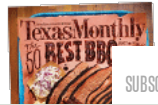




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Ring of Fire

IT WAS ONE OF THE MOST PASSIONATELY OBSERVED TRADITIONS ON ANY COLLEGE CAMPUS IN THE COUNTRY. THEN, ON NOVEMBER 18, 1999, A WEEK BEFORE IT WAS SCHEDULED TO BURN, THE TEXAS A&M BONFIRE COLLAPSED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, KILLING TWELVE AGGIES. TEN YEARS LATER, AS THE UNIVERSITY CONTINUES TO WRESTLE WITH THE TRAGEDY—AND DEBATE WHETHER BONFIRE SHOULD EVER RETURN TO CAMPUS—THE STUDENTS AND ALUMNI WHO CHOPPED LOGS, HAULED TIMBER, AND BUILT STACK TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY SAW, WHAT THEY LOST, AND HOW THEIR SCHOOL WAS CHANGED FOREVER.

by PAMELA COLLOFF

NOVEMBER 2009



The Bonfire Memorial, located on the A&M campus at the site of the collapse, photographed on September 17, 2009.

Photograph by Randal Ford

“The bonfire symbolizes two things,” reads the 1947 Texas A&M freshman handbook. “A burning desire to beat the team from the University of Texas, and the undying flame of love that every loyal Aggie carries in his heart for the school.”

The tradition began as a wood-and-trash pile in 1909, when A&M was still an all-male military college. Over time it grew in scale and ambition, eventually setting a world record in 1969, when it reached 109 feet. In keeping with A&M’s belief that Aggies should learn as much outside the classroom as they do in it, the arduous task of constructing Bonfire was left entirely to students. Until 1999, it burned every year except for 1963, when it was torn down after the assassination of President Kennedy. Head yell leader Mike Marlowe explained, “It is the most we have and the least we can give.”

And then, in the early-morning hours of November 18, 1999, the million-



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pound structure—which took almost two months, five thousand logs, and 125,000 man-hours to build—collapsed in a matter of seconds. Nearly sixty Aggies were working on Bonfire when it fell; twelve were killed.

Though the tradition had always held great meaning for A&M, it was not without controversy. Earlier warnings that its design was flawed had gone unheeded. Critics pointed to the marginalized role played by female students (for most of the seventies they were excluded from working on the project), as well as its demanding construction schedule, which caused some students' academic performances to suffer. But many Aggies were still outraged when the administration suspended the beloved tradition. This fall, the controversy began anew when Governor Rick Perry, an Aggie alum, said in an interview with *texas monthly* that he believed that Bonfire will return to A&M as soon as next year.

Ten years after the collapse, on what marks the hundredth anniversary of Bonfire, *texas monthly* tracked down many of the students who were working on or around the structure when it fell. Drawing on more than one hundred hours of interviews with student leaders, workers, medics, football players, professors, parents, and alumni, this is the untold story of Bonfire, in the words of Aggies themselves.

“We were all gathered around a fire, trying to put some voodoo on a football game.” *Bonfire was set ablaze every November before the Aggies-Longhorns football game. The construction was supervised by redpots—the elite group of juniors and seniors who wore red Army surplus helmets, or “pots.” On the night it was lit, the crowd could swell to 70,000 people.*

JAMES BROWN, *class of 2001, was a biomedical science major and a student medic. He lives in Jackson, Wyoming, and owns an outdoor guiding company.* There's that famous line about A&M: “From the outside looking in, you can't understand it. From the inside looking out, you can't explain it.” That's true of Bonfire too. You can't understand the intensity—neither in size, nor in temperature, nor in emotion, nor in any measurable aspect—unless you saw it burn.

CHIP THIEL, *class of 2000, was an agricultural economics major and a cadet in the Corps. As a brownpot, he was one of the few leaders who were allowed to use mechanized equipment. He is the vice president of a wealth management company in Houston.* We cut, loaded, transported, unloaded, and stacked a forest full of trees to create the largest bonfire in the world.

AARON HORN, *class of 1998, was an agricultural development major, a cadet in the Corps, and a redpot. He owns an automotive repair shop and lives in College Station.* Five thousand logs, cut by hand. Five thousand logs! The center pole alone was a hundred feet tall. When you stood on top of stack, it felt like you were on top of the world. We lit it around Thanksgiving, and when we got back from Christmas break, it was still smoldering.

MIKE FOSSUM, *class of 1980, was a mechanical engineering major and served as a squadron commander in the Corps. An astronaut, he is a veteran of two space missions and lives in Houston.* It was a herculean effort to build. And then came the night when we actually burned it. The band would come marching in, and the yell leaders and the redpots would circle around with flaming torches. On cue, they would throw their torches onto Bonfire. When that sucker went up, it was an amazing sight to see, especially if you had built it with your own blood, sweat, and tears.

RICK PERRY, *class of 1972, was an animal science major, a cadet in the Corps, a yell leader, and a redpot. He is the governor of Texas.* At Bonfire, I led the band with my date, who subsequently became my wife. Those are



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moments you never forget. As you get older, they become more poignant.

MIKE RUSEK, class of 1998, was an agricultural development major and a cadet in the Corps. He lives in La Grange and is a terminal manager for an oil field transportation company. The goal was for Bonfire to fall after midnight. If it fell after midnight, then we were going to beat Texas. The kicker was the moment when the whole thing would topple over. A wave of heat would come off of it—like a sonic boom of heat—and everyone would go crazy. The entire crowd had to back up, because the heat got so intense. I mean, it was almost medieval. We were all gathered around a fire, trying to put some voodoo on a football game.

ETHAN MCDANIEL, class of 2003, was an interdisciplinary studies major and a cadet in the Corps. He teaches Texas history at a middle school in Mansfield. I drove to College Station with a buddy when I was still in high school to watch Bonfire. My car got completely caked in ash, and being a dumb kid, I thought that was so cool. I didn't wash my car for weeks.

MARK FERRELL

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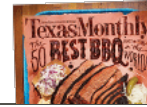
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