

Bonfire: Beat the hell outta' t.u.

Bonfire a big tradition since its start in 1900s

by Hope Paasch

Battalion Staff
One of the best known of all Aggie traditions, bonfire began in the early 1900s as nothing more than a pile of junk burned by excited students in anticipation of Varsity football games. During November and December, when the games usually were played, a fire was welcomed for the warmth it added to the chilly night.

Building and burning a bonfire before the University of Texas football game at Thanksgiving gradually became a custom, and by the 1920s it was a tradition, a former commandant and coach at Texas A&M University wrote in a letter to the University archives.

Frank Anderson, who saw his first bonfire in the fall of 1920, said the fire consisted of community trash, tree limbs, boxes, lumber scraps and debris.

The outhouse that sits atop bonfire found its beginning in this era. One of the cadets' favorite materials for building the bonfires was untended, unwatched and, hopefully, unoccupied outhouses, Anderson wrote.

Speeches and yells accompanied the lighting of the bonfire, but the fire was usually burned

out by the time the speeches ended.

Apparently, no one considered the early bonfires very memorable, since the first picture of a bonfire didn't appear until the 1928 Longhorn, the Texas A&M yearbook.

By 1935, bonfire was an established tradition, marked by the enthusiasm of the cadets who gathered junk to build it.

The cadets' resourcefulness began to bring complaints from the community. On the morning after the 1935 bonfire, a very irate farmer visited Anderson's office and said the cadets had carried off his log barn.

Because of the problems in 1935, the building of bonfire was put under the commandant's control in 1936. Cadets chopped a grove of dead cottonwood trees near what is now Eastwood Airport. Texas A&M

College provided axes, saws and trucks. The 1936 bonfire was the first legal and all-log one, Anderson wrote.

That first log bonfire was only about 12 feet tall, but it got the job done, Anderson wrote. Some junk, as well as logs, was still used to build the fires until after World War II.

After the second world war, many of Texas A&M's traditions became more codified and ritualized, including the bonfire tradition.

The first centerpole for a bonfire made exclusively of logs was raised in 1946, and the 1947 bonfire used a centerpole of two logs strapped together. Every year after that, bonfire grew bigger and more elaborate.

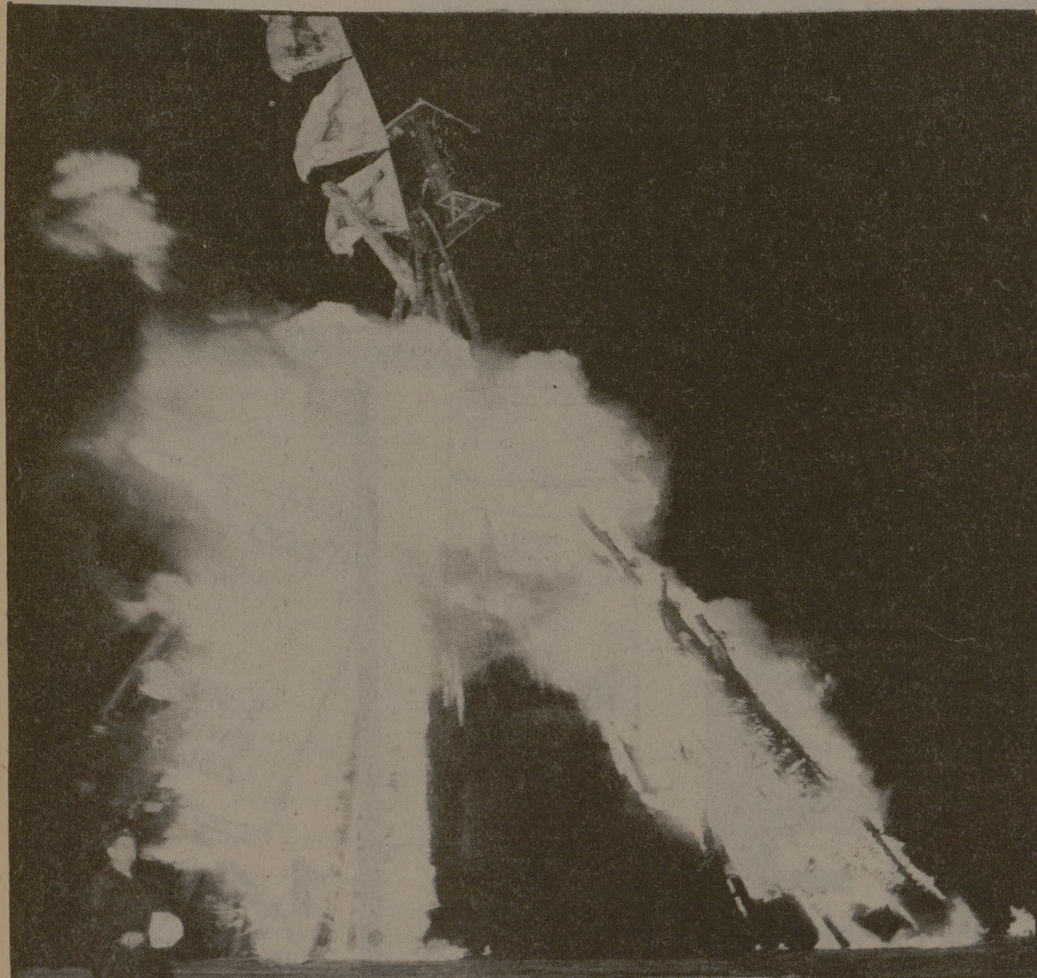
From its start until 1955, bonfire was held on the drill and parade field near the Memorial Student Center. In 1955, bon-

fire was moved to the field behind Duncan Dining Hall.

