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It might be the biggest topic of conversation in town.

Missouri’s in the Southeastern Conference now. What do you think?

It is a major move. Moving from the Big Eight to the Big 12 wasn’t really a move, was it? It just meant adding a few new opponents.

But sliding into the SEC means adding ALL new opponents. The defending national champion Alabama Crimson Tide will be coming to Columbia this fall. Kansas will not — for only the second time since 1891 — be on Missouri’s schedule.

(The 1918 Missouri-Kansas football game was canceled due to a flu outbreak. The reason that there won’t be a 2012 Missouri-Kansas game depends on whom you ask.)

But back to the future. Missouri and Texas A&M are the 13th and 14th members of the SEC — a conference that produced the last six football NCAA National Champions.

(The list - Alabama, 2011; Auburn, 2010; Alabama, 2009; Florida, 2008; LSU, 2007 and Florida, 2006.)

Even so, the SEC is a neighborhood that most Missouri fans are unfamiliar with.

So we went for some visits. This spring, the Missourian sent reporters with notebooks and camera phones to every SEC city. The assignment was simple: Find out what it was like there. Emily Becker, Katy Bergen, Ben Frederickson, Harry Plumer, Tony Schick and Andrew Wagaman hit the road and checked out the towns and campuses.

Most made visits to two or even three of the SEC towns. They shot some guns, ate some crawfish, listened to the music and the stories. They stood in the shadow of Strom Thurmond’s statue, wandered through the Alabama football museum, looked at some alligators and visited William Faulkner’s home.

They would want me to tell you that they had a blast.

But I’m pretty sure that you’ll see that in their stories and their snapshots.
Names and years etched in brick lead away from the front steps of Old Main on the campus of the University of Arkansas. Each graduate, from 1876 to present day, has his or her name carved into five miles worth of sidewalk on campus.

A custom cake awaits delivery in the back of Rick’s Bakery in Fayetteville. Rick’s is the only bakery in Fayetteville licensed to use the Razorback logo on its products.
Hills and hogs dominate in Fayetteville

Harry Plumer, reporting from Fayetteville, Arkansas

On the east side of Mount Sequoyah, a low cloud has turned the sunrise into nothing more than a faint orange glow. The flatlands and foothills below are sparsely populated.

It’s 6:46 a.m.

To the west, the city of Fayetteville is bathed in gray. Sunlight has yet to make its way over the mountaintop. A few scattered clouds cling low to the horizon. It will be a beautiful early spring day in northwest Arkansas.

People get married on top of Sequoyah. There’s a church retreat as well.

Overlooking a city of about 70,000 people, Skyline Drive is without car horns or city chatter. The trees are your company, along with the giant cross that sits atop the look-out point.

This mountaintop solitude is disturbed by a woman who pulls up in a silver Toyota Rav4. Cup of coffee in hand and windows cracked, perhaps this is her moment of clarity and sanity before a tough day.

Whatever it is, she doesn’t want to talk. “I’m only here for the view,” she says.

People don’t come to the top of Sequoyah to be bothered. Not when you can look down and see downtown, the square and Old Main, the University of Arkansas’ signature building, situated on another hill across the city.

Beyond the first set of hills the land is perfectly flat, leading the 20 miles or so to the Oklahoma border. Fayetteville might be a southern town nestled in the Ozarks, but it’s surprisingly close the great plains of the Southwest.

The woman in the Rav4 pulls out of the parking lot. The city starts to stir.

Liars table

At Rick’s Iron Skillet, the “liar’s table” is the one right next to the cash register. That’s where Jim Slavens, a self-admitted “hateful old SOB” holds court with his buddies.

On this Friday morning, he is accompanied by Robert Cook and Don Paschal.

For 47 years, these men, and others from the rural areas just outside Fayetteville, have been coming to the location now known as Rick’s to sit at vinyl-covered tables, harass the waitresses and drink their coffee.

“The bullshit’s deep here,” Paschal says.

Slavens, retired from a career in construction, moonlights as a wildlife trapper. On this morning, as he sips his coffee, a live coyote lies in a rusty cage in the bed of his pickup truck.

Fayetteville wasn’t always the bustling college town it is today. It only takes a 10-minute drive in any direction but north to realize there is still a country feel to northwest Arkansas.

“This used to be a real, good old redneck town,” Slavens says. “So many people come from other places and want to change everything. Now you can’t hardly find a place to throw an empty beer bottle without hitting something.”

The sentiment is the same at the White Star, a small bar in south Fayetteville, just across from the Tyson chicken plant. It’s the kind of place where older men drink canned beer while being serenaded by David Allan Coe over the jukebox.

The kind of place where the smell of stale cigarettes permeates everything. Smoke and age have yellowed the pages of the tattered old books on the shelf next to the door. Street signs on the walls notify customers they are at the corner of “Bullshit Blvd.” and “Retired and Broke Dr.” Old Tyson nametags are scattered as well. Apparently Wayne, Robert, Mark, Nevin, Jim and Tabitha don’t need them anymore.

Northwest Arkansas was built by Wal-Mart Stores Inc., Tyson and J.B. Hunt, a transportation company. As those three grew alongside the university, Fayetteville transformed into the medium-sized city it is today.

That’s why, when he finishes his coffee at Rick’s, and when the men inside the White Star finish their beers, they head back out to surrounding areas such as Farmington or Elkins.

Fayetteville no longer belongs to them.

Up on the hilltop

Walking in Fayetteville is a workout.

In a city dominated by two large hills, going anywhere on foot challenges a pedestrian’s calf and quadricep strength. For those without vehicles, tired legs could easily become a daily occurrence.

Nestled between the hills is Fayetteville’s downtown, are a smattering of shops, restaurants and bars in old brick edifices that could be in any college town.

What distinguishes Fayetteville is the ubiquitous Razorback gear: T-shirts, posters and signs.

The home of the city’s most delicious hamburgers sits completely underground. Eleven
steps lead down from Block Avenue into Hugo’s, a Fayetteville establishment since 1977. Exposed piping hangs over diners as they sample the midday fare that includes Hugo’s specialty — the burger, but also the classic southern staple — Po’ Boy sandwiches, along with crepes and salads.

The décor is eclectic to say the least, a classic example of quantity over quality that includes a random selection as diverse as old portraits and a “Kangaroo Crossing” sign. The only consistency: Razorbacks signs, which can be found on every wall.

Eating a big lunch is an easy mistake to make when the burgers are as juicy as Hugo’s, but it’s a poor plan if you have ambitions to walk uphill to campus.

“The hills are part of what define Fayetteville,” says Lincoln McCurdy, the kitchen manager at Hugo’s. “You eventually get used to it, but at first, it’s pretty rough.”

The route from Hugo’s to the heart of campus is a little less than a mile up Dickson Street, the heart of Fayetteville’s nightlife and bar scene. The in-shape crowd might call it a nice stroll. Others would consider it more of a hike.

It takes 20 minutes to reach the massive red brick building that houses classrooms and offices and displays the seal of the University of Arkansas.

Old Main is a classic 19th century collegiate building. Two towers rise from its north and south ends, the latter sporting a clock on its east face. Ninety windows and a giant white door face a large courtyard to the east as well.

At the bottom of the steps, the year 1876 is carved in the sidewalk, and under it, nine names. These are the first graduates of the University of Arkansas. Leading away from Old Main, every graduate’s name from 1876 to the present is etched into stone over the course of almost five miles of sidewalk.

As the sun begins to set behind Old Main’s south tower, the green grass of the courtyard and the names on the sidewalk are awash in a golden light. It is easy to see why students would want to come to school in such a beautiful place.

### Proud athletic tradition

Baum Stadium, home of the Razorbacks baseball team, is a short drive from the heart of campus.

While football and basketball are the most popular sports on campus, the strong affinity for Arkansas baseball is unique.

The stadium, which could easily be mistaken for AAA-level ballpark, holds 8,237 maroon seats, but it’s the 2,500 fans on the grass berm in the outfield that make Baum Stadium the liveliest place in Fayetteville during the spring.

Fans bring coolers full of beer and make use of the charcoal grills scattered about the area, turning what baseball fans might consider to be the worst seats in the house into a tailgate party.

The team is no slouch either, with seven trips to the College World Series to its credit.

Driving away from the stadium, though, it’s still clear that even though it’s March, all eyes are focused on August, and football season, despite the fact that the Razorbacks basketball team is still playing.

“That’s the thing that sets Fayetteville apart, we’ve got no (major) pro teams.”

Razorbacks fandom isn’t limited to Fayetteville either. Lucas Bauer, a student at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith, says the Hogs gospel is preached statewide.

“It doesn’t matter where you go to school,” Bauer says. “Everyone in Arkansas is a Razorbacks fan.”

Rick Boone, owner and proprietor of Rick’s Bakery, went as far as to become the only bakery in town that has licensed the Arkansas logo.

“It’s kind of a pain and it costs,” Boone says. “But, ultimately we’re the only ones so it’s worth it.”

Rick’s uses the logo on top of its cakes and cookies, but its specialty is the petit fours, French for “small cake.” Vanilla icing surrounds delectably moist white cake, topped of course, with a miniature Razorback.
Amanda Hancock, an Arkansas student from St. Louis, says the tradition in Fayetteville far outweighs anything she would have experienced had she stayed in-state.

“The tailgating, the tradition, the culture of the SEC, Missouri doesn’t really have that,” Hancock says.

“The entire city revolves around this campus and the entire state focuses in on this city.”

High priced whiskey, low-priced beer

The sign hangs above the bar at Grub’s just off Dickson Street.

“Countdown to Arkansas football season,” it reads. There are 182 days and some change remaining.

Underneath the sign, Jordan Pridgin leans against a pole. Dressed in a checked blue Polo dress shirt, whiskey and “coke” in hand, it’s not a stretch to guess he is in a fraternity.

“Sigma Nu,” he says.

According to the University of Arkansas website, 22 percent of students belong to Greek organizations, exactly on par with the most recent statistics available from MU.

“There’s a lot of support behind it,” Pridgin says. “The houses here are very prestigious.”

Prestigious enough, says Pridgin, that they require a very specific and strict dress code. Emblems on shirts are discriminated against — moose (Abercrombie), seagulls (Hollister) and eagles (American Eagle) are all no-no’s. Horses (Polo) and whales (Vineyard Vines) are the preferred brands.

Jeans are watched closely as well: The rule of thumb is to keep it simple: Any sort of designer brand is frowned upon.


On Dickson Street itself is Shotz! — a Fayetteville tradition. Brightly lit inside, chalkboards line the walls and provide a list of the miniature liquid refreshments customers can sample. Two fake palm trees sponsored by Corona hang over the heads of the masses inside. At the far end, one chalkboard lists the “Shots of the SEC.”

The last stop on a night out in Fayetteville is the crowded Z330. Enter before midnight and the bar colloquially known as “Z’s,” is deserted, but for the late night crowd, it becomes a mass of humanity.

Getting to the restroom requires shoveling and the occasional thrown elbow, and ordering a drink can take what feels like an eternity. Z’s knows its role. The bartenders, some of whom don’t even report for duty until 12:30 a.m., wear T-shirts with the following on the back: “You may not start here, but you’ll always end here.”

But there was one more place to visit in Fayetteville before this day ended.

Mountaintop hop

Darkness has long set in, and upcoming dawn is closer than the night’s sunset.

It’s 2:56 a.m.

The hills to the west of Sequoyah are merely shadows, illuminated only by the lights of the city’s major thoroughfares.

Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard cuts a white swath in between two hills, leading west 25 miles to Oklahoma.

The few that are still awake are students — probably pouring out of Waffle House or Jimmy John’s, the two staples of drunk-en late-night snacks on Dickson Street.

There is no woman in a Rav4 at this hour. No one walking their dogs, no churchgoers on their way to a service and no couples up here to take romantic photos.

At this hour, on top of Sequoyah, there is peace.

This is the Fayetteville men like Jim Slavens are looking for.

Silhouetted against the sky, the light towers of Donald W. Reynolds Razorback Stadium rise above the hill on which campus sits, looming in the distance.
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The Texas A&M Corps of Cadets hold their “Final Review” on May 5 on Kyle Field. Texas A&M was strictly a military school until 1965. The Cadets remain an important part of the school’s identity.

Twelve portals surround the Bonfire Memorial. They represent the number of Texas A&M students who lost their lives in the collapse of the annual bonfire in 1999. It was one of the school’s most cherished traditions. The bonfire continues as an unsanctioned event.
In Aggieland, tradition runs deep

Andrew Wagaman, reporting from College Station, Texas

Neon beer lights reflect off the glass encasing two rattlesnakes and a couple cow skulls. Pool players with a cue in one hand and a Shiner Bock in the other examine the table before their next shot.

Beneath a speaker that buzzes between country tunes, Wes Toms is fixin’ to get all worked up.

“This — Is — What — It’s — About!” Toms hollers. His buddy Clinton Kasprzyk leans back on a pool table and watches Toms like a rerun of some timeless sitcom.

“The Chicken — Is — Aggieland!”

Welcome to The Dixie Chicken, the watering hole just ‘cross the street from Texas A&M University. Heck, Welcome to College Station! Welcome to Aggieland!

“The Chicken,” as Aggies (past and present Texas A&M students) call it, claims to sell more beer per square foot than any bar in America. Hungry? Try the Death Burger or the Tijuana Fries. Head back to the patio and chuck that bottle cap into the side lane, “Bottle Cap Alley,” where boots make less of a click-clack than a metallic crunch. Stop by again during the week for a dominoes tournament.

“If you want to be modern,” says Toms, a 2002 A&M graduate and Beeville, Texas, native, “don’t come here.”

Kasprzyk laughs and chimes in. A first generation Aggie (something of a rare bird) who graduated in 2000, he says his initial experience at “The Chicken” convinced him to come to A&M.

“I visited UT (University of Texas) first and didn’t like it,” says the native of Kenedy, Texas, a place he jokes you know is small because of the one ‘n.’ “Then I walked into here and saw the pool tables and the boots and whatnot. I said, ‘Oh my God, this is it.’”

“UT people like to think the only reason people go to A&M is because they couldn’t get in there,” he adds. “No. I chose to be an Aggie.”

As Texas A&M also transitions from the Big 12 to the Southeastern Conference, Aggies love to share with outsiders what makes College Station singular.

Before any of the tradition, there was the town of Bryan.

In the mid-19th century, the town apparently had a wild streak to it. A site for a land grant school was chosen five miles south, according to the “Guide to Historic Brazos County,” to avoid the “immoral influence of Bryan’s saloons and gambling halls.”

College Station didn’t officially become Bryan’s twin town until 1938, once the community around the college had spread to Bryan’s border. After Texas A&M made the Corps of Cadets voluntary in 1965, enrollment skyrocketed. As College Station prospered, downtown Bryan fell somewhat into neglect.

In the last decade, the historic district has been refurbished, and today buildings such as the LaSalle Hotel, the Queen Theater and Howell Grocery give Main Street a charming ambiance. It’s a popular area to take vintage-looking prom photos.

Bryan has the more hip downtown. It hosts the “Downtown Street and Art Festival” in late March and attracts the college crowd with its monthly “First Fridays,” which feature movies in Sale Park and live music at different places around town.

College Station bars ban smoking, but Bryan bars allow it after 10 p.m., and the Bryan police have a reputation for being more lenient than their College Station counterparts.

On West 26th Street is The Village Cafe, which Texas Monthly has called “as close to an Austin experience as you’re going to get in the Bryan-College Station area.” Tonight a band called Tubie and the Touchstones plays before a night of salsa dancing. The walls are plastered with local art, including a “concept art” gallery from an art visualization school titled, “Teamma Bubba Nebula presents Hansel and Gretel in Outer Space.”

“Future Pixar employees,” the bartender suggests as she pours a Dulce de Latte with caramel and vanilla.

Behind her is the cafe’s signature touch. Five clocks line the wall, and they all tell the same time. The point of the quirky display is that the Village Cafe doesn’t have to import its produce from different time zones — everything it sells is from local towns, Bryan included.

The Bryan clock, she says, has a tendency to jump ahead of the others.

Before she helps run the dance later, Genevieve Genest sits at the bar with a drink. She had taken her last final at Texas A&M that morning and would graduate the following week with an environmental geosciences degree.

Genest wears her Aggie Ring, a class ring that students get after they’ve completed 90 credits and often wear for the rest of their lives. She cares less about what the eagle, the five stars and the 13 lines of a shield on the ring all symbolize than the general sense of accomplishment.

The ring also exemplifies one of the more practical benefits of Aggie Spirit. While working in Houston last summer, Genest was often approached by other businesspeople on the train who also wore the ring.

“It really is a powerful tool for networking,” she said. “People see the ring, and it immediately strikes up conversation.”

