

The Texas Aggie

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100 Years*

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100 YEARS OF AGGIE RINGS

By Jerry C. Cooper '63

The Aggie Ring has evolved from a simple 1889 band etched with an intertwined "AMC" into the highly detailed memento worn by today's graduates.

Class of '89 Presents Enlarged Version Of Ring

The Class of '89 presented a 14" tall rendition of the Texas A&M Class Ring to the university on Sept. 2 as part of the Class Gift. The reproduction is to be displayed in the Student Lounge of the Memorial Student Center.

For 100 years Texas Aggies have worn distinctive bands of gold on their ring fingers to symbolize their pride in alma mater. Less than 15 years after Texas A&M opened in 1876, students had a circlet cast with a large "AMC" intertwined across its face and surrounded by four small diamonds.

Two examples of this ring in the Texas A&M University Archives belonged to E. S. Middlebrook, a civil engineering major, and Frank L. Montgomery, an agriculture major. Both graduated in 1889.

A few years later, Edward C. Jonas, Class of 1894, solicited ideas for a class ring. From his classmates' suggestions he did a preliminary design which was approved by the 32-member class. A New York firm cast the rings at a cost of \$10 each and delivered the first batch two weeks before commencement. With the help of chemistry professor P. S. Tilson, Class of 1889, a senior tested the rings' gold content. They were found to be weighted with lead and each graduate had to re-order his own ring. Some replacements weren't received until 1896.

The next few classes adopted the same design. Though no 1894 rings are known to exist, they apparently had a squared top and angular sides. An 1895 ring which belonged to Asa Urban Smith features an intricately intertwined "AMC" inlaid on a rectangular crown with an "18" above crossed sabers on one side and a "95" above crossed rifles on the other side. Two 1898 rings that belonged to G. F. Foutrel and T. L. Smith have black class numerals set above a majestic eagle (similar to that used in the official United States Seal) on the square crown. One side has a state seal and the other features a crossed rifle and saber surrounded by the letters "A", "M" and "C". These rings are displayed in the



The 1895 ring of Asa Urban Smith kept the intertwined "AMC" used in 1889, but added crossed rifles and sabers on the sides.



The 1924 ring is representative of those cast in the early part of this century.

Glitsch Library of the Clayton W. Williams Jr. Alumni Center.

R. J. Poulter '99 headed a committee to approve the 1899 ring. Meeting in the room of classmate J. B. "Josh" Sterns, they decided to make several changes. "After much friendly argument," Sterns recalled many years later, "we finally selected a combination composed of a spread eagle in an oval, leaving room at the bottom for the year '1899,' a cannon and gun on one side and a Texas wreath on the other side." A shield with stars above vertical stripes was superimposed on the eagle's breast.

The Linz Brothers Jewelry Company of Dallas offered lower prices to subsequent classes if they would follow a suggestion by E. L. Martin, Class of 1900, and adopt the same design in order to perpetuate the ring for years to come.

Martin's classmate W. J. Walden recalled a half century later that a major consideration was to have "a ring with designs that would not interfere with putting on or taking off the white gloves we then wore while on dress parade, and

Color photos by Jim Lyle.

also a ring that could be used as a seal ring if so desired."

To prevent the problem suffered by the Class of 1894, the later classes pitched in to buy a ring to test for gold purity before delivery was accepted for the entire class.

Except for minor alterations, such as a saber being substituted for one of the crossed rifles, the cannon and eagle periodically facing in different directions, and the state seal and crossed weapons changing sides in 1912 and 1926, this design would remain virtually unchanged for more than 30 years.

In March of their junior year, the officers of the Class of '31, along with members of the Class Ring Committee, petitioned the A&M faculty to restrict the purchase and wearing of the Aggie

Ring to students who have attained at least the second semester of their junior year.

In 1933, A&M President T. O. Walton took steps to protect the meaning and heritage of the A&M Class Ring. He named an official Senior Ring Committee to oversee the handling and design modifications approved by the students. The words "Texas A&M College — 1876" were added around the crown that same year. In 1935, the Texas and United States flags were added behind the crossed cannon, rifle and saber and the legend was changed to "A&M College of Texas — 1876." It stayed that way until 1963.

On rings from the middle to the late 1930s, the class numerals were done in a larger and very stylized form. In 1943 the entire ring was enlarged and the seal

raised. During this period the shield on the eagle's breast was also enlarged.

