

**SOUTHERN REVEILLE: SOUTHERN CULTURE AND
TRADITION AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY**

A Senior Scholars Thesis

by

MEREDITH PADDON

Submitted to the Office of Undergraduate Research
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

April 2007

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Approved by:

Research Advisor:
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ABSTRACT

Southern Reveille: Southern Culture and Tradition at Texas A&M University
(April 2007)

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Tradition at Texas A&M University, as in much of the South, is considered vital to the university's survival. Many students and the Old A&Ms who comprise the distinguished Association of Former Students cannot imagine the school without rituals such as Muster and Silver Taps. My research explores the development of issues within the Texas A&M University student body regarding race, gender, and tradition throughout the history of the school in comparison with the culture of the post-bellum South. The ways in which the ideology that developed out of the Civil War and Reconstruction have affected the students and the role that traditions have played in shaping the school provide a context in which the modern emergence of Southern ideals can be explored.

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NOMENCLATURE

Old Aqs	Former students
Stack	Term used to describe Bonfire's physical structure
Humping it	Prior to each yell performed by the students at football games, all students uniformly bend forward in preparation for the yell, a process known as "humping it."
Yell	Mantras shouted by students during sporting events
VMI	Virginia Military Institute

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I saw Texas A&M University as an opportunity to bridge the gap between a secular world and the only world I had ever known: a conservative Christian home. The atmosphere at Texas A&M – the passion, the friendliness, and the conservative values – made me feel at home. Yet the same things that made the school familiar to me had a very different effect on my sister. My first month as a student consisted of many hours of Aggie indoctrination. My phone calls and e-mails to my family sung the praises of Aggieland. Soon enough, my sister wanted to see this place for herself, so I invited her for a weekend visit. Enthusiastic about my new home away from home, I dragged her all over campus, showing her monuments and explaining traditions. But my sister is not one for fanatics and, with each new Aggie experience, her eyes grew wider and her expression more dubious. After witnessing a friend’s ring dunking, the only Aggie tradition my sister fully appreciated, we went to Kyle Field for Yell Practice, the Aggie version of a pep rally that takes place on the eve of every football game. After “humping it” with the Ags, my sister pulled me aside and asked how I had been brainwashed into joining what she firmly believed to be a ritualistic cult. Greatly offended at my sister’s obvious lack of sensitivity, I gave her the classic line of Aggie apologetics: “From the

This thesis follows the style of *Southern Economic Journal*.

outside looking in, you can't understand it. From the inside looking out, you can't explain it."

Though she deflated my enthusiasm, her observation inspired my curiosity. Why did she see a quasi-religious cult where I saw school pride? Did her observation have any validity? And did my sister's perspective merely reflect that of an outsider or did it echo the feelings of any students at A&M? I had been taught Aggie traditions – but did I understand these traditions? Certainly I had accepted the myth of tradition, namely the concept of tradition as devoid of history and change. As the defense I gave my sister reflects, the idea of explaining traditions to outsiders is preposterous to students at Texas A&M. According to most Aggies, the traditions can only be genuinely appreciated when experienced first-hand – an objection I opted to disregard. The clarification of Aggie traditions did present a challenge, and the complexity of the traditions became only one obstacle associated with my quest for understanding. In Aggieland, tradition has become a word daily tossed around to describe even the most insignificant trend. While most of these so-called "traditions" can be set aside as an attempt by local business owners to market goods to the vast community of students and alumni in the area, studying the official Aggie traditions remains a massive undertaking. Fully unraveling the many traditions encompassed in the history of Texas A&M may seem impossible. Nevertheless the following pages endeavor to explain, as much as possible, how Aggie traditions gained importance to the students and administrators of Texas A&M. I will examine how the unquestioning loyalty to those traditions has, on occasion, created

unsafe or imprudent situations, and how the “unity” fostered by Aggie traditions has created an ironically estranged segment within the campus body.

In 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Land Grant Act, initiating the sequence of events that led to the formation of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas. The school did not open its doors, however, until August of 1876, nearly fifteen years later. The years separating the legislation that made way for the school to open and the physical realization of that order marked a tumultuous and difficult period for Texas, as well as the rest of the country. The desire to bring public higher education to the State of Texas became hindered by the state’s absorption in the American Civil War. Born in the aftermath of the all-encompassing conflict, and an equally chaotic decade of reconstruction, it is no wonder that the early school practices closely resembled Confederate inspired customs. To say that the school merely exhibited characteristics of Civil War era militarism, however, would exclude the additional social and cultural factors present within the history of military education in the South. Southern states had a heritage of military education dating back to the establishment of Virginia Military Institute in 1839. Initially endowed with the task of guarding the state arsenal in Lexington, cadets at VMI replaced the brutish militia previously given the station. The citizens of Virginia believed that the school would create disciplined southern gentlemen and an opportunity for academic scholarship.¹

Though produced by the same legislation responsible for similar colleges in the North, the values infused into the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, like

¹ Bradford Wineman, "J. T. L. Preston and the Origins of the Virginia Military Institute, 1834-42," *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography* 114, no. 2 (2006).

those of Virginia Military Institute, identified Texas A&M with the southern belief in the molding of boys into responsible and disciplined young men on a martial model. Texas A&M was founded on principles of higher education, military discipline, and strong moral conviction. Over the years, these principles grew into a revered sense of tradition fostered first through the Corps of Cadets and later through student organizations such as Fish Camp.

Tradition at Texas A&M University, as in much of the South, is considered vital to the region's survival. Many students and the Old Afs who make up the "distinguished" Association of Former Students cannot imagine the school without martial rituals such as Muster and Silver Taps.² The 1999 Bonfire tragedy is still remembered both for the tragic loss of life and for the demise of the school's most beloved and celebrated tradition. Yet many traditions, while cherished by the majority of students and alumni, have created a feeling of ostracism among the minority of students who choose not to participate in them. Those traditions no longer sanctioned by the University in particular, such as the tradition of white supremacy, have led to what is, even now, a largely segregated student body. While women have endured a slightly less hostile history at the school than racial minorities, the traditional ideas of gender roles still linger in the treatment of many female members of the Corps of Cadets.

