

## Tater Tots and Timelines

*The academic calendar cultivates spring harvest.* By SKIP ANDERSON

**I**N MY CHILDHOOD HOMETOWN OF Milan, Tenn., passage of time is largely marked by the ebb and flow of the agricultural seasons. Short winter days give way to spring plantings and summertimes filled with fresh tomatoes, corn and peas of every variety. Growing up, my sister and I reveled in the muggy glow of Tennessee's extended twilight until the town's century-old oaks were ablaze with color.

For the farmers of Milan—hardly a speck on the map north of Jackson and south of Martin—the transition to autumn marks a time of harvest. Cotton is king in the flatlands of West Tennessee, and each October trucks haul tons of it to market across the back of the arrow-straight pockmarked highway, bringing a fervently anticipated boost to the modest local economy before winter's somnolence sets in.

Such are seasonal transitions of agricultural communities. However, with 16,600-plus employees and 10,800-plus students, the Vanderbilt community is doggedly driven by a different calendar: the academic calendar. The pace of life on a college campus can vary radically day to day, and naturally revolves around the needs of the students.

Take the day following Commencement. As most faculty members enjoy a break from the classroom, swarms of students make way for swarms of maintenance crews racing to begin deferred projects that must be completed before the students return in a few short months.

Those of us left on campus during the

summer revel in parking lots no longer overflowing, and mercifully shorter lines at SATCO and the Pancake Pantry. My walks across campus feel different as the trees comprising Vanderbilt's national arboretum are naked of signs announcing SGA candidacies and social engagements. There are no bicycling students weaving around others on foot to get to class. And the squirrel population, fat from students hand-feeding them tater tots and french fries on the Wall for nine months, must again rely solely on their foraging instincts for food.

For me, the calm of campus absent of students soon becomes as barren as a dried riverbed. Staff members of the *Vanderbilt Register*, of which I'm editor, take turns depleting vacation time accrued during busier times. As there is generally little news to report between mid-May and mid-August, we write stories about various aspects of campus that, during the semester, we have neither the time to pursue nor the space on the printed page to publish. The result is a tome of lengthy feature stories and photo essays with an occasional news item that might be of interest to those who remain on campus during the long summer months. By July I long for the students and faculty to return, but it will be late-August before the University awakens.

Then, overnight, it happens. The quiet of campus is shattered by the arrival of some 1,579 recent high school graduates discovering independence like none they will ever know again. Each year I watch as freshmen dutifully stand in long lines at the bookstore, excited to use for the first time their student identification that also functions as a



JIM HSIEH

debit card. Savvy upperclassmen who arrive two days later might forgo books for a week or more to avoid a retail logjam that can, at times, rival a wedding-dress fire sale at Filene's.

I have always thought of fall on a college campus as a time of rebirth. Classes start, and parking lots overflow. I take my seat at the first football game alongside other fans enjoying quiet pride that the Commodores are tied for first in the SEC East. Papers are written, and exams are taken. Grant proposals are submitted. Discoveries are sought, and technology is advanced. The 330 acres between Hillsboro Village and midtown Nashville is again a bustling city within a city.

The rhythm of campus is in full swing as the trees' green canopies transform before our eyes. My cotton spring attire gives way to wool sweaters and overcoats. The muffled whirr of landscapers blowing leaves can be heard in classrooms and during otherwise quiet walks across the pebbled walkways of campus. Thanksgiving offers the last rest

*continued on page 85*

**VJournal** *continued from page 11*

before the sprint down the homestretch to final exams and the winter holiday break.

By January, many freshmen—now wise of the ways of the University—contemplate changing their majors while seniors plan the next step. Faculty members and administrative leaders write letters of recommendations for those applying to graduate school and perhaps offer career advice to those they may have closely mentored.

Out of step with much of the rest of the world, spring on a college campus is a time to say goodbye. As the seniors study (or not) for what will truly be their final exams, crews begin pitching huge tents and arranging more than 23,000 chairs weeks in advance of Commencement. Soon some 2,800 graduates will realize the fruits of seeds they planted more than four years ago. By lunchtime on the first Friday of May, empty chairs and discarded programs will litter lawns across campus. By the following morning, the cycle that has come full circle 127 times to date will again have ended—and at precisely the same moment, a new one will have begun. ▼

**Shadow of the '90s** *continued from page 43*

are placed, although Shanks says Vanderbilt excludes from its investment portfolio “companies where what’s being done isn’t completely transparent.”

