

AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

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A modern-day shrine

Texas A&M students, staff and faculty work to preserve memories of Bonfire

By Michael Whitlow
THE BATTALION

For two years, Dr. Sylvia Grider, an associate professor of anthropology, has been working with the University to preserve memorabilia from the Bonfire memorial site for future Aggies.

Grider said, "The Saturday night after the collapse I was at Sweet Eugene's when several of my graduate students approached me.

"They told me something incredible was happening at the site. When we arrived shortly after midnight, the perimeter fence had already been constructed and begun to be covered with flowers. In less than a day, it had become a pilgrimage site, with people from across the state coming to leave items at the fence and pay respects to the fallen."

Spontaneous devotion to a site of tragedy is not unique, she said. It is a world-wide phenomenon she has been studying for over a decade. The phenomenon, which she refers to as a spontaneous shrine, seems embedded in human behavior.

Grider has studied many shrines at such places as Columbine High School, the site of the federal building bombed in Oklahoma City, and in London following the death of Princess Diana. Grider was personally consulted by officials when such a shrine began being constructed at Ground Zero in New York City last September.

"After 9/11 the media has wanted to use the term 'makeshift memorial,'" Grider said. "I don't like that term because when you look at these sites, you can see that people are very careful of what they do and what they put there."

Grider, student leaders, and University officials quickly mobilized to protect the items left at the Bonfire shrine. "There was a campus-wide feeling this would have to be preserved," Grider said. "By the time I met with student leaders many had already been out to the fence collecting items. We didn't have time to worry about where the items would be stored or what would eventually be done with them, we had to get to work."

Dr. Wynn Rosser, assistant vice president of Student Affairs, agreed with Grider that the shrine had incredible emotional significance to Aggies, as well as incredible significance to the discipline of anthropology.

"This is the same kind of behavior that eventually led to the Egyptian tombs," Rosser said. "We knew that future Aggies would want to know about this and see these

items, but also that the event itself would be studied by future anthropologists to better understand people's reactions to tragic events."

The Student Government, Traditions Council, the Physical Plant, Motor Pool and Purchasing and Surplus coordinated efforts the week after the collapse in order to preserve the artifacts of the memorial.

Each section of the fence was numbered and each item was uniquely labeled according to its location on the fence.

"We could reconstruct the entire fence if we had to," Grider said. "We were that thorough in taking photographs and numbering everything. We know where every item in the collection was."

The process of gathering the artifacts met with some difficulties. "Flowers and paper aren't meant to be left outside for a month," Grider said. "There was no way to keep the flowers, so we gathered them in about 150 trash bags, and the Physical Plant composted them. The compost has been saved for use by the university in planting flowers or trees possibly at the memorial site."

The paper products also presented a unique challenge.

"We had banners, posters, notes, letters, even Bibles that after days of exposure had become completely sodden," Grider said. "We had to work fast to prevent mildew and disintegration, but these objects were very fragile. So, we froze them in the library's archival freezer until the archivist in the Cushing Library could work to slowly dry them out one by one and preserve them."

Bonfire grodes, teddy bears and 12th Man towels were water-logged and stained. With the expertise of the Department of Anthropology's nautical archaeology specialists, the objects were safely preserved.

Grider said a corner, featuring a twelve-foot cross and twelve individual crosses for the fallen Aggies was left until December 20th.

"Members of the community requested that we leave part of the shrine intact for a while because people were still visiting the site," Grider said. "We also wanted to leave part of the shrine intact until after graduation."

"We've stabilized all of the artifacts now and are keeping them in environmentally controlled conditions," Grider said. "We had to refine all our methods to work with this assemblage, and speed was vital, but now all the artifacts have been preserved indefinitely."

"Each artifact has been digitally photographed and cataloged. We just finished the work this past semester."

With the collection complete, the Department of Anthropology, University officials, and student leaders have been developing a long-term plan for the "Bonfire Memorabilia Collection," as it's been dubbed.