The major themes of the South over the last century largely relate to customs and traditions rooted in the American Civil War experience. The Lost Cause mythology, the racism that prevailed under Jim Crow, and numerous issues of sexism can be seen

² Members of the Texas A&M University Alumni Association often refer to themselves as the "distinguished" Association of Former Students.

distinctly through various aspects of Texas A&M University's history. As a University still steeped in tradition and symbolism, Texas A&M offers an example of how these themes survive in modern culture, how they are disguised, and the attempts made to eradicate them. The ways in which the ideology that developed out of the Civil War and Reconstruction have affected the cadets – and the role that traditions have played in shaping the school – provide a context in which the modern emergence of Southern ideals can be explored.

CHAPTER II

TRADITION WITHOUT QUESTION

Following the 1999 Bonfire tragedy, Aggies across the nation mourned with those in College Station, Texas, over the deaths of twelve students crushed when the tower of logs collapsed. Although a number of students immediately petitioned to continue the annual event held since 1912, many people called for its end. The University selected a panel of experts to investigate the cause of the collapse, and they deemed Bonfire unsafe. The administration responded by permanently suspending the tradition. Some of the more spirited students immediately organized an unofficial bonfire off-campus in an attempt to keep the tradition alive, but the years since the collapse have passed without an official Bonfire, creating an annual debate over the issue.

In his book *Bonfire: Tradition and Tragedy at Texas A&M*, Irwin W. Tang included a chapter appropriately entitled “Watch What you Say,” which described e-mail correspondence between then-President Ray M. Bowen and a concerned student. The messages referred to Dr. Hugh Wilson, an ardent critic of Bonfire before and after the tragedy. The student e-mailing President Bowen called for Wilson’s removal, claiming that the faculty member’s website criticized Bonfire as a stupid tradition. Bowen responded by saying Wilson “thrives on controversy.” He continued, “We do monitor his activities and he is working within his constitutionally protected rights of

communication. If he should cross the line, we will take appropriate action.”³ Bowen’s thinly veiled threat exemplifies the unwavering loyalty to tradition and the risk of persecution to dissenters that contributed to the 1999 Bonfire collapse.

Most of the traditions still celebrated at Texas A&M are not so perilous as Bonfire, but the collapse led several to wonder how a tradition so obviously unsafe could have been sanctioned by the University and yet allowed to continue with minimal faculty or administrative direction. The answer is simple: tradition. Tradition demanded that Bonfire be constructed and supervised by students. Tradition required that instructions on the construction of Bonfire be passed orally from one generation of students to the next. Tradition called for hazardous techniques and insufficient regulation. The tragedy would likely have been prevented if these practices had been discontinued.

Unfortunately, the University neglected to act in spite of earlier warnings. The Bonfires of 1957 and 1994, constructed similarly to the 1999 Bonfire, collapsed prior to their lightings. One question raised in the aftermath of the 1999 tragedy pertained to a lack of response regarding the incident in 1994. The Bonfire Commission created to investigate the 1999 accident suggested that because the 1994 collapse resulted from a soil deficiency that produced an unstable foundation for the stack, the University merely corrected the problem by adding lime to the soil, overlooking other Bonfire practices that may have been unsafe. The commission attributed the school’s nonintervention to what they deemed a “cultural bias impeding risk identification.”⁴ The commission did

³ Irwin A. Tang, *The Texas Aggie Bonfire: Tradition and Tragedy at Texas A&M*, 1st ed. ed. (Austin: The it works, 2000). 49-50.

⁴ Special Commission on the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire, "Special Commission on the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire Final Report," (College Station: 2000).

not fully identify the cultural bias to which they referred, but described it as a “tunnel vision ... in which legitimate courses of action outside past experience or contrary to the University’s pre-disposition are often not considered.”⁵ Thankfully, students managed to escape injury in both 1957 and 1994, but the faulty construction of two previous Bonfires should have been an obvious wake-up call to the administration.

Safety is just one aspect of Bonfire tradition long ignored. The racial and gender prejudices often connected with the occasion are issues that should have been considered by the administration before giving annual approval. The cadets responsible for the supervision of Bonfire, known as Redpots, carried notebooks entitled General Dan Faires Communications.⁶ The written instructions for Bonfire contained within held little about Bonfire construction; rather each book contained phrases and quotes that reveal Redpot culture. Though varied in their content, distrust of outsiders and secrecy prevailed throughout the text of the books. A condom could be found secured to the inside of the books, which often included phrasing derogatory toward blacks and homosexuals. Women, also subjected to prejudice as a result of Bonfire, were prohibited from entering the “perimeter,” a square section formed around the center-pole by four poles, for most of the tradition’s history. Campus lore claims that women had to have sex with a Redpot in order to gain admission to the perimeter, explaining the customary inclusion of a condom in the Redpot notebooks. The rules about the perimeter stayed in place until the late 1980’s when the editor of *The Battalion* printed an exchange of letters in defense of and in response to a defiant woman’s demand to work on “stack.” The

⁵ Bonfire Commission, *Bonfire Report*, 34.

⁶ Tang, *Texas Aggie Bonfire*, 51.

official response by the students in charge of Bonfire claimed that they welcomed women to work on Bonfire but that the labor required would be strenuous. If a woman capable of performing the tasks required wanted to participate, she would not be dissuaded. The attitude present here – that a woman was too weak to do a man’s job – provides evidence that traditional southern gender roles had not yet been discarded by Aggies in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s.⁷

Aggies have been outraged at previous insinuations that Bonfire, or Aggie traditions in general, symbolize prejudice. In November of 1999, the *Arizona Republic* featured a cartoon comparing the burning Branch Davidian Compound, a burning cross surrounded by Ku Klux Klan members, and a crumpled Bonfire with the slogan “Texas Aggie Traditions.” According to the *Bryan-College Station Eagle*, the Arizona paper immediately received nearly 2,000 e-mails and telephone calls from people outraged over the implications made by the publication, forcing the paper to print a retraction. While incredibly insensitive to the catastrophe, the editor of the newspaper claimed that the author’s purpose in the cartoon was to “highlight common themes that he saw in the three tragedies which he found disturbing – chiefly that all three tragedies occurred in Texas, resulted from poor judgment, and caused needless deaths.” While certainly insensitive, the cartoon made a valid point; the acceptance of tradition simply on the basis of tradition is reckless.⁸

The argument with the *Arizona Republic* did not end with the editor’s apology. A heated article in the *Bryan College Station Eagle* detailed President Bowen’s subsequent

⁷ Tang, *Texas Aggie Bonfire*, 51, 52, 138, 141-147.