On the east end of campus, time is
The Corps make up about 5 percent of the 50,000-person student body today, but their role has not changed. Most traditions originated and continue to be driven by the Corps, from leading “Midnight Yell” (glorified pep rallies before home football games) to Aggie Muster, the annual ceremony for students who have died in the last year.

First pass is for the the seniors, and it is their last before they graduate from the Corps. On the second pass, about an hour later, the graduating seniors stand along the side and face the three remaining classes, which have assumed their new class rank and salute their predecessors as they pass.

The hour in between the two passes, though, connects everything.

It starts when the seniors march off Kyle Field. Postures become less rigid, and they drop tunnel-vision stares to meet the eyes of others. Some don’t really slow their pace even though they finally can, but some of those who do look a little lost in their idleness. The cadets return to their dorms and change. The graduating seniors remove their tan Class B summer shirt and wear their specific outfit T-shirt. They have catchphrases such as “In time of peace, prepare for war.”

The new seniors get to finally sport their boots. Most ordered the boots, which usually cost more than $1,000, as freshmen. They are the most recognizable and distinctive feature of the Cadets uniform. Graduating seniors, each with cigars in their mouths and many garrison caps replaced with cowboy hats, take group pictures on the Quad.

Under one tree, Luke and Landon Ellis wait to meet their family. Even without the boots, sophomore Landon Ellis is a little taller than his big brother, a graduating senior. They are both members of the Fightin’ Texas Aggie marching band, the largest military marching band and the “pulse of Aggieland.” Landon carries two cymbals in one hand and a drum on his left hip.

Once they finish taking pictures, cadets and their families amble across Spence Park back across Kyle Field.

The Chicken is home to one of the school’s most famous, though unofficial, traditions. Once many students earn their Aggie Ring, first introduced in 1894, they dunk them into pitchers of beer on the back patio of The Chicken and chug until nothing’s left but the ring.

Understand, Toms says: So much of what makes College Station distinctive happens outside of town. It’s that moment, riding the train in Houston or walking down a street in San Francisco or sitting at a gate in Paris’ Charles De Gaulle International Airport, that an Aggie will spot the class ring on another’s hand.

They ask, “What year?” That’s all. It covers introductory pleasantries.

“You see the ring, and — You— Are— Instantly— In,” Toms says. He pauses. “In that exchange, you know the guy.”

Across the grass of Kyle Field, the austere, triple-deck football stadium at Texas A&M, men in uniform march. These uniforms consist of garrison caps and calf-skin leather boots instead of cleats and helmets. Older men in fancier uniforms study them from the sideline. Monosyllable commands stir and then restore the order, and a drum beats — again and again and again.

The Corps make up about 5 percent of the 50,000-person student body today, but their role has not changed. Most traditions originated and continue to be driven by

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**Texas A&M University**

**Tailgating area:** Spence Park and surrounding parking lots

**Setup:** Students spend most of their tailgating hours by Spence Park. The grassy area is home to tents and games of cornhole.

**Town population:** 93,857

**Stadium capacity:** 83,002
Do you like to eat?

- Yes
- No

- Are you crazy?
- Yes
- Seek help.

- Are you lazy?
- Yes
- No

- Are you hungry?
- Yes
- No

- On a diet?
- Yes
- No

- Schnucks has lots of healthy options!

- All of them!
- Yes
- No

- Head over to Schnucks!
- Yes
- No

- Let Schnucks cook for you!
- Yes
- No

- Dinner?
- Yes
- No

- Our snack assortment is huge!
- Yes
- No

- Check out Schnucks Bakery!
- Yes
- No

- Lunch?
- Yes
- No

- Check out our prepared foods!
- Yes
- No

- Breakfast?
- Yes
- No

- Do you miss mom cooking for you?
- Yes
- No

- Are you a snacker?
- Yes
- No

- Are you a snacker for every meal?
- Yes
- No

- Do you have a favorite meal?
- Yes
- No

- What's your deal?
- Yes
- No

- No
- Yes

- Yes
- No

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The Walk of Champions marks the entry point to The Grove in Oxford, Miss. The Grove consists of oak, elm and magnolia trees on approximately 10 acres in the heart of Ole Miss’ campus. Every inch is necessary, because the popular tailgating spot is packed during football games.

A second-story window of Square Books overlooks the Double Decker arts festival taking place in Oxford’s Townhouse Square on April 28.

*Locations are approximate

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Weekends mean football, Faulkner

Ben Frederickson, reporting from Oxford, Mississippi

The chubby-cheeked man steps onto the stage on North Lamar Boulevard. He turns to face the crowd that has filled the street and spilled over onto the sidewalks to hear the first-year Ole Miss head football coach speak.

“Well, you know we can’t start this afternoon off without this,” Hugh Freeze says.

Then he asks the question that starts the chant.

“ARE YOU READY?”

The crowd answers …

“HELL YEAH! DAMN RIGHT!”

Coach and crowd join together now …

“HOTTY TODDY GOSH ALMIGHTY WHO THE HELL ARE WE?”

“FLIM-FLAM!”

“BIM-BAM!”

“OLE MISS BY DAMN!”

And then everyone says …

“WHOOOO!”

This is the loudest the Double Decker Arts Festival gets. For most of the afternoon, the crowd had spread out as people made their way in and out of the tan and white tents set up in Oxford’s Courthouse Square. Locals and visitors mixed together like cocktail ingredients as they tried to eat (fried catfish and hush puppies) and shop (birdhouses with wild-colored jewelry and handmade scarves that flutter in the wind) while staying out of the way of the festival’s namesake, the big red bus that crawls down the streets.

Mothers and daughters in their short sun-dresses, distracted fathers and sons in their collared shirts and loafers. A rough-looking singer performed “Back Door Man” and a little bare-bottomed boy, pants down around his ankles, sprinted away from his embar-

rassed mother.

The “Hotty Toddy” chant is louder than all of that. The Rebel fans clap when it ends. Then they quiet down quickly because Freeze is starting his address.

He doesn’t say “damn” or “hell” again. Instead he delivers a message about how “love” and “faith” will return greatness to program that finished last season 2-10.

Freeze gives IMPORTANT words more EMPHASIS, and even when his voice cracks, he never loses his delivery, a pattern of speech that sounds like …

“He’s preaching!” someone says.

“Here’s where our program is right now,” Freeze says. “We are in the wilderness. That’s where we are. That’s the facts. NOW we can either stay in the wilderness and talk about how scary it is because it’s DARK and there’s BIG BEARS there and MONSTERS there. OR we can unite in LOVE and FAITH with a great attitude and start chopping down some trees to work out of that wilderness. And that’s what our team and our staff is all about!”

Later in the evening, Thomas DeBray, a lawyer who graduated from Ole Miss before going to law school at Alabama, will wonder if this preacher-like coach is tough enough to match up against the other Southeastern Conference coaches, especially hard-as-nails Alabama coach Nick Saban.

“I’m a Christian,” DeBray says. “And I love Jesus. But I’ve got to know my coach can reach down and scare a 19-year-old kid.”

Concerns about Freeze’s grit were not voiced during the afternoon. Instead, signs of support were in the Square long before the coach appeared. Those who walked past Square Books — the mecca of Southern literature that has a whole section dedicated to Oxford’s most famous writer, William Faulkner — and stopped at the tent outside of Emileigh’s Bakery, saw a display from painter Thomas Grosskopf.

The 2012 Ole Miss graduate had named his most recent painting in honor of the coach. The piece showed Colonel Reb — the white-haired, plantation owner that was the Ole Miss mascot until 2003 — standing atop a pile of dead animals with a rifle in his hands. Two tigers, an elephant and a gator immediately catch the eye. Every other SEC mascot was also included somewhere in the bloody massacre.

Grosskopf named the painting “Freeze Warning” because he hopes his new coach will get Ole Miss to the top of the pile again. And the way Freeze is talking now, powerful words booming from his chest, it seems like the man is going to deliver or die trying.

He is making men nod their heads and say things like, “Yeah!”

He makes one woman shout, “I love you, Hugh!”

The coach hits his crescendo …

“The result of this journey is gonna be YOU and I and OUR PLAYERS leaving Vault-Hemingway stadium, Doc Hollingsworth Field absolutely giddy over what you just saw our football team do there,” Freeze says. “And we’re going to go to the Grove and have one heck of a party!”

Andrew Gordon isn’t partying. He’s sitting in the shaded Grove at a picnic table that has a heart carved in it.

“I love coming here,” he says of the 10-acre lawn that holds more than 50 oak, elm and magnolia trees.

It was 1995 when Gordon moved to Oxford from upstate New York to study piano. He
stayed because the town is a good place for musicians. Between playing at churches and working on his own music, he remains so busy that a relaxing, quiet lunch in the Grove sounded better than the mayhem of Double Decker.

On Saturdays in the fall, this place becomes unrecognizable. Tents occupy every inch of every acre. High heels (people dress up here) and spilled booze kill most of the grass. Groundskeepers pull stripped chicken bones from the tufts that remain.

“It’s kind of like the Gold Rush,” Gordon says.

But today the Grove is calm. A soft wind rattles green leaves. The sunlight hits big, thick tree trunks with its golden beams.

It’s hard to accept the fact that such an ugly incident happened just a short walk away.

The Lyceum has been around as long as Ole Miss itself, one of the first few buildings constructed after the Mississippi State Legislature approved the plan to start a university in 1844. Four years later, 80 students entered Mississippi’s first public institution of higher learning. Today, the building is a welcoming place, the home to the chancellor and provost’s office. But a thin coat of paint on the columns out front hides the bullet holes from 50 years ago.

In 1962, Mississippi Gov. Ross Barnett refused the federal government’s demands to allow an African-American student named James Meredith to enroll at Ole Miss. President John F. Kennedy, on television, told the nation that desegregation would occur by “whatever means necessary.”

Whatever means necessary meant 300 federal marshals were sent to Oxford to stop the rioting of thousands who had gathered outside the Lyceum to protest Meredith’s enrollment.

On the evening of Sept. 30, the mob turned chaotic.

Bricks flew through the air. Tear gas exploded. Guns fired.

Hundreds were arrested. Hundreds were wounded. Two men died.

The next day, Meredith, flanked by marshals, entered the Lyceum, enrolled and started school. He would graduate with a degree in political science.

Walking away from the Lyceum, down the straight path that points back toward the Square, it’s impossible to miss a second landmark. The stone tower that has been here since 1906 has a Confederate flag carved halfway up and a Confederate soldier at the top.

The monument is in honor of the scores of Ole Miss students who lost their lives after withdrawing from their classes to fight at Gettysburg.

So goes the great balancing act of the South. How do you preserve history without making accommodations for race-based hate?

The university is still trying to figure it out.

In an ongoing attempt to distance itself from traditions that have direct ties to racial insensitivity, Ole Miss administration has made the school band stop playing “From Dixie With Love” at football games due to the tradition of shouting “The South will rise again!” at the song’s end. The school has also banned the waving of Confederate flag, another game-day tradition of the past.

In 2003, Ole Miss underevoused Colonel Reb as its official mascot. It ceased the printing of his image in 2010 and tried to introduce a new mascot, The Rebel Black Bear. The move has been largely unpopular in Oxford.

Many Ole Miss fans have refused to let Colonel Reb be washed away. He is still plastered across any type of memorabilia that has room for his head. Grosskopf places the old man in his artwork. Last year, his painting of Colonel Reb standing over a dead black bear summed up his and many others’ feelings about the mascot swap.

“Colonel Reb represents Ole Miss as people around it think it should,” Grosskopf says.

“It’s not a race thing. It’s tradition.”

The concept is hard to grasp for an outsider. Understanding it in one day is difficult, like trying to climb the tallest tree in the Grove.

Rowan Oak is so quiet you feel guilty walking on the gravel.

Faulkner, who moved to Oxford as a boy, purchased the Greek revival home in 1930 and lived here with his wife and children until he died in 1962. Now operated by Ole Miss, the white, two-story house with symmetrical windows and green shutters seems frozen in time.

A typewriter sits on a shaky desk in his writing room. One can imagine the mustached man who won the 1947 Nobel Prize for literature sitting there, clicking away on the keys as he, with the help of the whiskey that he loved, turned experiences he had in Oxford into fictional accounts based in his often-used setting, Yoknapatawpha County.

“Beginning with ‘Satori’ I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it …” reads a Faulkner quote framed on the wall.

Living in Oxford helped Faulkner craft his words. It’s worked for countless others since.

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**University of Mississippi**

**Tailgating area:** The Grove

**Setup:** Beginning in 1950s, The Grove became a vibrant place for tailgating. Today, it has grown into a sea of red and blue tents. It holds around 25,000 at a given time. The Grove is filled with tailgaters and vendors serving up the best of Mississippi cooking. It is overseen by the Ole Miss Alumni Association Grove Society.

**Town population:** 18,916

**Stadium capacity:** 60,580
“The way it manifests itself isn’t a tourist thing,” ESPN senior writer and Oxford resident Wright Thompson says. “It isn’t a following-in-the-footsteps thing. But there is a line you can draw.”

Willie Morris, Larry Brown, Barry Hannah, Tom Franklin and many more have found success writing from or living in Oxford.

As the waves of writers have come in, the town Faulkner knew has changed. Writers now find a university town that offers a strong sense of place with few distractions. They find a place where the dialogue is sharper, the food tastes better and the music speaks in ways it hasn’t before.

Thompson was born and raised in Clarksdale, Miss. After graduating from the Missouri School of Journalism in 2001, he knew where he would end up making his permanent home.

“There are all sorts of places in Missouri where, if you were creative, you could come settle,” Thompson says. “If you’re from Mississippi, and you want to return to Mississippi, or if you’re of a certain mindset and want a certain group of friends, this is it.”

The Square is different come dark. Streets empty. Bars fill.

The white and tan tents have been loaded into vans and box trucks. Children who ran free early in the day now must hold their parents’ hands. Two cops ride horses. Another, standing near the entrance to Rooster’s Blues House, opens a can of Red Bull.

It’s not long before a young man with eyes as glossy as a magnolia leaf stumbles in the Square. His cell phone falls from his hand and skips along the ground like a rock. He struggles to bend down and pick it before disappearing into another bar for another drink. He has company.

At City Grocery, men and women sip whiskey beneath hanging ferns.

At The Library, Ole Miss students pay $20 to watch sports highlights on TV instead of seeing the free band just a block away. A bouncer wears a shirt that says “Ole Miss — The best five or six years of your life.”

At Frank & Marlee’s, a piano plays in the basement and pool tables are racked and re-racked upstairs. On a patio attached to the back, a lawyer who met his wife in an Ole Miss art appreciation class talks to a stranger about Hugh Freeze.

The Mississippi night wears on and the inebriated collegians start their late-night pilgrimage to the nearby Chevron gas station. The small store under the blue and red awning sells Natural Light 30 packs for $16.99.

But it’s too late to buy beer.

Instead they line up in front of a glass case and order Chicken-on-a-Stick. The skewers of golden fried goodness are placed in white paper sacks and handed over at the register. Grease soaks through the bags as the Rebels walk the University Avenue sidewalk toward a Sunday morning that seems to come earlier than it should.
The image of Mississippi State football coach Dan Mullen is displayed on the side of Davis Wade Stadium. Mullen was an offensive coordinator at Florida before taking over the Bulldogs in 2009.

Statues of Mississippi State bulldogs can be found all around the campus. During football games, the school’s live mascot, an English bulldog named Bully, watches from the field.
Boring is in the eye of the beholder

Ben Frederickson, reporting from Starkville, Mississippi

Sam Jones pulls his shoulder-length blond hair back into a ponytail and leans forward in the leather driver’s seat. The zombie target stands at the end of the gravel road. Jones points his .30-06 rifle out the window of his black sedan. He aims at the zombie’s head.

“You can’t be afraid of it,” he says to the newcomer about the gun’s kickback. “You just have to be like, I’m going to shoot a big bullet at a zombie. It’s the end of the world.”

Starkville, Miss., just got a lot more interesting.

Things had not started out this well.

The drive from Columbia to the hometown of Mississippi State University was a long one that went through a crowded mess of cars on Interstate 70 before turning southbound on Interstate 55, a drive so lonely some traffic of Mississippi State University was a long one that went through a crowded mess of cars on Interstate 70 before turning southbound on Interstate 55, a drive so lonely some traffic.

The exit sign for Starkville (people there say the “k” like a “r”) had been unremarkable enough that it was nearly missed. The car screeched sideways through the first turn of what felt like a 720-degree exit ramp before sanitariness and proper speed were restored.

Five hundred seventy-five miles, nine hours and one near-death experience.

And for what?

To see if what everyone said was true.

To see if, out of the 14 U.S. cities that have Southeastern Conference Schools, this town really was the most boring.

The woman behind the desk at Starkville’s Days Inn and Suites didn’t persuade anyone otherwise.

She answered a question about the town’s attractions by first saying what wasn’t an option.

