

# Ross changes Ag image

By DON MIDDLETON and JOHN ADAMS

This is the final installment on the story of Ross and Coke. The amount of information available on the lives of these two men, especially Ross, would fill many books. Come to think of it, many books have been filled, along with magazines, newspapers, and file after file in the University Archives.

In regard to the A&M College of Texas, Lawrence S. Ross was, at the time of his invitation to become President of the college, Governor of Texas. The young institution was in dire straits. The Texas legislature was pouring thousands of dollars into the school, but the place didn't seem to progress beyond the dubious role of a hang-out for hell-raisers.

Partly through the efforts of Richard Coke during his tenure as Governor, A&M was saved from being closed on more than one occasion. It was Coke, you may recall, who signed the original legislation creating the college in 1873.

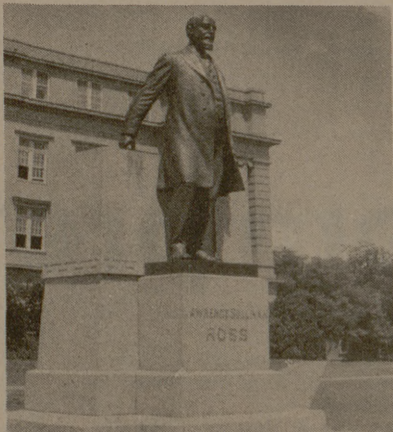
In 1883, the Board of Directors of the college abolished the office of President and created instead the role of Chairman of the Faculty. During the next seven years this move proved to be a serious blunder, adding to the school's troubles rather than helping solve them.

It seems as though the faculty members had difficulty deciding who actually rated the title of chairman. Disputes over seniority eventually led to bickering and rendered the office of Chairman of the Faculty ineffective.

In an effort to correct the mistake the members of the 1890 Board reestablished the Presidency and sent a letter to Governor Ross asking him to fill the position. Ross accepted without hesitation.

At the time some believed that Ross had padded the Board with friends who were more than glad to offer him the Presidency, but this rumor was never substantiated.

## The first 100 years



An early photo of the statue of Lawrence Sullivan Ross. The once-smooth bronze has been roughened and pock-marked by years of painting and polishing. Courtesy University Archives.

Regardless of how he came to hold the office, Ross undoubtedly saved the school from extinction. When his term as governor was up in 1891, he came to A&M with the single idea of making the school a viable institution of higher learning.

Ross was loved and respected by everyone at the school, but he was stern and unbending in his goal of cleaning up A&M. He once flatly refused admission to a young man who came to his office seeking to enroll. When a professor who was present at the interview asked him why, he replied "Couldn't you see that the boy was a gambler?"

During Ross' administration the college grew and prospered. The legislature continued to give the college enormous sums of money, but they were now beginning to see

signs that the money was being put to good use.

Five major buildings, including a plush home for the President, were built while Ross was in charge. He instituted a system by which students were assigned grades as a measurement of progress in their classwork. And in general he lent an air of dignity and respectability to an otherwise crude and unmannerly student body.

When Lawrence Sullivan Ross died on Jan. 3, 1898, the entire nation mourned his passing. But no one suffered more than the students and teachers at the college he had so masterfully brought from the brink of disaster.

The cause of his death was listed as pneumonia when it was listed at all. Oddly, very few accounts of Ross' life mention the events leading to his death.

In 1929 the Houston Chronicle published a story that contradicted the accepted account of Sully's death.

The article was based on an interview with Clint Padgett, a businessman in Ross' hometown of Waco, and it read in part: "... probably less than a dozen people in Texas know that Ross died from accidental poisoning, his death usually attributed to pneumonia."

The story went on to say that the former governor was hunting with friends in the woods near the A&M campus when his death occurred. The party had brought along two barrels of flour, one of which contained rat poison to kill the rats that infested the area.

A servant who was along to do the cooking for the group presumably used flour from the wrong barrel in preparing an evening's meal. Ross, the first to eat that night, observed that the food tasted odd and warned the others not to take any. He im-

mediately fell ill and died soon after.

Again, the story is uncorroborated, but the Houston Chronicle placed enough credence in it to print it.

