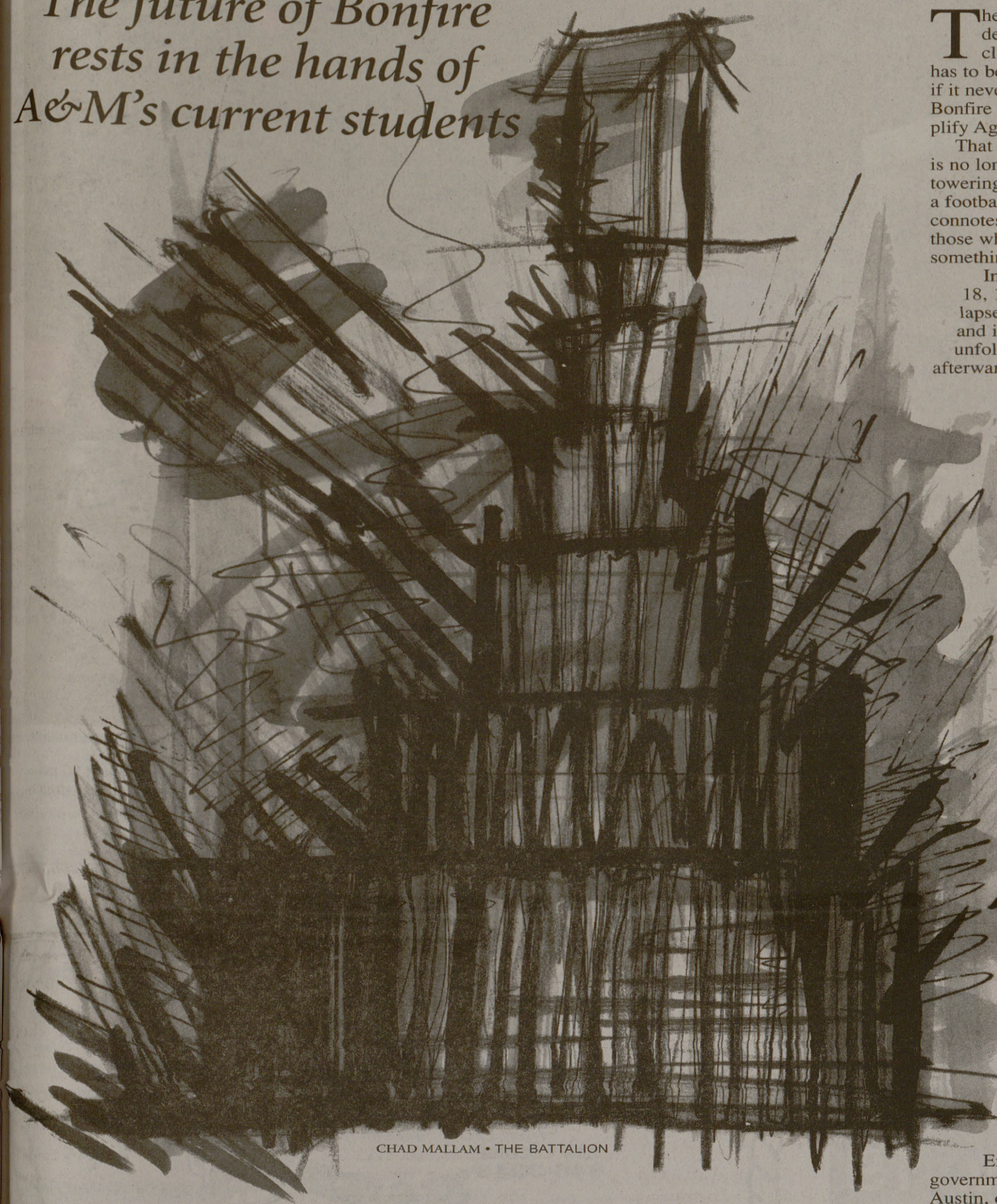


## ...And they call it 'Aggie Bonfire'

### The future of Bonfire rests in the hands of A&M's current students



CHAD MALLAM • THE BATTALION

The story of Texas Aggie Bonfire defies explanation. Words can only clumsily describe an experience that has to be lived to be understood, and even if it never burns again, Bonfire will always exemplify Aggie spirit.

That is because Bonfire is no longer solely about a towering stack of logs and a football rivalry. It also connotes the memory of those who perished doing something they loved.

In the early-morning hours of Nov. 18, 1999, the 90th Aggie Bonfire collapsed, claiming the lives of 12 Aggies and injuring 27 others. The story that unfolded in the days, weeks and months afterward is engraved in the hearts and minds of Aggies everywhere. In Reed Arena the night of the collapse, then-Lt. Gov. Rick Perry, Class of 1972, said, "We will remember them as long as there is a Texas A&M and Aggie spirit, and that, my friends, is forever."