“There’s no mall,” she said. “There’s a movie theater and a bowling alley. There’s the club scene. If you’re not into that there’s really not a lot to do.”

One thing she could offer was a breakfast recommendation for the morning.

“There’s a diner where a lot of people go . . .”

The Starkville Cafe was busy at 8 a.m.

The biggest commotion was when a group of old, stiff men got up from a table and shuffled toward the register in a race to pay the bill.

“Get the hell out of here or there’s gonna be a fight,” the winner said. No one believed him, but he got to pay anyway. It will be someone else’s turn next time.

“Most of the people in here, they’re sitting in the same place they do every day,” said John Peeples, the friendly man behind the counter.

Peeples is the owner of the Starkville Cafe. But he prefers to be called the caretaker. The restaurant has been here since 1945. After leaving his job as a Ducks Unlimited regional director, he has only been in charge of the cafe for three years.

“The town owns this restaurant more than I do,” Peeples said.

And the town was well represented on this Friday morning. There were policemen and farmers and even two Mississippi State football players. Every single person was friendly. But advice on things to do in Starkville was few and far between.

Someone recommended going to the Mississippi State baseball game. And that was about it.

“You’ll have to ask someone younger than me about the nightlife,” a short, stocky man said before tucking a post-breakfast pinch of tobacco into his lip.

That person was supposed to be Sam Jones. The Mississippi State junior is a friend of a friend’s cousin who had agreed to show a visitor around. But he hadn’t called.

The university’s campus would have to be explored alone.

Mississippi State’s campus is beautiful. Its buildings are big and made of traditional red brick that will never go out of style. The school’s white buses drive quietly as if not to disturb the chirping birds. Statues of the school mascot, a bulldog named Bully, seem to be waiting around every corner.

At Drill Field, the rectangular patch of grass at the heart of campus, members of the Air Force ROTC program marched under the careful supervision of their commander, Lt. Col. Robert Reed.

“This dates back to the history of this institution and our military tradition on campus,” Reed said when cadets in navy uniforms started leaving the field in all directions.

Mississippi State started as The Agricultural and Mechanical College of the State of Mississippi in 1878. It has since been through two name changes (Mississippi State College in 1932 and the current name in 1958). According to the Mississippi State Legislature, the land-grant university should offer training in “agriculture, horticulture and the mechanical arts ... without excluding other scientific and classical studies, including military tactics.”

The school’s first president, Stephen D. Lee, was a West Point graduate who served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. His 20-year tenure as the school’s top man ended in 1899, but remnants of the military-based atmosphere he created remained. The ROTC programs at the school remain popular, along with other staples of the school: science, math and agriculture.

This latter is why some people call Starkville a “cow town.” Mississippi State has embraced the label. At athletic events, fans ring cowbells in the stands.

Legend says the tradition came from an...
Mississippi State was playing hated rival Ole Miss when a cow interrupted the game. Mississippi State won after the cow was removed. The bells stuck around.

During the years, opponents have tried to get the cowbells banned. Their reasoning is understandable. Imagine the intimidating sound a crowd of rowdy Bulldog fans could make rattling their cowbells all at once.

Knowing where to go after touring campus is when things can get tough. Luckily, the arrival of a black sedan at a barbecue shack called “Petty’s” erased the problem.

A tall young man with long, blond hair and Ray-Ban Sunglasses stepped out.

Sam Jones was sorry he couldn’t meet up sooner. He’d slept in.

But he could give his tour of Starkville now.

As he drove, he pointed out buildings that went unrecognized before. There were the popular bars (Mugshots and Zorba’s) and a good place to hear live music (Dark Horse Tavern).

While he steered, he explained his love-hate relationship with the South.

Part of him is tired of this place. He doesn’t like the way people here look at his hair. He doesn’t like the way they judge his music (not country). He has an internship at a music magazine in New York this summer. He can’t wait.

But he knows he will miss it here. He likes his fraternity brothers and being close to the outdoors. He loves to hunt deer, turkeys and ducks.

Sometimes, when he wants to practice his shot, he gets on the highway and drives out past the shallow ponds used to breed catfish. He pulls onto a gravel road that leads to an empty field his brother owns. There’s a dirt mound there that will hold paper targets up. He puts away his gun and pulls a pound of deer meat from the freezer. One quick microwave defrost cycle and it is time to go to the baseball game.

It’s not just any ordinary game taking place under the lights of Dudy Noble Field this Friday night. It’s the first of a three-game series against Ole Miss, the Bulldogs’ most-hated rival and in-state competitor.

Starkville is just less than 100 miles south of Oxford, Miss., the hometown of Ole Miss.

Boil down the schools’ differences and the feud becomes easy to understand. Mississippi State and Ole Miss have different priorities.

“They want to be Ivy League and we’re farmers,” one State student said.

Bulldog fans’ distaste for the Rebels is so strong most won’t even say “Ole Miss.” Instead tonight’s game is against “that school up North.” And it’s a good game, because the Bulldogs are winning and fans have plenty of chances to rattle their cowbells.

Jones puts his deer burgers on a grill in the tailgating area known as the Left Field Lounge. Here, just outside the fence of the stadium, elaborate decks and bleachers have been built on the backs of rusted-out trucks and trailers. The contraptions are called ball wagons. A series of introductions later and a dairy farmer who lost his right arm in a machinery accident will explain how it all came to be.

“You want to know about the history of this?” Jon David Naugher said after making his way out from behind the bar of his own ball wagon.

Naugher used to come to Mississippi State baseball games when he was in high school. It was early in the ’70s and the baseball stadium was much smaller. The field behind the left-field fence was just a cow pasture then. He and his friends would park their trucks close to the fence so they could drink their beer and watch baseball for free. Eventually, more trucks started showing up.

Naugher said he was the second person in the Left Field Lounge to add bleacher seats to the flatbed trailer he’s had since 1984. Other newer ball wagons have been built onto broken-down farm trucks that have to be hauled out after every season. Eventually, the university started charging an annual fee to rent a spot for a ball wagon. For Naugher, it’s worth it. He gestures toward a young brunette sitting on his ball wagon.

“I’ve got my daughter, my baby, right here,” he said. “She’s going to be coming to Mississippi State next fall.”

When the 4-0 Mississippi State victory is final, a 10-minute fireworks display lights up the sky above the stadium.

Naugher’s tailgate shows no sign of stopping, but Jones is preparing to walk to his car. The after-party is at his house.
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Memorial Tower, off the quadrangle of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, serves as a memorial to the state’s residents who died in World War I. The building is also home to the LSU Museum of Art and administrative offices for the university.

A bronze version of Louisiana State University’s mascot, Mike the Tiger, stands on guard outside the tiger habitat on the campus. The statue, titled “On the Prowl,” was created by Patrick Miller.
At LSU, everything is purple

Emily Becker, reporting from Baton Rouge, Louisiana

The newspaper racks are purple. The portable toilets are purple.

Southern Baton Rouge is home to Louisiana State University, and that has turned much of the campus and the area surrounding it purple.

On apartment buildings and fences, the purple is more pastel than the bright color of the drawstring bags of students walking around the campus on a Friday afternoon. A student walks past wearing a T-shirt that describes the commitment to the school colors as, “Love purple, live gold.”

LSU loves purple.

A river runs through it

A 20-minute drive from campus on Highland Drive leads to downtown Baton Rouge, which is sleepy after 5 p.m. on a Friday. In a few hours, some bars will become more populated as older college students head out for the weekend. But currently, like the business areas of most cities, downtown Baton Rouge is empty after the business week concludes.

Baton Rouge is a city in a balancing act. Louisiana’s second largest city is caught between two major influences: the culture of the business-driven state capital and the student culture of four universities, one of which happens to be the current SEC football champion.

There are a few people sitting on the black metal benches that line the Mississippi River levee. Two friends are swapping gossip. Two benches down from them, a man and a woman are watching the river while listening to music from the speakers on the man’s phone.

The Mississippi River is not majestic. Here in Louisiana, it is a river mostly used for industry. Cargo ships carrying grain, crude and cars from the south enter the Port of Baton Rouge to transfer their shipments to rails and pipelines. Barges and cargo ships from previous deliveries sit in the river, the metal slowly rusting to a dull orange.

Farther down, stairs turn into a ramp that ends in the river, although it isn’t steep enough to prevent those who really wanted to baptize themselves in the gray-brown water. Heads, tails and legs of crawfish, bleached to light orange from the sun, litter the concrete steps.

Friday is crawfish night

Crawfish, one of the staples of the Louisiana diet, are served boiled Friday nights at The Chimes. The smaller cousins of lobsters are served heaped on blue metal trays at least 14 inches in diameter. Crawfish turned as red as a sunburn are paired with potatoes and corn on the cob, the traditional sides.

In Louisiana, the small crustaceans are also known as “mudbugs.” In the eastern U.S., they’re “crayfish.” In the Midwest, “crawdad” is common.

The Chimes is known for its traditional Cajun food and 130 different varieties of beer. The menu includes crawfish, oysters, shrimp, alligator, salmon and grits. The restaurant is located on the north end of campus, in the middle of Tiger country.

The LSU-Arkansas baseball game is on the TVs at The Chimes, but during the 36-minute wait for a table, the conversation turns to football. “If you say LSU, people think football,” said Amber Hansen, a junior studying elementary education.

During the fall football season, the LSU campus and the surrounding areas virtually shut down during a game. And don’t expect to get anywhere fast in the traffic that streams into the city. Hansen joked that the game is a great time to get work done in the dorms because no one else is around.

Hansen, originally from Illinois, came to LSU for the academics and to be closer to family who live in the area. “I love that you have 93,000 other people in there cheering with you,” she said.

Hansen pointed to being in the LSU student section as one of her favorite parts of a football game. The LSU student section is known for its coordinated cheers and commitment to stay for the entire game.

A night in Tigerland

In the evenings, many LSU students find their way to Tigerland, a square block south of campus that is home to five bars, all of which seem to cater directly to the college crowd.

A yellow sign spelling out “TIGERLAND” is stuck into the grassy median that divides the two-lane road that leads into the area. Cars are parked eight rows across, 18 cars deep on both sides of the street on gravel in front of the bars.

The marquees outside Fred’s and Reggie’s advertise an open bar from 8 to 10 p.m. for LSU students with a valid student ID, and Fred’s is hosting a drunken spelling bee the next day. Next to JL’s Place is a yellow-and-purple striped tent where a live band is playing.

At 10:45 p.m., there are already students leaning against the bus stop, half asleep waiting for the next shuttle. Students wander from bar to bar, holding tall cans of beer in paper bags. The drink of choice here is cheap beer.

Across town, northeast of campus, at Duvic’s, the drink of choice is a martini. The bar is tucked underneath Interstate 10 with two other bars frequented by a mixed group of LSU students and young professionals.

Alison Piccolo, one of the bartenders at Duvic’s and a senior at LSU, says she’s been to the bars in Tigerland, but prefers
the atmosphere of the places on this side of
the city.
“I could list all the reasons I wouldn’t
go there,” she said. “They make you pay
$10 to get in and then I can’t figure out
what I just paid $10 for.”

**Louisiana nice**
The next morning, many of those who
spent their Friday night in Tigerland
moved to tailgates for today’s LSU spring
game. For others, Saturday mornings are
spent at the Red Stick Farmer’s Market,
which shuts down Fifth Street between
Main and North streets from 8 a.m. until
noon.

Springtime in Louisiana is crawfish
and strawberry season. At the market,
the berries are more plentiful than the
crustaceans, which are mainly found at
specialized seafood stores. White card-
board containers of the bright red fruit,
smaller than those found in the grocery
store, are stacked to waist level in front
of the produce stands.

William Fletcher is the ninth gener-
ation of his family to farm on the land in
Ponchatoula, La., a city 46 miles east of
Baton Rouge and the unofficial strawber-
capital of Louisiana. He said he’s been
coming to the market every weekend
since 1998.

“If the Lord allows me to do it, I’ll keep
doing it until the day I die,” he said.

On Main and Fifth streets, Luca Di
Martino stands outside his white delivery truck that has been converted to a gelato
truck. Di Martino has been driving his
gelato truck for the past four years. He
offers samples of his gelato to visitors at
the market.

“It’s the best in the world,” said Di
Martino in his Italian accent that hasn’t
yet been masked by the long “a” of the
Louisiana drawl.

A woman stops to sample the Vanilla Chai Tea flavor and walks away with a
pint of the flavor. The cold treat is lighter
than ice cream and much creamier.
Besides Vanilla Chai Tea, Latte E Miele,
Di Martino’s business, is also serving
milk and honey, mint chocolate and hon-
ey-roasted bell pepper out of the window
on the passenger’s side of the truck.

Baton Rouge is the type of city where
people wish you a good weekend when
they pass you on the street. It is the
type of city where people call you
“baby” instead of “dear” or “ma’am.”

“I’ll take whatever you’ve got,” is Di
Martino’s response to a customer who
is $2 short of the $5 needed for a cup of
gelato. “I want you to walk away with a
smile.”

**A visit to Mike**
Across town, it’s football that is putting
a smile on the faces of LSU fans. LSU
supporters treat their Spring Game, the
annual exhibition game, with less inten-
sity than their scheduled season games.
But at 11:30 a.m., two hours before the
game starts, the closed streets surround-
ing Tiger Stadium are filled with fans,
many wearing “Geaux Tigers.” The spell-
ing is a spin on the French-Cajun influ-
ence in the area.

And for many, no football game is com-
plete without a visit to Mike the Tiger.

A sign outside the enclosure reads,
“ATTENTION, PLEASE! NO PETS
ALLOWED IN TIGER HABITAT
AREA!”

There are no small animals among the
small crowd gathered on the southwest
corner of the enclosure, but it is hard to
imagine the tiger inside would be will-
ing to make the effort to attack any pets
right now. Mike, the live version of LSU’s
mascot, is expending most of his energy
panting in the Louisiana heat and humid-
ity. His biggest movement during the
afternoon was rolling onto his back.

This is LSU’s sixth Mike. In 1936, the
first Mike was brought to campus after
being purchased from the Little Rock
Zoo. He was named after the athletic
trainer at the time, Mike Chambers. Mike
I reigned until 1956.

Mike lives by himself on the west side
of campus, across the street from Tiger
Stadium and next to the basketball arena.
The enclosure is open 24 hours a day to
whomever happens to wander by, or fans
can check in on Mike via his webcam.

Two chain-link fences separate Mike
from his visitors. A finely woven mesh is
stretched across the top of the habitat
to prevent objects from being thrown into
the cage. The 15,000-square-foot enclo-
sure was built in 2005 and includes a
waterfall and a pond.

Despite the ethical debate over hav-
ing a live mascot, many LSU students
embrace the tiger as a member of the
family. “We’re by Mike,” one says by way
of directions to the person on the other
end of his cell phone call.

Megan Reynolds will start at LSU in the fall, but she says she’s been visiting Mike since her brother started at the university. It’s tradition now for her to stop by the enclosure. She says she understands why people would question the necessity of LSU having a live mascot, but believes Mike is content with his lifestyle.

“He lives like a king,” she said.

Mike is popular this afternoon, but there are LSU fans around the entire perimeter of the stadium. Some are standing in shade watching the live band. Others are gathering near where the marching band is setting up. Most are just enjoying the prospect of seeing some football.

As in spring games at most universities, LSU will take the field against itself. The game gives fans the chance to see different plays, new recruits and a peek at what will happen next fall. The focus is on watching a good football game.

“And no injuries,” said Timothy Wall, 26. “Please God, no injuries.”

Wall no longer attends LSU but still drives an hour for the football games. He says it’s the atmosphere that keeps him coming back. He thinks you have to witness it for yourself to understand it, but he describes feeling like he is part of a big family when he’s in Tiger Stadium.

“When the band starts playing the fight song, I get goosebumps,” he said.
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ALABAMA

University of Alabama • Tuscaloosa, Alabama
618 miles from Columbia

*Locations are approximate

A sign hangs from the door at the original Dreamland BBQ. Dreamland, which opened in 1958, is one of Tuscaloosa's main attractions and is known for its ribs.

The “Walk of Champions” leads up to Bryant-Denny Stadium. Alabama has won two of the last three national championships. The stone markers in the middle of the walkway honor the school’s 14 total national championships.
City leans on football tradition for hope after storm

Andrew Wagaman, reporting from Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Inside the Bryant Museum, just down the street from the University of Alabama, spotlights shine on souvenirs of the school's football tradition.

The crystal replica of Paul “Bear” Bryant’s houndstooth fedora shimmers as it rotates inside its glass display. A glare hits the chest of the legendary coach’s bronze bust. Wide-eyed faces glow in the LCD of the museum theater, where a history of the football program repeats over and over again.

