

The Twelfth Man.



© Will van Overbeek, photographer "Aggies" from The Pictures of Texas Monthly Twenty-Five Years.

Polishing Sully.



courtesy Cushing Memorial Library, Texas A&M University



courtesy Cushing Memorial Library, Texas A&M University

Ring Dance, ca. 1960.



courtesy Cushing Memorial Library, Texas A&M University

Ring Dance, ca. 1980.

There was a time, a long, long time ago, when there was little to be proud of at Texas A&M. When Texas's first venture into higher education began (a mere 15 years after President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the Morrill Land Grant College Act of 1863), the first cadets enrolled into a college with only one building, no kitchen at all, primitive outhouses, and a remarkably undistinguished and tiny faculty. The school was equidistant from the three most populous centers in late-19th-century Texas (Galveston-Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio), a political decision guaranteed to make A&M forever feel like it was located in the middle of exactly nowhere.

In time, our time, Texas A&M would distinguish itself among modern American universities as a leader in research, as one of the top ten universities in number of National Merit Scholars, and also in the size of its endowment. It has provided its country with more than 200 individuals who achieved the rank of general or admiral, and now with more than 43,000 students, it is the seventh largest university in the United States. How it got from there to here is a story worth knowing.

Texas A&M began in the 1870s, the same decade that saw the start of the great Texas cattle drives, when trail-driving cowboys guided vast herds to market by way of the railheads in Kansas. They quickly captured the imagination of the entire country, and the cadets of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas profited immensely by the coincidence. Two great Texas myths began together.

From the beginning there was the Corps of Cadets, who wore uniforms and marched everywhere. But the Corps in itself was not enough to build a legendary university. For that, A&M needed a hero, and Lawrence Sullivan "Sul" Ross, more than anyone, fulfilled that role. He shaped the myth of Aggieland during his tenure as president.

Sul Ross came of age in Waco at the dawn of the Civil War, becoming one of the youngest brigadier generals in the Confederacy, and immediately thereafter he served as a second-generation Texas Ranger.

From 1887 to 1891 Ross was an immensely popular governor of Texas, the only war-hero governor Texans had enjoyed since Sam Houston. The respect with which he was held was legendary.

Sul Ross accepted the presidency of the college immediately after his governorship, a decision that in itself signaled the emerging importance of Texas A&M. Fathers at the time spoke of sending their sons not to college but to Sul Ross. His seven-year tenure, which ended with his death in 1898, was as distinguished as he was. Texas had to take A&M seriously because Sul Ross did, and under his leadership the university grew and prospered as never before.

After Sul Ross, tradition at A&M continued to be molded by the Corps of Cadets, which became a single fraternity, encompassing all student life at the college. Its colorful traditions developed early in the 20th century: the large military-style precision Aggie Band; the Silver Taps ceremony in memory of students who died while enrolled; the Aggie Muster on April 21, when Aggies gather together, wherever they may be to remember their deceased comrades; Final Review, when the senior class passes authority to the junior class; the Bonfire, the largest in the world, on the eve of the football game with the University of Texas (t.u. in Aggie parlance); the Twelfth Man tradition, which goes back to a 1922 football game when student E. King Gill answered the half-time call of a desperately worried Aggie coach. Gill volunteered, then suited up for the second half. To this day Aggies at football games do not sit, but remain standing in honor of the Twelfth Man and his readiness to serve the institution.

The cult of Texas A&M was ultimately shaped by two forces: the spirit of the Corps and the Southern military code of honor, personified by Lawrence Sullivan Ross, an ideal model for success. This articulated spirit and code of honor drove a mediocre Southern military college to become one of this country's great universities. *Barry Moore*

THE MYSTIQUE OF AGGIELAND

I first arrived in College Station in the spring of 1992 as a prospective graduate student from up north. Sean, an old friend from my undergraduate days who was living in College Station, offered to show me around. After the obligatory campus tour and cruising the north, south, and east gates in an Alamo rental car, I presumptuously said to Sean, "I've seen enough of this commercial strip stuff. Let's go downtown." Sean looked at me like a parent trying to find appropriate words to tell a child that there is no Easter Bunny and said, "Well, this is downtown." I exclaimed, "This isn't a town, this is a franchisescape!"

Now, six years later, I have become acculturated to the extent that I have learned enough Aggie lore to form an understanding of the complexities and contradictions between the physical presence of College Station and the intangible cultural construct (mythical image) that is Aggieland. For thousands of undergraduates and former students, Aggieland is the magical setting where the glorious rites of passage afforded by university life are played out. Aggieland should not be confused with new American suburbia, where the best coffee house in town is in a strip mall and has a drive-thru window. But there is an inauthenticity in the disparity between the symbolism of Aggie traditions and the experience afforded by the generic monotony of College Station's self-proliferating sprawl.

Historically, the majority of sacred places and paths of Aggieland have been a manifestation of inculcated doctrine rather than lived experience. Beginning with Fish Camp, undergraduates at Texas A&M have been brainwashed to believe in the superior significance of a plethora of monuments and rituals. While this conditioning has been applied to things such as the statue of Sul Ross, it could just as easily been directed to a rock in the parking lot of a nearby McDonald's. The point is not to belittle Aggie traditions but to illustrate that the mental attitude produced by them is not one of spontaneous, first-hand experience. Through official university rhetoric and corporate marketing practices,

A VIEW OF TRADITION

Aggieland has become Aggieworld, a kind of collegiate theme park crafted to capture the imaginations of undergraduates in the same way that Disneyland dazzles children with plastic elephants and robotic pirates. This phenomenon is illustrated by recent initiatives of the Old Main Society to create a replica of the original College Station train station, which would neither function as a train station nor occupy the original site.

Instead of creating the opportunity to authentically experience train travel, something that is now practically impossible in Texas, the College Station station would merely symbolize the Aggie rail heritage. This nostalgic disposition ignores the realities of a community that is overrun by automobiles and desperately needs transportation alternatives. It also treats local heritage, such as rail transportation, as a series of static vignettes instead of understanding that history as part of a dynamic process. Why not create a new rail network and station that is fast, efficient, and grounded in the contemporary, high-tech, research-driven processes of Texas A&M?

Both the citizens of College Station and the student body of Texas A&M are becoming more heterogeneous, and the days of the infamous two-percent center (slackers who give only 2 percent as opposed to real Aggies, who give 110 percent) are long gone. Thus, this budding urban center can no longer rely exclusively on the symbolism of Aggieworld to define its identity as we enter the third millennium. In order to become vital, the physical character of College Station as well as the rituals and traditions of Aggieland must be adapted to the challenges posed by this new era. Citizens of College Station need to be prompted to question the validity of a franchise-dominated landscape, and the Texas A&M student body needs to be educated to respect the university's heritage, while being encouraged to express the spirit of its time. *Timothy J. Cassidy*