

Aggie bonfire

Once a pile of junk, now represents burning desire to "beat the hell" out of Longhorns

By Victoria Larrocca
Reporter

What began in the early 1900's as a pile of junk burned by students before Texas A&M football games has turned into one of the best known A&M traditions — bonfire.

Before the 1920's bonfires were built before many home games. A&M students would build the bonfire out of scrap lumber and junk from the surrounding communities. However, things started to get out of hand, and in 1935 an irate farmer visited A&M officials after bonfire to complain that cadets had taken his log barn. Residents from the local communities also complained each year about the number of outhouses that ended up as part of bonfire.

It was 1936 before the first all-log bonfire was built, but troubles with stolen property have continued to arise from time to time. In 1983, four members of the Corps of Cadets were arrested after being caught stealing signs, including an Austin city limits sign, north of Austin. The cadets reportedly told the police they were gathering material for the Aggie bonfire.

An outhouse with an Austin city limits sign on it remains the crowning touch to bonfire year after year.

In 1946 a centerpole was added for the first time, and in 1947 the 65-foot Aggie bonfire achieved its famed status as the world's tallest bonfire after two poles were spliced together to make a taller centerpole. The stack reached the height 107 feet in 1969, but, due to safety concerns, recent bonfires have maintained an average height of 60 feet. A&M lore holds that if the bonfire centerpole stands past midnight, A&M is destined to win the game. Texas has won 63 of the 89 games.

The actual expenses required to build a bonfire run about \$25,000, said Bill Gibler, assistant director of Student Affairs.

"This includes insurance, equipment rental, supplies, et cetera," said Gibler. "Luckily most of our expenses are covered by donations from former students and local businesses."

Bonfire, a festive time for most A&M students, has not been without its tragic moments. In 1955 sophomore cadet James Sarran of Brownsville was killed when he pushed two friends out of the path of an out-of-control car as it crashed into his guard's post. Wiley Keith Jopling of Nacogdoches was crushed to death after falling off a tractor trailer in 1981. In both instances the bonfire was dedicated to the memory of the students.

Bonfire has been cancelled only once — after the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The rivalry between A&M and UT extends beyond the football field. Numerous attempts have been made by UT fans and students to start bonfire earlier than scheduled. In the late '50s some U.T. students dropped a fire bomb from a low-flying plane. The bomb missed, but the serial number of the plane was turned in and the students suspended.

