

Northgate merchants, city argue al

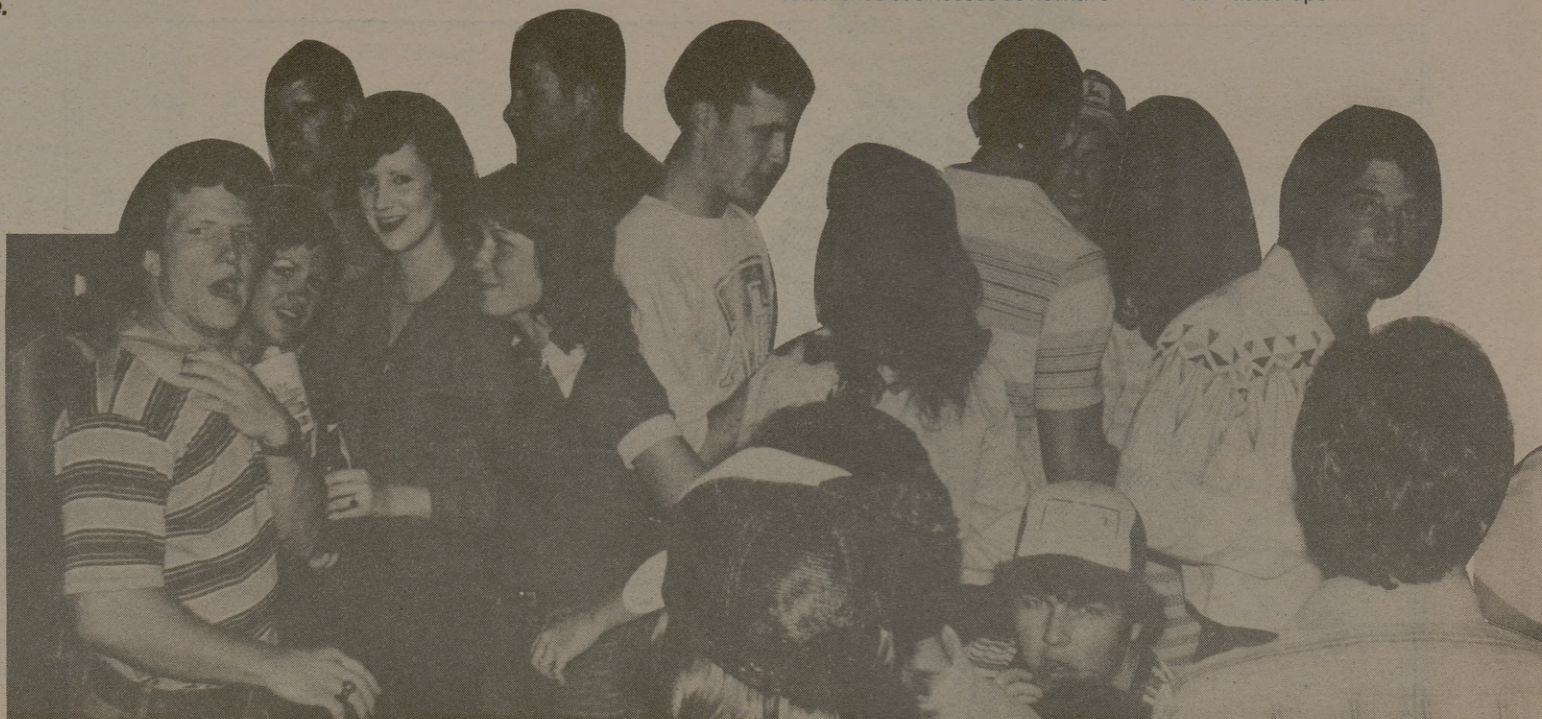


Photo by Lee Roy Leschper Jr.

The Dixie Chicken is one of the Northgate bars that is accused of overcrowding. But Don Ganter and Don Anz, the co-owners, say that there is no overcrowding problem at the Chicken, and that it is a "popular myth."

Photos by Cathy Kirkham

Close to 600 students swarm in and out of Northgate bars on a Thursday night. Officials say it is just as dangerous outside the bars as inside.



by Cathy Kirkham

Back in 1921, Texas A&M College students patrolled the school's north wall and gates every night.

Today, 59 years later, Texas A&M University students still travel that same path every night.

The "path" is called Northgate, and the students now travel it for different reasons than in 1921, and in much greater numbers.

In a telephone survey, 40 percent of the 300 Texas A&M students called said they frequent the Northgate area at least one night a week.

College Station Fire Marshal Harry L. Davis said on March 6, which was the Thursday before spring break, all Northgate bars except Miranda's were seriously overcrowded. He said there were more than 300 people outside and the traffic was almost stopped.

From 10 p.m. to midnight, he and three other officers stayed at Northgate. Davis said it was almost as dangerous outside as in the bars.

Overcrowding violations were issued to all the bars except Miranda's.

"The problem is a historical one," College Station City Planner Albert O. Mayo said. "The buildings were built to accommodate fewer people and were built before city ordinances were written, exempting them and considering them non-conforming establishments."

City ordinances require buildings to be a minimum of 25 feet from the street and signs a minimum of 18 feet. Awnings are also prohibited by the ordinances.

Some of the Northgate businesses violate all these ordinances, but because of the exemption, Mayo said, "it makes it very difficult for the city to crack down on them."

"It would be unfair to have a new business set its walls back when all the other businesses come out to the street," he said.

Because of the area's location by the campus and its volume of business, Mayo said people are trying to buy bookstores to turn them into bars.

The established businesses in the area are carried under a grandfather clause in the ordinances that says they are not required to update to meet regulations, Jim Berry, president of the Northgate Merchants' Association said.

But Berry, who owns University Studios, said just because the established businesses do not have

to meet the standards is no reason to assume the buildings are hazardous.

One thing the Northgate businesses are accused of is being fire hazards.

Fire Marshal Davis said blocked aisles, entrances and exits, and the absence of sprinklers are all fire hazards in the overcrowded buildings.

The Dixie Chicken, one of the most popular bars at Northgate, is one of the places that the city claims is overcrowded and a fire hazard.

But Don Ganter and Don Anz, co-owners, said there is no overcrowding problem at the Dixie Chicken except for a couple hours on Fridays.

"It is a popular myth, but it's just not true," Ganter said. "I can't help but question their (the City Council's) motives, why they keep picking on us. I worry about all those people at church, crowded into those pews, and the people that shop at Skaggs on a Saturday."

Anz said that after the March 6 warning was issued, he stood the next night at the door regulating the number of people allowed to enter the bar.

"I don't know what it did," Anz said. "It only put a line of more than 300 onto the street, on the backs of the police."

Ganter said they are behind the police and fire departments all the way.

Both men said they think the major problem in the Northgate area is not overcrowding, but the parking shortage.

Berry, Mayo and Davis all said there are too few patrolmen to adequately enforce the parking regulations in the Northgate area.

"It is mostly personnel from the school's Physical Plant, across the street, that take up the spaces," Berry said. "They're trying to escape the escalated \$20 University parking permit fee."

Employees from area businesses are forced to park on the street in front of businesses, causing another parking problem, Berry said.

He said if the lot behind Patricia Street was changed to an employees' and merchants' lot, it would allow customers to use street parking and would alleviate the parking problem.

Other parking alternatives have been suggested, but none have been acted upon.