



The addition of the J. Wayne Stark Galleries in 1991 eliminated the windows seen in the inset picture.





# A&M's Memorial Student Center: The Crossroads Of Campus

By Stephanie Jeter '06



There's life in each brick, in its walls and floors. When the Memorial Student Center was dedicated on Muster Day, 1951, the beloved building changed more than the campus landscape. It changed life. How can a building be a "living memorial?" *Texas Aggie* explores the past and future of A&M's historic MSC as Aggies prepare for its renovation.

Fifty-nine years ago, the campus of Texas A&M University was a very different place. World War II was won, and Aggieland found itself the new educational home to thousands of veterans making their triumphant return to the states.

On behalf of a grateful nation and a grateful University, Aggies

wanted to do something to honor those who didn't make it back. An undertaking of passion, the Memorial Student Center was dedicated on Muster Day 1951, in memory of Aggies killed in both world wars. Speeches were made; wreaths were laid; and each clap from the crowd was a wordless toast to history.

# Memorial Student Center



Ground was broken for the MSC on Sept. 21, 1948. Pictured is then University President Frank Bolton.

## 1918

The past has a lot to do with the present at Texas A&M. It's built into our structures; it names our streets; and it says aloud what can't be forgotten. As such, it's not surprising that the Memorial Student Center has a more fascinating history than its blueprints can convey.

It's both fascinating and extended. The time it took from a first mention of a memorial until the doors opened to the Memorial Student Center spanned more than three decades.

Fifty-five Aggies gave their lives during World War I, and Aggies called for a tangible way to honor them. In an Alumni Quarterly dated 1918, University President William B. Bizzell wrote that he envisioned a "more dignified, elaborate and permanent memorial that shall be made to perform some useful function on the campus at the

same time that it perpetuates the names of the men who gave up their lives for freedom." The story is retold in the book *Building Leaders, Living Traditions*, by author and Aggie Amy Bacon '91.

Bizzell imagined a living memorial, Bacon said. She smiles as she retells the stories.

Former students started offering ideas they felt fitting to a memorial status. A student activities building was among them, though at the time, most were leaning toward a memorial concrete football stadium, Bacon said. A few steps were taken toward building the stadium, but the plans sputtered out before anything actually came of them.

Meanwhile, students started vocalizing their need for a student union building. Increased enrollment in the mid-1930s caused overcrowding. There wasn't enough room. There weren't enough on-campus facilities, "particularly at the time of year when more dances and weekend visitors came to A&M," wrote Bacon in her book. Soon, editorials made their way into *The Battalion*. One even encouraged students to raise money for such a building and have it matched by former students, Bacon wrote.

So they did. Seated on an MSC couch, Bacon told about how student leaders got involved. The YMCA president challenged students to contribute \$10. The Classes of 1936 and 1937 raised money and donated as their Class gifts. Aggie Mother Clubs were pulled in after the East Bell County mothers started a bank account and christened it with \$6. A&M Clubs, college administrators and the Board of Directors were all called upon to make contributions.

Then World War II happened and an estimated 20,000 Aggies served their country. As young veterans started returning to College Station, the process toward a student union earned a fresh set of legs. By 1946, more than 9,000 new students and returning veterans arrived in Aggieland, Bacon wrote.

In response to the population boom, in 1942 The Association of Former Students did away with membership dues. Instead, the organization asked former students to make an annual gift, with the first goal of the money to help build the memorial

"In humble reverence this building is dedicated to those men of A&M who gave their lives in defense of our country. Here is enshrined, in spirit and in bronze, enduring tribute to their valor and to their deep devotion. Here their memory shall remain forever fresh—their sacrifices shall not be forgotten. Gratitude is due those thousands of former students of this college who



provided the initial incentive to erect this structure and made liberal contributions to its cost. In their behalf and that of the generous people of Texas as a whole—who made possible its completion—this Center has been created. May it serve as a useful memorial to the heroic sons of A&M who gave their all, enriching the lives of thousands of young Texans now living and other yet unborn."

— From the Memorial Student Center dedication, April 21, 1951

## MSC Quick Facts

- Dedicated April 21, 1951, with a student population of less than 7,000
- Renovated in early 1970s when student population was 11,000
- Renovated in early 1990s when enrollment was at 32,000
- Closed for renovation Aug. 14, 2009, with enrollment more than 48,000
- Set to reopen fall of 2012
- For more information, go to <http://msclivingtradition.tamu.edu>

student union. As of 1947, more than 11,000 Aggies had sent in their contributions. Ground was broken for the Memorial Student Center on Sept. 21, 1948. It took two years and almost \$2 million, but Texas A&M had its Memorial Student Center.

And now, it's time for Texas A&M to come together again, Bacon said. The doors to the Memorial Student Center closed Aug. 14 for renovation, set to reopen fall of 2012. And just as in the 1930s, it was the students who called for the change. The building was old, did not meet current building standards, and—due to a present student population almost seven times larger than the one in 1951—the MSC was in critical need of more space. In the fall of 2007, the Aggie student body passed a referendum with 68 percent approval to renovate the MSC and voted to increase their own semester fees by \$60 to help cover the cost. (See sidebar for the list of renovations.)



