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‘Ole Tiger’ Gives Back

Mizzou alumnus, anesthesiologist and philanthropist Russell Shelden died June 20, 2014, at 92.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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When Russell Shelden first arrived in Columbia from his hometown of Kansas City, Missouri, in 1938, Mizzou was a small college in a small town. There were two dorms, Memorial Union was only a tower and the Tigers were in the Big Six. When Shelden, BA '42, BS Med '47, ScD '07, graduated, there were 4,436 students at MU. Known on campus as “Ole Tiger,” Shelden died June 20, 2014, in Kansas City at 92.

Shelden spent most of his career



Russell Shelden watched Columbia grow since he stepped on campus in 1938. The anesthesiologist and philanthropist died June 20, 2014, at 92. Photo by Rob Hill.

practicing anesthesiology in Kansas City, but he returned to Columbia from 1958 to 1983 to help support the School of Medicine's anesthesia residency program, attaining the rank of clinical professor before retiring. Throughout those years, he and wife Mary watched Mizzou and CoMo grow. The philanthropic couple's gifts to MU include funding for two endowed chairs in anesthesiology, a clinical simulation center and an academic resource center for student-athletes. For his support, Shelden received the Mizzou Alumni Association Faculty Alumni Award and the Distinguished Service Award.

Much has changed since Shelden's student days at MU but not everything. Freshmen still paint rock M on the north end of Memorial Stadium; students still eat at the Shack (though now it's in the MU Student Center); and alumni still love reminiscing about Old Missouri. In the Winter 2008 issue of MIZZOU, Shelden recalled memories from his days as a student. The article is reprinted below.

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 Café. 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 cheek to cheek. It was a great way to end a tough day at school. 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 out 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.

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