⁸ John Lebas, "Cartoon Enrages Aggies," *The Bryan-College Station Eagle*, November 23 1999.

refusal of a \$10,000 peace offering from the *Arizona Republic*. Intended for the Bonfire Memorial Fund, Bowen claimed that acceptance of the money would "violate our ethical standards." The *Republic* rebutted with a statement claiming the tragedy could have been prevented by Bowen and the other "grown-ups" involved. The spiteful dispute between the newspaper and the administration at Texas A&M further demonstrated the University's unquestioning support for tradition and the lack of understanding among outsiders. By claiming that the acceptance of the donation would violate the ethics of the University, Bowen suggested that acceptance of funds would further impugn a celebrated tradition. Bowen likely saw the affront that Bonfire had suffered as an insult to the memory of the students killed in the collapse. To the newspaper and others outside the University, however, the President's rejection seemed to place the tradition, once again, before the well-being of the students.⁹

History of Traditions

Aggies and other southerners alike have long valued traditions for the character and legacy they believe tradition fosters. At Texas A&M the practice of following the customs of former students goes back to the opening of the University. The earliest of the Aggie student traditions involved rules enacted by the University and the subsequent evasion of them. The hazing of cadets on campus and various pranks such as the theft of then-President Thomas Gathright's Thanksgiving Day turkey are among the distractions found by the cadets to escape the monotony of life on an isolated all male military

⁹ John Kirsch, "A&M Refuses Republic's Money," *The Bryan College Station Eagle*, December 4 1999.

campus. It is not surprising that the students lacked alternate forms of entertainment when considering the average day in the life of an early cadet. In the *Centennial History of Texas A&M University: 1876-1976*, Henry Dethloff reports that the first students to attend the school reported promptly to President Gathright, at which point they received a book of *Rules and Regulations*. As if the description of the expected schedule and allowed possessions of a student were not enough, the list of acceptable and unacceptable behavior puts the code of conduct maintained by the present Corps administration to shame. One rule which has survived is the expectation that an Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal. As Dethloff asserted, however, “good evidence indicates also that the student then, as he undoubtedly does now, successfully evaded many of the rules.” Gathright’s Thanksgiving Day turkey would likely agree.¹⁰

Another rule often broken by cadets past and present has been the prohibition of alcohol. The book of *Rules and Regulations* deemed the consumption of alcohol unlawful along with gambling and the visiting of any place of public amusement. The rules forbade early cadets from leaving the campus without written permission from the president. The University’s current administration has graciously avoided regulations restricting the students to the campus or limiting off-campus activities. Ethics and morality are still strongly encouraged by the University, however, and only the Corps of Cadets sustains the school’s attempt to control the influence of secular disobedience on traditional ideals. The “dry” Corps dorms exemplify the University’s attempt to rein in

¹⁰ Henry C. Dethloff, *A Centennial History of Texas A&M University, 1876-1976* 1st ed. ed., 2 vols. (College Station: Published for the Association of Former Students by the Texas A&M University Press, 1975). 40, 44.

the mayhem evoked by the evil drink, and the amusing lengths to which current students go to hide their contraband indicate similarities between the regulation of the early cadets and the modern day Corps.¹¹

An edition of *The Battalion*, printed in April of 1920, discussed one way in which the early Aggies dealt with the alcohol ban. While the article sheds light on the continued debate with administrators over permission to consume alcoholic beverages, the article also manifested the attitudes of the previous cadets toward African Americans. The student editorialized that in order to enjoy their “free-born” rights to “the most refreshing substance in the world” students had to “bribe some degenerate specimen of the Ethiopian race to bring his bottle of Bud to the rear of the saloon.”¹² Though used in a different context, the language used by the defiant student when describing his “free-born” rights connect with the far broader issue of what the early cadets interpreted to be their free-born rights as white male citizens. As LeeAnn Whites argues in *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender*, a southerner’s understanding of freedom prior to the Civil War was in part defined by the “extreme form of ‘liberty’ that the slaveowner obtained by virtue of control over his ‘property.’” Whites clarified that this liberty “served to exemplify the values to which all white southern men could aspire in a system that grounded white liberty in black slavery.”¹³ The liberty that Whites speaks of merged with an overwhelming loyalty serving as the foundation of tradition at the university.

¹¹ Dethloff, *Centennial History*, 41.

¹² "Faculty Solves Liquor Problem in Novel Manner," *The Battalion*, April 22 1920.

¹³ LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

The Spirit of Tradition

Although Bonfire presents an example of how tradition can be dangerous if continued without reservation, countless stories recounted by former students reveal Bonfire as their first opportunity to act with their peers as a community of Aggies, to feel the sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves. The spirit of tradition revered by many Aggies throughout their lifetimes often connects back to the sense of unity they attribute to their experience with building and lighting Bonfire. Muster, a tradition distinguished as a unifying aspect of Texas A&M culture, likewise provides a chance for Aggies to memorialize and honor other students and alumni who have died within the last year. The annual observance takes place on April 21, and while memorializing Aggies who have died serves as the primary purpose for the tradition, the reunion of students that takes place during Muster offers the additional benefit of reinforced camaraderie among fellow Aggies. Muster officially gathers on the campus of Texas A&M University in College Station, attracting over 10,000 students and alumni. Unofficial Musters are held around the world, however, during which Aggies gather with fellow students and alumni in their region and reminisce about mutual experiences and acquaintances at Texas A&M. Texas Governor and former Texas A&M student Rick Perry addressed the 2002 College Station Muster shortly after the death of his friend and fellow alum George Schriever.¹⁴ The next day's issue of *The Battalion* quoted

¹⁴ Emily Peters, "Softly Call the Muster," *The Battalion*, April 22 2002.

Perry: "In a world where we are taught to look out for number one, A&M teaches us to look out for others. The values taught at A&M transcended time."

Aggies, like their fellow southerners, hold few things dearer than the values and legacies of their predecessors. The transcendence of which Governor Perry spoke is a vital part of the identity of many southerners, not just Aggies. The memory of those lost, particularly those lost in battle, takes on a reverence for southerners generally reserved for martyrs elsewhere. Often combining the celebration of victory, independence, and camaraderie with the remembrance of those killed in an effort to attain ambitions such as these, southern commemoration bears a close resemblance to the remembrance which permeates Aggie tradition. Though the customs and traditions of many southern schools pale in comparison to Texas A&M, the influence of southern culture exists in other universities as well, particularly those originally created as military schools.