No matter how many times museum attendant Diane Griffin sees it, she still gets goosebumps watching the opening scenes alone in the morning. Then, she opens the museum doors to visitors. In the parking lot, cars have license plates from eight different states including North Dakota, Pennsylvania and Kansas.

This place is a shrine.

Peripheral details of the museum deserve note, too. For example, there are no windows. A few feet beyond each exhibit, the room is dark. Large, gray pillars give the room a sense of sturdiness, and the lattice of black air ducts makes the ceiling seem lower than what it is. The room feels isolated from the town around it.

You can’t help but think this place might make a pretty good storm shelter, too.

On April 27, 2011, a twister with winds of 190 mph devastated a six-mile long, almost one-mile wide area of Tuscaloosa. Fifty-three people, including six Alabama students, died.

One year after the most destructive tornado in state history, Tuscaloosa continues to recover. The majority of debris has been removed, but an absence remains. Empty skies instead of century-old oaks make up the horizon.

Bryant-Denny Stadium, home of the Alabama football team, wasn’t visible from some areas struck by the tornado. Now it is.

The storm spared the university, and life thrives around campus — especially on Saturdays in the fall. Alabama has won two of the last three national championships after a 17-year drought, the longest in school history. In a college town that epitomizes fanatic SEC football, the victories are a big deal.

Even last season, more than 100,000 fans filled the stadium each home weekend, and for big games nearly as many packed places along The Strip such as The Houndstooth Sports Bar. On the 22-acre Quad, among the oaks and between the Gorgas Library and Denny Chimes bell tower, tailgates persisted.

The university does not have a clean history. It barred black students from attending until 1963 and didn’t recruit a black football player until 1970. But in the aftermath of the tornado, Tuscaloosa has leaned on the school’s more positive traditions for hope.

There is nothing subtle about the Alabama campus. Everything about it — the trees, the lawns, the facades of buildings — is big and majestic.

There is nothing subtle about the Alabama campus. Everything about it — the trees, the lawns, the facades of buildings — is big and majestic.

The colossal fraternity and sorority houses along University Boulevard underline all this. About 30 percent of the student body is Greek, and of the 56 fraternities and sororities that have houses on campus, most take their appearance seriously. At least out front.

A “dead week” of classes follows, so lawn parties have raged all afternoon. Live bands play at many houses, and DJs at others. The Delta Kappa Epsilon house blasts the My Morning Jacket song, “One Big Holiday.” Empty cans of Natty Lite practically pave the yards.

By early evening, students sway down the sidewalk out front, attempting to rally for whatever is to follow in the evening. Some howl, “Roll Tide!” with some choice modifiers between “Roll” and “Tide.” Some head for The Strip.

On University Boulevard, The Strip starts where campus ends, and campus ends with a final row of fraternity houses. It makes sense, then, that the first bar on The Strip, Gallettes, is the Greek bar.

Men over the age of 30 should be advised against going into Gallettes, even for a quick beer after stopping in the Alabama apparel store next door. They might be, as one man was, accused of reminiscing.

In the woodlands five miles southwest of The Strip, only technically within Tuscaloosa city limits, Josh Hayes pulls into a remote dirt lot and parks in front of an unmarked burgundy shack.

“Wow, they painted it,” the lawyer says. He sounds a little disappointed.

This is Nick’s Original Filet House, better known as Nick’s in the Sticks, and it is a dive.

Inside, the ceiling is covered with stapled dollar bills, and tables are crammed close together. Waiters keep tabs on pads that line the inner part of the bar, and ’Bama football surrounds you. Hayes immediately identifies a large framed photo that stands out on the left wall. He calls it the “The Manhandling
of Gino,” which depicts Alabama sacking Heisman-winning Miami quarterback Gino Toretta in the 1993 Sugar Bowl.

Hayes, a 1998 Alabama graduate who at 6-foot-6 looks like he could be a former Crimson Tide lineman, comes here with colleagues at the start of every court trial. He knows the waiters by name, and one called Spoon — “Just Spoon” — gets him a couple of the famous house drink, the Nico-
demus. It’s basically a New Orleans-style Hurricane in a Styrofoam cup. The recipe once included a fair share of grain alcohol.

Tonight Hayes is here with his wife, Car-
rie. Over a plate of delicious fried gizzards with hot sauce and pickles, they discuss one challenge of their marriage: Carrie Hayes is an Auburn grad. One year at the Iron Bowl, the rivalry game between Alabama and Auburn, an older female Alabama fan watched in disapproval as Carrie Hayes cheered in her husband’s face. The older fan told him, “I can’t believe you put up with that.”

But Josh Hayes says he can’t really com-
plain. “For an Auburn fan, Carrie’s got an awful lot of red dresses,” he said.

As Josh Hayes pays afterward, Nick’s manager Ken Walker tells a story. He’d received a phone call that afternoon from an older couple wondering if the restaurant would be open the next day. The couple wanted to take their children and grand-
children to the place they’d gone on their first date as Alabama students 51 years before.

Never mind that Nick’s doesn’t seem like the most romantic of places. Tuscaloosa is built, and rebuilding, on stories like this one.

Driving east on 15th Street is at first like driving along any other impersonal business loop in America. Instead of the trees along University Boulevard or the Black Warrior River, retail stores line both sides of this street.

Then Forest Lake appears on the right. It is an ugly swamp of debris from the neighbor-
hoods that once surrounded it. FEMA has tried to drain the lake to prevent toxicity and make wreckage removal easier, but on this morning, a duck drifts through viscous areas of grime. A single house on the north end of the lake, with red roofing, white siding and manicured landscape, stands in contrast.

Today happens to be the university’s “UA Remembers: A Day of Service” event. Scattered among bulldozers and excavators west of the lake are a couple hundred students with thick white bags. They pick up nails and planks and shards of shingles. While two construction supervisors discuss a recent Wall Street Journal article deriding the town’s recovery compared to Joplin, Mayor Walt Maddox talks to TV reporters about progress.

Alone, a middle-aged woman named Janie Hubbard stoops to pick up rubble with gar-
dening gloves.

Hubbard, who teaches social studies edu-
cation at Alabama, lived in another neigh-
borhood along the tornado’s path. Her home was a brick, 70-year-old Colonial Revival house with a full-width porch and a two-
century-old oak next to the mailbox. The house had two stories but had no basement.

She was home when her husband looked out from the porch and saw the twister bar-
reling toward them. Along with their son, they ran to the only spot in the house that did not have windows: a hallway enclosed by five doors. They crouched over their knees and in a circle and held onto each other’s arms. Debris rose from a floor vent beneath them, and above the freight train-
like sound she heard glass shattering and the creaking of what she imagines were nails being torn from wood.

Nobody spoke until the tornado passed, and then her husband said not to move — the tornado would be coming around again.

When it was over, the hallway remained. The rest of the house had fallen or flown away. Hubbard could not find her second floor or her porch, and the gigantic oak lay across the street, completely pulled from its roots. The stench of sewage was inescapable, and panicked rumors of another approaching storm spread. Later, when the U.S. Marines arrived, they put up a sign that said, “Looters will be shot on sight.”

Hubbard found her grandmother’s china and glassware, worth a lifetime of memo-
ries. They were all shattered inside an antique Indonesian cabinet.

Later, she would understand her family was lucky to be alive. In the moment, she worried about her son’s upcoming high school graduation. She remembers thinking, “It’s gone, it’s gone. Everything’s gone.”

Now, though, some displaced neighbors are beginning to move back into the neigh-
borhood. They would gather for a potluck
and give a toast at 5:15 p.m. the following Friday, when the tornado had hit a year before.

Hubbard is rebuilding, too. Her family has lived other places — including Egypt and Indonesia — but doesn’t want to leave this neighborhood.

“When I moved here, I just liked the house,” Hubbard said. “But the neighborhood is the life support. People keep saying, ‘We can’t wait for you to get back.’”

She describes Tuscaloosa as “extremely high-energy” and emphasizes that such energy goes beyond football. However, she also says that football sure has helped. In Tuscaloosa, Hubbard says with total sincerity, there are a lot of serious fans. It’s something that has not been lost.

“I can’t even imagine if you didn’t have something that feels hopeful,” she said. “You go on campus and it’s a break from all this. The football takes everybody’s mind off it, one Saturday at a time.”

Bryant-Denny Stadium towers over the University of Alabama. Despite being the fifth-largest college football stadium in the country, it is not removed from campus but rather right in the middle, moments away from The Strip, the fraternity houses and the Quad. The “Walk of Champions” leads from University Boulevard to the stadium entrance, and there is no sense of detachment between them.

It’s getting chilly, but a couple wearing Alabama hoodies lingers along the walkway. They bounce a small football to their toddler off stone markers commemorating Crimson Tide championships. The ball usually dribbles past him, and they giggle as he chases it down.

The son scampers to the right, and his mom follows. Over there, five statues of the Alabama football coaches who have national championships form an alcove. One of current coach Nick Saban fills the spot closest to the stadium.

Some thought that spot was cursed, says the father, Vince Bellofatto. Others saw it as a challenge.

“Saban is one of those guys, and that’s probably why he’s been successful,” Bellofatto says.

Bellofatto and his wife, Brooke, are both originally from the Northeast but have lived in the Tuscaloosa area for the last 10 years. As a kid in Washington, D.C., Vince Bellofatto remembers spreading his allegiances thin across a variety of college and sports teams. Then he went to school at Alabama and discovered it didn’t work that way down here. The community invested in one team, and that collective fervor made the community stronger.

He decided he never wanted to leave.

“I came here for my degree but stayed for the football,” Bellofatto said.

When the tornado hit, football did not rescue Tuscaloosa. The community did, and this too, the Bellofattos say, has made its identity stronger.

The “out of bad comes good” sentiment has been repeated often. It could come across as contrived, but people in Tuscaloosa seem to believe it. How else is there to cope with loss than turn to what you still have?

Once, Bryant-Denny Stadium wasn’t visible from places like 15th Street.

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Toilet paper hangs from one of the oak trees at Toomer’s Corner to celebrate the Tigers’ sweep in baseball against the Tennessee Volunteers. Alabama fan Harvey Updyke admitted to poisoning the two iconic oaks in January 2011. The trees are still in danger of dying.

A statue of 2010 Heisman Trophy winner Cam Newton was recently unveiled outside Jordan-Hare Stadium. Newton led the school to its second national championship in football in 2010.
University, town form tight community

Harry Plumer, reporting from Auburn, Alabama

The list is on the glass door of “The Villager,” a store on College Avenue, less than half a block from Toomer’s Corner.

“How to build community,” it reads. “Turn off your TV. Look up when you are walking. Know your neighbors. Use the library. Share what you have. Play together.”

These are just a few of the instructions. In many places, these would be nothing more than empty suggestions, swept away generations ago by our new lifestyle where the TV is never off and the reason people don’t look up while they are walking is because they’re too busy texting, tweeting or Facebook-ing.

In Auburn, they’ve taken these suggestions to heart. Sometimes a nickname fits the city; other times it seems overly contrived or flat-out untrue.

But Auburn, known as “The Loveliest Village on the Plains,” lives up to its billing.

As “The Loveliest Village on the Plains,” Auburn is certainly pretty. It isn’t about landscaping, though campus is kept in pristine condition. It isn’t about a bustling music scene, delicious places to eat or athletic success, either. It’s about the people. It’s about the sense of community that Auburn has fostered in its university, its residents and the city as a whole.

It’s about the set of eight beliefs known as the “Auburn Creed.”

It’s about the look Auburn people get in their eyes when they talk about Auburn. It’s about “War Eagle.” Most of all, it’s about the “Auburn family.”

Just Wayne

The stone courtyard outside the Auburn First Baptist Church is buzzing.

The mid-morning sun is high in the clear Alabama sky, but a chorus of “How’re y’all doin’?” and “Good to see ya’s” echoes like crickets at midnight.

Everyone seems to know everyone’s name, and the few newcomers who dribble in are greeted with an overwhelming warmth.

A man dressed in a tan blazer, slate gray slacks and a black tie enters the courtyard. There is something different about how the others treat him, a certain unique reverence.

But he is not the pastor. He isn’t employed by the church at all, in fact.

“That’s just Wayne,” says Drew Smith, the unofficial head of the welcoming committee in the courtyard.

Inside a classroom in the church’s annex, Wayne Flint holds court at the rear of the room before Sunday school.

“I just love your outfit,” he tells one woman. “Isn’t she just straight out of Saks Fifth Avenue?”

Flint says. “People have a high level of respect for government and for each other.”

Flint adores the town right back. “This is a friendly, loving, kind town,” Flint says. “People have a high level of respect for government and for each other.”

Party on the parking deck

Everett Duke is temporarily retired from partying.

“At least until finals are over,” the Auburn graduate student says.

Lucky for him, as the Auburn baseball team takes on Tennessee below, the Plainsman Parking Deck is quieter than usual.

Set just outside the stadium down the left-field line, the roof of the four-level parking structure provides Auburn baseball fans with a perfect place to enjoy both the game, and their favorite beverages.

“No glass bottles and don’t back in,” Duke says. “Those are the only two rules.”

For today’s matinee against Tennessee, the crowd is sparse, perhaps 10 or 12 blue-and-orange clad Tigers fans have braved the afternoon heat to watch Auburn go for its first sweep of 2012.

“Normally it’s shoulder to shoulder up here,” Duke says. “About 100, 150 people will show up.”

The deck is prepared. There are a few long-legged chairs near the wall for fans to use, as well as trash cans and a security guard to make sure everyone keeps it clean.

Duke and fellow Auburn graduate students Brent White and Brittney Rieben are among the deck’s mainstays throughout the season. Like any group of zealous fans, they’ve got
their own set of traditions.

The scoreboard in centerfield will periodically ask fans for musical requests via Twitter. The answer from Duke and Co. is always the same.

“All we want is some Seger,” Duke says. “Roll Me Away.”

Lately, the Auburn staff working at the stadium has obliged, and seventh-inning Seger has become a staple.

“We love to use Twitter,” Duke says. “We love to light into opposing players on there.”

Four stories below, the main seating bowl is nearly devoid of students. Instead, it’s the city’s community that supports the Tigers baseball team.

“That’s Auburn,” Duke says. “The school is the city and the city is the school.”

**War Eagle**

Jon Haney speaks about Auburn the way a proud parent talks about his child. His eyes light up, his tone rises and his chest puffs.

Within 30 seconds of meeting him, it’s easy to see Auburn has had a great effect on him.

He shows off the campus while whipp ing around in a golf cart and pointing out landmarks as if he was employed by the school’s admissions office instead of its facilities department.

It’s a pretty place. Nearly every building is red brick, and open grass areas meet with wide pedestrian boulevards to provide a sort of idyllic Southern university setting.

Haney attended his first Auburn football game in 1981, as a 6-year-old, and that day made a proclamation to his mother.

“I told her I would graduate from here someday,” he said.

His route wasn’t the traditional one. His high school grades weren’t good enough to get him admitted to Auburn. But he moved the 125 miles from Gadsden to Auburn with a friend a few years after graduation.

In 2008, he finally made good on his promise to his mother.

“It took me a while, but I did it,” he says with a crooked smile.

Being part of Auburn means everything to Haney. He’s not alone. That’s a refrain you’ll hear quite a bit if you visit the Loveliest Village. At first, it sounds contrived, like Auburnites have been brainwashed into some sort of blue-and-orange cult. But when you meet someone like Haney, it becomes clear that the unconditional love students, graduates and Auburn residents feel for this place is genuine.

“Georgia has ‘Bulldog nation’ and Florida has ‘Gator nation,’” Auburn student Drew Steverson says. “We don’t have a nation. We have the ‘Auburn family.’”

The family extends beyond the Auburn city limits and the Alabama state line. The school’s battle cry, “War Eagle,” is heard all over the nation and the world.

“War Eagle is a bond we all share instantly,” Steverson says. “Once you become part of that, it will take hell or high water to break it.”

When an Auburn fan is met with the phrase in a strange location, Haney says it’s called a “War Eagle moment.”

“I was in Washington, D.C., and my wife and I were at the Vietnam monument looking for her uncle’s name. I had my Auburn hat on backwards,” Haney recalls. “Out of nowhere, I get a tap on the shoulder and it’s this park ranger, and he says, ‘Hey man, War Eagle.’ That was amazing.”

Philosophy professor Kelly Jolley, who has taught at Auburn since 1991, knows another factor in Auburn’s togetherness.

“This place has a remarkable hold on its graduates,” Jolley says. “That it has its own creed says something about the kind of place it is.”

The creed isn’t just something that Auburn lists on its website for posterity. Students know it. It’s carved in stone on the outside of Auburn Arena.

Steverson was able to recite most of the creed. He nailed the final line.

“...and because Auburn men and women believe in these things, I believe in Auburn and love it,” he finishes.

As Haney’s tour concludes, he parks the golf cart and unprompted, reflects.