And so we have. Two years later, Aggies have moved on. Wounds of the heart are still healing, but the Aggie family mourns no more. And Aggies will never forget — Nov. 18 will always be a day of observance in Aggieland.

What Aggies did in the aftermath of the 1999 Aggie Bonfire collapse proved that Bonfire embodies everything the Aggie spirit should be. It proved that Bonfire is about people who cared for each other — a bond of unity that transcends everything else. In Aggieland on Nov. 18, 1999, fate proved the old adage that, "From the outside looking in, you can't understand it. From the inside looking out, you can't explain it."

The world looked upon A&M the day of the collapse with eyes filled with tears of grief and a sparkle of admiration. Bonfire proved that there is no place like Aggieland and no people like Texas Aggies.

"The A&M student body is truly one of the greatest treasures of our state," wrote Eric Opiela, vice president of student government at the University of Texas-Austin, of the memorial service in Reed Arena. "As part of the UT delegation, we sat on the floor of Reed Arena, and immediately following the end of the service, I heard this rustling sound behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw the sight of 20,000 students spontaneously putting their arms on their neighbor's shoulders, forming a great circle around the arena. The mass stood there in pin-drop silence for close to five minutes; then, from somewhere, someone began to hum quietly the hymn 'Amazing Grace.' Within seconds, the whole arena was singing. I tried, too — I choked, I cried. This event brought me to tears. It was one, if not the, defining moment of my college career. I learned something tonight. For all us Longhorns who discount A&M in our never-ending rivalry, we need to realize one thing: Aggieland is a special place with special people. It is infinitely better equipped than us at dealing with a tragedy such as this for one simple reason: it is a family. It is a family that cares for its own, a family that reaches out, a family that is unified in the face of adversity, a family that moved this Longhorn to tears."

Even rivalry was set aside the next week when A&M played UT. UT's annual Hex Rally, their version of a pre-game yell practice, was canceled and replaced with a memorial service. The Longhorn Band dedicated its halftime performance to the 12 fallen Aggies, and in rare form, the 12th Man remained standing for the performance.

This year, the horizon above the Polo Fields is void of what should be there. Since 1909, Aggieland has been without a Bonfire only three years. In 1963, Aggies decided to forgo their Bonfire as a memorial to slain President John F. Kennedy.

"It is the most we have and the least we can give," said Head Yell Leader Mike Marlowe when the decision to not burn Bonfire was made.

In 1994, Bonfire fell days before it was to burn. There were no injuries or deaths, and students and alumni flocked to the Polo Fields to rebuild the shrine.

Aggies were not so lucky in 1999.

A&M President Dr. Ray M. Bowen canceled Bonfire the day of the collapse — a decision that remains in limbo today. The commission tasked with investigating the 1999 collapse forced the A&M community to confront the stark reality of a tradition that was out of control. Resistance to change and "tunnel vision" caused administrators to ignore safety concerns and to allow a complex structure to be built by untrained students whose immature behavior had become an embarrassment.

"If I had to allow my heart to make the decision, we'd have a Bonfire," Bowen said after the commission presented its report. "But my heart won't make the decision — my brain has to make the decision."

That chapter of Bonfire history remains unwritten today as Bowen determines the fate of Bonfire 2002.

Bonfire has become a point of contention among Aggies, dividing the A&M family. Some are upset that Bonfire has been postponed. Others fear it will never burn again, and critics oppose the idea of trying to bring back Bonfire.

But consensus on campus is clear: the spirit of Bonfire is dying as each year passes without the blaze. Dorm unity, some students say, is almost non-existent, and the Classes of 2004 and 2005 have no concept of what Bonfire means and why it is important to Aggies. They do not realize that Aggie Bonfire is a culture unto itself — a staple of Aggies and Aggieland.

The evolution of Bonfire is not a simple story, though. Rather, it is a saga decorated with legend, lore, mystery and tradition.

The blueprints for Bonfire are in the souls of those who love Bonfire, and a passion for tradition has perpetuated all the knowledge necessary to build Bonfire from generation to generation. Though no written documentation exists, Bonfire has survived 90 years. Today, its future hangs in the balance.

Each facet of Bonfire culture is special in the heart of everyone who helped build it and everyone who watched it burn — a

*The consensus on campus is clear: the spirit of Bonfire is dying with each passing year.*

manifestation of their burning desire to "beat the hell outta t.u." and enjoy the fellowship of thousands of Aggies.

That culture, though, is fading away. Bonfire knowledge is compartmentalized — no single person can recount Bonfire legend in its entirety. The good and the bad of that tradition are waning as Aggies graduate, because each who knows about Bonfire is part of a greater whole: the living institutional memory of Bonfire.

In 1963, non-cadets were, for the first time, allowed to join the Corps of Cadets in building Bonfire. Since then, friendly rivalry and mutual respect have been bred by that relationship. Today, though, the two factions have no connection. That must change before it is too late.

