Since long before Shakey Jake, distinctive figures have put their stamp on Michigan.
CHAPTER 1

Professor of Dust and Ashes

Long before Shakey Jake roamed Ann Arbor, students at Michigan conducted affairs of the heart with a series of men who took on the status of human landmarks.

One after another, they came to symbolize their eras in campus history. Aging alumni pondering their years at U-M were as likely to conjure an image of Uncle Jimmy Ottley or Railroad Jack as they were to think of Michigan Stadium or the Union tower.

The first was Pat Kelly, who made his appearance in campus lore at the very start.

How Kelly came to Ann Arbor has been lost to history, though his Irish lineage is obvious enough from his name. In the 1840s—the high tide of Irish emigration—he became the first janitor and all-around campus factotum just as the University’s first classes began along State Street.

The earliest students—all dozen or so of them—lived in rooms on the third floor of North Hall, which stood about where Mason Hall stands today. They swept their dirt into the hall, and Pat Kelly collected it—thus the title he soon acquired: “Professor of Dust and Ashes.”

The students had compulsory chapel at 5:30 a.m. It was Pat Kelly who got them there. One part of his job to ring a powerful bell, reputedly borrowed from the Michigan Central Railroad, that hung outside North Hall.

If that didn’t do the job, Pat’s own voice, said to be at least as loud as the bell, would burst upon them: “DID YEZ HEAR THE BELL?!”

He took his pay as a fraction of each student’s annual housing fee of $7.50. He also was entitled to a portion of the crops that grew on what would soon be known as the Diagonal.

All in all, Pat did all right, according to Andrew Ten Brook, one of the first faculty members, and he certainly suffered from no shortage of self-esteem.

“The place held by Patrick he deemed about equal to that of a professor,” Ten Brook recalled, “and doubtless its emolument, with the wheat crops (from the Campus), and other perquisites, was about as much as ours.

“He felt his oats. He read the books of the library. He rang the bell according to his convenience, rather than by his clock. If his pipe went out on his way to ring the bell, he went back and relighted it.”

CHAPTER 2

Uncle Jimmy

James Ottley was a cabin boy in the British navy, then a valet in the “great house” of a British lord, before he landed in Ann Arbor about when the Civil War was beginning.

He was Pat Kelly’s successor as campus janitor, but he lasted much longer than Kelly in U-M’s employ. Soon known as “Uncle Jimmy,” Ottley worked for U-M for half a century. He straddled the era of Michigan’s growth from a tiny frontier school to one of the country’s great universities.

For many years he carried firewood to campus stoves and cleaned. Then, after a trip home to England, he was judged unfit for heavy manual labor. So he was assigned to the post of “hat man” in the Library, checking students’ hats and coats for 18 years more. Every year the students pitched in to pay for Uncle Jimmy’s Thanksgiving turkey.

He didn’t need the help. When he died in 1910, a little safe he kept was found to hold $14,000 in savings.
The Medical Department of the 1800s kept time by a bell rung by Gregor Nagele, who came to the U.S. from Germany in the immigrant surge that followed the failed democratic revolutions of 1848.

With many other Germans, Nagele, just 18 when he arrived, made his way to Ann Arbor. He found work as a laborer with the crews that built U-M's first Medical Building, then stayed on to work as janitor, bell-ringer, and—most significantly—procurer of cadavers for the Medical Department.

In the 1800s, there were no standard procedures for donating bodies for scientific study. So medical faculties had little choice but to use any means, fair or foul, to dig them up. Every medical school employed one or two men with the contacts and the savvy to manage this dirty and illegal work. Nagele was Michigan's indispensable man of this type for many years.

He reportedly had close knowledge of the re-purposing of at least 2,000 corpses. Sometimes this entailed a brush with the law, but usually he skirted serious trouble. Dean Victor Vaughan later noted, with keen appreciation, that Nagele could trade barbs and jokes with American medical students all day long; yet “when placed on the witness stand Nagele lost absolutely all knowledge of the English language; he could neither speak it nor understand it.”

In time, Nagele became an assistant in the dissection of the corpses he had helped to secure. In time he was so expert that students and faculty alike began to call him “Doc.” He worked closely with Michigan's Corydon Ford, one of the era's great professors of anatomy. Dean Vaughan said: “It is doubtful if Professor Ford ever had among his students one who became more proficient in practical anatomy than was the old janitor of the Medical Building.”

In the 1890s, the regents tried to put Nagele out to pasture. They said he had grown too feeble for his duties as janitor, and there was no longer a need for a bell-ringer, since the new campus clock chimed the passing of every hour.

When the medical faculty learned of the regents’ decision, they declared en masse that they were quite unable to hear the clock's chimes. Doc Nagele was soon reinstated. He lived on—and rang his bell—until July 1900.
The remarkable character known as Railroad Jack first stepped off a freight car in Ann Arbor in 1896. A slim fellow in his 30s, with straggling black hair, he was “arrogant, agnostic, defiant, and loved the sound of his own voice,” according to one who knew him.

He found his way to the campus and announced himself as the “World’s Champion History Expert.” He lectured for a few minutes, then challenged students to ask him a question about world history that he couldn’t answer.

How old was Mary, Queen of Scots, at the time of her execution? He knew. (Forty-four.)

What two major events happened in 1648? He knew. (The Treaty of Westphalia and the end of the Thirty Years’ War.)

Who was the most important person who died in 1820? He knew. (Britain’s King George III.)

And so Railroad Jack made his living for nearly 40 years. Sometimes he’d take up a collection at the end of the gig. Sometimes he’d make it a betting proposition.