“I get to live and work at the place I idolized growing up,” he says. “I want my kids to feel like I do about this place.”

He starts to pull away, then stops abruptly.

“I almost forgot, I brought you some thing,” he says, backing up. He reaches into his pocket for a blue plastic wristband that says “War Eagle.”
He looks up and offers a fist pound. “War Eagle, brother,” he says, and drives off.

Red-headed little brother

Mentioning Auburn without also mentioning the University of Alabama is impossible. It’s like mentioning Batman without the Joker, Luke Skywalker without Darth Vader, Harry Potter without Lord Voldemort. Who is the villain depends on who you ask, but the fact is that the two are inexorably linked in a tumultuous relationship that shows no sign of ever growing less hateful. If anything, the vitriol is increasing.

Kelly Jolley grew up in Ohio, in the shadow of the of the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry. To him, the Auburn-Alabama “Iron Bowl” as it’s known, is in a completely different spectrum of rivalry.

“I wasn’t prepared for the existential depth of the hatred,” Jolley says. “It’s not a Saturday phenomenon, it’s an all the time thing.”

Auburn fans vehemently disagree with the perception that Alabama is “big brother.” They fight the fact that they are viewed as some sort of “cow college,” as Bear Bryant once said.

“We feel ’Bama has undue arrogance,” Steverson says. “They view us as the red-headed stepchild, they feel superior. We don’t stick our nose up.”

Brittney Rieben, from the parking deck, summarized the Auburn inferiority label a little more sharply.

“That’s what the uneducated masses across the state will tell you,” she says.

Part of the stereotype of the rivalry exists because Alabama has medical and law schools, which Auburn does not. Instead, Auburn has strong agricultural and veterinary programs. Jolley believes there is a sort of trickle down effect from that in funding and government.

“Most of the Alabama government that went to school in the state obviously went to Alabama for law,” Jolley said. “It gives Alabama a huge political advantage.”

On the football field, Alabama leads the series 41-34-1, a lead that it built during the Bear Bryant-era and has seen diminish since 2000 — Auburn is 8-4 this millennium, including six straight victories from 2002-2007.

This isn’t just a football rivalry, though. It extends throughout the athletic departments, even all the way to the usually friendly gymnastics mat, where the Crimson Tide hold a 104-meet win streak.

In 2011, after Tigers quarterback Cam Newton won the Heisman Trophy, and Auburn won the National Championship in football, an Auburn gymnast struck the Heisman pose during her floor routine in Tuscaloosa, much to the chargrin of the fans, who booed her.

“It even goes all the way through academic departments,” Jolley says. “You will not go broke underestimating the hatred. It permeates every part of the culture.”

So then, it really shouldn’t be surprising what happened at Toomer’s Corner the weekend after the 2010 Iron Bowl, where Newton and the Tigers rallied back from a 24-point deficit in Tuscaloosa for a 28-24 victory that punched their ticket to the SEC Championship game, and later on, an undefeated season and a national championship.

But just because something’s not surprising, doesn’t make it any less sad.

Singing to the trees

At the corner of College and Magnolia avenues, otherwise known as Toomer’s Corner, are two majestic oak trees.

Toomer’s Corner and Toomer’s Oaks are the center of all things Auburn. A giant Tiger paw is painted at the intersection. After Auburn victories, the tradition is to bathe the branches of the oaks in toilet paper.

“I remember the first time I saw it after a win,” Jon Haney recalls. “It looked like a damned blizzard had rolled through.”

Toomer’s Corner was raining toilet paper for Auburn’s biggest celebration on the night of Jan. 11, 2011, when the Tigers defeated Oregon 22-19 in the BCS National Championship Game.

The name Harvey Updyke Jr. meant nothing then.

It wasn’t until 16 days later, on Jan. 27, 2011, when Updyke Jr., under the alias “Al from Dadeville,” called into the extremely popular Paul Finebaum sports talk show, based in Birmingham, Ala. The transcript of the end of the call is startling.

Al from Dadeville: The weekend after the Iron Bowl, I went to Auburn, Ala., because I lived 30 miles away, and I poisoned the two Toomer’s trees. I put Spike 80DF in ‘em.

Finebaum: Did they die?
Al: Do what?
Finebaum: Did … they … die?
Al: They’re not dead yet, but they definitely will die.

Finebaum: Is it against the law to poison a tree?
Al: Do you think I care?
Finebaum: No.
Al: I really don’t! And you can tell Tammy, I hope … never mind. Roll Damn Tide!

The police soon figured out Al From Dadeville’s true identity, and on Feb. 17, 2011, Harvey Updyke Jr. was arrested on suspicion of poisoning the two trees. Updyke Jr. pleaded not guilty to all counts for reasons of mental disease or defect.

Updyke’s trial process has been high profile in Alabama — so much so that his trial was moved from June to October because too many potential jurors had been subjected to media coverage of the case. The defense has also asked for a change of venue out of Lee County (where Auburn is located) because of all the attention.

Seventeen months after the poisoning, a few pieces of toilet paper hang above in celebration of the baseball team’s weekend sweep of Tennessee. It seems token. The trees do not look well.

They should be in full bloom like those that surround them. Instead, many of the branches sport yellow-brown leaves or none at all. Although the group of experts charged with keeping the trees alive are not optimistic about the future, the trees are still alive, for now. They are now protected by metal barriers. You used to be able to walk up and touch them.

Underneath the oaks, a group from the Sandhill Bible Church sings gospel songs as the sun sets. They serenade the corner with beautiful harmonies about God and life.

If the trees above them were in full bloom, it would be a perfect setting.
You’d never expect to have this much fun on a first date.

Welcome to the Show, Mizzou. You might not be surprised to find an SEC dynasty like Auburn takes our football seriously. You might expect the rabid fans, the ocean of orange and blue, and the ceaseless chant of War Eagle. But what you’ll also find here is unparalleled hospitality, an array of activities for fans of all kinds, and a healthy appreciation for all athletic traditions. We welcome our new friends of the SEC and invite you to come find these and a whole lot of other cool things you might not expect. Call or visit us online today!
FLORIDA

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Eight weekends per year, Ben Hill Griffin Stadium, hosts the roar of a crowd that rivals the population of Gainesville, Fla. Since 1990, the Gators have the winningest program in Division I NCAA football, including two recent national championships in 2006 and 2008.

A painter launches into a new project as part of “Art Walk,” a festival held at the end of every month in downtown Gainesville. Joining him is a group of musicians and various folks snared by the moment, dancing, dining, hula hooping and watching the artists at work.
Football is common ground in diverse Gainesville

Anthony Schick, reporting from Gainesville, Florida

One hundred and fifty-five days away from football season, the gates at the University of Florida's football stadium are open. The grass of “The Swamp,” as it’s known, is unpainted save for the faded imprint of last year’s stencil. Its bare silver bleachers shine in the noon sun. Yet students at the University of Florida pound their way up its 95 steps at a grueling pace.

Freshman Dante Frisiello heaves and claps as he reaches the top of the stadium, finishing his workout the way his fellow students have done all morning.

Doubled over and catching his breath on the highest step, he looks down on the empty field and pictures the Florida Gators charging into view to the tune of AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck.” He feels the wall of sound that hits him as Florida alumni scream “Blue!” in echo of the student section’s cries of “Orange!”

“If you’re not a Gator fan, you hate the Gators because we’re so up front about who we are. It comes across as arrogance, but it’s not arrogance. We’re just very proud of what we do.”

DANTE FRISIELLO
University of Florida student

Lacking unity

There’s a little bit of everything at the University of Florida, and none of it is hard to find. A stroll through Turlington Plaza in the heart of campus provides a glimpse of impromptu foursquare games, political activists, club promoters and preachers of the nigh end.

Like much of the campus, Turlington Plaza is built of red brick and draped in Spanish moss — an eerie, flimsy plant that hangs from trees found in southeastern states. According to the school, during school hours, Turlington Plaza sees more foot traffic than the gates of Disney World.

The University of Florida, which didn’t admit an African-American student until 1962, is now just outside the top 50 most diverse universities in the country — largely the result of decades long, court-ordered integration programs. The university boasts more International Baccalaureate students than any other university and ranks in the top five for degrees awarded to African-Americans and Hispanics.

Nearby at the expansive Plaza of the Americas, Krishnas serve up the vegetarian and vegan lunch that has become famous at the university.

But for all the different groups represented, Florida’s campus remains quietly segregated.

“If you look at Turlington, you see black people here, Hispanics there, Filipinos there, and the different groups all keep to themselves,” says Erinn Afflick, a senior biology major at the University of Florida, who is African American. A section of Turlington plaza known as “The Set” has become the main gathering place for many African-American organizations on campus, he says.

“People choose to segregate themselves. This was something my cousin, a former graduate of UF, told me a few years ago, and it’s pretty evident. I wouldn’t say that this is for every single person, but for the majority.”

Afflick points out that many university organizations are trying to bridge the gap between groups on campus, but “that is an effort to bring unity, versus unity that naturally flows.”

Football isn’t an equalizer on Florida’s campus, but it does create the more natural unity students such as Afflick are seeking.

Florida’s athletic programs have dominated the modern college sports scene. Its football team is the winningest in NCAA Division I since 1990. Under coach Urban Meyer, now at Ohio State, the Gators won national titles in 2006 and 2008. Three bronze statues outside Ben Hill Griffin stadium immortalize the Gators’ Heisman trophy winners: Tim Tebow (the pose is running, not genuflecting), Danny Wuerffel and Steve Spurrier, who returned to Florida as a coach and helmed its first-ever national champion team in 1996. Wuerffel quarterbacked that 1996 team.

Florida’s men’s basketball team has two national championships in the past decade, and its softball, baseball and gymnastics teams are ranked third, second and first in the country, respectively. All that success has forged an attitude in Gator fans they know isn’t appreciated elsewhere.

Before Dante Frisiello enrolled at the University of Florida and spent his spare time in Ben Hill Griffin stadium, the...
Satellite Beach, Fla., native didn’t understand Gator fans, either.

“If you’re not a Gator fan, you hate the Gators because we’re so up front about who we are,” he says. “It comes across as arrogance, but it’s not arrogance. We’re just very proud of what we do.”

Gator pride, Gainesville scenes

Few places flaunt that pride better than midtown, a section of Gainesville that sits across from the stadium and neighbors a row of fraternities on University Avenue, where students, dressed in Gator orange and blue, play drinking games on the front lawn of houses. Midtown is where you’ll find restaurants such as The Swamp and bars like the Salty Dog Saloon and Grog, all of which are jam-packed with students. In midtown, even the churches — of which there are no shortage in Gainesville — are plastered with Gator signs.

“For Greeks it’s an extension of themselves,” Ryan Butler, a senior journalism student at Florida and a member of Delta Chi fraternity, says about football. “The Gators’ success becomes part of their success. Greeks want the Gators to win because they then feel better about themselves — by UF winning, so does the Greek.”

Travel a little more than a mile east on University Avenue, to downtown Gainesville, and the scene changes. Buskers occupy every third or fourth street corner, filling the air with a mixture of spoken word, jazz and acoustic guitar. A painter has erected an easel and blank canvas, and has launched into a new project in the middle of downtown. Joining him is a group of musicians and various folks snared by the moment — they dance, they hula hoop and they watch the artists at work. Photographers have scattered their portfolios on the steps of the Hippodrome Theatre, a converted post office that hosts film screenings, art galleries, plays and 10 different festivals each year.

In their own right, both scenes are equally charming and equally Gainesville. The city, like the university that put it on the map, has a group for everything. But those groups are connected by little beyond geography and football.

“I’d say that the different groups mix like oil and water,” Butler says.

T.C. Hinson, a 23-year-old Gainesville native and aspiring graphic artist, works at the Pita Pit in midtown — a scene that doesn’t fit her. She’s been approached in the Salty Dog Saloon just a few doors down and asked what she was doing there, she says.

“Midtown is just frat guys, everyone knows you don’t go midtown unless you want to be around that group,” Hinson says. “And you don’t go downtown unless you want to be around hipsters, you want to be around artsy people.”

Between stints of guitar strumming on the porch, Hinson and roommate Jeff Jones recall all the discrete circles that endear Gainesville to them, from the art community to the gay scene to the influence of the Bible Belt.

Jones, who says he is very much a product of Gainesville, was home-schooled and raised in the church his parents helped found, the Family Church of Gainesville, where “before we talked about the Bible we would talk about football,” he says. But neither the football nor the church seemed to fit him.

He dropped out of the University of Florida last year after he came out as gay, a traumatic experience he says caused a rift between him and his parents. He’s worked six different restaurant jobs in the past year to try to pay off a debt to his parents.

Jones found his own niche as a vocal leader in the gay community, a musician and variety-show host at local venues, putting both his theater and voice training to use. He’s a staple at many of his favorite clubs, so much so that he can’t remember the last time he’s paid for a cover charge or a drink.

“But at the same time,” he says, “there are certain circles — I can’t show my face at my old church. I can’t show my face where I went to high school. I can’t affiliate with a lot of people I knew growing up.”

Growing up, Jones was dragged to Gator games. His parents never missed an event. Perhaps that’s why he loses no love on them now, he says. Yet neither he nor Hinson would have a place to live or money for food without their service industry jobs in midtown, and they know it. And both are well aware neither of those jobs would exist if not for Gator football.

“You can’t escape the Gators in Gainesville,” Jones says. “The Gators is the one thing that everyone has in common whether they like it or not.”

It’s one thing Gainesville’s wealthy
neighborhoods, the University of Florida campus, midtown and downtown all have in common with the area east of downtown, where 65 percent of the population lives on an income below the city average.

That's where 67-year-old Gator fan Joe Williams waits beneath his blue canopy, next to a tarp-covered fishing boat, and watches a torrential rain bounce off the street.

It hasn’t rained like this in a long, long time Williams says. He's lived in Gainesville his whole life. He's seen it change from a town with racial segregation by policy to a city with covert economic, racial and cultural divides by default.

Football has been a constant through it all. Williams began following the Gators when he was a produce manager at Winn-Dixie, and he and his buddies used to meet in a back room of the grocery and place bets on games. He goes to games from time to time.

The rain continues, off and on, for hours. The streets flood and the town reverts into itself, a ghost of the vibrant night before.

South of campus, on a bluff overlooking the swampy expanse of Lake Alice, a select few are out enjoying a break in the storm, prowling the jungled trails and scenic bluffs that outline the lake. Alumni often get married there. It's a beautiful last stop in Gainesville. It's also a place where people can see alligators.

The gators have us surrounded here. One, roughly 4 feet long, is lounging on a rock at right, another, closer to 6 feet, is sprawled across the bank at left. Neither is more than 6 feet away. At least three more are lurking in the water. As the rain starts up again and the joggers and students who frequent Lake Alice have left, only the travelers are left, too entranced by the reptiles to turn away. We came from different parts of the world. We don't speak the same language. Greetings are exchanged, but little is understood as we snap photos and watch the water get riddled with raindrops.

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Welcome to the SEC!

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN — eMprint edition
THURSDAY, AUGUST 16, 2012 — Page 43
Jeff Griggs, a die-hard Georgia football fan who has played drums in more than 70 different bands over his past 17 years in Athens, Ga., descends a staircase inside the University of Georgia’s Butts-Mehre Heritage Hall, which doubles as the Georgia football team’s headquarters and the school’s trophy hall.

Students loiter around The Arch, a well-known landmark upon which the three principles of the Georgia Constitution — wisdom, justice, moderation — are engraved. Local legend has it that if you walk beneath The Arch before you graduate from the university, you go sterile.
Music, football at the heart of Athens

Anthony Schick, reporting from Athens, Georgia

A little piece of the Athens art scene, made for and later torn from the University of Georgia campus, now rests nearby on an old Southern farm. The same day in 1952 the university unveiled sculptor Abbott Pattison’s “Iron Horse,” a hefty statue of sheet steel and avant-garde, Georgia students swiftly defaced it with yellow paint, carved profanity into its flanks and pummeled it with flaming mattresses and car tires. It was reported that cries of “Burn that horse!” echoed throughout the night.

The university removed the horse and hid it behind a barn later destroyed by a tornado. The Iron Horse was forgotten in the woods until years later, when an agriculture professor at the university asked if he could place the statue on his farm. It has rested there, in harmony with the desolate field surrounding it, ever since.

Athens has old Southern roots. Drive an hour in three directions that don’t include Atlanta and the hills are rolling, the livestock roaming. Confederate flags ride the wind. But the isolated university and the influx of youth spawned a thriving music scene. In the ’70s and ’80s, Athens gave rise to the likes of the B-52’s, famous for “Love Shack” among others, and R.E.M., credited as pioneers of the transition from punk to alternative rock. For now, the city of just more than 115,000 people has remained what long-time resident Jeff Griggs calls “the seed of culture in an otherwise culture-less wasteland.”