Southern Roots

The history of military schools in the South began long before Texas A&M. Virginia Military Institute, the first military school, was established to replace the militia garrison responsible for guarding the state gun arsenal in Lexington shortly after the War of 1812. Initially, local residents of Lexington, Virginia, grew excited about their new status as home of the arsenal. The harmony did not last, however, and citizens of Virginia quickly became agitated at the drinking and carousing of the men assigned to protect the weapons. The soldiers stationed at the arsenal, bored with the monotony of the largely dormant facility, entertained themselves with mischief in the streets of

Lexington. In addition to the restless misbehavior of the soldiers, the soldiers' salaries began to deplete the financial resources of the state. In his article about the origins of the school, Bradford Wineman discusses how local men like J.T.L. Preston convincingly argued that VMI would alleviate the expense involved in paying men to guard the munitions, create a disciplined environment in which the poor behavior of the militia guards would be improved upon, and correspondingly create an institution of young trained soldiers available to protect the community in the case of another military conflict.¹⁵

The establishment of a military institution for the sole purpose of local utilization indicates the antebellum attitude toward state sovereignty. Texas had only gained statehood thirty years before the founding of Texas A&M, and the statehood of the short-lived but no less self-governed Republic did not alter the attitude of allegiance toward state sovereignty possessed by the majority of Texans. The tradition of Muster developed in part from early celebrations held on the campus to commemorate the events of the battle of San Jacinto. Held annually on San Jacinto Day, Muster resembles the memorial atmosphere liable to have been present during the remembrance of the lives lost in the battle that paved the way for Texan independence from Mexico. Cadets in attendance prior to the turn of the century gleaned a second hand account of the battle of San Jacinto from Nettie Bringham, General Sam Houston's seventh child and wife of W. L. Bringham, vice president and acting president of the college from 1880 to 1893.¹⁶

¹⁵ Wineman, *Origins of the Virginia Military Institute*.

¹⁶ Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, "Intended for All: 125 Years of Women at Texas A&M: An Exhibit," (College Station: Texas A&M University, 2002).

The 12th Man

The Texas Aggies are perhaps most unified when they gather in their greatest numbers, acting as one voice and standing as one student body. Thousands of students attend each football game year after year and often for many years after they graduate. As many students argue, an Aggie football game is a completely unique experience. The “Maroon Out” game was originally intended to be an individual home game during which all Aggies wore the team color. The distinction of a “Maroon Out” game quickly became somewhat irrelevant as every game at Kyle Field promptly became a “Maroon Out” game. Garbed in solidarity, the students clamor into the stadium and harmonize – at times poorly – to the Aggie War Hymn, during which the students link arms and rock back and forth to the tune of the “Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band.” The roar of the students while the opposing offense calls plays is said to be deafening by the rival team players. The silence when the home team offense takes the field can be just as remarkable. Yell Leaders (elected positions at the school) announce the yells shouted in support of the Aggies. The crowd then “passes back” from the front rows to the back rows by a hand signal synchronizing all students for the particular yell. In an attempt to further intimidate their opponents, all of the fans in the student section stand during the entire game – a practice known as the 12th Man. Though the term “12th Man” has been used by several schools to describe similar traditions of standing during games, Aggies first used the term to describe the actions of E. King Hill on January 2, 1922. The first half of the game against the defending national champions Centre College produced so many

injuries that the Aggie coach, D.X. Bible, did not think they would be able to finish the game. King had played football previously but it had been decided that he was too valuable an asset to the basketball team. Therefore, having been sidelined to avoid injury, King received the task of spotting players for the press. When able bodied players dropped to eleven and Bible requested his assistance, King suited up and stood ready during the rest of the game, which the Aggies won 22-14. The tradition of students standing ready to support the school began. As the loyalty to the school by way of this new tradition became ingrained into the culture of the University, football became an integral part of being an Aggie, and often took precedence over other departments in the school – a practice shared with many other southern universities.

In his article discussing southern politics and football, Andrew Doyle describes the events surrounding the dismissal of Spright Dowell, President of Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now known as Auburn University), who had served the school from 1919 until 1927. Doyle conveys the astounding progress made administratively during Dowell's tenure at the college. His reorganization of the system used for class registration and valiant efforts to raise more than \$500,000 for campus renovation are just a few of the improvements made by Dowell. So why did the board of trustees at the school call a meeting to release Dowell from his position in November of 1927? 1927 marked the Alabama Polytechnic football team's first losing season. By taking attention and school funds away from sports and applying them to other aspects of the school's administration, Dowell's actions led to the decline of a once vibrant (and more

importantly winning) football program.¹⁷ Football at Texas A&M has been a central aspect of Aggie culture and the administration has been continuously subjected to the same expectations regarding the funding of the football program.

Though the football team at Texas A&M has changed significantly since the 1920's when Bible coached, the diversity of the team has only developed over the last twenty to thirty years. The period between the 1920's and the 1950's, as discussed in Michael Oriard's *King Football*, encompassed immense growth and many changes within the class boundaries of the sport. The sport did not escape the ethnic and gender stereotypes of the period, however, as addressed by Oriard in chapters on both race and masculinity. According to Oriard, "the football field served as one terminal for the circulation of racial stereotypes," the game a "standard against which (the masculinity of) young males were tested," and the football player "as neither a girl nor a sissy."¹⁸

Though college football originated in northern universities, southern schools such as Texas A&M quickly adhered to the conventional gender and race associations of the sport. In 1965, when Southern Methodist University announced their recruitment of the first African American member of the Southwest Conference, Gene Stallings, the head football coach at Texas A&M, publicly stated that the school was "not yet ready to integrate its football team." Stallings made his declaration despite the official statement of the Athletics Counsel and the Texas A&M administration that opened athletics to

¹⁷ Andrew Doyle, "Fighting Whiskey and Immorality at Auburn: the Politics of Southern Football, 1919-1927," *Southern Cultures* 10, no. 3 (2004).