In 1981, when the Union Press building on Duncan moved again, many students feared that bonfire would be moved again. Officers in the Corps Commandant's office said bonfire still will be held on Duncan field.

Though most memories of bonfire are cherished, it has marred the occasion at three times. In 1955, a sophomore cadet was killed while working on bonfire by a centerpole that fell on him. James Sarra, who died after he shoved two other cadets to safety, was honored posthumously by the Board of Regents for heroism.

Bonfire was built but not seen BONFIRE, page 7



University Archives photo

Before the mid-50s bonfire was held on the drill and parade field near the Memorial Student Center.

In 1955, bonfire was moved to the field behind Duncan Dining Hall where it is held now.



University Archives photo

In the 20s, the bonfire before the Thanksgiving game consisted of community trash, tree limbs, boxes, lumber scraps and debris.



University Archives photo

In 1968 bonfire was 85 feet high. The following year 107-foot 10-inch bonfire set a new world

record, which is still the largest bonfire ever burned in the United States.

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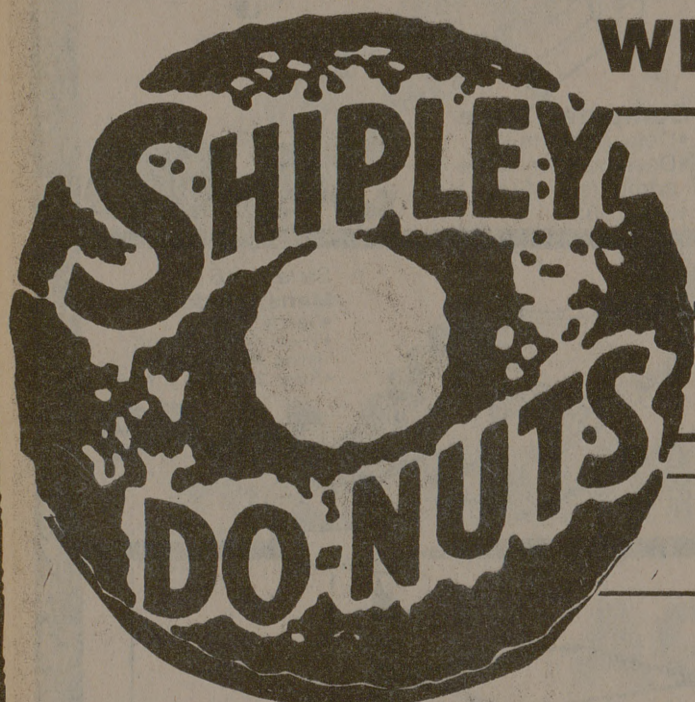
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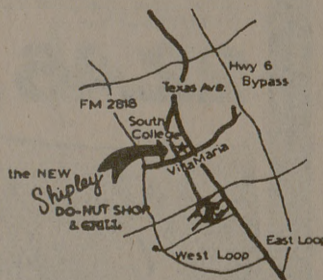
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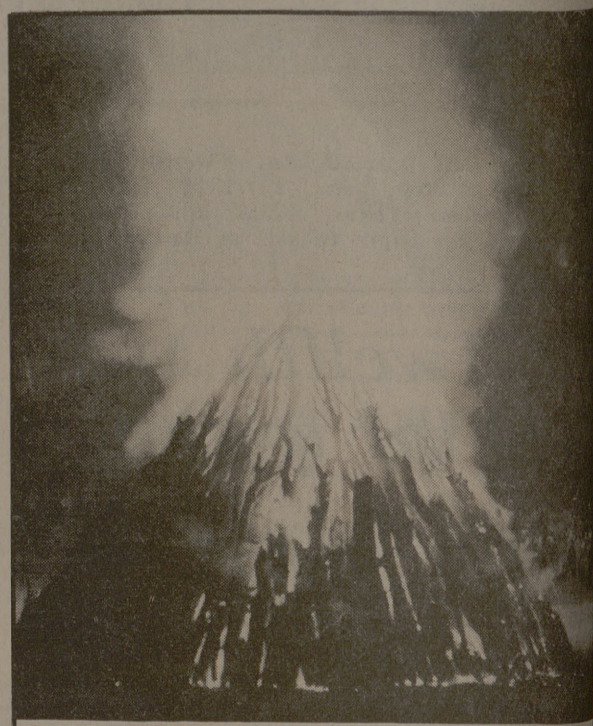
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