**The beat of Athens’ heart**

Athens is a clash you can taste. It’s on your plate at the The Grit, a restaurant on the edge of downtown with a core menu of traditional southern fare: collard greens, okra, corn bread and the likes. In addition to those foods, on the menu are tofu, fried plantains and falafel — The Grit is and always has been purely vegetarian, with many vegan options.

The restaurant has been an Athens favorite — with inextricable ties to the town’s music scene — for three decades. It bustles with students and townsfolk alike, and at a bar full of sweet tea pitchers and microbrew taps, a sharp-dressed businessman has lunch beside a man with cut-off jean shorts and tattoos for sleeves.

Downtown Athens and the University of Georgia are in close proximity. They are also stark contrasts of each other.

The University of Georgia got its charter in 1785, making it the oldest public university in the country by some definitions (a few others began actual operation before Georgia). Its buildings, particularly the soaring antebellum estates of North Campus, reflect that history.

There, between classes, Georgia junior Zach Lewer relaxes on a wooden bench in front of the Herty Field Fountain. The school’s first football game was played on Herty Field, which is now freckled with students napping or studying. Lewer asks about the recent Bulldog news: Two cornerbacks and one safety were arrested recently. Even in late March, Georgia football is on everyone’s minds.

That side of campus runs right into downtown Athens. On a football weekend, the scene spills into downtown until it’s so packed you can hardly move, Lewer said.

Three black columns with an arch across the top symbolize the gateway between North Campus and downtown. Passing under it rather than around, it has become a rite of passage for Georgia graduates. Rumor has it that passing beneath The Arch before graduation puts one’s reproductive future in jeopardy.

Noticing someone has indeed just crossed beneath it, a nearby student turns his head and yanks out his headphones.

“You’re gonna be sterile.”

Downtown Athens has 62 bars, and 61 more restaurants that double as bars, in one square mile — that has long been rumored to be the highest concentration in the country. That same square mile hosts live music every day of the year at dozens of venues.

Most nights, The Georgia Theatre is the thumping heart in the center of Athens.

A century ago it was a YMCA. Later it became a movie theater, and in 1989 it became a concert venue. It reopened last year after a fire gutted it in 2009. It now has three tiers and a popular rooftop bar.

Tonight, Greensky Bluegrass, a band from Kalamazoo, Mich., plays to a small but energetic Wednesday crowd. Most everyone has migrated from the top balcony to the dance floor by the middle of the show.

When Greensky Bluegrass first started touring, they went anywhere they were wanted, banjo player Mike Bont said before the show. Athens welcomed them. After playing smaller venues since 2005, tonight is their first time in the Georgia Theatre.

“We’ve always wanted to play here,” Bont said. “We were so disappointed when it burned down. R.E.M. played here. It’s got such history.”
Music history

The green house on Milledge Avenue where the B-52's played its first gig — a Valentine's Day house party in 1977 — is still there. As is the sign above Weaver D's Delicious Fine Foods that reads “Automatic For the People,” the line R.E.M. made famous as the title of its eighth album via $16 million in sales. All that remains of R.E.M.'s first show is a church steeple, a lonely rise surrounded by parking lot.

On the corner of Clayton and College Avenue is Wuxtry Records. R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck once worked there. It's where he and Michael Stipe met.

Inside Wuxtry, Gordon Lamb helps his friend, store manager Mike Turner, stuff records for a local band preparing an album release. Lamb is a 23-year veteran of Athens music.

“Ostensibly I originally moved here to go to school,” Lamb said. “But really, I moved here for the music scene.”

For the past 10 years, he's written a music column for the local magazine Flagpole, and before that he spent more than a decade working various jobs, playing in bands, putting on shows and putting out fan zines. Asked about the current landscape of Athens music, Lamb spouts off a half dozen bands he's excited about: Gripe, Muuy Biien, TunaBunny, the Grass Giraffes and Reptar. Turner chimes in and says Reptar could be the next band to break out nationally. That's why Turner, who Griggs knows and says would burn down Sanford Stadium if he had his druthers, remembers the Bulldogs had a particularly bad season that year. The Georgia Theatre doesn't host concerts during games and instead shows the broadcast on a screen over its main stage.

In Athens' most storied music venue, The 40 Watt Club (named for the lone bulb that lit its original location), most staffers watch every Bulldogs game. Last year, for Georgia's home game against Auburn, the club hosted tailgating and a party bus to take people to the game. The club's owner, Barrie Buck — the former wife of R.E.M guitarist Peter Buck — attended the University of Georgia during its last national championship win. She was classmates with running back Hershel Walker, and her roommate dated basketball star Dominique Wilkins. She remembers tailgates on North Campus, which have since been banned repeated.

Though contentious at times, she's watched the music scene and the football scene — namely, the public drunkenness and downtown mess that accompany both — find a way to coexist.

“Somehow it has tacit approval from everyone in town,” Buck said of the public drinking during football games. “But they can't say anything about messy rock 'n' roll fans, because we've been dealing with the others.”

Dissonance of football

By now, there are few people in Athens' vast music scene Lamb doesn't know. So when he thinks of how to sum up Athens, he knows it's best done in the form of Jeff Griggs. Griggs, 35, has played drums in upwards of 70 different bands in Athens and is a diehard Georgia football fan.

In that regard, he's a self-described anomaly.

“I would like to tell you there's a really harmonious relationship between the artistic community here in town and college football fans,” he says, “and that before R.E.M. was breaking up they were working on a concept album about Matt Stafford throwing passes to A.J. Green and stuff, but it's really not the case.”

Most people like Griggs stay clear of the stadium on game days. He's tired of fans coming in, renting the town and not cleaning up after themselves, he says. Most people on the western edge of downtown — the “rock 'n' roll side of town,” as they call it — don’t fit in with the football scene, and they're aware of it. He sees a friend passing by the Caledonia Lounge, where we're seated outside, and takes a chance illustrating his point.

“Hey, why don't you go downtown on gameday Saturdays?”

“Because it's crazy.”

“Right. And because you don’t want to be accosted by some guy poking his head out of a red pickup truck,” Griggs says. “That's every weekend.”

It's for that reason that Griggs, who was more excited to spot wide receiver A.J. Greene downtown than he was Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Famer Michael Stipe, calls Athens “a music town with a football problem.”

Reaching harmony

Football and music also harmonize in Athens though. Griggs has found himself explaining “third and 7” situations to artistic rockers in the band “of Montréal.” Lamb remembers one season he went to almost every home game. Even Mike Turner, who Griggs knows and says would burn down Sanford Stadium if he had his druthers, remembers the Bulldogs had a particularly bad season that year. The Georgia Theatre doesn't host concerts during games and instead shows the broadcast on a screen over its main stage.

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University of Georgia

Tailgating area: No specified zone.

Setup: Sanford Stadium is another stadium that is set in the middle of the campus. People find anywhere and everywhere to tailgate. "A lot of students prefer East Campus areas. They will tailgate anywhere, and this makes us a great traveling school," Stan Jackson, director of communications, said.

Town population: 115,452

Stadium capacity: 95,000
That, and it’s an economic boon to the bars and clubs that keep many musicians employed and provide them a place to play.

“I don’t follow the games,” said Randy Smyre, 38, who works at a tattoo parlor next to The 40 Watt and plays bass in a band called Guzik. “But I do appreciate the enormous benefit. Financially, it helps this town a lot.”

**Dueling identities**

Every year, as they would be in any college town, the music and football scenes are renewed with 5,000 new freshmen.

It’s kept Athens reinventing itself, and it’s made Athens a place people can reinvent themselves. That’s what 49-year-old Ken Nations is doing now that he’s retired from the military. He’s returned as what he calls an entrepreneur to the place he earned both bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

He’s looking for projects and trying to launch an Athens writer’s guild. He’d like to write a book about Athens.

It’s not the first time he’s reinvented himself here.

Fresh off a bike ride and resting on the curb, Nations recalls the first time he ever visited Athens, when he was 16. He and his friends got into some trouble in Atlanta, and they were afraid to go home for fear of their parents’ punishment. So they drove to Athens. He remembers they all cut off a quarter inch of hair and, using Vaseline, pasted it on their upper lips. They got into every bar they wanted and even saw a show at The 40 Watt.

Nations thinks the Athens he’s always known may not always exist that way, though. Both Atlanta and Athens have unfurled in major urban sprawl. What was once a lonely road separating the two by about 70 miles is now a highway with strip malls and housing developments.

“The day will come that Athens has to change because it will be a suburb of Atlanta,” Nations said.

“Oh, God. That’s what everyone’s been predicting for years,” Griggs later said of Athens becoming an Atlanta suburb. “But I hope not.”

Athens has fought for its identity before.

Randy Smyre remembers a decade ago, when the rock ‘n’ roll side of downtown was downtown. But steady gentrification and businesses catering more to college students and football fans relegated businesses like Smyre’s to the outer edge. But it’s still there.

There’s a fight going on right now. Plans to build a Walmart near downtown have spurred protest all over Athens. Nearly every downtown businesses has a sign in the window that reads “Live Better. Buy Local. Say no to downtown Walmart.”

Atlanta sprawl would be a different kind of invasion though: gradual and impervious to protest.

The two continue to creep toward each other, threatening the isolation that gave rise to Griggs’ cultural oasis.

“I would think that it will still be able to retain its identity if that ever happened,” Griggs said.

“It’s like the moon to Atlanta’s Earth, and never the twain shall meet.”
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directed by Suzanne Burgoyne
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Heather Carver, Artistic Director
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by Eric Coble
directed by Bradley Stephenson
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by James Baldwin
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TRUE WEST
by Sam Shepard
directed by Kevin Brown
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A warehouse on Gervais Street sports ivy on its east face. The building is in “The Vista,” a neighborhood of refurbished warehouses that have been turned into restaurants, bars and art galleries.

A metal palmetto tree sits outside the South Carolina State Museum. The tree became South Carolina’s state symbol after palmetto logs were used to successfully build a fort on Sullivan Island during the Revolutionary War.

*Locations are approximate
Columbia’s identity complicated but changing

Harry Plumer, reporting from Columbia, South Carolina

In the plaza outside the South Carolina State House, on top of a stone block, a man caught in mid-stride is sculpted of bronze.

A group of elementary school students and their chaperones enter the plaza from the east side, each carrying a clipboard. They are on a field trip. They are also on a scavenger hunt.

A group of 10 or so quickly approaches the statue.

“When is it?” someone shouts.

“It’s… It’s… It’s Storm Thunder!”

It is not Storm Thunder. It’s former Sen. Strom Thurmond.

His name is easy to find in Columbia. The statue bears his name. So does the Strom Thurmond Wellness and Fitness Center on the University of South Carolina’s campus.

Thurmond’s legacy is complex. He is infamous for his segregationist policies, but revered by both his constituents and colleagues. He is cast as a relic of the Confederacy, but also considered a true patriot. His policies and his personal behavior didn’t always match up, either.

As Thurmond’s legacy changed, so too did South Carolina and its capital.

A neighborhood transformed

Overhead, old exposed beams look almost unsafe. The wooden floor is a pale blue, accented brown where it’s been chipped away by time.

Lots and lots of time.

This is the 19th century warehouse where Pam Harpootlian operates her furniture business Carolina Imports, where ironically, the products look old but are actually brand new.

Twenty years ago, the area to the west of downtown Columbia just above the banks of the Congaree River was a wasteland — filled almost exclusively by unused warehouses, mills and railroad depots.

“Oh my gosh it was decrepit,” Harpootlian says. “It was where the homeless people slept.”

A joint venture between the city and private business owners turned urban blight into Columbia’s trendiest neighborhood — The Vista.

“It’s the hot area right now,” says Harpootlian. “The hottest.”

The old railroad depot has become the “Blue Marlin,” an upscale seafood restaurant. Next door to Carolina Imports, in a former cotton warehouse, is the City Market Antiques Mall. There are tapas bars, art galleries, wine bistros and wedding boutiques — all housed in historic buildings and designed to cater to Columbia’s older population.

“This is definitely the adult’s playground,” says David Dubley, a 40-year Columbia resident who was eating lunch at the Wild Hare, a sports bar and cafe in The Vista.

Art has become central in The Vista’s development. The neighborhood features 10 galleries and studios, and twice a year the streets are blocked off for art festivals.

For an area that was once strictly industrial, the transformation is remarkable.

“It’s very coordinated,” says Carol Saunders, who owns the Carol Saunders Gallery, which features an eclectic mix of handmade jewelry. “The city has really refocused on the arts over the past 25 years.”

Identity crisis

Imagine if the Missouri Statehouse in Jefferson City was 30 steps from the MU campus instead of 30 minutes. That’s the situation in Columbia, S.C.

So how, then, does the city define itself? Capital or college town? Growing urban metropolis or sleepy Southern hamlet?

Twenty-five years ago, Carol Saunders was part of a group, led by nationally prominent consultant Ralph Burgard, put in charge of trying to help Columbia define itself.

“Nobody could come up with a single identifying factor,” Saunders recalls.

Commissioned to develop a slogan, though, the group was forced to settle on everyone’s favorite conversational safety net: the weather.

“It ended up being ‘famously hot,’” Saunders says.

In a city where temperatures routinely climb into the 90s five months per year, the slogan stuck. It’s the banner on the Columbia Convention and Visitors Bureau’s website, and the group’s logo is three flames.

The heat and the spirit of Columbia’s residents are most definitely Southern, but one thing isn’t — the architecture. Trademarks like wrought iron gates and pastel-colored facades are notably absent from view. To see those, it’s a 120-mile drive down Interstate 26.
to the Atlantic Ocean and Charleston.

The reason? Columbia was burned to the ground in 1865, two months before the end of the Civil War.

“You can blame General Sherman for that,” Harpootlian says. “I think they cut a deal with the Yankees down in Charleston.”

Despite not being as attractive as its coastal counterpart, resident Greg Moise says that Columbia has other merits.

“Charleston is far more transient,” Moise says. “This is a much more livable everyday city. Columbia people come here and they stay here for their whole life.”

On Campus

The university’s Greek Village is nearly as beautiful as its famous horseshoe. immaculately manicured lawns lead to equally impressive fraternity and sorority houses. As a light rain stops, and the sun comes out in the evening, the houses are soaked in a golden light. The light gives the red brick houses an orange glow.

On the patio of Sigma Nu, J.D. Hammond and Kyle Smith enjoy the evening with Smith’s dog, Czar. The duo agrees that living in the well-kept neighborhood is the biggest benefit to joining a fraternity at South Carolina.

“It’s actually been a model for other schools,” says Smith. “Virginia Tech and Georgia have both come by here to get a sense of how to expand their own Greek Villages.”

There are, of course, other perks to being one of the just over 20 percent of students at South Carolina who are part of the Greek system.

“Each frat gets a tent at home games to tailgate,” Smith says. “It’s really tough tailgating here if you don’t have a group.”

But if you’re expecting John Belushi setting fire to his flatulence, or Will Ferrell streaking through the quad and up to the gymnasium, South Carolina is not the place for you. On this Friday evening, the village is more serene than the rest of campus, and according to Smith, it pretty much stays that way throughout the year. Since the village is technically on campus, the houses are subject to university rules and patrols.

“We’re not as outrageous as other schools because we’re on campus,” Smith says.

“You’re not going to come here and find people falling down unable to control themselves.”

Grand parties aren’t the only myth about Greek life at South Carolina. Across the street, on the patio at Kappa Alpha, Walt Robinson reflected on his experiences with the stereotypes the Gamecocks, and South Carolinians as a state, have come to face.

“Our state is pretty well-known for not being the most accepting,” Robinson says. “Every time we meet someone from out of town, especially Northern people, they tell us, ‘You’re completely different from what we thought you were going to be.’”

A losing tradition broken

In seat 17 of the third row of metal bleachers behind the left-field wall, Brett Wells has something to cheer about.

At this moment, he, along with 8,200 of his closest friends, is going wild because Grayson Greiner has just put the Gamecocks baseball team ahead of Alabama with a three-run home run.

Wells is giving out so many high five requests that he’s actually rejected by a couple nearby fans.

It’s not just this one home run that has Wells excited, however.

Two national championship trophies — 2010 and 2011 — sit in a case behind the center-field wall. The football team made its first-ever appearance in the SEC championship game in 2010.

The Gamecocks have begun to reverse a long tradition of losing.

“When we joined the SEC (beginning with the 1991-92 basketball season), people said, ‘You can’t win,’” Wells says, in a throaty drawl. “It’s taken us 20 years, but now we’re finally doing what it takes.”

Part of doing what it takes was building Carolina Stadium, which could easily be mistaken for a high-level minor-league facility. With 6,400 actual seats, luxury suites and club seats on the second deck and an HD video board in left field, the home of the Gamecocks is more than suitable.