¹⁸ Michael Oriard, *King Football: Sport and Spectacle in the Golden Age of Radio and Newsreels, Movies and Magazines, the Weekly & the Daily Press* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

“every student regardless of ‘race, color or creed,’” at the official integration of the school in 1963.¹⁹

Despite the open allusions to racist attitudes within the sport in the 1960’s and 1970’s, the manifestation of gender stereotypes has remained far more subtle. While football has been considered a masculine sport throughout the nation, the customary inclusion of cheerleaders on the stadium sidelines arguably provides a venue for female involvement within the sport of football. The sport of cheerleading remains inaccessible to female students at Texas A&M, however, as Aggies do not cheer; they yell. The tradition of yelling dates to long before the inclusion of women as students at the school, leaving one to wonder if the practice of ‘cheering’ the football team might have seemed too feminine for an all-male university. Logical for a school for men, the near half-century of coeducational history has not seen any changes to the broadly accepted tradition.

¹⁹ Martin J. Angus, "In Fulfillment of a Dream: African-Americans at Texas A&M University: An Exhibit Catalog Presenting the History of African-American Contributions, Participation and Achievements at Texas A&M University, 1876-2000," (College Station: Cushing Memorial Library, Texas A&M University, 2001).

CHAPTER III

MAKING WAY FOR A NEW TRADITION: GENDER AND RACE

AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Understanding racial and gender relations in the post Civil War South requires an appreciation for the system of slavery upon which the economy, social hierarchy, and cultural mores of the South relied until abolition of the institution. The antebellum South exemplified a traditional Anglo patriarchal society. Unquestionably, southern men claimed the position as the head of the house, with their wives acting as subordinate administrators of household matters. In her study of antebellum issues regarding race and gender, Kirsten Fischer asserts that traditional gender roles in antebellum America derived from the English outlook on the appropriate place for women. At one point Fischer discusses a “husband’s right to the ‘moderate correction’ of his wife, children and servants (which included the use of a whipping switch no bigger than the size of his thumb).”²⁰

The eighteenth and nineteenth century attitudes of Europeans toward women greatly influenced America’s outlook on the issue. While these opinions existed in northern states as well, the South maintained a fervent claim on patriarchal culture. The lifestyles of northern women, whose roles were expanded by industrialization, bore little resemblance to the lifestyles of women in the far more agrarian society of the South. In

²⁰ Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2002).

particular, rural families in the antebellum South demonstrated the strongest inclination toward traditional gender stereotypes.

The role women played during the Civil War drastically altered their role in society. As with any war, the departure of men to the battlefield required that women, at least temporarily, assume the responsibilities of the head of household. The heavy casualties and injuries suffered on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, however, prevented a vast number of men from ever returning home – leaving women with the job of managing their homes permanently. The agrarian South refused to shrug off the traditional gender roles, however, and women were left to support their husbands, fathers, and brothers, while maintaining a submissive attitude. Though many of these women gladly filled their traditional roles, the political equality awarded to black men (at least on paper) contributed to a substantial push by women for equality, politically and otherwise. The Jim Crow South saw white women assert their supremacy over blacks, creating an ironic power struggle between the two subjugated groups.

The virtue of white women in the South held great importance within southern culture. The majority of white southerners believed strongly in the racial inferiority of black people, and an almost constant suspicion that black men threatened the integrity of white women often resulted in incidents of racial violence. As Fischer argues, “by the mid eighteenth century, class-related notions of honor for white women and men had become entwined with assumptions of racial difference. The restoration of tarnished honor required the assertion of racial identity in public performance of ‘whiteness.’”²¹

²¹ Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 151.

The violent response to what white southerners believed to be racial inferiority often took the form of lynching; the practice of killing by mob, through the use of vigilante tactics like hangings, burnings, and mutilation. Although lynchings took place across the country, lynchings tended to be more prevalent in the South, and were often racially motivated. An overwhelming 81% of lynchings happened in the South and of those lynchings 85% of the victims were black. In contrast, 82% of lynching victims in northern states were white.²²

Although outbreaks of racial violence in the South often stemmed from white paranoia over black male rapists, additional research has been done connecting lynchings to the agricultural cycle. Lynchings, occurring predominately during the harvest and planting seasons in the South, are believed by some to have been connected to racial tensions resulting from surplus labor. An article by E. M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay examines the correlation between the decline in the price of cotton and a rise in the number of lynchings. According to Beck and Tolnay, “violence was a response to fear of black competition for economic and social position.” Despite the emphasis placed on poor whites involved in lynchings, the elite whites benefited from the racial tensions as well, both through the disappearance of any possible alliance between black and white laborers, and the construction of a society of racially motivated brutality which further suppressed the black race.²³ It is no surprise that the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, born in this culture of racial turmoil and strict notions of gender roles,

²² Christopher C. Meyers, "'Killing Them by the Wholesale': A Lynching Rampage in South Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2006).

²³ E. M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay, "The Killing Fields of the Deep South: The Market for Cotton and the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930," *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 4 (1990).

exhibited many characteristics of this aspect of southern culture. More surprising, however, are the ways in which these attitudes have been fostered in the modern surroundings of Texas A&M University.

Early Race Relations at Texas A&M

According to the Tuskegee Institute, which began compiling documented lynching incidents in 1882, over 3,400 African Americans were lynched between 1882 and 1968. Over 350 of those lynchings occurred in Texas.²⁴ Although a compelling figure, the numbers provided by the Tuskegee Institute are likely conservative given the limited documentation of the incidents. Ingrained into the culture of the South, lynching was not specifically connected to the Ku Klux Klan; however, the Klan did represent one avenue through which white southerners suppressed the political and social power of African Americans. Though a great deal of Klan violence took place in other areas of the South, often becoming publicized nationally, the Brazos Valley did not escape from this southern tradition. Klan violence, more often than not, tended to be clandestine in nature and therefore specific examples of student involvement remain obscure. Evidence that students and faculty participated in Klan activities exists, however, such as a picture in the 1906 yearbook of students in KKK robes and masks.²⁵

Somewhat circumstantial evidence of Klan activity can also be found, such as a student organization known as the Kream and Kow Klub, which existed throughout the

²⁴ The Tuskegee Institute Lynching Inventory, "The Lynching Century: African Americans Who Died in Racial Violence in the United States 1865 - 1965"

<http://www.geocities.com/Colosseum/Base/8507/NLists.htm>.

