



PHOTO BY STUART VILLANUEVA — ILLUSTRATION BY GUY ROGERS • THE BATTALION
Dabney, Class of 1922, receives an award during the Corps of Cadets 125th anniversary Sept. 22 at Kyle Field. Dabney is the oldest living Aggie.

By BRANDIE LIFICK
THE BATTALION

In a 101-year lifetime, Virgil Dabney, Class of 1922, has worked his way through college, worked his way through 43 years teaching and left behind a trail of generations of Aggies who believe in the things he taught them.

Born on Dec. 2, 1899, Dabney was 18 years old during the height of World War I. His family hardly had enough money to support the children, much less send one to college. He decided to pay for school himself, and after working with his father as a carpenter for one year, he had saved enough to attend college for the first year.

"With all respect to my mother and dad, I received only a one dollar bill while I was going to A&M. I worked my way through," he said. "After high school, one night I turned to my mother, and I said, 'Momma I'm going to A&M.' Finally, Momma quit washing dishes and looked at me and said, 'That would be nice.' She knew I couldn't go there — we didn't have money. So I worked."

From February to September, Dabney worked as a carpenter at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to earn money to pay for his first year at A&M. For every year that he attended classes at A&M, he would take off a year to work and save money to pay for the next year of courses.

Dabney entered A&M as a freshman in 1918. Not long after settling into class and the everyday grind of college life, the Corps of Cadets was conscripted into service during World War I.

During World War I, early in Sept. of 1918, the entire military corps of Texas A&M was mustered into military service," Dabney said. "At that time, there wasn't a single senior on campus. The seniors had already received their assignments, some of them were even in France engaged in actual warfare. The juniors were scheduled to go in the fall, sophomores in the winter and us freshmen in the spring."

Although Dabney was majoring in industrial education, his courses changed once the cadets were put in the military. Each cadet was required to take courses in infantry training — specifically trench warfare and machine gun fire.

On Nov. 11, 1918, the cadets were instructed to form a semicircle around the stage President Dr. William Bizzell's office.

"Dr. Bizzell came to the front porch and, in a few words, simply said, 'the war is over,'" Dabney said. "When he said that, we could look around at that group of cadets and see they were puzzled. You were sitting there at attention, but you couldn't

help but glance to the left and glance to the right and question yourself, 'Did I hear what he said?' And finally, it dawned on the Corps what Dr. Bizzell had said, and all at once, that cadet corps burst into a yell. And it continued so long and so loud, that you wondered if it would ever quit."

The armistice that ended the fighting was signed Nov. 11, 1918, before the sophomore or freshman classes were shipped out, and World War I officially ended with the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919.

Dabney said the influx of students continued after the war's conclusion, and at times, as many as 300 students were placed in temporary housing tents on the present day Law-Puryear Field. The tents contained beds and a large wood burning stove to keep the cadets warm.

"The tents were about 12 by 12, and they had stuff in them for either two or four cadets," he said. "We didn't have facilities, like showers or water in the tents. It wasn't too bad, until the winter hit. It was an unusually hard winter, and the snow would cover our firewood."

Dabney was assigned to Row One, Tent One in front of the YMCA Building his junior year. He roomed with a cadet from Louisiana named Morgan.

"Life by that time had returned to normal in the cadet corps, which meant that there was a lot of heavy school work, heavy assignments, and of course, fun," Dabney said. "Morgan and I went back to our tent after supper one night, but there wasn't any tent there. It had been picked up by the freshmen and carried over to the middle of the drill field. And it sat there for three days and three nights, until Col. Ashburn read out orders in Sbis mess hall that Dabney and Morgan's tent was to be removed from the drill field and returned to its original location."

In the winter of 1919, an influenza epidemic hit the campus, and cadets housed in tents were affected the most, Dabney said.

"Almost daily, there was some member of the Corps taken by that influenza," Dabney said. "No Aggie will ever forget what he experienced when he went to bed at ten o'clock at night. All of the sudden, what would you hear? Taps."

"After all these years, I can still feel the skin move on my arm. It was 'Silver Taps' playing, and that meant that another buddy had died."

Dabney decided to not take a year off to work after his junior year, and instead, took 23 credit hours his last semester to graduate in Sept. of 1923.

After graduating from A&M, Dabney went back to Wichita Falls High School to resume his teaching position. After only three months, he was called back to

College Station to assume the role of an assistant lecturer in the College of Industrial Arts Education.

"I didn't like the position, and after six months, I quit," he said.

Dabney spent the next four years working as a carpenter on a contract basis.

"After all that work, I finally decided I was going to go back and teach," Dabney said.

He spent the next 38 years at San Jacinto High School teaching wood shop and later, mechanical drawing.

"Some of the things that didn't mean much to me then mean a lot now," he said. "The biggest reward that I received in teaching came to me one year when a girl came to me, and she asked me if I would give her away in marriage. It didn't mean much to me then, but I think of it now and it is one of the greatest rewards I received."

Dabney retired from San Jacinto High in 1965 and moved to Kerrville, where he and his wife of 65 years, Katie Mae, ranched.

Dabney now resides in the Veteran's Administration Retirement Center in Kerrville. He says that students from San Jacinto High School still visit him.