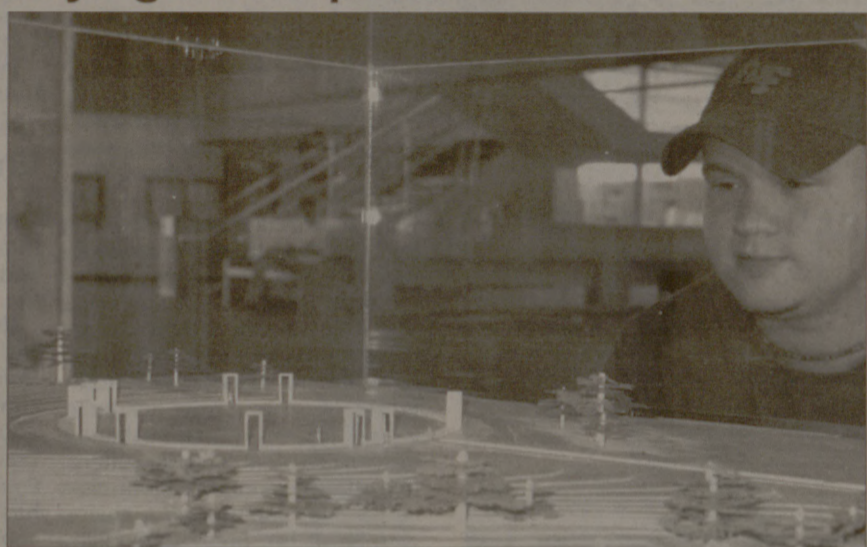
"We're hoping to do some sort of exhibit this fall," Rosser said. "Due to the nature of the artifacts, it will most likely be a photographic exhibit, with documents explaining the history of Bonfire and the nature and significance of spontaneous shrines."

Beyond this, no final decision has been reached regarding the ultimate fate of the collection, although there has been talk of linking it to the Bonfire Memorial.

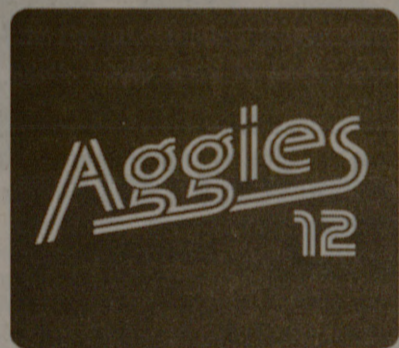
"We realize the emotional link between the collection and the memorial," Rosser said. "We'd like for there to be a physical link as well."

Grider said an online version of the collection's digital catalog may be created. For now, the Aggie family can rest assured that the artifacts from the Bonfire shrine will be safe for generations of future Aggies.

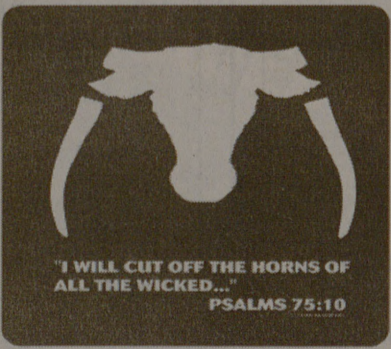
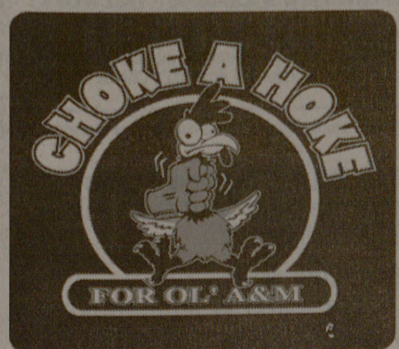
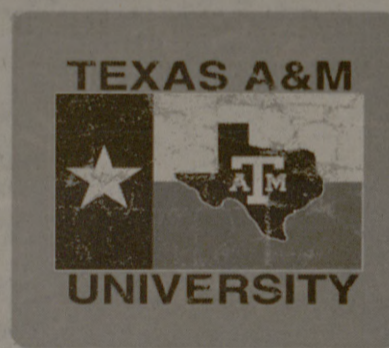
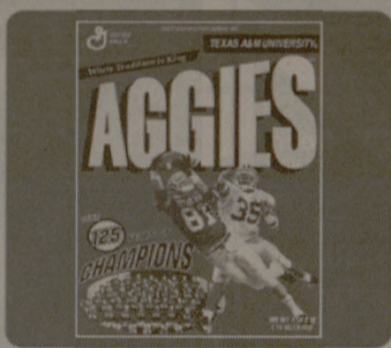
Paying his respects



Junior computer engineering major, Sloan Williams, looks at a scale model of a proposed memorial site at the Bonfire Memorial exhibit on Tuesday.



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