They expected you to do better than you knew how to do.” But those shared rigors also served to bring the students together. “You really learned to love your classmates,” Nelson says. “Everyone who was a freshman with you came to have a special place in your heart for the rest of your life. To this day, when I see somebody from my class, my heart jumps. It’s indescribable, but that’s the way you feel.”

Nelson says he didn’t realize at the time that A&M was any different from other schools, but those challenges he faced at A&M would benefit him in the working world. “A&M gave us an advantage over others, which is that it made us harder workers,” he says. “It wasn’t apparent to me at the time, but later on people would note that those engineers from A&M, those guys work hard and get the job done. And A&M taught me what professional standards were all about. You couldn’t go through the petroleum engineering school or mechanical engineering school and not understand what being a professional meant. They gave us lessons that lasted a lifetime.

“Now, we didn’t know when we were young that that situation existed. As a young graduate going out, nobody said to you, ‘Boy, we sure are glad to have you, because you graduated from A&M.’ What they actually said to you in the oilfield was, ‘You’re just a boll weevil and a college boy and you don’t have what it takes to work out here.’ It isn’t until later, when you are older, that you realize a lot of good things happened to you because you’re an Aggie, and a lot of good things happened because they taught you to work hard. But they don’t tell you that when you go out in the oilfield and go to work. You learn about it later.”

Nelson counts himself fortunate to have attended A&M along with thousands of young students who were returning veterans of World War II. “Some of these guys were in their 30s, some of them had children. And they were so kind, so considerate, so happy to be out of that war, so glad to be on that campus, so glad to be getting an education. They added so much to our lives. Their

Connecting with James K.B. Nelson ’49

James K.B. Nelson can’t remember a time before he was a Texas Aggie.

“I grew up in Bryan. We lived on the boundary line between Bryan and College Station, along a little creek. We spent all our Saturdays at A&M. They entertained us.” During his childhood, Nelson said, parents didn’t have to be as protective of children as parents today, “so we went everywhere and did everything.” And Aggie athletics were a particular source of entertainment. “I can remember running up and down the sidelines at Kyle Field during their spring training. And there were the horse shows. We knew all the athletes at A&M. We had what they called the knothole gang. Every student in College Station and Bryan got a knothole ticket. And for 25 cents you could sit in the end zone and watch a game. That’s where all your friends were. So it was a lot of fun to ride your bicycle from Bryan to College Station. You could ride the bus if you had to, but we nearly always were on our bicycles. A&M was just a wonderful place with just a million things out there to entertain a little boy growing up.”

There was never any doubt about where young James Nelson would go to college. “I don’t ever remember that there was ever any question about it,” he recalls. “By the time I was 5 years old, I already knew about A&M. In fact, I don’t actually remember any first times that I associate with A&M. A&M was just always there. And there was really never any question about where I would go.”

But when Nelson enrolled at A&M in the summer of 1945, at the tail end of World War II, he learned that cadets at A&M lived in a different world. He said the hardest part was the academics. “It was really tough, very rigorous.
concentration, the seriousness they had in the classroom, they raised the level of education at A&M. One of the most fortunate things ever to happen to me was getting to go to school with veterans of World War II.

Nelson works to benefit his alma mater in many ways today, but one that he is most passionate about is helping bright young students get admitted. “It’s actually very difficult to do for most students, so I spend a lot of time doing that. I just love to see them do well at A&M. We’re getting such very, very good students at A&M. I walk across the campus and look at them, 18, 19, 20 years old, in their T-shirts and shorts, just like Secretary Gates observed in his Muster speech, and I wonder if they realize how fortunate they are to be at Texas A&M, and how many of their peers would give nearly everything to be there with them.”

Nelson also gives his time and resources to A&M in other ways. He has served as a member of the College of Education and Human Development Advisory Council, the Harold Vance Department of Petroleum Engineering Industry Advisory Board and the Visual Arts Development Council. He is member of the A&M Legacy Society and has established numerous endowments, chairs and scholarships. He also provides support to his community through the James K.B. and Audrey Calais Nelson Foundation. And he is an avid supporter of The Association of Former Students, a 27-year member of the Century Club and the sponsor of a Pillar of History in the enhanced Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center.

“The Association of Former Students of Texas A&M is much more than meets the eye,” he says. “What they do in supporting and encouraging loyalty to A&M and the spirit of comradeship and friendship and love that Aggies have for one another is very, very effective. I shudder to think of anything harming or affecting or retarding the work of The Association. For 130 years, they’ve done a great job. We’ve been blessed with this excellent organization and we’ve gotten accustomed to it and we often don’t appreciate it.”

### At A Glance: James K.B. Nelson ’49

**FAMILY**

James married Audrey Calais in 1960. The Nelsons have one daughter, Felicia.

**EDUCATION & CAREER**

He received dual bachelor’s degrees in petroleum and mechanical engineering from Texas A&M University in 1950. While a student, Nelson was a Ross Volunteer, cadet lieutenant colonel, senior class secretary/treasurer and editor of The Battalion student newspaper. Upon graduation, he was commissioned a 2nd lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force. Shortly after his service in the military, Nelson began his career in the oil and gas industry. In 1958 he joined Grey Wolf Drilling Co., a leading provider of contract oil and gas land drilling services in the United States. Nelson became president and owner of the company in 1978 and served in that role until his retirement in 1997. Nelson manages his family partnership through Felicity Ventures, which he founded in 1997. His career achievements were recognized by Ernst & Young with the Houston Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 1997, induction into the Texas A&M Petroleum Engineering Academy of Distinguished Graduates in 1998 and the Texas A&M Dwight Look College of Engineering Outstanding Alumni Honor Award in 2000. He was named a Distinguished Alumnus of Texas A&M in 2005.

**KEY INFLUENCES**

“I was thinking of studying veterinary medicine, but I had a math teacher, Frances Dusek, who said, ‘You shouldn’t do that. You like math, you’re good at math. You should be an engineer.’ And I had a lot of respect for Mrs. Dusek, so I decided to study engineering. And I had the utmost respect for my professors at A&M. You know, I may forget a lot of names now, but I will never forget their names. Charlie Crawford was head of mechanical engineering at the time and had been for a while. Harold Vance was head of petroleum engineering. He pretty well founded and put that department together. Like a lot of the students, I was opposed to a lot of their requirement and their rigid discipline. But I believed in those men and that helped me all my life. And the head of student publications, Dr. Roland Bing, Jr. 42, was a brilliant man and a lot of fun. Everybody loved working in student publications because of him. With his leadership, and along with the work of some of these mature veterans of World War II, we put out a good paper and had a lot of fun doing it.

**ADVICE FOR ENTERING FRESHMEN**

“Don’t look back. Commit yourself and go at it with everything you’ve got. It’s worth all your efforts, all your concentration, all the misery and grief and agony you are going to go through to get an education and be an Aggie. Go at it with your whole heart. It will repay you far more than you’ll ever know.”

**ADVICE FOR GRADUATING SENIORS**

“That’s a difficult time to advise anyone, because most graduates have hundreds of questions they’re wondering about. They’re wondering what the future holds for them. So I would say: ‘I want to reassure you that you have been well prepared. And again, don’t look back. Go at it with everything you’ve got, because you’re equipped. You can do things that you never dreamed you could do. And you are not going to have to do them all at once. You can do them one step at a time. And you can be great if you want to.’"