

Remarks by Mr. Chip Thiel
Representing Injured Students
Bonfire Memorial Dedication Ceremony
November 18, 2004

Five years ago I stood on top of the world perched atop fourth stack with three dear friends of mine watching Aggies build what is one of our greatest traditions. Suddenly, in some unforeseeable twist of fate, my life changed, the life of every Aggie that came before and after me changed. Texas A&M changed.

As a natural result, Texas A&M has to adapt to a life without Bonfire on campus. As we celebrate the memories of 12 Aggies whose lives were cut short as they willingly participated in this university's greatest tradition, I would like to reflect on the contagious spirit of a tradition left behind.

My favorite time of year comes in the fall, when the northern air arrives to push the humidity down to a reasonable level, to turn leaves brown, and to remind me and Ags everywhere that it is Bonfire weather. Many current students do not understand this and many former students have let the memory fade. Bonfire weather is the time of year when Aggies unselfishly sacrifice time, grades, and everything in between to cut, load, transport, unload, and stack a forest full of trees to create the largest bonfire in the world.

It was bigger than necessary and defied reason and possibility, but we would not have it any other way. While it would have been more efficient to use modern technologies and equipment, we chose to do it as it was done for 90 years: with sweat, blisters, grunts, groans, teamwork, axes, machetes, ropes, chains, wire, over-sized nails, pliers, steel toed boots, carhartt jackets, generous donations, left handed sky hooks, FFE semi's, muddy pick-ups, muffler-less tractors, scarecrows, and perimeter pole fires. Then just before the Fightin' Texas Aggie football team squared off against the ladies from Austin, we burned it in an arrogantly flamboyant ceremony that said, "We are the Aggies, the Aggies are we."

While tens of thousands gathered annually to witness the big fire, the cadets, non-regs, brownpots, yellowpots, butt-pots, crew chiefs, centerpolepots, pinkpots, redpots, Bonfire buddies, and randoms who had invested thousands of hours of sweat equity in that stack of wood knew that the only reason we burned it was to clear the Polo Fields so that we could do it all over again next year.

I would now like to take you back to a day prior to November 18, 1999 to enjoy what many Ags enjoyed: a common day at Bonfire, not to diminish the memories of the fallen, but to burn into your memory why they were here that night. If you would like, go ahead and close your eyes and take a nostalgic journey back to the good ol' days.

As you make your way to the fields, first you hear it. It's dark outside and you are walking across a sleeping and studying campus. Steel toe boots clunking along the sidewalk. A chain jingles at your side that is taped to your pliers. Your pot rattles a little. The first sounds from the field emerge as the buzz of

chainsaws, tractor engines, and then some faint music. A nearly worn out Jerry Jeff tape moans out "Desperadoes Waiting for a Train..." Then you can hear the shouts and your pace quickens. "1-2 halfway up / I need a log right here / gimme some wire / I want my pot back / headache! / I need a heave."

Then you can see it. A home made flag waves atop an oppressive hulk of a structure lit by old beat-up gas lights atop leaning perimeter poles. A chill of Aggie pride runs down your spine. A mass of people are there, some working, some watching. A huge crane lifts another log and swings it gently into place.

Then you can smell it. Smoke from perimeter fires, mud or dust depending on the weather, diesel, chainsaw mix, cigar smoke, stale coffee, non-reg's grodes, sawdust and fresh cut hardwood.

Then you can taste it. You flick a dead bug off an old donut and wash it down with coffee that tastes like it was made last week. On your way to the stack, you put in a dip of Copenhagen...no less than a third of the can.

Finally you can feel it. A chilly north wind, oaky bark, cold wire, metal pliers, a 2x8 for a seat in a swing on third stack, perimeter ropes nearby. You survey your quadrant and agree with your ground man where you need to concentrate. You spy a penny nail a few logs in, you grab it and stick it through the hole in the sleeve of your jacket so you can use it later. Then you shout with all of your might "I need some wire and a log up here right now!!!"

At the end of the shift, the sun is peeking up over the oak trees. You work your way down the stack. Your voice is spent. You walk back to the dorm joking with your friends, probably your friends for years to come. All of you tired, but proud to be Aggies and united by the fire.

That is the Bonfire that the 12 we are here to remember knew and loved. It is the Bonfire we all loved building together, and that is the Bonfire I miss.

God Bless America and the soldiers that defend her. Gig 'em.

-- Chip Thiel