The Great Spring Water Fight Of 1954

By Stephanie Jeter Cannon ’06

Patrick Ball ’57 draped his elbow inside the rusty old fire truck’s open window.

It was just chance that he found the thing. Nearly obscured in a local auctioneer’s lot, it was camouflaged by the other treasures parked and stowed on property. He knew the auctioneer well enough that security unlocked the gate. He knew the truck well enough that he had to take a picture with it.

And now, he stood waiting for the click of the camera as his mind took him back to when those tires could spin. It was a modern-day time machine.

The year was 1954, and Bear Bryant was coaching the game against Rice on Kyle Field. The stadium was loud, but he was able to hear over the roar the answer to the question he asked of an upperclassman.

Yes, Ball could leave the football game early.

It’s not that Ball didn’t like football, or even that he would rather be somewhere else. No, he had to find a way out of the stadium in order to fulfill an integral part of a prank being pulled by the Class of ’57 Aggie Band members.

The tradition then was for the entire Corps of Cadets to engage in a water fight following the last home game before the traditional Thanksgiving Day matchup against the University of Texas. More than just Good Bull, the water fight determined where each outfit could hang their signs—another tradition—around Simpson Drill Field.

“The signs said stuff like ‘BTHO tu,’” said Mitch Butler ’57, another one of the pranksters. “Things that got people excited for the tu game.”

Ball said the watery battle was normally fought with ponchos and buckets, and the Band had a history
of winning because it was the largest unit in the Corps. But he had an idea.

His father, a rancher in Lincoln, had a fire truck, Ball said. Texas was in the middle of an awful drought, and his dad used it to help neighbors and put out flare-ups on the property. If Ball could get it without his dad knowing, he would use it to help the Class of ’57 become legends.

By the time the football game was over and the Corps started running to Simpson ready for battle, the fire truck was already parked and waiting for them. The 600-gallon tank put out a brave face, “but the irony was, the battery had gone dead and I couldn’t start the engine,” he said. “We couldn’t have shot any water if we wanted to. We just bluffed it.”

The threat worked. No one lifted a finger against the Class of ’57. But they couldn’t just take the truck back without seeing what it could do, Butler said. They got the battery charged up and hid it behind Duncan Hall until later that evening.

Ball knows the difference between Good and Bad Bull, he said, and it’s important to know that there was thought put into the consequences of what they were planning before they actually did it. With no computers, no carpet and nothing that could be ruined, “the worst we could do was get some homework papers wet,” he said.

That’s what makes it Good Bull, he said.

“We drove (the fire truck) down the quadrangle and sprayed every window that was open,” he said with a laugh. In past water fights, one particular outfit with a fourth-floor window always water bombed the Band with big buckets of water, he said. That debt was repaid.

Knowing that the campus cops would be there soon, Ball drove the truck around the golf course and over to Highway 6 and didn’t stop until home. “We looked back across the golf course and could see the red lights flashing,” he said.

That narrow escape kept them from any official punishment, but not from the upperclassmen in the Band. They had been given permission to use the fire truck at the water fight, not on the Quad, Butler said. “I remember having to run laps around Kyle Field and waxing floors,” he said. They were made to stand at attention for their boldness.

Butler said it was so hard not to smile.

Good Bull, Ball said.