

From trash fire to tradition

By RUDY CORDOVA JR.

Originally, bonfire was a trash fire that was thrown together on the night before the game against the University of Texas. In the 1920s, bonfire became more of a solidified tradition that intensified the Aggies' school spirit. Bonfire was constructed with community trash, limbs, debris, and anything else students could get their hands on. One of their favorites was untended outhouses.

Bonfire of yesteryear has evolved into the more aesthetically pleasing symbol it is today. For the past 15 to 20 years, the construction of bonfire has basically remained the same.

"This is a prettier way of doing it, and definitely the safest," Joey Dollins, head stack Aggie redpot, says.

The centerpiece, traditionally called the centerpole, is actually two telephone poles spliced together. The first 10 feet of each pole are cut diametrically in half. The two poles are then joined together using glue, nuts and bolts, and cable wire. The idea of splicing two poles together was first used in 1947.

Ten feet of the centerpole is lowered into the ground. It is held in place by heavy rope attached to four surrounding poles, which serve the purpose of lighting the bonfire site as well. The remaining height of the pole is 55 feet.

"Most people believe that the fire department or the city limited the height of bonfire. That's simply not true. The University itself decided after the bonfire of 1969 to limit the height, because it was getting out of hand," says Bill Kibler, University advisor for bonfire and associate director for Student Affairs.

The 1969 bonfire holds the record for the largest bonfire at 109 feet.

Once the centerpole is in place, the

logs that comprise the first stack are brought in and put in place around the centerpole. They are wired together with cable wire and are basically held by their own weight.

After enough wood is stacked in place, the top of the first stack is shaved off with a chainsaw to make the poles even. This serves a dual purpose — to make the bonfire pleasing to the eye, and to allow the bonfire crew a place to walk around and work on the second stack.

Each stack, or level, gets progressively shorter and more narrow as it reaches the top. The first stack is 12-13 feet high, with the sixth stack made of limbs and tiny pieces. As the bonfire crew works up to the fourth stack, more logs are added to the first three.

The fifth stack is wired together by the junior redpots the day before bonfire. And on the day of bonfire, the senior redpots put the sixth stack in place, which only takes about half an hour. Finally, the traditional outhouse is lowered into place by a crane on the day of bonfire. The outhouse is constructed by the Aggie Band.

"Experts have been consulted about the different methods of construction. Trial and error was used as to what works best," Kibler says.

The construction of bonfire has evolved through a collaboration of student leadership and University rules and policies. Many different methods have been used in the past, but this method seems to work best for all those involved in the construction.

"New ideas are brought up every year, but the way we build it now is probably the most solid," says Dollins, a senior animal science major from Katy.



Battalion File Photo

Agency donates trees from mined land

By KRISTI LORSON

Aggies Against Bonfire, a group that may have been outlawed at Texas A&M twenty years ago, is now speaking out against what it says is "a blatant and hedonistic waste of natural resources."

"People come here for a good education, not to learn to stack up trees and burn them," graduate member Bryan Skipworth said. "This much effort into something so frivolous is sickening."

Hubert Nelson, the land department manager at the Texas Municipal Power Agency, where trees are cut for bonfire, says the trees will be buried if not used for bonfire.

"We have 40,000 acres of land, and they only cut trees in areas that will be stripmined for lignite," he said. "We clear the land, strip out the coal and bulldoze the trees into the resulting pit."

"You can't even tell when they've taken trees out. They don't even make a dent, but we go back and doze after them."

Nelson said the vein of lignite which runs from San Antonio to Texarkana will be mined for the next 100 years because it is an unlimited resource in Texas.

Senior redpot Joey Dollins said a new statement is proposed to be added to the official bonfire policy this year.

"Trees for the bonfire will be cut only if a cut site is available which was already scheduled for clearing,"

it states. "If no site is available in a given year, no bonfire will be built."

Skipworth said trees shouldn't be burned even if they'd be thrown away anyway. "You have to justify to yourself whether it's right or wrong," he said.

He suggested cutting trees into firewood for the poor in the local community.

"I think that if A&M put that much effort into the Bryan/College Station community, it would be closer to what A&M stands for than stacking up a pile of trees," Skipworth said.

Nelson said cutting the trees into firewood is not economical, and burning it puts the same amount of smoke into the air.

"It takes all day for one person to cut an \$80 to \$90 cord of wood," he said. "That's a lot of work for a minimal resource."

"However, there's lots of wood left out there that AAB could come cut," he said.

Dollins said he'd also help AAB if they came up with a project to help the environment that used the same resources.

"I'll get every thing donated, the money, the equipment and all the resources to do it if they'll come up with the people," he said.

Skipworth said another problem with bonfire is the wasteful example Texas A&M shows to the nation.

"The state of our nation's forests and our growing population demands conservation," he said.

Darren Gabriel, a forest management major who is pursuing a masters in the field, disagrees.

His one-year independent study about the economic and environmental impacts of bonfire states there are more forests today than when Christopher Columbus landed.

"Each year, 2.7 billion trees are planted in the United States by foresters and landowners," he said. "There are 27 million more acres of forests today than 20 years ago thanks to new ways to plant trees where they weren't growing before."

Gabriel said in addition to those statistics from the American Forest Resource Alliance, he gathered evidence from local stores, bars and restaurants about the economic aspects of bonfire.

"When asked what percentage, if any, increase they see in their business during bonfire, responses ranged from 20 percent to 70 percent increase," he said.

Dollins and Skipworth also disagreed on the amount of time and money that should be spent building bonfire.

"This is a great opportunity to learn leadership," Dollins said. "A chance to generate school spirit while learning to lead and motivate."

A flier distributed by AAB says, "Comradeship is a good thing, but this alone does not justify the means by which it is achieved. Groups such as the KKK and street gangs can easily make the same claim."