The fans have responded, both to the success and the stadium. South Carolina finished 2011 fourth in the NCAA in baseball attendance, averaging 7,431 fans per game. That figure also happened to be fourth in the SEC, behind LSU, Ole Miss and Arkansas.

Wells, a lifelong Gamecock fan, says the tides are most definitely turning in favor of South Carolina, but he is also cautious.

“We hadn’t tasted any success until two years ago, but man, come on, right now what we’ve got going is special,” he says. “Then again, I’m dumb. I’m a Gamecock, and that comes with 100 years of losing.”

Five Points

The taxi driver laughs at the request to
be dropped off at a bar named Breakers in Five Points.

“Do you know where it is? Like what street?” she asks. “Honey, these places change names so often, I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. How about I just drop you off in the center of Five Points?”

With parties in the Greek Village a no-no, South Carolina students turn to Five Points to provide them with a place to drink and revel in the college experience. “We’re very downtown oriented here as far as partying goes,” said Sigma Nu’s Hammond. “If I had a friend in town, and as far as partying goes,” said Sigma Nu’s Hammond. “If I had a friend in town, and we were looking to have a good time, Five Points is where we’d go.”

Set just east of campus, the neighborhood’s selection of bars is extensive, and, according to Jackie the cab driver, in a state of constant flux.

Recommendations on places to go varied for the most part, so the only option was to just dive right in and begin an exploratory pub crawl.

The cleverly named Group Therapy, and its hotly contested pool table was the first stop. The crowd was diverse. Men with white dreadlocks talked with international students from Dubai, though their names were inaudible over the pounding bass of Jay-Z’s “99 Problems.”

At Lucky’s, aspiring country musician Jesse Moore channels ’90s rockers Hootie and the Blowfish, who got their start as students at South Carolina, with a rousing acoustic cover of “Let Her Cry.”

The crowd, however, was more receptive to Moore’s next selection: Alabama’s “Song of the South.”

“Sweet potato pie and I shut my mouth!” they sing in unison. It’s the loudest cheer of the evening.

A few doors down at Sharky’s, the attraction is a beer pong table, where two female students appear locked in a heated battle with two male students.

There was one recommendation, however, that was almost universal from every South Carolina student: Finish at Pavlov’s.

So just after 1 a.m., Pavlov’s was the final stop.

Inside was a mass of humanity, each person seemingly indistinguishable from another. Men dressed in plaid shirts and salmon-colored shorts and girls in casual dresses filled the inside. Getting a drink required a combination of slinking through small gaps and throwing the occasional elbow. Shoes stuck to the floor. Getting spilled on was a regular occurrence rather than a cause for concern.

The patio was no different. Smoke rose as students chatted about their impending final exams, sang along to “Song of the South” (again) and enjoyed their final weekend before the end of the semester.

At 2 a.m., Pavlov’s is too packed for comfort. Taxis are a constant presence in the driveway outside.

**Goodnight, Strom**

It is just after 2 a.m. and Strom Thurmond is alone, except for a stray white cat that roams the plaza outside the State House.

There are no leaf blowers or schoolchildren to disturb the silence at this hour — the noise of the revelers in Five Points is too distant to hear here.

Untangling Thurmond’s legacy is a complicated process.

There is the undeniable fact that he supported segregation.

“There aren’t enough troops in the Army to force the Southern people to break down segregation and admit the Negro race into our swimming pools, into our homes, and into our churches,” he said, during a speech in 1948.

Yet if you believe his colleagues, that Thurmond isn’t the one people remember.

“His legacy in South Carolina is quite simple for every South Carolinian — black, white, rich, poor, no matter whether you are from upstate, middle, low state — I am sure every state has different regions and different dialects but the one thing we had in common: If we had a problem, we knew who to call,” Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said in 2002. “We knew to pick up the phone and call Senator Thurmond because if he could help you, he would.”

But it’s something that happened after his death that might be even more indicative of Strom Thurmond the man.

Underneath Thurmond’s many titles and accomplishments carved in the stone block, is listed one final aspect of his life.

“Father of five children.”

This inscription wasn’t always there. The stone is damaged where the word “five” is carved.

It used to say “four.”

In December 2003, six months after Thurmond’s death at the age of 100, a biracial woman named Essie Mae Washington-Williams came forward with a shocking revelation.

Washington-Williams’ mother, Carrie Butler, had been a servant in Thurmond’s family’s house. Butler gave birth to her daughter in 1925, when she was just 16.

Strom Thurmond, then 22, was the father. Though both Thurmond and Washington-Williams kept their secret from the public, they were introduced to each other in 1941. They kept a relationship throughout the rest of Thurmond’s life.

“Whenever I was in need, he would help me out financially,” Washington-Williams told CBS News in 2009. “And as I said, he did a lot of counseling.”

Now, on the statue, underneath his other four children’s names Essie Mae’s is also present. It was added in 2004.

What was originally written in stone about Thurmond, and about South Carolina, has been revised.

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TENNESSEE

University of Tennessee • Knoxville, Tennessee

610 miles from Columbia

Daniel Kimbro, Jonathan Maness and Cory Kimbro of Mountain Soul are accompanied by one of their young audience members during the Kidstuff radio show on station WDVX on April 28. Besides Kidstuff, the radio station also broadcasts the music show The Blue Plate Special live from a stage in the corner of the city’s Visitor’s Center.

The Sunsphere stands on the edge of World’s Fair Park. The tower, built when Knoxville hosted the World’s Fair in 1982, is open daily to the public.
In Knoxville, a mix of new and old

Emily Becker, reporting from Knoxville, Tennessee

At 10:30 a.m., the vendors of the Rossini Festival are just beginning to set up on Gay Street: heating oil for kettle corn, chopping white onions that will be grilled with Italian sausage and hanging paintings that depict various locations in the city.

It is festival season in Knoxville, Tenn. Knoxville is a laid-back city that sits at the crossroads of the hospitality of the South and the folk heritage of the Smoky Mountains to southeast. Here, the police stop to warn you the headlights of your parked car are still on.

The place to be this morning, the policeman said, is the downtown square. Just head right down the street, and you’ll run right into it.

A city in renovation

A block up, Megan Scott and John Becker sit behind a table loaded with shortbread, scones and buttermilk coffee cake at the Market Square Farmers Market.

This is only their second time selling their baked goods at the market. Scott and Becker started this season because the market offers an opportunity to test new recipes.

“I think the university is partially self-contained, but it does have some impact. You would never be able get married in a church in Knoxville on a home football Saturday.”

CHARLOTTE TOLLEY
Director of the Market Square Farmers Market

When the market began in 2004, there were 20 vendors and few visitors to downtown Knoxville.

“Downtown is just becoming a new place to go hang out again,” Becker said.

Until recently, Knoxville was a city that was still in development. The city has spent the last 60 years trying to recover first from a textile industry that was unable to compete with foreign competition, then the loss of a large railroad shipping industry after the construction of the interstate system.

Since 2000, downtown has been the focus of an aggressive redevelopment campaign. Now, almost all the buildings have been leased to both local and chain businesses.

“The square is kind of the heart,” said Tolley. “Things are building out more and more.”

Tolley first came to Knoxville as a student at UT but has been “living as an adult” here for the past 12 years. She said she has seen a significant increase in the number of people and events over the past 10 years.

“Now stuff’s going on down here all the time,” she said.

Revitalized history

The most unusual building of the Knoxville skyline is a steel structure topped by a large golden globe. The building, the Sunsphere, is a remnant from Knoxville's hosting of the 1982 world exhibition.

In 1982, 22 countries participated in the “Energy Turns the World” Exhibition. The festival took over the west side of the city for six months with pavilions, a Ferris wheel and a giant Rubik's cube in the Hungary exhibit. The fair had an attendance goal of 11 million people, a record met the day before it closed on Oct. 31.

Today, beside the Sunsphere, the only building that remains from the fair is the amphitheater that sits on the bank of a small lake in World's Fair Park.

A 48-second elevator ride to the top of the Sunsphere takes visitors to the public observation deck. There are a few other visitors wearing matching team T-shirts from this morning’s “Walk to Cure Diabetes” in the park below.

Through the tinted windows lies the city of Knoxville. The city is banked by the Tennessee River. In the distance are the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, barely visible through the haze and clouds.

To the northwest, old warehouses dominate the skyline. The Old City district is an area of converted warehouses, saloons and train tracks left over from Knoxville's days as an industrial capital. At night, a combination of college students and young professionals head to the area's bars, pubs and nightclubs.

‘Vol’ country

A five-minute drive down Cumberland Avenue, the University of Tennessee is firmly planted on top of one of the many rolling hills of Knoxville. The university is focused on research and has ties to Oak Ridge National Laboratory, which is about 25 miles outside the city. A major portion of the research at Oak Ridge is nuclear energy. The facility was established during World War II to separate and produce uranium and plutonium for the atomic bomb as part of the Manhattan Project.

Sports have a strong following at Tennessee. In terms of records, the university's
most successful sports team is the women’s basketball team, which has made it to every NCAA basketball championship tournament since the tournament’s establishment in 1982. The “Vols” football program has won the second most games of the current SEC programs. The team holds six national titles; the most recent was in 1998.

“I think the university is partially self-contained, but it does have some impact,” Tolley said. “You would never be able get married in a church in Knoxville on a home football Saturday.”

Tennessee’s mascot, Smokey, is a Bluetick Coonhound, a small dog cared for by members of the Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity on campus. Smokey also exists in a costumed form that appears at every Vols game.

A somewhat steep walk leads to Ayers Hall, the main administration building. It is surrounded on the north side by other academic buildings. In between the buildings peeks the bright orange of Neyland Stadium. The stadium, named for former football coach Robert Neyland, is the home of the Tennessee Volunteers football team.

On football home game days, major streets around campus are turned into one-way streets headed into campus. After the game, all traffic is directed one-way out of campus. This past summer, Henley Bridge, one of the few bridges across the Tennessee River into campus, closed for renovations. According to an article in the Knoxville News Sentinel, representatives from the Knoxville Police Department, University of Tennessee and Homeland Security met a month before the opening home football game in order to discuss how to direct traffic with the current closure.

“It’s pretty much all orange to the stadium,” said junior Mason Vickery.

About two hours before games, fans line the streets leading to the stadium, which is two blocks from the student center. During the “Vol Walk,” one of the traditions on Tennessee game days, the cheerleaders, Smokey, the coaches and players walk through the crowd of fans into the stadium.

“Tennessee is one the richer schools in terms of tradition in the SEC,” said Vickery.

One of his favorite parts of the game is singing along to “Rocky Top,” the unofficial fight song of the university. He describes the atmosphere of the student section inside the stadium at football games as “rowdy.”

“You don’t want to wear the wrong colors in the student section,” he said.

**The lunchtime ‘Special’**

Back on Gay Street, the five members of the Corey Bishop Band set up their instruments on a small wooden stage in the corner of the Knoxville Visitor Center. Monday through Saturday, for an hour starting at noon, the center hosts the “Blue Plate Special,” a live music radio show broadcast on station WDVX. The program normally hosts country, folk and bluegrass musicians. The Avett Brothers and Bela Fleck have made appearances in the past.

The Corey Bishop Band is the second act of today’s show. Among brochures for museums and maps of the city sits a crowd of about 30. Some are regulars. Others wandered in the center and found themselves in the middle of a live radio show. Two are John and Tracy Vandiver, members of Claxton Creek, the folk band that just finished its half-hour set.

The red “On Air” sign flicks on as the band launches into its first song. The members met at Belmont College in Nashville and have been playing together for two months. The guitar, bass and drums give the songs an alternative rock sound, but the songs turn more country when Bishop adds some harmonica.

“It’s a real honor to be here on the Blue Plate Special,” said Bishop after the band’s second song. “My favorite color is blue. My favorite thing to eat off of is a plate. And my mother has told me several times that I’m special.”

After a few songs, some audience members begin clapping and bobbing their heads to the beat. Five songs later, the show signs off off to enthusiastic clapping from the audience.

**Aria in the afternoon**

A few blocks down Gay Street, customers are gathered in the small patio of the “French Market Creperie.” The market-turned-restaurant serves sweet and savory versions of the large, thin pancake, stuffed with things such as Swiss cheese, fruit or nutella, and then folded into eighths.

Knoxville food is not traditional Southern cuisine. One of the oldest restaurants in town is a vegetarian-friendly pizza, sandwich and burrito joint off Market Square named Tomato Head. The highest-rated Knoxville restaurants on Internet sites serve vegan-friendly burritos, gyros filled with lamb and onions, and sushi.

In the street in front of the restaurant, visitors to the Rossini Festival stream by. This is the Italian festival and street market’s 11th year. On a stage set up at Gay Street and Union Avenue, Michael Austin, a tenor cur-
Currently with the Knoxville Opera Company, is belting “Old Man River.” After he is finished, he steps off stage to cheers and clapping. His deep laugh is carried across the street, a side effect of having lungs used to dealing with full, operatic notes.

Across the street, Mali Glazer has lost her husband to the wine tasting tent. Glazer is originally from San Francisco, but she and her husband retired to Knoxville almost six years ago. The city met all their requirements: a college town, good libraries, natural beauty and a place that was small enough that she would be able to attend most of the festivals and events downtown.

“I really love coming down here,” Glazer said.

Glazer has missed the Rossini Festival the last five years but was determined to attend this year, even though it meant a late-night, 8-hour drive home from Cleveland last night.

The Knoxville Strip

At night, Tennessee students in small groups head in a steady stream to a section of Cumberland Avenue to the north of campus, known as the “Strip.” The windows on the front of Tin Roof have been opened, which allows the country music on the speakers inside to be broadcast onto the sidewalk.

Inside, students stand at wooden tables drinking beer. Near the front, teams of two are competing in the beanbag toss game ‘cornhole,’ which is known as ‘baggo’ in other parts of the country. Students continue to arrive and form a line outside to enter.

Across the street, campus is dark. On one wall of the University Center hangs plates of the seals of the universities in the SEC. Missouri and Texas A&M have yet to be added.

“We take football pretty seriously around here,” said Vickery. “I guess you'll get a taste of it in the fall.”
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VANDERBILT

Vanderbilt University • Nashville, Tennessee

431 miles from Columbia

Crawfish boils are a popular tradition at Greek parties at Vanderbilt. Students break the freshwater crustaceans in half, suck out the juices and pull out the meat.

Vanderbilt University is the smallest and only private university in the Southeastern Conference. Though its football team does not typically perform well in the conference, new coach James Franklin just led the Commodores to six regular season wins and a bowl game invitation in the 2011 season.
Vanderbilt teeters between Southern charm and bright lights of Music City

Katy Bergen, reporting from Nashville, Tennessee

stand in the center of the arboretum on Vanderbilt University’s campus. It’s easy to forget you are in Nashville.

But there are simple reminders that a college town doesn’t exist outside this gated community.

City sounds break through — the hammer of a construction worker or the hum of traffic. Keith Urban shows up at the movies or Taylor Swift is seen at Pancake Pantry on 21st Avenue. Students walk across the street to the Parthenon, the full-size model of the ancient Greek structure that represents Nashville’s role as “Athens of the South.”

Outside the wrought-iron gate that surrounds much of the smallest school in the Southeastern Conference is the old stomping ground of music legends, a place that helped Johnny Cash and Patsy Cline and Hank Williams build careers. It’s a tourist trap, where 50 cents gets you 20 minutes on a parking meter and Jimmy Buffett’s Margaritaville Café is next to the honky tonk bars. It’s a strange celebration of the humble beginnings of American music and the giant industry that the word “country” has grown to represent.

People don’t come to Nashville for Vanderbilt University. They come for Music City.

Country music connections

Stephen Jones, of Greenock, Scotland, beams at the round wooden pews that surround the Ryman Auditorium in two levels.

In the years after World War II, a Nashville radio program called the “Grand Ole Opry” established the city as a hub for country songwriting and stardom. Today, “Grand Ole Opry” is a weekly country music show that features country legends, up-and-coming stars and tribute performances from the Grand Ole Opry House on Opryland Drive in Nashville.

But between 1943 and 1974, the radio show and live performance was hosted at the Ryman Auditorium on Fifth Avenue. Originally built as a tabernacle in 1892, the auditorium earned the name “Mother Church of Country Music.”

And there is a reverence to the expression, full of awe, which consumes Jones’ face as he takes in the stage that once propelled artists such as Hank Williams and The Carter Family to fame.

Jones and his family are touring Nashville and Memphis on a family vacation. They’ve been to the Country Music Hall of Fame and RCA Studio B, the famous recording studio that produced hits such as Dolly Parton’s “Jolene” and Waylon Jennings’ “Only Daddy That’ll Walk the Line.”

“Did you get to Studio B?” he asks solemnly. “I had a tear in my eye.” He traces a tear down his cheek.

Inside the ‘Vander Bubble’

Drive five minutes from downtown Nashville and Vanderbilt’s campus comes into view.

