



History of A&M traditions clouded with mystery

By Rodney Rather
City Editor

Texas A&M is a Garden of Eden type of folklore called tradition, and the spirit and bond that breeds tradition is welcome at A&M. Aggies are drawn here because of the unifying hue its traditions secrete, but what's curious about this cohesion is whether it sticks when held in steam, because the actual history of tradition often isn't as glorious as its popular history.

As with most legends, the origins of A&M traditions aren't necessarily as spectacular as they seem. One of A&M's most popular traditions, well-known both inside and outside the University, is the Twelfth Man.

The origin of the Twelfth Man, as is told to just about everyone who enters through Aggieland, begins in 1922. A common description of his legend is preserved in a traditions guide written in the late 1940s by the Fort Worth chapter of the A&M Mother's club.

The tradition of the Twelfth Man was born on New Year's Day in 1922 when the Aggies were playing in a one-season game in Dallas. An underdog Aggie team was battling the nation's top team, Centre College. The Aggies were taking a beating, and when finally out of substitute players, Coach D.X. Bible called into the stands for E. King Gill, a reserve who had made the trip with the Corps of Cadets. Although he didn't play, Gill stood ready and, in spirit, helped lead the Aggies to victory.

That rendition of the Twelfth Man legend probably is the most common, but while it explains who the first Twelfth Man was, it doesn't pinpoint exactly who derived the term — or its meaning. Evidence regarding such an explanation exists in the A&M archives, but not until 1980, in the form of a letter from Ted Thompson, Class of '21. A notable difference between Thompson's version and that of the Mother's club is that in his version, the game was played on Jan. 2 instead of New Year's Day as the first of the Cotton bowls (then called the Dixie Classic).

Thompson also says he derived the notion of the Twelfth Man while on the train back to College Station after the game. A&M students always are on hand to support the team in any sport, he says, whether it is through yelling, praying or cus-



Yell leaders lead a crowd of Elephant Walk participants in a yell

Battalion File Photo

sing. On Jan. 5, Thompson says he put the idea up to the Cadet Corps.

However, the new tradition didn't spread at a feverous pitch. Photographs in both the 1924 and 1925 school yearbooks clearly reveal several uniformed Aggies sitting during football games. In one photo, a handful of Aggies are sitting while someone receives a pass in the end zone and in the other, the seated fans are relaxing during a kickoff.

Because both of these situations are those in which one usually stands, even non-Aggies, and because an Aggie not participating in the Twelfth Man tradition often is in danger of social and physical anguish, the practice apparently evolved over several years.

While the roots of the Twelfth Man are easily traced, most origins of A&M's traditions are tough to pin down. The first Aggie tradition is thought to have been initiated by A&M's first graduating class, shortly after the University opened in 1876. The saying "Once an Aggie always an Aggie" planted an eternal seed of Aggie mentality.

Another tradition, midnight yell practice, is not as easily traced. For a

tradition as popular as it is, no one seems to agree about when it started. In a letter written in 1962, Harry E. Allen, Class of '34, recounts his version of the first yell practice.

"In 1932, and just before the Texas game, some of us were gathered in Puryear Hall . . .," he wrote. "We then got in touch with Horsefly Perryhill and Two Gun Herman from Sherman, both senior yell leaders, and asked about having all the fellows finally congregate at the 'Y' for a midnight Yell Practice."

But another message, handwritten and without a name, says the first one was held in 1920.

Apparently, the head yell leader, R.B. Goodman, ignited another of A&M's traditions, a bonfire, and ran through the campus yelling; hence, another tradition was born.

But the credibility of those letters is wounded — mortally — after one reads a 1906 *Battalion* article. The editorial doesn't condemn yells, but says they are "vulgar, and are not fit for use by gentlemen."

Although this article proves yell practices were common at the turn of the century, it doesn't say when they began. But the article's tone

hints they had been established for quite a while.

Another tradition, Aggie Muster, is regarded as noble, solemn and a symbol of Aggie unity. This is how the media portray it and how Aggies perceive it, but a close look at how it started should raise a question to the reasoning behind its conception.

Muster is a beautiful ceremony held on April 21 — San Jacinto Day — every year. While it commemorates those who fought for Texas' freedom, it also honors students and former students who have died in the preceding year and in past wars.

