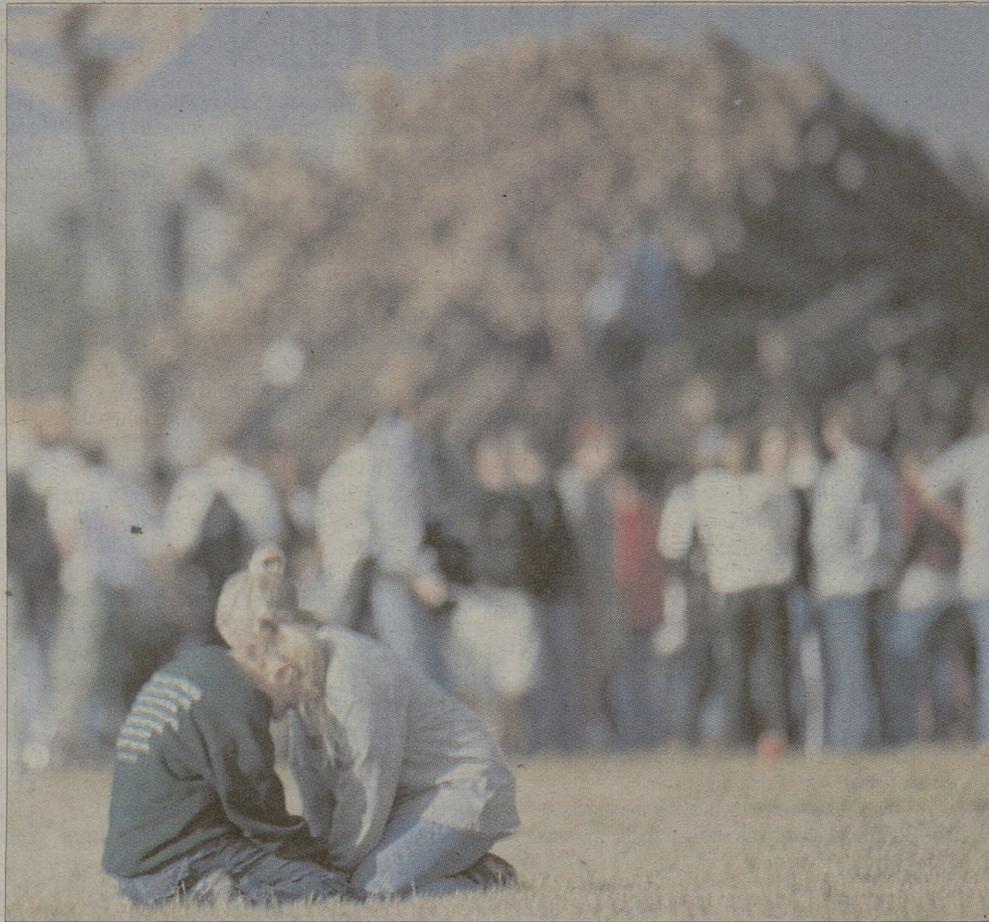
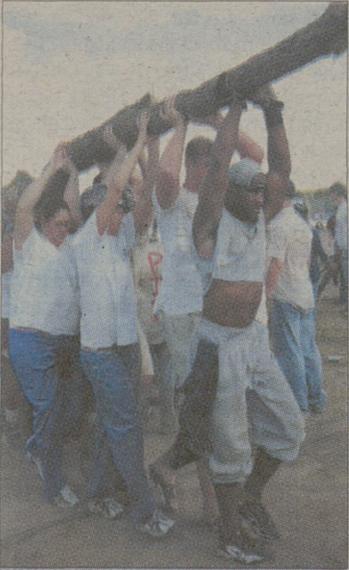


Explaining a tragedy



FILE PHOTO/THE BATTALION



By STUART HUTSON
The Battalion

When axes should be swinging, they lie still. When Saturday mornings should be filled with wake-up calls for cut, they are silent. When work gloves should be molding steel and wood into the grandest monument to tradition, spirit and pride, they remain unworn.

This is the time of year when thousands of freshmen typically would be led by upperclassmen in the construction of what many would call their greatest achievement during their college careers, second only to graduation.

But now, the time when these students would have been involved with cut, load and stack, they are left without the tradition.

