
MIZZOU

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Alumni Profile

The way it was

When I came to college in Columbia in September 1938, I was all of 16. On the first Saturday morning of the term, freshmen had to appear at Memorial Stadium to whitewash the big stone M at the north end of the field. Back then, the stadium was just a natural sunken bowl with all seats below street level.

Columbia was essentially bound on the south by the football stadium, on the north by Highway 40 (now Business Loop 70), on the east by old Highway 63 and on the west by West Boulevard. The town's population was about 17,000.

Few students had cars, and one could park easily on the street. Students walked everywhere carrying books by hand or dangling them in a strap. All school buildings were on the Red and White campuses. On White Campus, the Memorial Union tower stood alone, flanked by stone foundations that would later support the Union's north and south wings. Weeds and small trees grew freely within these walls.

There were four movie theaters downtown: Hall, Missouri, Uptown and Varsity. Across Conley from Jesse Hall were the Campus Town shops. East from the corner of Maryland was a small grocery store, a taxi stand, The Diner and its 10 or so stools, The Shack with its green door and, of course, Gaebler's Cafe. These last two deserve special mention.

The 1992 statue of Beetle Bailey, which rests now in front of the Reynolds Alumni Center, characterizes him sitting in one of the Shack's booths. The beer-soaked tables were covered with initials carved into the wood. Mort Walker, Beetle's creator, is a Mizzou alumnus. The place had low ceilings and dim lighting. It burned in the wee morning hours following Halloween night 1988, but I'm surprised it didn't go up in flames sooner.

In the late afternoon, it was fun to have a "jelly date" at Gaebler's. A dance floor on the rear upper level had tables and a nickel-a-tune jukebox. We ordered Cokes for the same price and danced to the great music of Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw and others. We held the girls tight and danced cheek to cheek. It was a great way to end a tough day at school.

russell sheldon
Dr. Russell Sheldon has watched Columbia grow since coming to campus in 1938. Photo by Rob Hill.

The only other eatery adjacent to the campus was the Ever Eat on Ninth Street across from the J-School.

Small residences occupied the blocks between Conley and Rollins, where some students rented rooms. The campus had one dorm for men and one for women, and many students lived in fraternity and sorority houses. The University Bookstore, in the basement of Jesse Hall, and the Missouri Bookstore, north of the library, filled our needs.

Dec. 7, 1941, was a tragic day. After lunch, I was hitting the books and listening to the radio in my room in the Phi Delta Theta house. The program was interrupted by the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. There was no TV then, so we followed the events on the radio the remainder of the day. Soon thereafter, some of our classmates who were in military reserve units were called into service, and the national draft followed.

Having won the Big Six championship, the Tigers played in the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans against Fordham on Jan. 1, 1942. The air was so thick with fog and rain that the radio announcers calling the game could see only part of the play. This was during World War II, so the announcers kept national security in mind and did not reveal the weather conditions. MU lost to Fordham 2-0 as the result of a blocked punt.

On June 9, 1942, I graduated in one of the largest classes to that date — 1,266! There were 4,436 students in Columbia and 815 in Rolla. That was the University of Missouri. By 2006, Columbia's population had grown to 94,428. — *Dr. Russell D. Shelden, BA '42, BS Med '47, ScD '07*

About the author: After earning a degree in chemistry at MU and completing two years at the University's medical school, Russell Shelden finished his medical training at Washington University in St. Louis. During 32 years at the Research Medical Center in Kansas City, Mo., he practiced anesthesiology and was president of the medical staff in 1963. Beginning in 1958, Shelden traveled to Columbia to help support the School of Medicine's anesthesia residency program. He attained the rank of clinical professor before retiring in 1983. Shelden and his wife, Mary, are philanthropists. Their gifts to MU include funding for two endowed chairs in anesthesiology, an academic resource center for student-athletes and a forthcoming clinical simulation center. MU awarded Dr. Shelden an honorary doctorate in May 2007.

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