

In Aggieland, traditions run deep

By [Andrew Wagaman](#)

Editor's note: This is part of the [Missourian's "SEC Road Trip" special section](#).

COLLEGE STATION, Texas — Neon beer lights reflect off the glass encasing two rattlesnakes and a couple cow skulls. Pool players with a cue in one hand and a Shiner Bock in the other examine the table before their next shot.

Beneath a speaker that buzzes between country tunes, Wes Toms is fixin' to get all worked up.

“This— Is— What —It’s— About!” Toms hollers. His buddy Clinton Kasprzyk leans back on a pool table and watches Toms like a rerun of some timeless sitcom.

“The Chicken— Is— Aggieland!”

Welcome to The Dixie Chicken, the watering hole just 'cross the street from Texas A&M University. Heck, Welcome to College Station! Welcome to Aggieland!

“The Chicken,” as Aggies (past and present Texas A&M students) call it, claims to sell more beer per square foot than any bar in America. Hungry? Try the Death Burger or the Tijuana Fries. Head back to the patio and chuck that bottle cap into the side lane, “Bottle Cap Alley,” where boots make less of a click-clack than a metallic crunch. Stop by again during the week for a dominoes tournament.

“If you want to be modern,” says Toms, a 2002 A&M graduate and Beeville, Texas, native, “Don’t come here.”

Kasprzyk laughs and chimes in. A first generation Aggie (something of a rare bird) who graduated in 2000, he says his initial experience at “The Chicken” convinced him to come to A&M.

“I visited UT (University of Texas) first and didn’t like it,” says the native of Kenedy, Texas, a place he jokes you know is small because of the one ‘n.’ “Then I walked into here and saw the pool tables and the boots and whatnot. I said, ‘Oh my God, this is it.’”

“UT people like to think the only reason people go to A&M is because they couldn’t get in there,” he adds. “No. I *chose* to be an Aggie.”

As Texas A&M also transitions from the Big 12 to the Southeastern Conference, Aggies love to share with outsiders what makes College Station singular.

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Before any of the tradition, there was the town of Bryan.

In the mid-19th century, the town apparently had a wild streak to it. A site for a land grant school was chosen five miles south, according to the "Guide to Historic Brazos County," to avoid the "immoral influence of Bryan's saloons and gambling halls."

College Station didn't officially become Bryan's twin town until 1938, once the community around the college had spread to Bryan's border. After Texas A&M made the Corps of Cadets voluntary in 1965, enrollment skyrocketed. As College Station prospered, downtown Bryan fell somewhat into neglect.

In the last decade, the historic district has been refurbished, and today buildings such as the LaSalle Hotel, the Queen Theater and Howell Grocery give Main Street a charming ambiance. It's a popular area to take vintage-looking prom photos.

Bryan has the more hip downtown. It hosts the "Downtown Street and Art Festival" in late March and attracts the college crowd with its monthly "First Fridays," which feature movies in Sale Park and live music at different places around town.

College Station bars ban smoking, but Bryan bars allow it after 10 p.m., and the Bryan police have a reputation for being more lenient than their College Station counterparts.

On West 26th Street is The Village Cafe, which Texas Monthly has called "as close to an Austin experience as you're going to get in the Bryan-College Station area." Tonight a band called Tubie and the Touchstones plays before a night of salsa dancing. The walls are plastered with local art, including a "concept art" gallery from an art visualization school titled, "Teamma Bubba Nebula presents Hansel and Gretel in Outer Space."

"Future Pixar employees," the bartender suggests as she pours a Dulce de Latte with caramel and vanilla.

Behind her is the cafe's signature touch. Five clocks line the wall, and they all tell the same time. The point of the quirky display is that The Village Cafe doesn't have to import its produce from different time zones — everything it sells is from local towns, Bryan included.

The Bryan clock, she says, has a tendency to jump ahead of the others.

Before she helps run the dance later, Genevieve Genest sits at the bar with a drink. She had taken her last final at Texas A&M that morning and would graduate the following week with an environmental geosciences degree.

Genest wears her Aggie Ring, a class ring that students get after they've completed 90 credits and often wear for the rest of their lives. She cares less about what the eagle, the five stars and the 13 lines of a shield on the ring all symbolize than the general sense of accomplishment.

