

State and Local

Watering run by radio waves

A&M sprinkler system a winner

By KAREN KROESCHE
Reporter

Around the state, Texas A&M is known for many things. The University has the highest paid athletic director in the Southwest Conference, a nationally acclaimed marching band and yes, even an award-winning sprinkler system.

The latter accomplishment may not be well known, but it is largely visible in the flourishing acreage of A&M.

And Eugene Ray, head of the Department of Grounds Maintenance, is quick to point out the importance of his department and the irrigation system, which was completed in 1982, to the University.

"A lot of people think that all we do is mow the grass," he says. "They don't realize what is involved in our system."

The system employs between 20,000 and 21,000 sprinkler heads, which are centrally controlled, and irrigates about 500 acres.

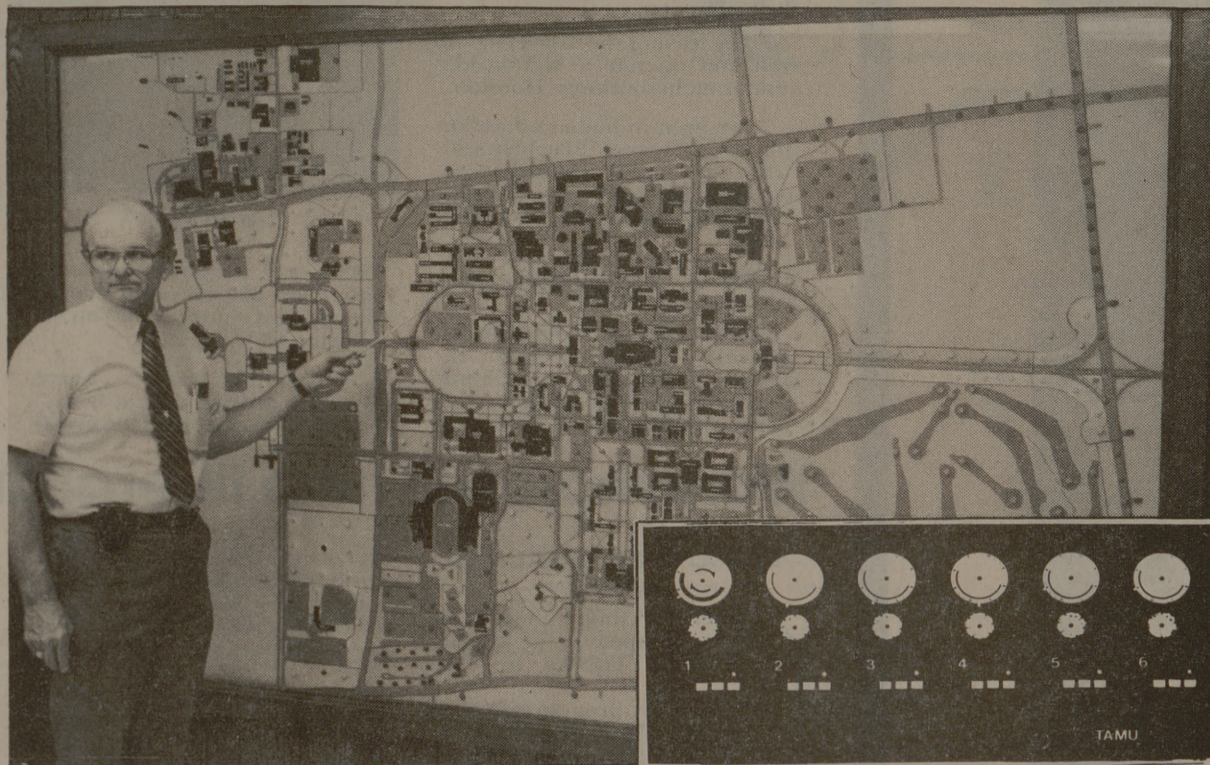
The system was designed by Ray and Mike Goldwater, associate director of grounds maintenance, when the manual operation of the previous equipment was no longer feasible.

"We got to the point where we simply couldn't control it (the old system)," Ray says. "The manual days are gone."

The new system, which operates by radio waves, won a fifth place award from the National Association of College and University Business Officers and the United States Steel Foundation for its efficiency and cost reduction, Ray says.

The system features a rain measurement gauge which will automatically shut down the entire system when the campus receives a designated amount (one-half inch during the summer) of rain, he says.

The irrigation system also shuts itself down if the temperature drops below freezing, preventing frozen



Eugene Ray, director of grounds and maintenance, designates specific areas of the campus to be sprinkled. Ray is able to turn on or off the sprinklers through a central timer (see inset).

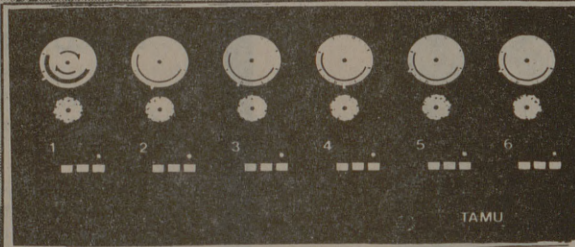


Photo by MIKE SANCHEZ

sprinkler heads and other ice-related problems, Ray says.

An electronic display map is an added feature of the system. Irrigation areas are lighted up as they are watered, allowing the grounds maintenance staff to closely monitor the system. The display feature also simplifies planning for additions to the system.

In order to create a minimal drain on domestic water usage and the least amount of inconvenience to people on campus, he says the majority of the watering is done between midnight and 6 a.m.

In high pedestrian areas, such as the grounds around the dorms, the earliest the sprinklers are started is 12:30 a.m. or 1 a.m., Ray says.