²⁵ *The Long Horn*, 46 vols., vol. 3 (College Station: A&M College of Texas, 1906).

late 1910's and early 1920's. A 1920 *Battalion* article identified the Kream and Kow Klub as a dairy club planning an inspection trip to large dairy plants in the area.²⁶ No specific evidence that the club existed for any purpose other than that publicized in *The Battalion* exists, but the use of K's in the name of the group leads one to speculate as to the potential alternate purposes in which the organization may have engaged. Other somewhat controversial evidence of Klan participation exists in the form of a Klan robe donated to the University. Embroidered with the name D.X. Bible, most people assume that the robe belonged to the legendary football coach, Dana X. Bible, best known for the records set by the football team during his time at A&M.²⁷ The idea of a faculty member involved in the Klan is not hard to comprehend, but Bible also has a reputation for filling the role of mentor to many of the cadets, placing him in a position to have influenced many of the students.

Separate and Unequal

Blacks continued to be excluded from attending Texas A&M University until 1963 as a result of the "separate but equal" policy on education throughout the South. The supposedly equal option for black students in Texas existed in Prairie View A&M College, founded just two years after Texas A&M. Anything but equal, the poorly funded school continued to lack most of the educational programs offered at Texas A&M and the University of Texas until 1945 when the state legislature expanded the school's programs in an attempt to prevent blacks from enrolling at all white colleges.

²⁶ "Kream and Kow Klub Consider Inspection Trip," *The Battalion*, November 20 1920.

²⁷ Tang, *Tradition and Tragedy*, 96

When Texas A&M at last integrated, the administration and student body did so with great reluctance. Leroy Sterling, one of the first three blacks admitted to Texas A&M originally received a letter of rejection from the University stating “we aren’t admitting blacks at this time.” Sterling received another letter shortly thereafter stating that he had been accepted as a “special student” for the 1963 summer session.²⁸

Uncomfortable Memories

Race relations at Texas A&M have evolved considerably since the integration of the school in 1963. Undoubtedly the greater part of the present student body would deem the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan and the racial discrimination of Jim Crow laws reprehensible. A lack of tolerance for violence, though, does not signify a complete change in the disposition toward prejudice. In March of 2005, Finnie Coleman, assistant English professor and associate director of the honors program at Texas A&M, presented a rare look at the negative side of the University’s history entitled “Matthew Gaines, Uncle Dan and the Ku Klux Klan: Early Efforts at Negotiating Race and Racism at Texas A&M University.”²⁹ Coleman claimed in his presentation that two racially motivated secret societies, the True Texans and the Stikas, existed at Texas A&M in 2005. Coleman went on to discuss figures he considered to be “undeserving individuals enshrined on campus,” such as Richard C. Coke, governor of Texas at the time the University opened. Though Coke made racist comments in many of his public speeches, the debate raised by Coleman asks whether or not the racist tendencies of individuals

²⁸ Angus, *In Fulfillment of a Dream*.

²⁹ Melissa. Filbin, "Professor Cites Racism in University's History," *The Battalion*, March 4 2005.

within Aggie history should exempt them from positions of honor in order to diversify the campus.

Years before Coleman presented his research on the campus, students involved in the Aggie Republicans and the Association of Black Former Students made an unlikely coalition, joining with other students and faculty urging administrators to consider the building of a memorial to Texas legislator Matthew Gaines, one of the subjects of Coleman's research.³⁰ An educated former-slave and one of the first black elected officials in Texas, Gaines ardently supported public education in Texas and, although unsuccessful, he fought for integration in schools nearly one hundred years before the Civil Rights Movement. Many considered the memorial to Gaines to be appropriate in light of his support for the Morrill Land Grant Act that created The Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas. Unfortunately the administration denied their petition. The matter has not disappeared completely, however, and regular discussion on the potential monument continues. A *Battalion* article printed in February of 2007 quoted Dale Baum, a history professor and supporter of the memorial, who said, "On the one hand, you had two groups of people who were typically antagonistic to each other black former students and Aggie Republicans – coming to meetings and working together, but a few Old Ag's got really upset because, essentially, you were going to put up a statue of a black man on campus."³¹

³⁰ Collins Ezeanyim, "Gaines Deserves Tribute on A&M Campus," *The Battalion*, February 12 2002.

³¹ MacKenzie Garfield, "Monumental Gaines: One of A&M's Founders Receives Formal Recognition," *The Battalion*, February 9 2007.

Post-integration

Although the line preventing blacks from registering at the University had finally been crossed, the struggle for equality at the school continued for years. The first black graduate of the University, Dr. James Louis Courtney, came to the school in the fall of 1964 and graduated in January of 1968 with a degree in veterinary medicine.³² In 2004, Texas A&M sponsored an exhibit to honor the history of African Americans at the school. *In Fulfillment of a Dream: African Americans at Texas A&M University* served to “tell a story of struggle, pride, humility, persistence, dedication, contributions and achievements” and opted not to include documents and photographs that emphasized the persecution of the African American race. The exhibit did quote Dr. Courtney, however, as having said that he “endured name calling, taunting, discrimination and other racial slurs” throughout his time at Texas A&M, becoming one of the first of many who would be forced to tolerate racism on the campus. When students burned a cross on the lawn of the athletic dorms, presumably for the viewing of Hugh McElroy, member of the class of 1971 and the first black starter on the football team, the tradition of racism continued. Likely a result of the inhospitable conditions present, the enrollment of blacks at Texas A&M remained near 1% of the student population until 1981 when African Americans made up 383 of the 35,146 students enrolled. Even as late as 2007, the percentage of minorities at the University remains incredibly low, with just under 3% of the student body consisting of black students.³³

³² Angus, *In Fulfillment of a Dream*.

³³ Office of Institutional Studies and Planning, Dr. Cindy Dutschke, Assistant Vice President, "Enrollment Profile 2007," (College Station: Texas A&M University, 2007).

Recent Events

For the most part, instances of hostile or violent racism on the campus have been isolated over the last thirty years. One might question, therefore, why those isolated events should hold any importance? Does the fact that those cases have become fewer and farther between indicate the decline of racism on the campus? The majority of Aggies on campus claim to welcome anyone to the school who will appreciate and honor the traditions of the school. Other schools have had instances of racism on their campus as well. Why should Texas A&M be given more pressure to make minorities feel welcome than other schools in the South? The definition given of an Aggie does not include a particular race or cultural background. A student who loves the school and the traditions would be an acceptable student to most on the campus.

