

BAAWWNNNN-FIRE, AGS!

'Burning desire' displayed at Aggie bonfire since 1909

By Michael Kelley

Of The Battalion Staff

Bonfire '89 will mark the 80th year of one of Texas A&M's best-known traditions. Built upon a strong love of school, bonfire has become a symbol of an undying spirit for Texas A&M, as well as for that "burning desire to beat the hell outta t.u."

The first bonfire was built in 1909 and consisted of nothing more than junk burned by students who were excited about the football game against their rival — the University of Texas. The fire was a welcome addition as it provided warmth to the cold November and December nights.

By the 1920s, the building and

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burning of bonfire before the Thanksgiving football game against UT became an A&M custom. The fire consisted of trash, boxes, tree limbs and lumber scraps.

The speeches and yells that accompanied the lighting of bonfire usually ended as the fire burned out.

The most notable characteristic of bonfire in this era was the placing of a stolen outhouse atop the structure. Otherwise, the early bonfires were not considered very memorable. In fact, the first bonfire picture to appear in *The Longhorn*, the A&M yearbook, was in 1928.

Bonfire '35, however, changed the way bonfires were built.

A local farmer complained to the Commandant of Cadets that the cadets had carried off his log barn as material for the fire.

This led to the first all-log bonfire, built with non-stolen materials, in Fall 1936.

The bonfire that year was just 12 feet tall, and was constructed using a grove of dead cottonwood trees located near present-day Easterwood Airport. The college provided saws, axes and trucks to help with the project.

In 1946, the first centerpole was raised. The next year, two logs spliced together started the centerpole tradition that is used today.

The early bonfires were located on the Gen. Ormond R. Simpson Drill Field north of the Memorial Student Center. When the MSC was constructed in 1955, however, bonfire was moved to its present-day location on Duncan Field for fear that the building would ignite from the

flying embers of the fire.

Bonfire '69 was the largest ever burned in the United States, standing 109 feet 10 inches tall. By 1974, because of local residents' fear of their homes catching fire, the height of the stack was limited to 68 feet.

Two students have lost their lives while working on bonfire.

In 1955, James E. Sarran died after shoving two other cadets to safety when a car swerved out of control as they were working.

Wiley Keith Jopling died in 1981 when he fell under the wheels of a tractor. Numerous injuries have been reported by bonfire workers over the years as well.

To avoid such accidents, safety classes are mandatory for students who work at the cut site.

Those who work in the perimeter around the stack must wear fiberglass helmet liners known as "pots".

Also, students who have not previously worked on bonfire must wear a white tape stripe on their leg. This "virgin stripe" is used to help the more experienced builders keep an eye out for possible accidents their newer counterparts could encounter.

In 1963, bonfire was not lit. As a show of mourning for the death of President John F. Kennedy, students and administrators decided to remove all logs from the stack.

Students supervise bonfire construction at the site. Each year, eight students serve as senior redpots, working to ensure that the bonfire gets built. They earn their status by apprenticeship as a junior redpot the previous year.

The "head stack" is the highest ranking senior redpot, and he acts as liaison between University officials and the students. He serves as the student representative on the University Bonfire Committee, a newly formed advisory group consisting of staff members from various departments of the University's administration.

The head stack has the final word in decisions that affect the construction of bonfire.

Other redpots work as "stack pots," who are in charge of all activities that occur on Duncan Field; "truck pots," who oversee the transportation of the logs from the cut site to the stack at Duncan Field; and others who coordinate activities with the Corps and civilian students.

The junior redpots serve in the same position they will fill the following year as a senior. They learn their duties from their senior "dad." The redpot juniors carry out the actual work that goes on dealing with bonfire. They are the main solicitors of funding for the bonfire, mainly getting donations from former students.

"Brownpots" are below the redpots in the chain of command. They help the junior redpots coordinate with the Corps and civilian living areas in getting student help for cut-site and at the stack.

Next in line are the "yellowpots." Their main function is to coordinate with Corps outfits and "non-reg" residence halls. The "crew chiefs" help the yellowpots as floor representatives in the halls.

The "climbers" are in charge of axe handle stations at the cut-site. At Duncan Field they handle the use of rope swings, lights, and any duties where climbing is needed.

Two female groups help with annual bonfire construction. The Women's Bonfire Committee is part of the official bonfire chain of command. It consists of women who work at the concession stands on Duncan Field, and they provide lunches and water to those at the cut site.

The other female group, independent of the official bonfire committee, is the "Reload Crew." Sponsored by the A&M Mother's Clubs, its members provide cookies for those working on the bonfire.

Bonfire funding is provided by donations, sales of paraphernalia, and by holding a Bonfire Benefit Bash dance in the fall.

Each year, H.B. Zachry Construction Company provides a crane to help during "push week," the final week before bonfire is lighted. "Go Aggies" and "Beat Texas" are painted on the arm of the crane used at the site.

The San Antonio company also donates the services of two operators and a maintenance person.

Some other things have changed since the first bonfires.