A 1963 *Battalion* editorial commented on a situation similar to that in which Aggies find themselves today.

"We will readily admit that construction of the Aggie Bonfire does not do much for academic quality of our University," the editorial stated. "But one thing is for sure: The construction of the world's largest Bonfire — which the Aggie Bonfire most certainly is — demonstrates one of the characteristics that have won Aggies respect around the world. That one characteristic is the Aggies' ability to take on the biggest jobs of all and then do them well."

"We want to promise the fish who have never worked on an Aggie Bonfire before, that they are about to undergo an experience they will never forget and one that will seldom be matched — regardless of what they might accomplish during their lives. For many of the Class of 1967, the Aggie Bonfire will be their first experience to accomplish the apparently impossible. Learn the lessons well and it will go with you through life."

Members of the Classes of 2004 and 2005: That message applies to you, too, and the future of Bonfire is in your hands. Act now, or it will be lost forever. Those who will come after you await your leadership in ensuring Bonfire burns in the future. Those in Aggieland today await your willingness to accept their knowledge. A blueprint for Aggie Bonfire is enclosed in today's newspaper.

The hearts of Aggies are devout, and the spirit of Aggieland can ne'er be told. But it can certainly be seen.

*Brady Creel is a junior journalism and management major.*

### MAIL CALL

#### Let them cheer

In response to Melissa Sullivan's Nov. 15 article:

Texas A&M's Department of Student Activities told 'The Fightin' Texas Aggie Competition Cheer Squad' to exclude "Aggie" from its name and the A&M logo from its uniforms because several alumni complained to University officials. The alumni said they are worried the squad will be confused with the Aggie Yell Leaders.

That idea is baseless because everyone who watches A&M football knows the yell leaders are all male. However, the biggest outrage is that University officials and members of the student body are fighting the squad. For A&M officials to ask a student organization that is working in good faith and with the purpose of bringing positive attention to the school not to use the Aggie name or logo is a slap in the face for all their work and effort. They have the right to use the Aggie name, because they are Aggies. They have the right to use the logo because this is their school.

No one wants to see the yell leaders replaced, or even have to share their traditional spirit responsi-

bilities at Midnight Yell or the games.

They simply want to compete against the squads at other universities. There is nothing wrong with that. It could be a good thing for the university to be represented in another area of competition.

These students should be commended for taking an initiative. They have been fought every step of the way by not only the university, but by their own student body. That is truly the saddest part of this situation.

The school that prides itself on unity, tradition and the importance of family is turning on its own because it worries about what others might think.

The squad simply wants the ability to cheer at competitions around the country and show their school spirit and pride.

What the University and the student body need to worry about is the message this sends to other Aggies and future Aggies who want to take a chance and do something new.

Shame on the University officials for trying to take away the freedoms of its students because of alumni's threats. Most of all, shame on the student body for not supporting its fel-

low students.

Joseph Pleasant  
Class of 2003

Accompanied by  
three signatures

#### Uncartoonist not uncool

Let me say that your Nov. 16 cartoon was a ray of light that broke through Friday's dreary sky. As a playwright, I have to wholeheartedly admit that I enjoy your style, even though I may not agree with your madness. I am usually the

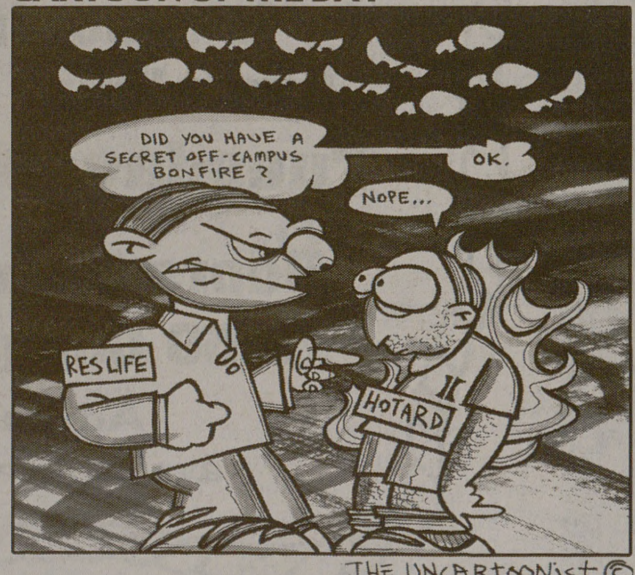
guy who has to explain all your cartoons to all his friends.

As for those readers who did not get it on Friday, I believe the message illustrated how people try to use technicalities to get away with things, much like the University's bureaucratic systems. And if you actually thought it had something to do with rocks, then you are a rockhead for taking the cartoon too literally.

Borrowing a line from the movie *Top Gun*, I say to you, Uncartoonist, "You can be my wingman anyday."

Matthew V. Parker  
Class of 2002

#### CARTOON OF THE DAY



THE DUNCARTOONIST ©