Founded in 1893, Vanderbilt University was named for Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, the shipping and railroad mogul who gave the university its first financial gift. The university boasts the highest ACT scores for incoming freshman in the Southeastern Conference and is the only private university in the league. Students here frequently make reference to the fact that everything they need is within walking distance.

“We call it the Vander Bubble,” senior Tracy Fetterly says. “Because you have to try to get off campus.”

Undergraduate enrollment is just under 7,000 and there’s a sense that people know each other on this campus. A boy dancing on a table in the yard of a fraternity house sees basketball player Steve Tchiengang, shouts his name and throws a tennis ball at him. Tchiengang misses the ball. There are shouts of disappointment.

“Butterfingers,” the man yells. Tchiengang just shakes his head with a smile. He said although Vanderbilt football has traditionally had a weak program, the school came together when the basketball team won the
Outside: Recording at the Ryman

Visitors to the Ryman Auditorium can record a solo or duet version of popular country hits such as Merle Haggard’s “Mama Tried” or Patsy Cline’s “Crazy” in the recording booth located at one end of the main floor.

Inside the booth, sound technician Emmanuel Trevino, 22, turns to a potential singer and says, “This blasts through the entire auditorium.”

Trevino is kidding. The booth is sound-proof. But a mix of nervousness and terror still ensues.

The singer can’t sing in key. The visitors on tour who stop, smile and point from the other side of the glass freak her out. She’s about to disgrace country music forever.

So she asks Trevino how many people who record at the Ryman are actually talented.

He pauses as if he’s about to give a diplomatic answer. Then breaks into a grin.

“I’d say about 3 to 4 percent.”

Inside: Occupy Vanderbilt

A colony of camping tents take up a grassy island in the middle of a cul-de-sac on a Vanderbilt drive. The area is abandoned, empty except for a single parked police car.

Donald Clark of the Vanderbilt Police is assigned to keep an eye on the Occupy Vanderbilt movement, which he guesses has been in existence for about three weeks.

“No problems yet,” he says with a slight smirk as if mocking the kind of enthusiasm that can be found in deserted, wet tents on a Saturday morning. “They seem to come out in the evenings.”

Clark has another curious smile when asked if the Nashville community gets excited about Vanderbilt football.

He said the campus is made up of a diverse group of students, faculty and staff whose loyalties often lie with surrounding states, particularly ones with stronger programs: Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama. Clark, himself, is a Kentucky fan.

“Game day you’ll see a variety of colors,” he says, laughing.

Outside: Student tourists

Throngs of high school students pile out of buses outside the Ryman. Four choruses from a Maryland high school are on a Nashville music trip. They’ve taken in the Grand Ole Opry and performed for the Vanderbilt University voice faculty.

They watch as the set of “A Prairie Home Companion” is built. The live variety radio show will be filmed here next week. Stephen Indrisano, 15, of Walt Whitman High School in Besthesa, Md., manages to get his hands on papers that map out the light, sound, microphones and wires for the show.

For a music student, this is a jackpot. Indrisano is part of the tech crew at his high school, manning the light and sound technology for all school events.

“I’m teching out so hard right now,” he says.

Inside: At the frat house

Fraternity brothers sit behind white foldout tables outside the front of Greek houses. They check IDs and enter names into a laptop. Men in yellow jackets with “Event Staff” stamped on the back give wristbands to those over 21.

Seth Cadan, a sophomore from Connecticut who is involved in Greek life, says every fraternity is required by the university to register parties and hire event security and a bartender. Soon, an event staff member brings a man back outside.

“We go through this all the time,” Event Staff Man said. “I know there’s a bottle in your back pocket. (Liquor is not allowed at fraternity parties according to university rules.)

The younger man laughs: “How do you always know?”

Fetterly and senior Kate Kerbel participate in another school tradition at a fraternity party down the road: crawfish boils.

The freshwater crustaceans are poured out over a long table. Students line up on each side of table, breaking the crawfish at the tail, sucking the juices from the head and pulling the meat out.

The crawfish are kept in inflatable kiddie pools on the front porch until they can be boiled. A boy scoops one out of the tub and chases a girl, who screams.

Fetterly says attending frat parties is typical fare at Vanderbilt, particularly on game days.

“The big thing about football Saturday isn’t really the football game, it’s the frat-tug,” she said. “Everyone’s out on their lawns drinking. The student section is notoriously late.”

A new football coach is trying to change that. Fetterly says it’s a well-known fact that head coach James Franklin, who led the Commodores to six

Vanderbilt University

Tailgating area: Vandyville

Setup: Vandyville is a short way from Dudley Field on Natchez Trace. It has a kid zone and areas for tables and chairs (fans bring their own food). Vanderbilt is somewhat land locked in Nashville, but Vandyville gives it a little bit of a grassy abyss.

Town population: 601,222

Stadium capacity: 39,790

Vanderbilt is planning to build a new grass hill in its stadium, which will put it just over 40,000.
victories and bowl game eligibility last season, visited each sorority house this year with two requests: Wear sundresses in school colors and start coming to games on time.

The women soon grow bored of “day-fratting” and decide to break for dinner before going back out later in the evening — to their own student commons for the Rites of Spring concert.

Rites of Spring is a Vanderbilt concert tradition that began in 1971 as a way for Nashville residents to interact with the university community. Today, it is an annual two-day concert that draws the likes of diverse group of musicians from the rapper Kid Cudi to bands such as Passion Pit and The Flaming Lips. Tickets are open to Vanderbilt students and the public.

The concert isn’t meant to reject country, students say. They just don’t necessarily want to hear it.

“The general population here doesn’t want that,” Kerbel said. “And if you want country, there’s obviously plenty of places to go for that.”

Outside: At the honky tonks

While the students of Vanderbilt bob to the likes of Wiz Khalifa and Sleigh Bells at Rites of Spring, across the city a million honky tonk bars come to life.

Tequila Cowboy is one kind of country. Here, the cover band is just as likely to sing an Alan Jackson cover as a Tom Petty song; the singer thanks “the troops” for making it possible to enjoy cheap music in Nashville and the bar erupts in cheers; an ominous-looking man dressed in black carries a sign through the bar that reads “Mechanical bull open.”

A young performer takes the mic away for a song. She’s building a career, somewhere. She gets a few whoops and claps when she finishes.

“The stage is always open for those of you who are chasing you dreams, folks,” the main singer says.

If Tequila Cowboy is one kind of country, than Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge is another. Located across the street and up a few blocks, the back entrance of the lavender-colored bar backs into the Ryman Auditorium.

Look for the narrow bar with the faces of the Legends plastered on the front and old photographs that cover every inch of wall. Back in the day Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings, Patsy Cline and other legends frequented Tootsie’s between sets at the Ryman.

This is a bar where the bartender makes eye contact with you as soon as you walk in the door and gets you what you want immediately. She knows you’ll get lost, swallowed up in the crowd as soon as you get further than 5 feet in the door.

Tonight, every person in the bar, from the Virginia Tech music students to a pack of plump middle-aged ladies, sings along to a Garth Brooks’ cover. The songs are diverse here too, but there’s a different kind of energy. Everyone belts out “Some Kind of Wonderful,” “Friends in Low Places,” and “(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay.”

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” a man says happily to an older woman who can’t help but laugh as she’s jostled by the crowd as she presses toward the door.

The woman smiles. “Oh, but it’s so much fun!”
KENTUCKY

University of Kentucky • Lexington, Kentucky

459 miles from Columbia

The Victorian Square Shoppes line Main Street of downtown Lexington, Ky. Lexington is the second-largest city in the state and the unofficial horse capital of the state.

Horse Ready Set munches on hay in the morning at Keeneland Race Course on April 27. Visitors of the track are free to wander the stables in the morning before races to see the horses up close.

*Locations are approximate
Lexington is horse, basketball country

Emily Becker, reporting from Lexington, Kentucky

The sun reflects off Charlie’s brown coat as he munches grass on a small hill outside his paddock. The pony has already eaten hay this morning, but his owner, P.K. Eldridge, knows how much he loves spring grasses, so she is allowing this mid-morning snack.

In a few hours, it will be time for Charlie to go to work at Keeneland Race Course outside Lexington, Ky. It is his job, as well as the job of other ponies, to lead the racehorses to the starting gates on the other side of the facility.

In the late morning, spectators will begin arriving for the afternoon’s 10 races. Between now and then, all the horses running will be groomed, saddled and shown outside the grandstand for those bettors who take their wagers more seriously than just based on name or number.

But for now, some horses are content with sneaking a few bites of grass on a chilly Kentucky morning.

Morning at the racetrack

Lexington is horse country. To the north of the city is Kentucky Horse Park, a horse farm that also hosts races and houses the American Saddlebred Museum. The Lexington airport is named for Man o’ War, a Thoroughbred who won 20 of his 21 career races.

Five minutes outside downtown, the roads are no longer lined with buildings, but instead the precise wooden fences of horse farms. Barns in forest green, black or dark gray with white trim sit on top of the rolling bluegrass hills of central Kentucky.

A 10-minute drive down High Street and onto Versailles Road leads to Keeneland. The track only hosts races in April and October, which Eldridge said is normally the perfect weather for racehorses.

Unlike most horse farms and race courses, the stables and paddocks at Keeneland are open to the public. The gravel paths around the whitewashed buildings are marked by both the footprints of humans and of horses. The air is scented with the earthy smell of dirt, hay and manure.

Thoroughbreds, the breed of racing horses, are an investment. The average price of one of Keeneland’s horses last year was $71,400. Winning the Triple Crown, which means winning the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness Stakes and the Belmont Stakes, carries a purse of $5 million to the owner of the horse.

Horseracing is a highly competitive sport, sometimes at the cost of the animals’ health. Thoroughbreds begin racing as 2-year-olds, before their bones are fully formed, which results in injuries later.

“It’s nerve-wracking to be a racehorse,” Eldridge said. “We lead them through crowds of people screaming to a metal gate. Then the jockeys are hitting them with their whips to make them go faster. But they have heart. If you treat them right, they’ll perform.”

A stop in Big Blue Nation

The University of Kentucky is on the south side of Lexington. The campus is quiet on a Friday afternoon. It is the beginning of finals week, and the most popular place on campus appears to be William T. Young Library.

Blue and white paw prints of the Kentucky Wildcat mascot mark the sidewalk leading up to Memorial Hall. The brick building serves as a memorial to those who died in World War I. It is the most photographed spot on campus, and the white clock tower has been incorporated into the Kentucky logo.

Downtown, a 20-minute walk from campus, is Rupp Arena, the home of Lexington’s other sporting obsession, Kentucky men’s basketball. A banner next to the main entrance congratulates Kentucky on its eight NCAA basketball championship wins, most recently in 2012.

The arena is named for former Kentucky basketball coach Adolph Rupp, who ended his career with 876 wins and a .822 percentage, the fifth and second best in history, respectively. Today, the arena is empty, a contrast to when the seats are filled with members of Big Blue Nation, the name of the Kentucky fan base, during men’s basketball season. The average attendance of the basketball games in the 2011 season was 23,603, the largest in Division I men’s basketball. Kentucky has held this title, calculated by the NCAA, for 15 of the past 16 years. (Comparatively, the average attendance of Missouri men’s basketball games in 2011 was 11,112.)

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After this year’s championship win against Kansas, the scene in Lexington became the focus of media coverage; in some cases, it was the subject of critique.
Twitter was filled with quotes from the Lexington Police scanner that detailed riots, burning couches and cars and shots fired in the city. Bilby said she believes these incidents came mostly from a small percentage of Kentucky fans. She attributes some of the atmosphere after the game to the sheer number of people who had traveled to Lexington to watch the game.

“With that much passion and that many people, things are going to happen,” she said. “We wanted a championship so bad.”

Bilby, a self-proclaimed sports nut, said she transferred to Kentucky from Western Kentucky University so she could have access to student tickets to basketball games. But she said now, she loves other aspects of the university, including the community created by the college.

“Big Blue Nation is like a family,” she said.

**On the bourbon trail**

Ramsey’s Diner is a five-minute drive south from Rupp Arena. There are now four locations in Lexington, but the original — on High Street — is just a few blocks northeast of the Kentucky campus.

The tables are made of wood, and the drinks are served in plastic cups. A sign directly at eye level displays the 15 varieties of pie available each day, which include peanut butter, cherry, pecan and coconut cream.

The diner is known for its traditional Kentucky cuisine, a diet that includes macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes and fried green tomatoes under the “veggies” section of its menu.

Also on the menu is the Kentucky Hot Brown, a dish created at the Brown Hotel in Louisville, but has since been adopted as the state’s unofficial sandwich. The open-faced sandwich features ham, turkey and tomatoes stacked on white bread. This is covered in cream sauce, cheddar cheese and bacon, then broiled until the cheese has created a melted crust over the entire entree.

Patrons at the next table over are beginning their lunches with glasses of bourbon. Although Lexington is not in Bourbon County, the county in which the spirit was first distilled, it is the liquor of choice in the area.

A 20-minute drive outside Lexington leads to the Bourbon Trail. The distilleries are tucked into the countryside, between the large horse farms on the outskirts of the city. The trail itself consists of six distilleries: Four Roses, Heaven Hill, Jim Beam, Maker’s Mark, Wild Turkey and Woodford Reserve.

Woodford Reserve, the last stop on the 70-mile trail, is a large, gray house with white shutters. Rockers sit on a wrap-around porch, where visitors can overlook the stone buildings of the distillery while sipping bourbon. The liquor smells slightly of vanilla and has less bite than other whiskies.

Kentucky is responsible for 95 percent of the world’s bourbon supply, and bourbon is the largest spirit exported from the U.S. But some does stay in the state. Call it hometown pride. Each year, over the two-day race period, the Kentucky Derby serves almost 120,000 mint juleps, a drink that consists of bourbon, mint, sugar and water.

Bourbon whiskey has been part of the state’s history since before it was a state. Immigrants to the area, mostly from Scotland and Ireland, used surplus corn, which grows well in the Kentucky climate and soil, as the grain in the distillation process to create bourbon. After securing the territory that would become Kentucky, a captain of one of George Rogers Clark’s troops sent him a letter that read, “if you have not provisions, send whiskey which will answer as good an end.”

**‘The thought of winning’**

Back at Keeneland, it is 25 minutes until the next race starts. The entries are being shown to the public in a grassy enclosure outside the grandstand. There will be 10 races today, the last racing day of the season for the track.

Twenty-three minutes before the race, the initial odds for the horses are broadcast on the screens around the area.

The crowd of college students and older professionals wearing sport coats and sundresses has left the standing-room area near the track to refill drinks, place bets or observe the horses.

Kentucky senior Jordan Ellis says he had an anthropology teacher one semester who let them out of class early on some Fridays so students could head over to Keeneland.

“In the fall, you don’t schedule class on Fridays for football and Keeneland,” he said. “In the spring, it’s just Keeneland.”

Many out front are spending their afternoon talking and drinking with friends, the races an afterthought.

“It’s more of a social thing for me,” Kentucky senior Bryce Moffett said. “But winning, or the thought of winning, is fun.”
Fifteen minutes before the race starts, the lines in front of the betting windows are six people deep. Upstairs, groups have taken over tables to lay out their newspapers and race programs that include details about each of the horses, poring over them for some last minute inspiration for the best bet.

“Don’t listen to what the bookies say,” a man in line offers as a tip for first-time betters. Two minutes before the race, a trumpet is sounded over the speakers, a signal that it is time for the horses to be walked to the starting gate. At this point, the only betting window that doesn’t have a line is the $50 minimum.

The race begins with the announcement of “And they’re off.” The attention of the majority of the people is turned to the track or the large screens where the race is being broadcast.

No. 5, Hava Dream, takes an early lead, galloping out in front of the rest. Over the loud speakers, the announcer narrates the race as the horses charge out of the gates.

Cheers rise from the crowd as No. 1 begins to gain on Hava Dream. As the horses approach the finish, Dodie Jo continues to edge toward the front.

The horses stream past the grandstand; Dodie Jo has taken the lead.

In total, the race took a minute and 56 seconds.

**The end of the race**

At night, students at the University of Kentucky head just north of campus to Limestone Avenue.

The inside of Tin Roof, a chain with locations in several college towns, looks a little like a warehouse turned into a bar. The exposed heating pipes and ductwork have been wrapped in lights.

Many are sitting on the top of the back of the booths in order to see the one-man ’90s cover band playing at the front of the room.

Tin Roof is a bar that fully embraces being next to a college campus. During the NCAA playoffs in March and April, the bar rented big screen TVs in order to show the basketball games in the parking lot.

Tonight the crowd is smaller, an effect of the end of the semester and the end of the sports season. Across town at Keeneland, the lights are dim, and the horses have been boarded for the night. The race for this season has been run.
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