The outhouse that is placed atop

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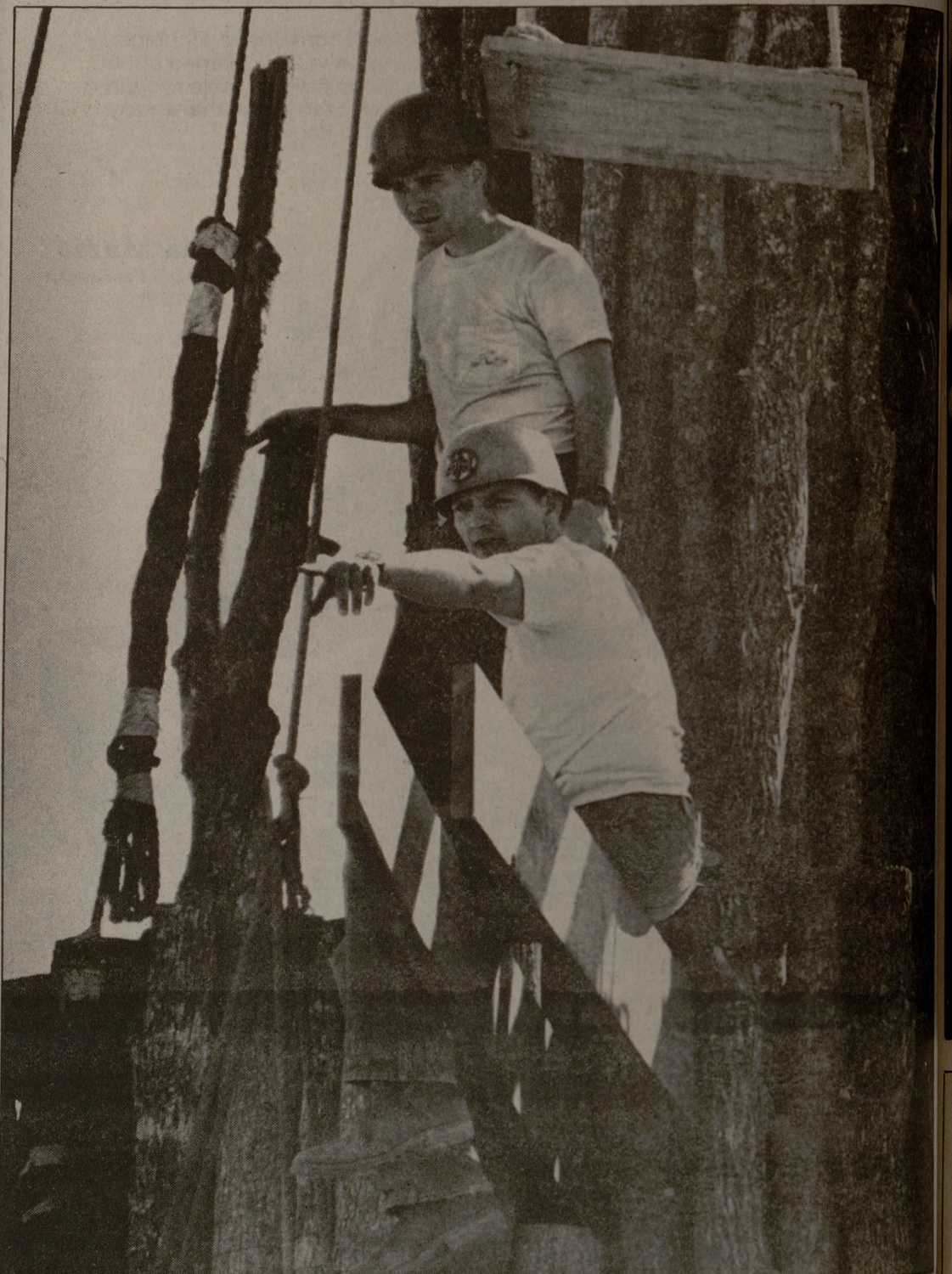
the bonfire is now built by the sophomore class of the Aggie Band, and the Austin city limits sign that is placed outside the outhouse is donated by a Hearne resident.

The logs wired to the center pole and stack are cut down by students at the cut site.

The cut site over the years has been land that was being cleared for cattle ranching or strip mining.

All students are encouraged to help in the construction of this proud Aggie tradition.

Bonfire '89 will burn on Friday, Dec. 1 at "dark-thirty." This usually means about 8 p.m., but no actual time is set for the lighting of the fire.



Yells

(Continued from page 1)

round the Aggie Band in a perimeter so that nobody breaks their ranks during the march to Kyle Field. The yell leaders and drum majors carry torches in order to light the way to yell practice.

Once the Aggie Band reaches the stadium, it marches the length of the playing surface, countermarches, and returns to the north end zone, where it plays its traditional military songs. After the yell leaders go to the 50-yard line, and the junior yell leaders do a "class set" of push-ups for the football team, yell practice begins.

At midnight yell, Aggies practice yells, sing the "Aggie War Hymn" and "The Spirit of Aggieland," listen to "grode stories" told by the yell leaders, and have "scoring" practice by kissing their dates when the lights go out.

Yell practices before out-of-town football games are held Thursday evenings at the Grove across from Albritton Bell Tower. At the Thursday night yells, the yell leaders announce where a Friday yell practice will take place, so that Aggies can assemble the following midnight in the opponents' hometown to show their Aggie spirit.

When the Aggies win a football game at home, the yell leaders are

thrown in the Fish Pond, and another yell practice is held on the steps of the YMCA building. When the Aggie football team is "outscored," however, a yell practice is held in the stands to prepare for the next game.

The yell leaders are elected to their positions by the students during the spring student body elections. They are advised by the University Yell Leader Committee, consisting of seven faculty and staff members and 13 students. This committee selects a head yell leader out of seniors who have been chosen through an application process. The yell leaders each serve a one-year term.

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