At the building dedication, a wreath was laid beneath the bronze plaque listing the names of the more than 900 Aggies who gave their lives in both world wars.

“Students are giving their time, effort and own money on something they won’t see built as students just the way Aggies did in the 1930s,” said Stephanie Burns ’09, president of the Memorial Student Center.

### ‘Living, Useful Memorial’

“The MSC is a center, a crossroad, where you want to be,” said Denis Davis-Mayfield ’85. The former MSC president

spoke from a podium at the MSC’s May 1 “Countdown to Construction” event.

She drove in from Houston for the event. She’s been gone a while, she said, but coming up on that lovely grass, the familiar entryway, the long hall, “I was home again with the simple act of walking into the MSC.”

A third-generation Aggie, her memory has a special knack for MSC fodder: of her grandfather playing the piano for her in the Flag Room, of family trips to campus over Thanksgiving break for Bonfire—“It would be cold and wet, and we would have turkey dinner at the first floor’s cafeteria,” she said. “I’d be sitting up on my Dad’s shoulders as we waited in the hallway line.”

Shoulder level was the perfect height for a young girl to inspect the glass etchings of the Texas wildflowers outside the cafeteria. She was enchanted, and when she’d reach out to touch, Davis-Mayfield can still hear her mother’s

request: “Baby, don’t put your fingerprints on the glass. This building is a memorial to all soldiers. We show our love and respect by being good to the decorations.”

The MSC takes you in, she said, “the MSC is in my conscious and my subconscious.”

It’s rooted deep in all Aggies because “consciously or subconsciously, we all get it,” Davis-Mayfield said. Whether an Aggie comes to the MSC for its leadership opportunities, to hear a speaker or to see pieces of art, the MSC and its magic transforms you, she said.

Whether an Aggie comes to the MSC for a meal, to check the mail or to meet with friends in the Flag Room, the MSC is a reassurance that you’re home.

“It is certain that if you Google mapped the heart of the A&M campus, the search would show you the boundaries of the Memorial Center Complex,” she said.

The MSC is tangible, not just because of its bricks and chairs, carpet and



Though the building opened in September 1950, the official dedication for the Memorial Student Center was held on Muster, April 21, 1951. Originally dedicated to Aggies who died in the two world wars, the building was rededicated in 1976 to the Aggies who have died in all wars.

## Did You Know?

- The MSC was one of the first air conditioned buildings on campus.
- The first college union was organized by university debating societies in England. In 1812, a small circle of students at Oxford University in England formed a group for debating and free discussion. Their debate society grew to several chapters and spread to Cambridge University, where the college union idea was formalized in 1815.

*Information from “Building Leaders, Living Traditions” by Amy Bacon ’91*



# Memorial Student Center



The MSC dedication on April 21, 1951. In 1953, the decision was made to not use the grass and landscape adjacent to the student center for large assemblies without approval by the MSC Council.

decorations. The MSC is “a meaningful and alive experience” because somehow, along the way, a building and its people becomes intertwined in students’ lives, she said.

Dressed in their concert blues, the Singing Cadets closed out the “Countdown to Construction” ceremony. The cadets’ rendition of Spirit of Aggieland sounds deeper and stronger when sung in the MSC, says MSC President Stephanie Burns ’09. She says

## Class Gifts

Each year, the graduating Class bestows a gift to Texas A&M that will benefit the University and future students. Over the years, many donated gifts for the MSC.

- 1936** - Buffet Silver for Union Building
- 1937** - Buffet Silver for Union Building
- 1949** - Chimes for MSC
- 1950** - Silver Service Set for the MSC
- 1956** - Voting Machines for the MSC
- 1970** - Meditation Garden
- 1971** - Meditation Garden
- 1972** - Meditation Garden
- 1981** - Bell Carillon in the MSC
- 1988** - Track lighting for the Memorial plaque in the MSC Hotel Entrance
- 1997** - MSC Renovations Endowment
- 2004** - MSC Flagroom Renovation
- 2006** - MSC Entrance Restoration

this is the place where the Aggie Spirit is embodied and perpetuated.

“The MSC is more than a building,” she said, and it’s because of its living nature that the MSC spirit will continue, even without a building.

The doors will be locked, the construction fencing positioned, and keys turned over to the construction team. The timeline leaves the MSC president out of the MSC for most of her term.

“I’ve been asked what it’s like to be president of nothing,” she said. It is a joke, but Burns vocalizes that there is some truth to it. It’s a challenge—yes—but she believes it to be an even more “incredible opportunity.”

The temporary closure calls for Aggies to “be the spirit of the MSC and to embody all that it stands for,” Burns said. “The MSC will live on within each of us.”

“We have to make sure we teach the Class of 2013 the traditions of the MSC,” she said. You don’t walk on the grass, and you remove your hat at the door. “It’s not just something we do,” she said. “We have to teach incoming freshmen the reasons behind our traditions. We have to tell the stories of the MSC, our stories of the MSC.”