Notwithstanding the numerous defenses for the campus, the fact remains that blacks represent an extremely small percentage of the student body, and despite exceptions, racial groups remain largely segregated. For a school to claim the title of “friendliest campus” and yet have a group of people so isolated from the student body suggests that many students may be unaware of the prejudices that exist. In 2006 a video created by three Texas A&M students surfaced, inciting a media frenzy and campus outrage. The video showed a white student disguised in blackface being whipped and sodomized by his white master (another student) for using the internet without permission. The white master had a Twelfth Man towel hanging from his back pocket, distinctly identifying him as an Aggie. The significance of the video has been interpreted in a variety of ways. The consensus on campus, that the video exhibited racist and

inappropriate values, led to the voluntary departure of the students from the campus. The *Battalion* printed an extensive apology from one of the students. However, in which he claimed that while he and the other two students acted as foolish freshmen by filming the video three years earlier, they had intended the film to parody what they saw as racism on the campus of Texas A&M. If the intentions of the students at the time of recording were hateful, as the campus consensus claimed, the film could be construed as another isolated case of racism. However, if the student apologizing in the *Battalion* did so genuinely, the film may be seen instead as a foolhardy yet misunderstood examination of campus dynamics. Either way, the film lends credence to the suggestion that Texas A&M as a whole is not as impartially welcoming as students would like to believe.

Allegations made by students over the last few years that bar owners on Northgate, the popular strip of bars across the street from the campus have been another hot topic on campus. In 2005, two employees of a popular Northgate hang-out alleged that practices of discrimination were common at the establishment. The employees claimed that the bouncers consistently discriminated against potential African American patrons, adding that the musical selections often resulted from an attempt to discourage African American clientele.³⁴ While the Northgate incidents were argued by many to be isolated, an attitude resistant to discussion about diversity remains prevalent. As demonstrated by an article by Dustin Vogel in a 2006 issue of *The Battalion* entitled “People who don’t like A&M should go to Austin,” a broadly circulated opinion among students views issues of diversity as a threat to the traditional atmosphere of the school.

³⁴ Matthew Watkins. “Discrimination in Library Collaborated,” *The Battalion*, October 12 2005.

The idea that the school should diversify in an attempt at political correctness seems absurd to many students like Vogel who claimed that the one of the things that “makes A&M so great is the fact that we do not conform to every new ideology, the fact that we stand strong and we have survived the course of time.”³⁵

Women at Texas A&M

The official admission of women as students at Texas A&M did not take place until 1963, a year of many changes for the school. In addition to admitting women, the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas became Texas A&M University to reflect the more diverse student body. Women were not the only new students on campus, 1963 also saw the first African American students, further connecting race and gender with regards to the school. Unlike African American students, however, the enrollment of female students over the past forty-five years has increased at a far greater rate and women have quickly gone from a controversial minority to a major force on the campus, making up just under half of the enrollment for the Spring 2006 semester.³⁶ While their numbers have grown, women endured persecution right along with other minorities at the school. The question over coeducation became nearly as controversial as the dispute over racial integration. Despite their substantial numbers, however, debate ensues regularly over the inclusion of women in various activities, as well as over the treatment of women.

³⁵ Dustin Vogel. “People Who Don’t Like A&M Should Go to Austin,” *The Battalion*, September 18 2006.

³⁶ Dutschke, *Enrollment Profile*.

Women in the Corps of Cadets

Women who have opted to participate in the Corps of Cadets have faced particularly brutal hazing and taunting by the other cadets. Women are often stereotyped as incapable of performing to the standards expected of a soldier, and, as a result, the integration of women into military schools has been rocky at best, particularly in circumstances with a single woman integrated into an all male environment.³⁷ Texas A&M has not been an exception to the rule and in 1978, just four years after the first woman joined the Corps, Melanie Zentgraf began her fight against the customs of an all male Corps of Cadets. As a junior, Melanie wore senior boots to Elephant Walk, a tradition celebrated at A&M signifying the impending “death” of seniors as students at the school. Many junior cadets wear senior boots to the event as a prank. However, when Melanie was a student, a female cadet’s uniform still did not include riding boots, regardless of class and rank. Upon arrival at the event, twenty male cadets surrounded Melanie, forcing her to remove her boots. Tired of the harassment that she had been facing, Melanie filed a class action law suit against the University on the grounds of gender discrimination, gaining national exposure and eventually achieving complete integration of women into the Corps of Cadets.³⁸ The belief that women “do not belong in the military and that they threaten the established male culture, especially the tradition of all-male activities and the male right of passage” still exists for many of the more

³⁷ Jennifer Boldry, Wendy Wood, and Deborah A. Kashy, "Gender Stereotypes and the Evaluation of Men and Women in Military Training," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001).

³⁸ Cushing Memorial, *Intended for All*.

traditional cadets on campus today.³⁹ Women have had to fight for positions within the elite traditions of the Corps and titles such as that of Yell Leaders still remain inaccessible. Women have run for the position in the past, but the majority of students – or rather the majority of students who vote for Yell Leader – seem to fear that having a woman fill the traditionally male role will somehow pervert the sacred tradition.⁴⁰

Though excluded from the traditionally male roles at the school, women have been filling traditionally female positions at the University since the school's inception. Even following their inclusion as students, few have been willing to break the molds given to them in an attempt to change things on the campus. In 1974, after arguing women's rights with Ann Stone Sheridan in the lobby of the Library for some time, a cadet asked her "If you think women in the Corps are so great, why aren't you one?" Instead of following the example of those before her, Sheridan went directly to the Trigon and signed on as one of the first female cadets at the school.⁴¹ This type of action has been the exception rather than the rule over the history of the University both with regard to women's rights and the rights of African Americans.

Gender at other Southern Universities – The Citadel and VMI

Though it may seem that the integration of women into the Corps of Cadets happened quite recently, other southern military universities delayed gender integration until the 1990's. In 1993, Shannon Faulkner sued for admission to The Citadel, originally known

³⁹ Boldry, *Gender Stereotypes*.

⁴⁰ Collins Ezeanyim, "Women Can Yell Too," *The Battalion*, January 16 2003.

⁴¹ Claire-Jean Korzenewski., "The First Women to Join the Cadets," *The Bryan-College Station Eagle*, September 9 2004.

as the South Carolina Military Academy. As the first woman at the school, Shannon entered the school accompanied by federal marshals given the job of protecting her from the death threats she had received in the days leading up to her arrival. Remaining at the school for only five days, Shannon withdrew claiming exhaustion and harassment.