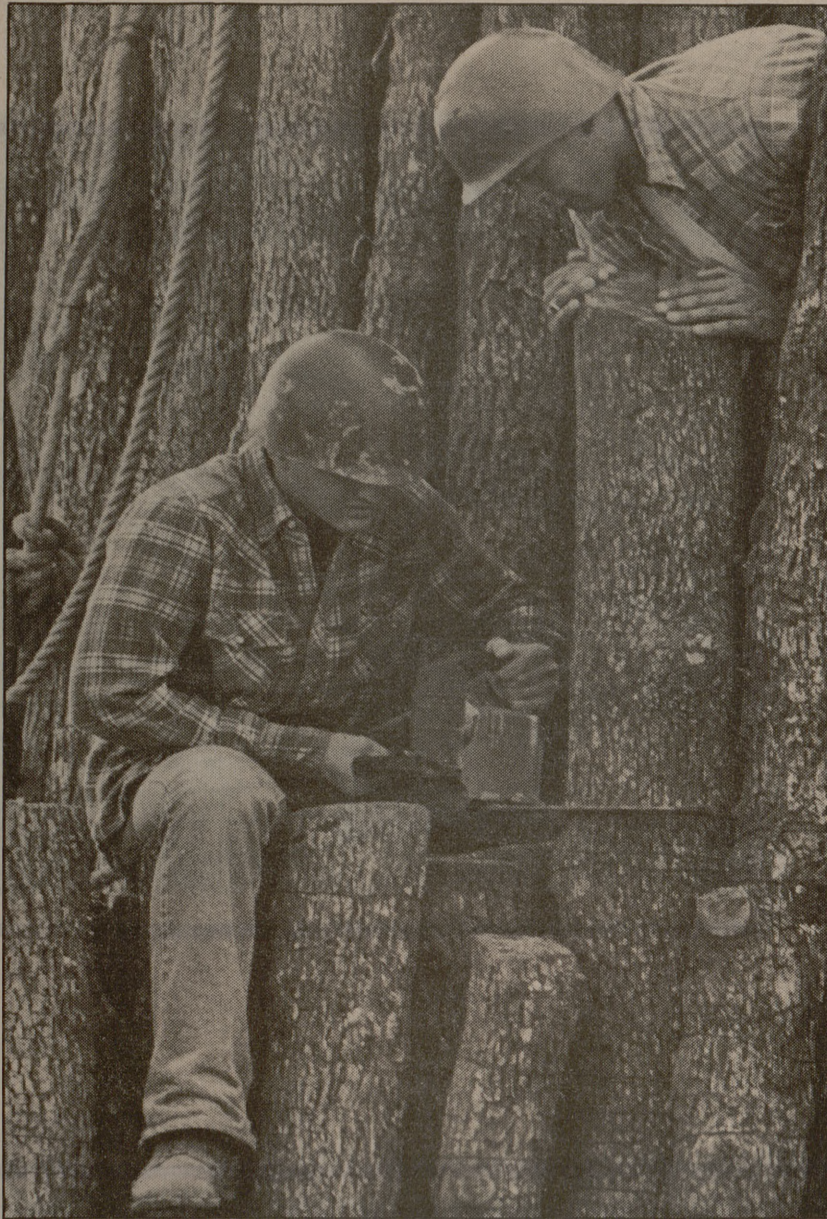
In 1956 someone tried to explode the bonfire with a detonator device that was buried several feet from the bonfire, but their attempt failed, too.

Bonfire has also had its share of problems with A&M students.

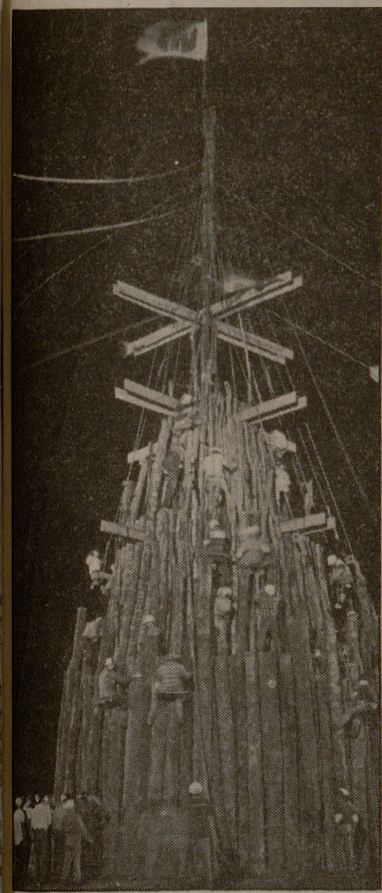
In 1986 a female cadet filed suit after five men dragged from the top of a barrel and threw her outside the bonfire perimeter.

In 1987 a male A&M student was charged with assault after two female Aggiecadet photographers said they were verbally and physically harassed while at the bonfire site. Tradition used to forbid women from entering the bonfire perimeter.

This year the 79th annual bonfire will burn at "dark-thirty" on the Tuesday before the Thanksgiving day football game against the University of Texas. Dark-thirty is about 30 minutes after dark.



(Top) Junior redpots use a chainsaw to cut off the end of a log wired to the stack. (above) Members of the Aggie Band carry a log at the bonfire site. (left) Members of the bonfire crew work around the clock during "push," the final two weeks of bonfire construction. This photograph was taken in the early morning hours.



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