In 1919, officials of the college unveiled a statue of L.S. Ross done by Italian sculptor Pompeo Coppini. It was originally planned to have a similar statue of Richard Coke placed across the mall facing Ross, but the plan was never carried out.

A grandson of Ross, Lawrence Sullivan Ross Clarke, enrolled in the college in 1917. Years later reports circulated that as a fish, Clarke had been forced to hold an umbrella over the statue of his grandfather whenever it rained. That would have been two years before the statue was erected.

Sometimes the quest for the truth is a hard road to climb. Next week — Aggie Bonfire.



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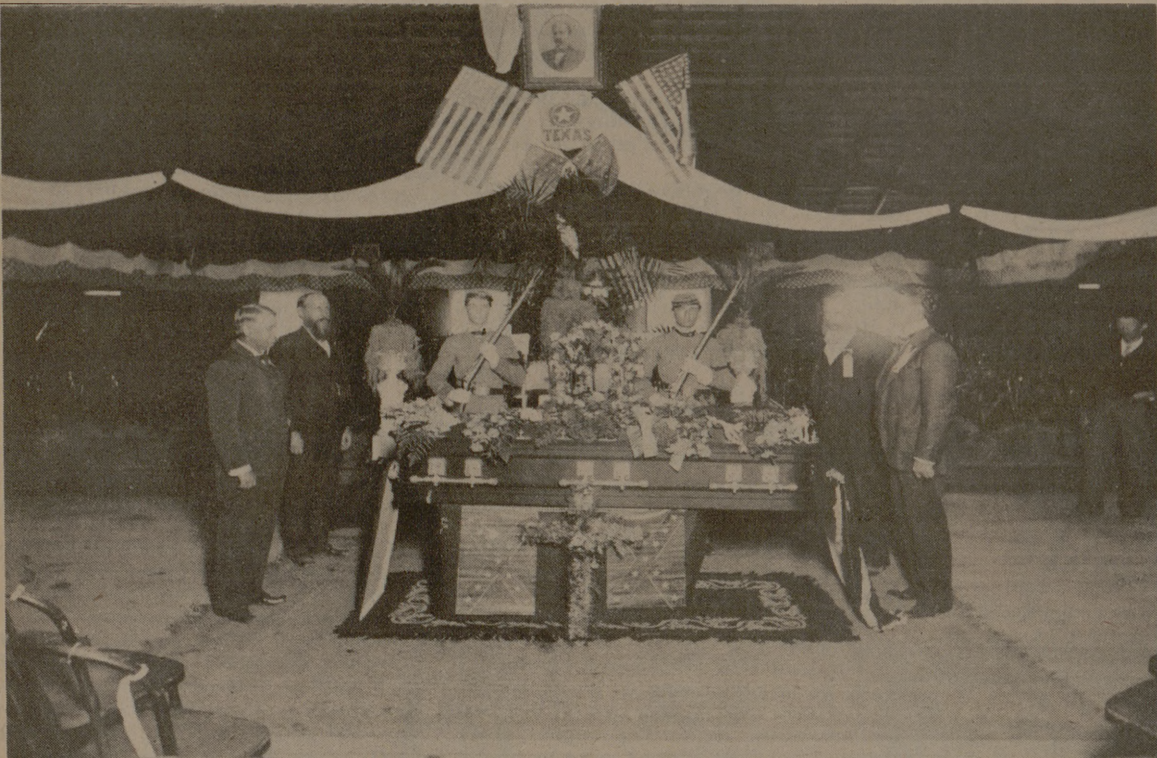
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The body of Lawrence S. Ross lies in State attended by two A&M cadets and former governors Culbertson, Roberts, Ireland and Sawyers. Courtesy University Archives.

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*The Battalion*, a student newspaper at Texas A&M, is published in College Station, Texas, daily except Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and holiday periods. September through May, and once a week during summer school.

Mail subscriptions are \$5.00 per semester; \$9.50 per school year; \$10.50 per full year. All subscriptions subject to 5% sales tax. Advertising rate furnished on request. Address: *The Battalion*, Room 217, Services Building, College Station, Texas 77843.

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