"I would like to build, to do load and to go to cut ... but I can't," said Jon McKinnis, a freshman general studies major. "All my life, I have heard stories from my family who went here before me, and I have watched Bonfire burn in the past. From what I can understand, it was almost the most important tradition at the University, but I don't know if I'll ever get to really be a part of it."

McKinnis, a resident in Walton Hall, said while his dorm continues with many of the activities that accompanied Bonfire, such as watching games together on Saturdays and eating out in groups of 40 or more, there still seems to be an element of unity and excitement

Freshmen search for their role in the aftermath of the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse and seek class unity

ment missing.

Lou Ramos, a freshman biomedical science major, said she recalls visiting a friend in the FHK Complex and being enthralled by the level of spirit and camaraderie of those who worked together on Bonfire.

"I feel gypped," she said. "Coming here, I knew that there wouldn't be a Bonfire, but I still hoped that the togetherness would be even more intensified. That isn't how it is; there isn't anything to unite us."

"I am jealous. I see the togetherness of the Bonfire group from last year and how much they share. Now, I am close to about five people, and the rest of the people in the dorm are strangers. It wouldn't have been that way a year ago."

Steve Stobel, a junior electrical engineering major in Walton Hall, said a lack of a sense of camaraderie is noticeable within the freshman class.

"It just seems like everyone is just not as

tight as they use to be," he said. "Walton is holding together pretty well, but things seem to be going downhill since All-U night (the first official yell practice). ... Maybe people have started to think that since there is no Bonfire, there is no real point to a lot of the stuff we do."

To supplement the normal activity of Bonfire, many campus residence halls have attempted to boost participation at other functions.

"We have had to work harder to find other activities so that the freshmen can be involved and can still form together as a group," said Brett Owens, a Lechner Hall sophomore adviser and a biomedical science and political science major. "I think as far as Aggie spirit, we are keeping a hold on it. But that is only because we are working for it, and not just rolling over and accepting a loss."

"But it can be hard to find things that really supplement. It is important to find things that

are labor-intensive so that the group can really get the feeling of accomplishment and that a goal was achieved. Working hard together toward a goal is a big part of that unity that people are missing."

Lechner, FHK and other residence halls have been participating in projects such as Habitat for Humanity.

"Going out (to Habitat for Humanity) was such an awesome experience because it is a group of people with a set purpose," said Jonathan Brewer, a freshman mechanical engineering major in Lechner Hall. "Bonfire was on such a wider scale, but I can only imagine that. It's a shame I'll never get to see what that was like. I am disappointed that I will never know a big part of A&M tradition, and it feels like I was a little slighted."

Ramos said she fears that the gap in unity will continue to grow.

"It is no one's fault," she said. "No one has had to come up with things to make up for Bonfire before, but we still have to move on. Bonfire was a part of this University, but it wasn't all of it."

"I am nervous about the future. What will we teach our fish when we are upperclassmen? What will they teach theirs? We need to find something that not just a class, not just a dorm, but the entire University can work for and take pride in — just like we did with Bonfire."

FAMILY

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Jerry Self

Michael Self, father of Jerry Self, said some people cannot understand why his family is not suing A&M

over the death of his son.

"It's as they say — from the inside looking out, you can't explain it. From the outside looking in, you can't understand it," he said.

Self said he likes to talk about his son, and it helps him to talk about the accident. He said that when he feels down, he goes to the cemetery or looks at Jerry's Web-

site. And other times, he will start whistling the "Aggie War Hymn."

Self said that, in today's world, he is glad there is a place like A&M. To him, Aggie tradition is special, and his son lost his life doing something he loved.

Self said he wanted Jerry to be remembered as a good Aggie and a strong Christian. Self said Jerry loved his school, his

church and his family.

Nathan Scott West

Richard West, father of Nathan Scott West, said his son wanted to come to A&M for many years. Scott, as he was called, got involved in Bonfire as a freshman in the Corps.

West said he has been back to

A&M after the accident to go to orientation and football games and to visit his and Scott's friends.

"We get by mostly through our faith," West said. "We have a really strong faith; our church has helped us a lot. However, the perspective is not far enough out — a year is not that long."

West said he has seen a lot of

people pull together through Bonfire when they otherwise would not. He said he has seen a lot of young people mature and grow, and he has seen people renew their faith.

"Scott should be remembered as an exuberant Christian young man who put himself into everything he did — whether it was the Corps of Cadets or Bonfire," West said.