“Our goal is to maintain or increase the inflation-adjusted value both of the corpus and the annual transfer to the operating budget,” says Spitz. “Fundamentally, it’s about providing for future generations the same purchasing power that current generations enjoy, to earn the minimum return to preserve the inflation-adjusted value.”

Moody’s Investors Service has observed that in the past three years, private philanthropy increasingly favors colleges and universities that already are well endowed. In effect, success begets success. In that sense, Vanderbilt is well positioned and will continue to benefit from its ranking among institutions that measure their endowments in the billions.

At the same time, in 2001, Vanderbilt ranked 51st among like institutions based on the value of its endowment per student, widely acknowledged as a more targeted measure of an endowment’s impact. Endowment-per-student is an

indication of how much of the full cost of a student’s education can be underwritten by the endowment. A larger number indicates a university could cover a higher percentage of a student’s cost. In Vanderbilt’s case, according to the 2001–02 annual report, that was \$211,851 for each of its 10,194 total students. By comparison, Duke was at \$278,023 for each of its 11,263 students, and Harvard was at \$971,225 per each of its 18,012 students.

“The best measure of an institution isn’t the total of its endowment, but rather endowment assets per student,” says Spitz. Vanderbilt’s relatively low endowment-per-student ratio is just one of many challenges that keepers of the University’s endowment face in the coming decade.

“Are we fat and happy? No. It’s one of the reasons we must be diligent. And we must continue to be good stewards of our money,” says Shanks. “The next 10 years will be different. The period we saw in the ’90s won’t repeat itself, so it will be hard to have the kinds of endowment gains we’ve enjoyed. Having said that, we’re fast followers of viable market trends.” ▼

**In Class** *continued from page 28*

“The National Association for the Advancement of White People,” says Reno Wolfe, the president of the group, “was set up to get us back to the point where everyone is seen as created equal. ... We just want to return to the ideal in which racially based policies of affirmative action and special privileges and special programs of any kind which are given to anybody, no matter what their race, are viewed as contrary to the best interests of race relations here in America.”

Swain believes that for many white nationalists, something more sinister lies beneath the veneer of sweet reason. There are extremists who dream of a racial holy war, or a white-only nation where people of color are no longer welcome. But Swain is worried less about the lunatic fringe—the people who make no secret of their hate—than about the new-style leaders on the radical right who have found a set of issues to broaden their appeal.

The most volatile of those issues is affirmative action—those race-based preferences in hiring, government contracts and college

admissions that have been a part of public policy since the 1970s. White Americans overwhelmingly see the policy as wrong, a violation of the promise of Martin Luther King that the fundamental goal of the civil rights movement was a color-blind society where people were judged “not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character.” As Swain believes, social and economic forces are at work that add a level of urgency to the issue. Whites are a minority in many large cities, and according to current demographic projections, they will be a minority in the nation by the year 2050. Add to that a layer of economic uncertainty, and Swain is convinced that many white people are primed and ready for the message of extremists.

“The issues that the new white nationalists champion are also those that are on people’s minds,” she says. “They paint a picture that is very frightening, and my worry is that if whites get caught in identity politics—if they see themselves as a distinct racial group whose interests are ignored by their leaders and the government—they may be drawn to

the more extreme elements. They may feel like they have no other place to go.”

Swain’s solution is simple—and shocking to many white liberals and blacks who still see affirmative action as essential. She wants to abolish all race-based preferences, and more than that, she sees the need for a new way of thinking. She is impatient with African-Americans who are spending their energy on symbolic issues like the banning of the Confederate flag in public places. She also opposes the call for reparations, an idea that seems to be gaining momentum among an important segment of the black population. Swain says she understands the shameful history of slavery and the impulse to seek compensation. But those issues, she says, are bitterly divisive and ultimately irrelevant to the most urgent needs still facing black Americans.

In poor neighborhoods especially, there are life-and-death problems of crime and drugs and single-parent homes where children drift too often into trouble. But instead of searching for creative solutions, Swain main-

*continued on page 86*