

Tunnel vision

Students explore A&M's steam tunnels

BY CHRIS CARTER
The Battalion

Under students' feet lies a world tangled in history, controversy and mystery. It is a place that has belied the tales of Texas A&M for more than 60 years, yet many current students are unaware of its existence.

Set only 10 feet below the surface, several miles of tunnels large enough to walk through have rested for more than half a century.

Commonly referred to as the "steam tunnels," they have been closed to students for more than two decades, but have never ceased to entice the daring who make attempts to enter the chambers.

Today these tunnels are crowded with telecommunications cables, heating pipes and volumes of whispered lore passed down between walls 5 feet apart.

The steam tunnels run between many of the older buildings on the main part of campus. From the Academic Building to the Memorial Student Center to the Administration Building and many buildings in between, the steam tunnels form an underground vascular system of A&M.

For many who find themselves exploring the veins of A&M, it is merely the challenge of staking a daring escapade through "OI Army" that draws them to passageways.

For others, it is the stories of those who have gone before and told of the miles of graffiti-filled walls and secret rooms of old signs from Corps of Cadets outfits. But for all it is a dangerous trip that could have health-threatening consequences.

Cecil Smith, master utilities plumber for the Physical Plant, said the steam tunnels were closed to students due to heavy concentrations of asbestos (a carcinogenic substance once used to fire proof buildings) which were found in sections of tunnel.

One senior finance major, who wants to remain anonymous, found himself in a dangerous situation when he and his friends took a stroll down these corridors one night his sophomore year.

"After a walking around for a while, we came upon a place that got pretty hot so we were going to take a breath of air through one of the manholes," he said. "When the first person opened the cover, a police officer was waiting for us and told us to all come out."

"I was at the bottom of the ladder in the tunnel, so I naturally ran and found myself lost in the tunnels for two hours before I could finally get out."

All of the older dorms on campus, including all of those on the Northside and Southside Quadrangles, have direct access to the steam tunnels. Though it has always been against school regulations, it seems the restrictions have only made entering the tunnels more appealing to resident delinquents.

According to several former students who were members of the corps who wished to remain anonymous, when A&M was an all-male military school several dorms began having trouble with other dorms playing pranks on them via the steam tunnels.

The solution to this problem was obvious to the cadets: have someone live under the dorm and guard it from further attacks. Responding to the outfits who inhabited a member in the tunnels, or "moles," most of the other outfits put moles in the tunnels as well.

At this point the purpose of the mole was not only to protect his dorm but to become proactive in the pranking process. It is said that moles only came out during the darkness of night and were masters of practical jokes.

Having only a desire to roam the steam tunnels is no longer a worthy excuse to descend below campus civilization. For those who dare to venture there, a much more definite fate looms ahead.

Aside from exposure to the carcinogenic properties of asbestos in the tunnels, Smith said there is danger in the amount of heat generated and many exits are locked, making escape in

See TUNNELS on Page 4.

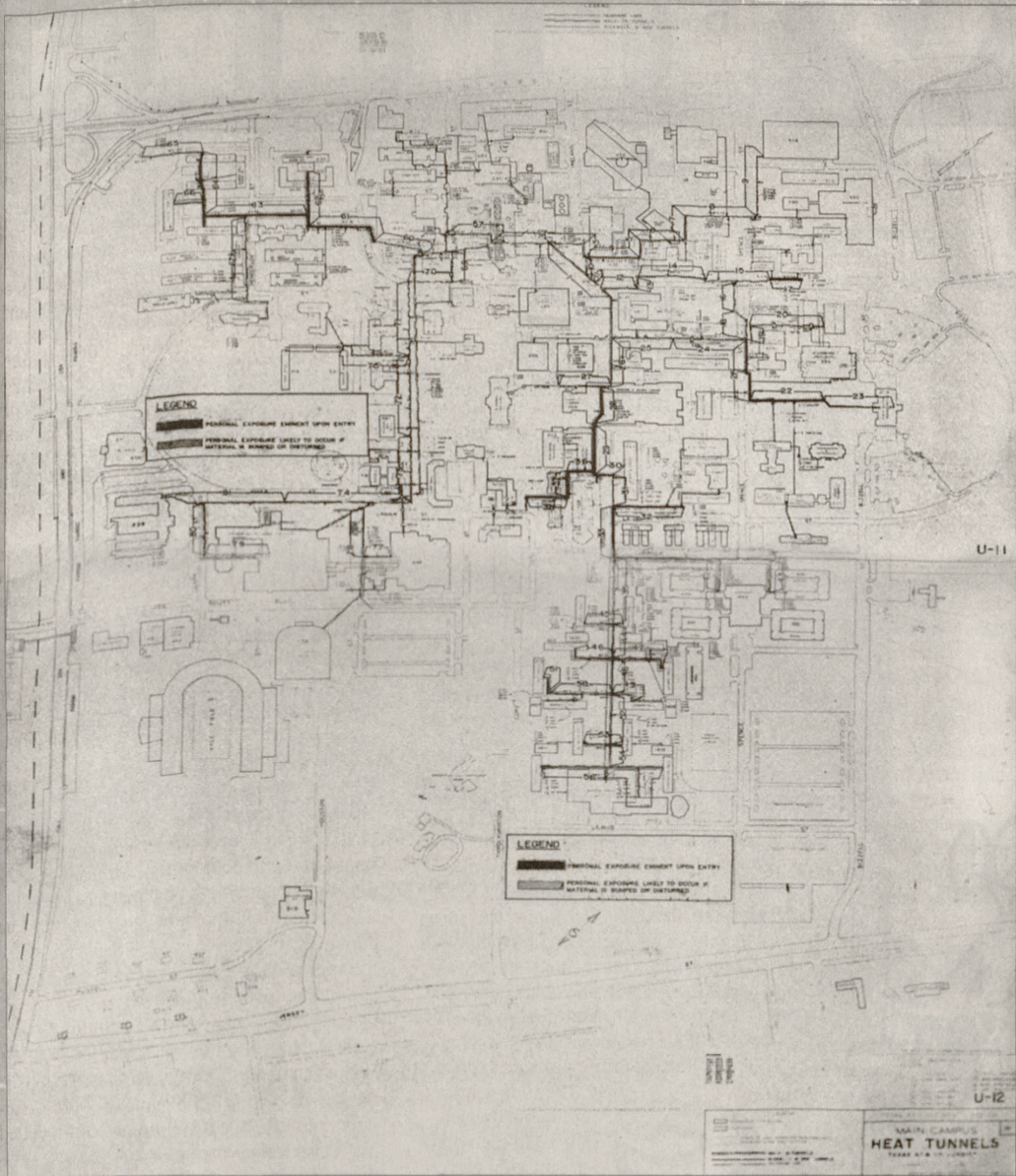


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE A&M PHYSICAL PLANT

(Above): A map of the Texas A&M University heat tunnels beneath the campus which connect most of the buildings on main campus. The tunnels have been closed due to the presence of asbestos and the dangerous levels of heat that can occur in the tunnels.

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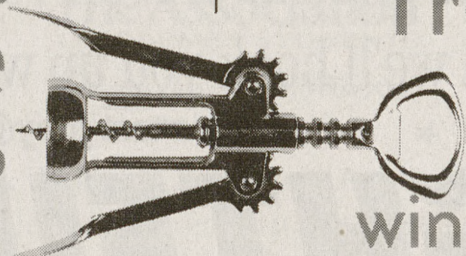
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she says,
"I'd call my
friends back
home to
invite
them to
a wine
party at
my new
apartment."



he says,
"I'd call
the guys
from this
lame
wine party
to bring
some
brews."

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