"I remember them only as boys — 14, 15 and 16 years old ... They'll come in the door and say 'My name is so and so.' Now those boys are 70 and 80 and even 85," he said.

Travis Dabney, Class of 1996, and Virgil's grandson, said his grandfather taught him that college and hard work were not optional.

"It became unacceptable not to graduate from college after him," Travis Dabney said. "He instilled a work ethic in all of us. He would put me to work driving his truck and tractor at the ranch when I was only 8 years old."

Looking back, Dabney speaks about things he wished he had known as a young man entering A&M.

"I wish that they had told me the importance of learning the English language," Dabney said. "And of studying your dictionary one page a day. Study your Bible one page a day."

Both of Dabney's sons, Robert and Thomas, Class of 1960 and 1962, respectively, attended A&M, along with Travis and two of his siblings and several cousins. Dabney says he likes the thought of his great-grandchildren — of whom there are seven, so far — following his lead and attending his alma mater.

"One boy is a natural-born Aggie — his great-granddaddy, his granddad and his mother and father are all Aggies of Texas A&M," Dabney said. "He's a pedigree Aggie, and one of these days, I'll give him this ring. This is the mark of my college education."

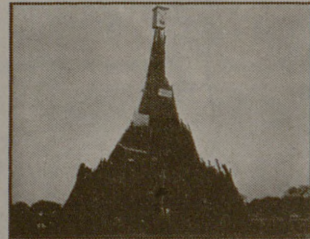
Sommer Bunce contributed to this story.

A&M celebrates 125th Anniversary of the Corps of Cadets. Anniversary activities and a reunion of former cadets, sponsored by the Corps of Cadets Association, are held Sept. 21 to 22.

2001

First permanent reviewing facility on O.R. Simpson Drill Field is constructed.

2001



1999

Aggie Bonfire stack collapses, killing 11 students, one former student and injuring 27 students.

President Bowen's Vision 2020 task force issues report containing recommendations aimed at placing A&M among the top 10 academic institutions in the nation by year 2020. Among these recommendations is the mandate to raise Corps strength to 2,600 cadets.

1999

Cadet Erica Smith, Class of 1999, is the first woman to command the Texas Aggie Band.

1998



1994

Dr. Ray M. Bowen, Class of 1958 and a former deputy corps commander, is appointed president of A&M.

1991

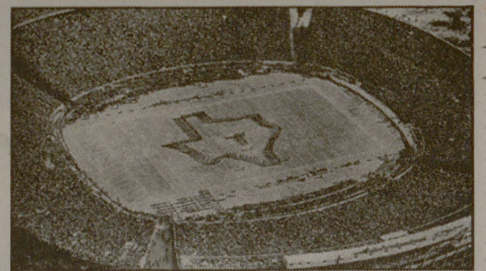


America enters Persian Gulf War. More than 300 Aggies serve, with three killed. Air Force Lt. Col. George Walton, Class of 1971, leads first attack of the war against Iraqi forces.

Women admitted to Texas Aggie Band. 1985

Ruth Ann Schumacher, Gayla J. Briles and Gretchan Ann Looman, all Class of 1977, are the first women commissioned through the ROTC program. Schumacher also is the first woman cadet to command a Corps unit, Comany W-1.

1977



First military commissioning of an A&M woman graduate, Collette Boyd, Class of 1975.

1975

1974

Women admitted to Corps of Cadets.



1973

Parsons Mounted Cavalry unit established. Named for commandant, Col. Thomas R. Parsons, Class of 1949.

1972

Naval ROTC program established, making A&M the only campus in the nation where a student can obtain a commission in any branch of service.



1963

Corps membership becomes non-compulsory.

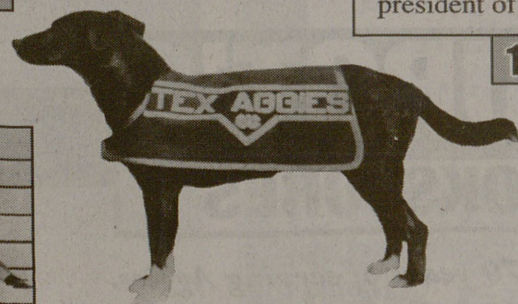
Women admitted to Texas A&M.

World War II hero Maj. Gen. James Earl Rudder, Class of 1932, appointed president of A&M.

1959

1962-1973

America goes to war in Vietnam. An estimated 3,000 Aggies serve in Vietnam, with 160 killed. A&M commissions 3,985 officers during this period.



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Universal Studios movie *We've Never Been Licked* is filmed at A&M.

1943

1942

Muster held by 26 Aggies during the siege of the island of Corregidor provides inspiration for annual, worldwide Aggie Muster program.

1950

America enters Korean War. More than 1,900 Aggies serve; 58 are killed, six missing.



1941



1939

Completion of 12-dormitory and dining hall complex, now known as The Quadrangle and home to the Corps of Cadets.

America enters World War II. Texas A&M provides more officers (14,123) than any institution, including the U.S. service academies. Altogether, 20,229 Aggies serve during the war, 953 were killed. Seven Aggies receive the Medal of Honor.

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