"We have an in-house philosophy," he jokes, "that anyone out after those hours needs to get wet."

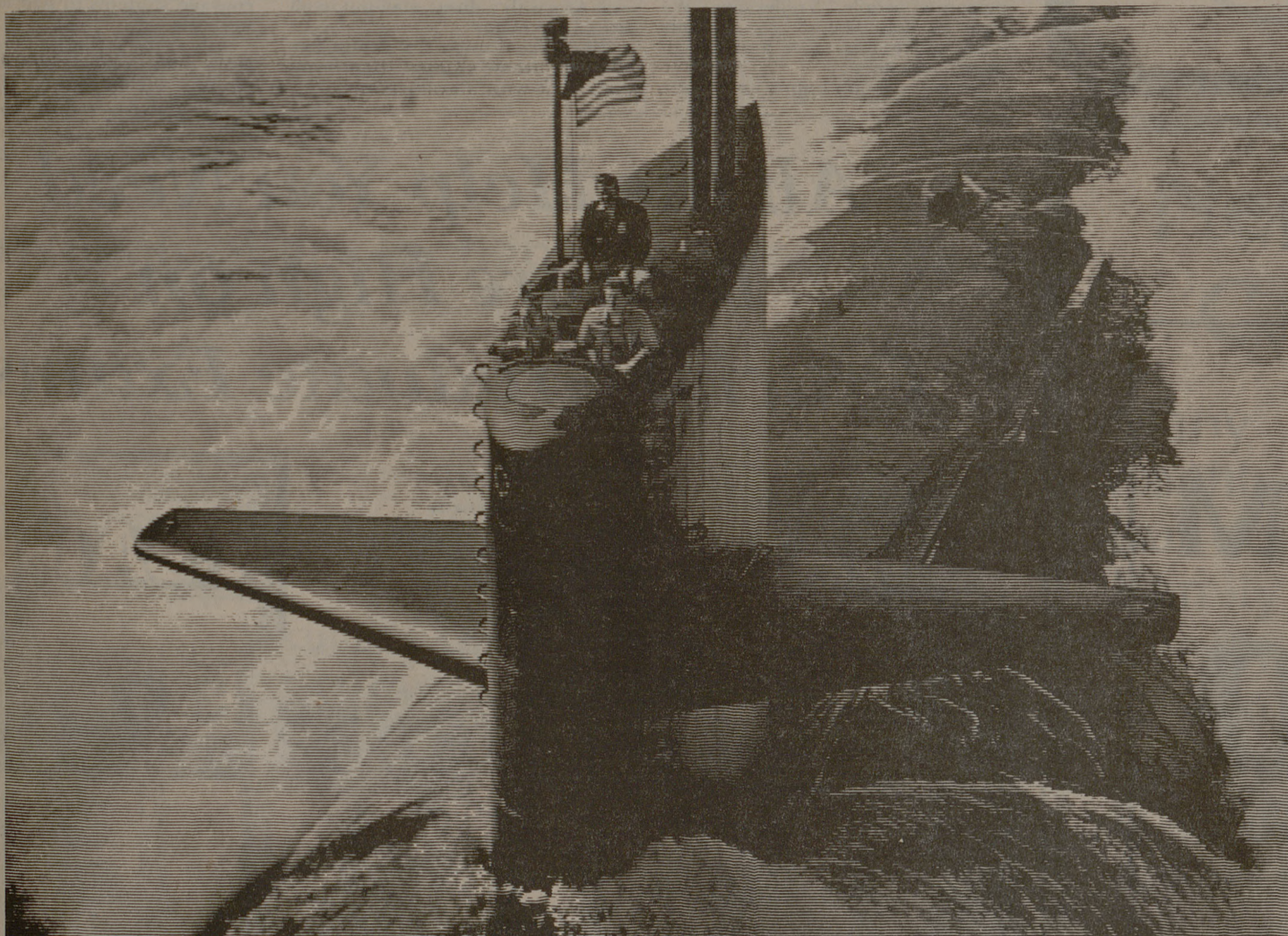
In addition to the considerations to student convenience, the department also must schedule watering around sporting events and late-night activities such as Silver Taps.

A shortage of staff, student mischief and extraneous vehicles (that is, people driving where they shouldn't drive), cause additional

problems for the grounds maintenance department, Ray says.

He says the department hopes, sometime in the near future, to computerize the irrigation system. Such a system, Ray says, would have the capability to measure how much water plants need at any designated time, but would require a substantial increase in funding.

In addition to the care of the landscaped areas of campus, the grounds maintenance department also is responsible for most of the streets and roads, parking lots, test gardens and other public areas on campus.



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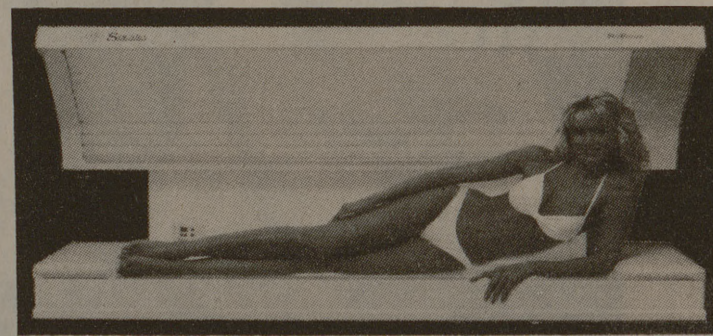
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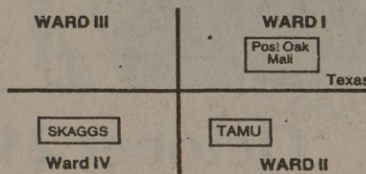
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