Shannon had fought a two and a half year battle for admission to the school and although her time at the school was short-lived, many other women have followed in her footsteps.

Virginia Military Institute had a similarly controversial battle over the inclusion of women as students. In 1990, the Department of Justice sued the school for illegally excluding women from a government funded institution without providing an equal all-female option. Many critics of the courts decision expressed disdain for what they saw as the liberal values of the justices ruining the traditions and values of the school.

Chivalry on the Bus

An almost annual debate on the campus of Texas A&M centers on the controversy over bus etiquette. Such a seemingly insignificant aspect of university life sparks an often hostile debate in the school newspaper at the launch of almost every semester. In a *Battalion* article entitled “Chivalry or chauvinism,” Judy Bohr discusses the divisive issue of whether a man giving up his seat on a campus bus should be seen as an outward expression of Aggie propriety or Aggie prejudice. Bohr describes chivalry as an “unspoken code of conduct to many students at Texas A&M,” later claiming that the practice “comes from the romanticized notion that a man should demonstrate his nobility

and strength by dramatizing courtesy towards women, who were considered the gentler, more fragile sex.” Though Bohr discusses the fact that women sometimes support notions of male chivalry, she focuses on the ease that men have in defining the “terms of such interactions due to the male initiative that is inherently a requirement of chivalry.”⁴² Though challenges to the traditional structure of Texas A&M, such as the one posed by Judy Bohr, do occasionally surface, they tend to be the exception rather than the rule. More often than not, the female students at Texas A&M conform to the expectations placed on their gender, as demonstrated by the majority of women at the school who have no problem taking a bus seat chivalrously offered by a male student.

⁴² Judy Bohr, "Chivalry or Chauvinism," *The Battalion*, October 3 2006.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

After joining the Corps of Cadets in the fall of 1999, Brian McClain got more than he bargained for during “hell week,” the week when freshmen are initiated into the traditions of the Corps. Upon returning home for a visit in October, Brian told his friends that he did not want to go back, but a former member of the Corps convinced him to give it through Christmas. Brian returned to A&M and started to work the next week on Bonfire, a tradition he immediately embraced. As a freshman at a school of over 40,000 students, Brian felt empowered by the idea of being a part of something as big as Bonfire. The night of the collapse, Brian should have been asleep in his dorm but when he passed stack and saw that help was needed, he jumped on a swing and went to work. Brian was killed that night when Bonfire collapsed.⁴³ The story of how Brian felt about Bonfire, his passion and enjoyment of the tradition, says a lot for the tradition and the Aggie Spirit so often talked about with regards to Bonfire.

It is not surprising that, following the collapse, Aggies wanted to build a memorial to the students who lost their lives. At a University where memory of those lost is incorporated into the majority of their traditions, it only seemed fitting that the school remember these Aggies. Replant, the student organization formed to replenish the trees killed to burn Bonfire quickly planted twelve trees on the campus with plaques bearing the names of the dead students. Another organization dedicated twelve light

⁴³ Crystal DeLeon, Student Interview, September 20 2006.

poles to the students. The official Bonfire Memorial, positioned on the part of campus where Bonfire had traditionally burned, contains twelve portals dedicated to each of the students. Each memorial remembers the student who died, while at the same time memorializing the lost tradition. Yet none of these memorials place any emphasis on the students as individuals apart from Bonfire. Although inspired by Bonfire, Bonfire did not subsume Brian. Yet that is always how he will be remembered.

Very few radical students have been willing to break free of the expectations placed on them as students at Texas A&M University. More often than not, however, students like Brian and Ann Sheridan find a way to fit with the traditions rather than question them. Tradition has been so engrained into the students, both as southerners and as Aggies, that many of them refuse to question the traditions they so strongly believe, regardless of the cost.

Summary

To many students at Texas A&M, traditions like Bonfire, Muster, and the 12th Man exhibit some of the most valuable ideals of Aggie culture. The unity and camaraderie of Aggie traditions portray the school in an admirable light. Unfortunately, other aspects of Aggie culture have presented an alternate perspective on Aggie traditions often disregarded. Traditions are not – in and of themselves – racist, sexist, or dangerous. The lack of preventative (rather than reactive) measures taken by the University, however, has created an environment in which these attitudes can subsist.

Many aspects of southern culture can be observed in the traditions at Texas A&M. The emphasis placed on military discipline in southern states before and after the Civil War, creates an obvious correlation to the University, which required participation in the Corps of Cadets until 1963. The celebration of Muster as an extension of San Jacinto day demonstrates the significance of state loyalty at Texas A&M.

Conclusion

I received a variety of responses when discussing my research with fellow students at Texas A&M. I had expected an overall defensive response, particularly with regards to the topic of racism on the campus. On the contrary, most people were open about their experiences and receptive to any information that I shared. Occasionally students hesitated to say anything for fear they might portray their school negatively, which is why I was so surprised at the immediate response of one student in particular. After briefly describing my topic, Jordan Light instantly responded by asking if I knew that Sul Ross's Klan robes were buried beneath the Memorial Student Center. Shocked, I responded that I had not come across any information to that effect, prompting Jordan to continue with his description of the other not so sensational items buried under other buildings on campus. The question of validity aside, Jordan's claim brought up an uncomfortable aspect of Texas A&M's reputation.⁴⁴ In my research I found nothing to validate the alleged Klan robes beneath the MSC, the fact that the story exists provides evidence that there are negative aspects of southern culture reflected in the attitudes of

⁴⁴ Jordan Light, Student Interview, 13 October 2006.

current students. On the flip side, Asha Carter, a lesbian and African American student, claims to have never experienced blatant prejudice on the campus, despite her expectation prior to admission that racism would be an inevitable aspect of her experience at Texas A&M.⁴⁵

Over the last few years, the University has made an effort to correct some of the attitudes of racism hidden away within the culture of the school. During his tenure at the University President Robert Gates initiated a program entitled Vision 20/20, designed to make Texas A&M into a top twenty university by the year 2020. With an emphasis on scholastic excellence and diversity, the program institutes a perspective totally different from that of the normal Aggie view which places tradition above all else. Student response to the program was indifferent at best, and many Aggies voiced offense at the notion that any of the practices at Texas A&M should be changed.

⁴⁵ Asha Carter, Student Interview, 22 February 2007.

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