Born Harry Cooper in 1863, he was said to have taken half the courses for a medical degree in Chicago; switched to journalism; published a small newspaper; then pitched conventional pursuits to live off his extraordinary memory for trivia.

He was called “the Curbstone Orator,” a “wandering human history book,” and “the Intellectual Hobo.” He rode the rails from one Midwestern college town to another, but he made Ann Arbor his headquarters. He crammed in the U-M Library, spending hours on end in the reference collection to soak up facts.

“There are 100,000 characters in history,” he would say, “and I can tell something about 5,000 of them. The average person can’t name more than 100.”

He said he had a photographic memory, but he was as mystified by his power of recall as anyone who tried to stump him. He claimed to have willed his brain to the Michigan Medical School so that some anatomist could discover his secret.

He died alone in Coldwater, Michigan, in 1933. A Catholic priest, a friend of Jack’s, brought him back to Ann Arbor for burial, brain and all.
CHAPTER 5

Andy Gump

In the 1920s, the U-M campus, like the rest of the country, was swamped with automobiles. In puttering Ford Model Ts and fancy Stutz Bearcats, students jammed city streets, necked in quiet lanes, and raced on country roads. The mayhem ranged from parking hassles to occasional fatalities.

A “Safety First” campaign went nowhere. A partial ban was ineffective. Finally President Clarence Cook Little decreed in 1927 that “no student…shall operate any motor vehicle.” But there were exceptions—students who needed a car for a job; older students, etc.—and students concocted endless ruses to skirt the complicated rules.

The job of enforcement fell to two overworked traffic cops hired by the University. One of the two became the guy all student drivers loved to hate—Chester Youngs, whose face and extremely tall and skinny frame so resembled the famous comic-strip character Andy Gump that students conferred that name on him.

Patrolling by motorcycle, he did his job with an “easy-going philosophy, geniality, and interest in students,” and in time he became a favorite. A writer of Michigan Daily doggerel composed an elegy that read in part:

So Andy won his place on the force
By patience and persistence
With the aid of a figure nobly shaped
To cut down wind resistance.
Our hero isn’t a social climber
In appearance unpretentious
But when it comes to stopping cars
He’s doggone conscientious.
A mug of beer to Officer Youngs!
Come gather round the pump.
Come, bottlemen of Michigan,
A health to Andy Gump!

Gradually, the car craze slowed down and the campus adjusted to life with autos. By 1930, Youngs remarked, “The only excitement around here is when a professor forgets whether he brought his car or not…”

But that fall, a student driver veered into the cop’s path on Observatory Street, and the crash cost Youngs his right leg below the knee. Students contributed to a fund to pay for a prosthetic limb, and Youngs worked on at the University in a new job.

CHAPTER 6

Mr. Tibbals

Truman Tibbals was a young man when he bought Drake’s Sandwich Shop from its founder in the 1920s. The fact may astound Michigan alumni, if only because, to those who remember Drake’s, it must seem inconceivable that Mr. Tibbals was ever young.

He and his wife, Millie, maintained Drake’s pretty much as they’d found it for nearly 60 years. It was an emporium of small, sweet pleasures—pecan rolls, special candies, fresh limeade. Mr. Tibbals, by contrast, looked like a man who had never tasted sugar. He was small and silent. He kept a grim eye on his student staff from a perch in the corner, and if he suspected loitering, he might swat his cane on the counter.

But Mr. T had his admirers. Student staff testified to the quiet support they received from Mr. and Mrs. Tibbals, who taught good work habits and sometimes helped students to pay their tuition.

Mr. Tibbals was a favorite of the Ann Arbor police. He did his bookkeeping late at night, and he left the back door unlocked for cops on the midnight shift. They’d step inside to make themselves a sundae or have a piece of pie. When they’d go to settle their bill, Tibbals charged less to his favorites. In time, the Police Department’s code for taking a break was “709”—the address at Drake’s.

Tibbals died in 1994, and the old Drake’s storefront on North University, much mourned, gave way to a franchise operation.
Most of the facts of Jake Woods’s life were unstable, starting with his nickname.

He was known universally as “Shakey Jake,” but connoisseurs of Jake lore insisted the nickname was actually “Shakin’ Jake,” the stage name of his years playing blues guitar.

But had he ever really been a musician? That was hard to credit, given the tuneless music he made with a half-strung guitar and a voice ravaged by decades of smoking. (He said he’d picked up the habit at the age of one, though his mother didn’t allow cigarettes in the house.)

News reports traced his arrival in Ann Arbor to the 1972 Blues and Jazz Festival, but Jake sometimes said he’d come to town much earlier — after his time in New Orleans, where he’d hitch-hiked as a two-year-old (by himself) from his birthplace, Little Rock, Ark. And after Saginaw, Michigan, his last stopping point before Ann Arbor.

Whenever and why he came to town, he liked it and he stayed.

He was a man of the streets but not a street person. Starting with the sun and striding on into the evening, he roamed the campus and downtown Ann Arbor, moving fast from one favorite haunt to another.

“On the move, on the move,” he would rasp, crossing streets, swinging down sidewalks, greeting strangers, turning in at stores owned by friends and at restaurants where something warm was waiting.

He always dressed to kill, from bow tie to fur-trimmed coats to polished white shoes. He lived in a series of apartments, supported by Social Security, the kindness of friends, and the sale of his own image on t-shirts and bumper stickers that said: “I Brake for Jake!”

Somehow the combination of man and milieu worked out.

“I’ve built a thing here,” he told the Ann Arbor News columnist Jo Collins Mathis in 1999. “I’m going to stay and I’m going to live forever. Ann Arbor is nothing but a playhouse for me.”

He died in September 2007. He was probably 82. He had said he was 104. And born on Halloween.

—James Tobin


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