The ring also exemplifies one of the more practical benefits of Aggie Spirit. While working in Houston last summer, Genest would be approached by other businesspeople on the train who also wore the ring.

"It really is a powerful tool for networking," she said. "People see the ring, and it immediately strikes up conversation."

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On the east end of campus, time is engraved into black granite:

11-18-1999 2:42 a.m.

A single piece of wood lies on the black marker, at the center of a grass ring.

This is the Bonfire Memorial.

For 90 years one of the most cherished symbols of “Aggie Spirit” was the bonfire students held every November before the football game against Texas. Each year the bonfire grew bigger and bigger, and in 1969 it set a world record, a staggering 110 feet tall.

The process of cutting and stacking all the wood for Bonfire took eight weeks, with assignments allotted to different classes and leaders assigned to each step of the construction. Nine seniors in charge, called redpots, built the final two levels of what resembled a wedding cake. They stuck an orange-painted outhouse and Austin City Limits signs on the top.

Then they doused the stack with 700 gallons of fuel and lit it. Tens of thousands of people would come to watch, and the flames could be seen 10 miles away.

But in 1999, a 40-foot, 5,000-log stack collapsed while 58 people were working on it. Eleven current students and one recent graduate died. At the vigil a week later, 40,000 people — including two students named Wes Toms and Clinton Kasprzyk — lit candles and sat for two hours in silence.

Bonfire was discontinued.

Today you get a chill upon visiting the memorial. Hills that rise immediately to one side of the “Spirit Ring” isolate it from the rest of campus, with only the top of a few buildings and the Aggieland water tower visible. On the other side is the flat, grassy expanse of the Polo Fields.

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Across the grass of Kyle Field, the austere, triple-deck football stadium at Texas A&M, men in uniform march. These uniforms consist of garrison caps and calfskin leather boots instead of cleats and helmets. Older men in fancier uniforms study them from the sideline. Monosyllable commands stir and then restore the order, and a drum beats — again and again and again.

The Corps make up about 5 percent of the 50,000-person student body today, but their role has not changed. Most traditions originated and continue to be driven by the Corps, from leading “Midnight Yell” (glorified pep rallies before home football games) to Aggie Muster, the annual ceremony for students who have died in the last year.

First pass is for the the seniors, and it is their last before they graduate from the Corps. On the second pass, about an hour later, the graduating seniors stand along the side and face the three

remaining classes, which have assumed their new class rank and salute their predecessors as they pass.

The hour in between the two passes, though, connects everything.

It starts when the seniors march off Kyle Field. Postures become less rigid, and they drop tunnel-vision stares to meet the eyes of others. Some don't really slow their pace even though they finally can, but some of those who do look a little lost in their idleness.

During that time, the cadets return to their dorms and change. The graduating seniors remove their tan Class B summer shirt and wear their specific outfit t-shirt. They have catchphrases such as "In time of peace, prepare for war."

The new seniors get to finally sport their boots. Most ordered the boots, which usually cost more than a thousand dollars, as freshmen. They are the most recognizable and distinctive feature of the Cadets uniform.

Graduating seniors, each with cigars in their mouths and many garrison caps replaced with cowboy hats, take group pictures on the Quad.

Under one tree, Luke and Landon Ellis wait to meet their family. Even without the boots, sophomore Landon Ellis is a little taller than his big brother, a graduating senior. They are both members of the Fightin' Texas Aggie marching band, the largest military marching band and the "pulse of Aggieland." Landon carries two cymbals in one hand and a drum on his left hip.

Once they finish taking pictures, cadets and their families amble across Spence Park back to Kyle Field.

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The Chicken is home to one of the school's most famous, though unofficial, traditions. Once many students earn their Aggie Ring, first introduced in 1894, they dunk them into pitchers of beer on the back patio of The Chicken and chug until nothing's left but the ring.

Understand, Toms says: So much of what makes College Station distinctive happens outside of town. It's that moment, riding the train in Houston or walking down a street in San Francisco or sitting at a gate in Paris' Charles De Gaulle International Airport, that an Aggie will spot the class ring on another's hand.

They ask, "What year?" That's all. It covers introductory pleasantries.

"You see the ring, and — You— Are— Instantly— In," Toms says. He pauses. "In that exchange, you know the guy."

Supervising editor is [Greg Bowers](#).