But the first Muster didn't grow through a peaceful, cooperative endeavor.

Once upon a time in Aggieland, a bugle sounded 15 minutes before classes started and the Corps, upon hearing the tinny noise, lined up and marched into another day of education. On April 21, 1903, looking for an excuse to ditch class, students decided to celebrate San Jacinto Day. So, instead of marching to class when the bugle was blown, they marched to the University president's house and asked the president for an annual holiday to honor dead Texans and dead Aggies. President

David F. Houston said he would agree to let the Corps out of school at noon every year if the students would return to class until lunch.

Today, students aren't excused from class after noon on April 21 unless they have a University excuse.

While A&M traditions may be a little distorted from the truth, they remain essentially the same. But perceptions of these traditions seem to run in cycles. By reading through old issues of *The Battalion* spanning more than 90 years, one detects waves of concern that swell again and again relating to the approaching death of traditions.

One theme running through these concerns is that the A&M of old was better than it is now, no matter when "now" is. In a 1929 issue an editorial laments the actions of those who don't adhere to tradition, while a letter in 1940 was devoted to dying traditions. The writer of the letter refers to the "good old days" when traditions were built and says the University is outgrowing them.

Although the above examples highlight the general paranoia Aggies feel over the loss — real or imagined — of tradition in their eyes, this attitude prevails not only over general A&M rituals, but over specific customs as well. If seen through the jittery minds of some, the Silver Taps ceremony — similar to a mini-muster wherein students gather to pay tribute to Aggies who have died in the past month — and the "Howdy" custom have been in peril numerous times.

A letter printed in a 1940 edition of *The Battalion* claims a Silver Taps ceremony was desecrated by students who were boisterously playing dominoes in a nearby building. Turmoil surrounding Silver Taps also is the subject of a 1961 editorial, after two successive ceremonies were marred.

Mournful editorials bemoaning the loss of "Howdy" also stain *The Battalion*, such as one in 1947 that says one of A&M's oldest traditions was rapidly becoming obsolete.

After looking at Aggie concern over traditions, one sees that these outlooks, like the traditions themselves, haven't changed. It could be said that fretting over the survival of traditions is a tradition in itself.

In spite of the near-religious belief A&M puts in the maintenance of

tradition, however, some traditions have died. These traditions are chronicled in *The Battalion*, but the disappearance of them is not recorded, nor is it explained.

One of these defunct cultural tidbits is Prexy's Moon, a lamp symbolic of Aggie friendliness whose light guided students through the night from its perch atop the Academic Building. Apparently, Aggies didn't put much stock into the light because it was shot with rifles regularly. Just when the lamp was abandoned is uncertain — a 1931 editorial begins with the words "We regret the loss of Prexy's Moon," and speaks as though the beacon would never return. But two years later, an editorial warned students to stop taking potshots at the lamp. The last recognition of Prexy's Moon uncovered in the archives is a definition of the lamp in a 1946 journal listing Aggie vocabulary, but whenever Prexy's Moon was shattered for the last time, its importance must have been swept away with its fragments.

The date of the demise of Prexy's Moon may not be cataloged, but the cause of its loss isn't hard to determine. The extinction of yet another tradition is a mystery. From the number of articles concerning this act, hitchhiking used to be as common to Aggies as is khaki. Letters and editorials in *The Battalion* of the 1930s and 1940s offer an array of comments on hitchhiking. A 1933 editorial gives a few tips on hitchhiking ethics and a 1938 editorial scolds a few rude thumb-waving cadets for their deplorable behavior when given a ride.

As with Prexy's Moon, no specific date denotes the passing of Aggie hitchhiking. But a fragment of A&M hitchhiking may still grace Aggie tradition through the "gig 'em, Aggies" custom. The sign looks remarkably like a hitchhiker's thumb.

Even when confronted with the dissolution of a few A&M customs, though, Aggie tradition doesn't lose its cohesion, although its true history often doesn't match its popular history. After all, folklore is part of the fun and heritage of any group, whether it be a university, town or country — A&M is just overstocked with it. And Aggies can't let these cherished traditions glue their minds shut to the truths and reality that traditions glorify.

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