Students have to be bearers of tradition and talk to freshmen about what the MSC feels like on game day, what a quiet spot in the Flag Room means during the stress of finals, what it smells like when you’re sitting around a table in the 12<sup>th</sup> Man Café sharing lunch with your Fish Camp buddies and what it looks like to enter the Flag Room and see your Aggie family.

Burns said students must talk about those whom Aggies honor through the building. Students must remember the Aggies who gave the ultimate sacrifice, and in turn, be encouraged to embody the traditions and core values of excellence, integrity, leadership, loyalty, respect and selfless service.

“I’m excited,” she said.

The MSC houses 19 committees and six resource areas with a student base around 1,200. As such, Burns is president and CEO of one of the largest student-led

programming institutions in the country, and with its doors closing, everything under her reign must be relocated. The animal science major spent her summer in College Station to help students through the building’s closure. (See Page 49 for the MSC’s Relocation Guide.)

## Moving

Everything goes in a box. The office supplies, the bubble-wrapped glass-framed photos, the files, the memories. “It’s weird, huh?” said MSC Director Luke



In this photo, dated 1955, students return to class, lining up their suitcases in front of the new Memorial Student Center.

Altendorf of the packed up, pulled down student affairs office, “and a little sad.”

His upstairs office in the MSC is the perfect location for watching students learn, grow and become bold in who they are. From his crow’s nest, he can see students succeed, and as freshmen turn to seniors, he watches as success knocks off the little bits of self-doubt, shyness and fear of inadequacy, to be dropped on the floors of the MSC.

“Hundreds of thousands of people have walked through this building,” Altendorf said. “It’s a memorial that changes lives. So, though there’s some sadness as we begin, we’ll walk through this together.”

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Many dances and balls were held in the MSC ballroom. These Aggies and their dates are pictured in the main lounge in 1959.



Before the arrival of the Internet, the MSC Browsing Library kept cadets in the know. With magazines and newspapers from around the nation, an area to listen to music, and a row of telephone booths, the browsing library served as a cultural and media center.



A special yell practice was held after the May 1 "Countdown to Construction" event to celebrate the building and the people who make it special. After yell practice, students attended a 1950s-themed dinner in the 12th Man Cafeteria.

## Where Can I Find ...

**Student organization meeting space:** Rudder Tower, Koldus Building, and various campus classrooms

**Lounge and activity space to replace the Flag Room:** Rudder Theatre Complex Public Spaces

**Dining Services coffee kiosk:** Rudder Tower Lobby

**MSC Bookstore:** G. Rollie White Coliseum, Main Floor

**Outdoor activity zones for information tables and events:** G. Rollie White Coliseum, Plaza

**APO Ticketmart (home football game days), Singing Cadets rehearsal (Friday of home game day weekends):** Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center

**MSC Information Desk:** 1st Floor Lobby, Koldus Building

**Class Centers, Department of Greek Life, Department of Multicultural Services, MSC Director's Office, MSC Student Programs Office and committees, Student Organization Finance Center (SOFC), Women's Resource Center:** 2nd Floor, Koldus Building

**MSC Hospitality and Event Services, MSC OPAS:** 2nd Floor, Rudder Tower

**MSC Facilities, Student Media:** The Grove

**Choral Activities rehearsal space, Choral Activities offices:** The Commons, Basement Level

**Amateur Radio Club, KANM Student Radio Station:** Graphic Services Building Annex

**MSC Administrative Services, MSC Information Technology, MSC Print N Copy, MSC University Plus Frame Shop:** Graphic Services Building

**University Art Collections administrative offices, Campus Art Loan Program:** 6th Floor, Evans Library

**MSC Forsyth Center Galleries:** Wimberly Building (Fibertown), 110 N. Main St., Downtown Bryan (proposed)

**Woodcarvings:** 2nd floor of Rudder Theatre Complex

**Medal of Honor plaques:** Rudder Exhibit Hall

**Aggieland Station Post Office:** Closed

**MSC Bowling and Games:** Closed

**MSC Guest Rooms:** Closed during construction

**Dining Services facilities in the MSC:** Closed



# Memorial Student Center



Student involvement has always been an important part of the Aggie experience. The MSC hosted its first “open house programs” in 1953. Now held twice a year, the MSC Open House helps students choose from among Texas A&M’s more than 800 student organizations.

## What Will Change

**When the MSC reopens, you’ll see:**

- A new and larger ballroom, and expanded meeting space.
- Upgraded mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, including fire sprinklers.
- Renewed compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Architecture influenced by the original MSC.
- Enhanced symbolic representation of the building as a memorial and prominent placement of the Medal of Honor recipient plaques.
- Increased connectivity between the MSC and Rudder Fountain Plaza.
- A clearly identifiable main entryway at the northeast entrance of the MSC.
- More open space and natural lighting.



Several plots of grass were moved from the MSC to the Bonfire memorial May 1, where it will grow until it is replanted at the renovated MSC.