, with Bill running for president. The slate swept the top MSA offices in a close election marked by the biggest voter turnout in Campus history. He looks back with satisfaction on one accomplishment of his year in office – convincing the Faculty Council to abolish its negative-hour rule that penalized students absent before or after a holiday.

“There were fears by some faculty members that doing away with negative hours would lead to a mass exodus of students from the Campus days before holidays started, but it never happened.”

During his senior year, Thompson worked part-time for the Alumni Office, traveling to alumni meetings around the state and nation, helping boost membership and presenting the student viewpoint. He met a “tremendous number of alumni and enjoyed the work tremendously, too.”

After graduation, on the advice of good friends like Engineering Dean Jack Morgan, he decided to get a master’s degree in business from another university, to broaden his educational experience. He applied at Harvard, was accepted and, the morning after his marriage to high school and college sweetheart Nancy Beckeman, set out in an overloaded Volkswagen for Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Harvard was a mind-broadening experience.

The exposure to Harvard proved, indeed, to be a mind-broadening experience. The era of campus activism and student protest exploded while he was there. Although he was more of a spectator than participant, Thompson made a point of listening to all sides of the hotly debated issues. He came to appreciate the sincerity of many Vietnam protestors, and lost a bit of his Midwest provincialism. “I began to recognize that everyone who wore sandals and a beard wasn’t all bad.”

Now that he is a Curator, Thompson finds that listening to all sides of a controversy, and keeping an open mind, are valuable assets. For example, on the question of whether the Board should recognize Gay Liberation as a Campus organization, Thompson feels the Board was wise to appoint a hearing officer to listen to each side presenting its case fully, and then to report back to the Board.

At the time of this interview, Thompson still had not received his copy of the full transcript of those hearings or the officer's report. Therefore, he had not made up his mind how he was going to vote on the question.

Young Curator won't view Gay Lib emotionally.

"I'm inclined to put my emotional feelings about homosexuality aside and look at what recognition of this group would mean... what the legal ramifications would be... and apply what I think is right," he said.

It's important to Thompson to do and say what he believes is right. After Bond appointed him to the Board, Bill went to his confirmation hearings in the Senate with "the distinct feeling of being under the gun. I was only 28, and I thought if any appointee were rejected, I was likely to be the one."

But, his apprehension vanished in his intense determination to voice convictions on the subjects raised by the senators. As a student at Mizzou only four years before, he was familiar with Campus issues, and his work with fellow alumni had kept him abreast of more recent University matters.

"I had strong ideas on many subjects," Thompson said. "For example, I was asked how I felt about out-of-state students taking places at the University that could go to qualified Missouri students. I said I just could not go along with the idea of eliminating out-of-state student enrollment. It's a great experience to sit in a classroom or to be roommates with somebody from another part of the nation or the world; it's a part of what higher education is all about. We shouldn't bury our heads in the sand and make this University one for Missouri people only."

He will not be only the Board's "student voice."

At the time of his appointment, it was widely predicted that the young Curator would be the "students' voice" on the Board. But Thompson disavows any such role.

"I know I will make some decisions that will be very unpopular with the students," he said. "They

will think Thompson has sold them out. But I have to feel that whenever I make a decision, it will be for what I believe is best in the long range for the University of Missouri."

He very much approves of the "Role and Scope" evaluation of the University, in spite of the controversy that resulted. As a former management consultant, before he became a stockbroker, Thompson is convinced of the value of advance planning for growth and development.

"I think Role and Scope can be very effective, but we must implement it... make it work... decide if we want to be a great university of a certain optimum size, or try to be all things to all people and wind up being mediocre. It was a far-reaching and unusual move, and it sets us apart from many other institutions that wish they were as far ahead in this kind of planning as we are now."

Mizzou needs to be kept strong as the flagship campus.

He travels frequently to all four campuses of the University, taking particular interest in the development of the new St. Louis campus. But he believes that the state university "must continue to have a strong flagship campus" in Columbia, as well as "fine campuses in the two cities and at Rolla."

Realistically, Thompson believes the time has passed when the General Assembly can be expected to hand over almost everything the University requests in the way of funds. Recent sharp criticism of some University programs and activities in the General Assembly may have involved "some personal animosities," Thompson said, but he accepts the right—and duty—of legislators to criticize and question how tax money is being spent. And he has no doubts that the University of Missouri can marshal its resources and maintain excellence at every level.

"We have top faculty, excellent research, teaching, athletics... We don't have to bow down to any other state university in this country," he declares. "Sure, there's a need to be critical and improve from within, but there must be a point where we all come together and have pride in the University of Missouri." □