In the early 30s, the A&M ring was manufactured by the Charles H. Elliott Co. of Philadelphia and the Herff-Jones Co. of Indianapolis. A five-year contract was awarded to Star Engraving Company of Houston, effective with the Class of '35 Ring. Following the bid specifications outlined by the Ring Committee, Star patented John Boehme's design used for the 1935 ring and, in consideration of receiving the five-year contract, transferred the rights to Patent #95,172 to Texas A&M. The patent was effective for seven years and doesn't seem to have been renewed, although such renewal was discussed several times prior to the expiration. The rings were distributed by



Today's ring proudly exemplifies the Aggie's love of school, state and nation.

Bryan jewelers John S. Caldwell and Sankey Park. In 1937, C. W. Varner was added as a distributor.

In 1938, the Registrar's Office, with the agreement of local jewelers, began handling distribution of the ring in order to exercise tighter control on making sure purchasers met qualification requirements. On December 16, 1941, the Ring Committee modified the policy on eligibility to permit qualified students to purchase a ring, even if military service prevented them from registering for school. The Committee ruled on each such request and this policy continued to the end of World War II.

Requests to allow senior favor pins and other jewelry such as tie clasps, etc. to be made using the ring crest were denied by the Committee as late as 1956, but the Memorial Student Center gift shop

apparently began selling these items sometime around 1960. In the mid-1960s, this was turned over to the MSC Student Finance Center and has been handled there since that time.

In 1939, the Josten Company of Owatonna, Minnesota, won a two-year contract to supply the rings and the contract was eventually extended for five more years. L. G. Balfour Company of Attleboro, Massachusetts, received the contract in 1948 and has supplied Texas A&M's rings ever since.

When the legislature changed A&M's name to "Texas A&M University" in 1963, the lettering on the ring crest was correspondingly changed. Students graduating from 1963 through 1966, the classes that were enrolled at the time the name was changed, were given the option



The 1889 ring of E. S. Middlebrook is one of the two oldest A&M rings in the University Archives. The other 1889 ring belonged to Frank L. Montgomery.

of having a "Texas A&M University" ring or an "A&M College of Texas" ring. All graduating in 1967 or later must have "University" on their rings and all before 1963 must have "College."

Lost Aggie Rings Have A Way Of Coming Home Again

The recovery of lost rings has almost become another Aggie tradition. Often the Association of Former Students plays a crucial role in reuniting an Aggie Ring with its owner.

One Aggie lost his ring on the battleground of Europe during World War II. After hearing from him, his mother wrote to the Association of Former Students seeking a replacement ring. The day her letter arrived, the Association also received a letter from an American major on German soil with a ring he had picked up on the battlefield. It proved to be the very ring the soldier's mother had sought to replace.

J. N. Parks, a member of the Class of '45, had his ring stolen while on a fishing trip to Corpus Christi in 1952. A year later it was found between two dead Communist soldiers in Korea by another Aggie, Class of '50. Parks had never been to Korea and no one knows how the ring got there.

Another ring was lost in Korea when William A. Broussard '50 tossed out a cigarette butt and his ring went with it.

He hunted around the battlefield until dark and gave it up for lost. Six months later, a friend of Broussard's spotted an M.P. wearing an A&M ring. Broussard got the ring back when the M.P.'s commander questioned him and found that he had confiscated it from a group of Korean laborers.

When his B-17 was downed at Clark AFB in the Philippine Islands, Army Air Corps officer Frank Kurtz made a final trip to the gutted bomber. As related in W. L. White's book *Queens Die Proudly*, Kurtz said, "So I went down to the line for the last time alone and took from each the thing I thought he valued most. . . . And when I came to Tex (co-pilot Lt. Arthur Edward Gary '40) at the end of the line — it had to be his A&M ring, the thing he was proudest of. I knew he'd want to send it to his mother."

When the B-17 piloted by Lt. John E. Harris '42 was shot down over Germany in 1944, his mother refused to believe he had died. Eight years later, a minister returning from Africa met a Methodist minister from Latvia. The Latvian

minister's son-in-law lived in Germany and had found Harris' ring in the bomber's wreckage, but customs regulations prevented him from sending it to the United States. Within weeks of the Army being notified, Harris' mother had her son's valued ring and confirmation of his fate.

Following World War II, Dewitt Greer, Class of '23, later a Texas Highway Commissioner and State Highway Engineer, tracked down the guards at a Japanese prison camp where his brother, Robert Greer, Class of '35, was held captive. Robert had been drowned when an unmarked transport taking him and other prisoners to Japan was accidentally sunk by U.S. bombers. Miraculously, Dewitt was able to recover Robert's A&M Ring and his Best Drilled Cadet medal that were confiscated by the guards.

If you should come across a misplaced ring, please contact the Association of Former Students for assistance in tracing the owner. Call 409/845-7514 or write to P.O. Box 7368, College Station, Texas 77844-7368.

Miniature or "sweetheart" rings were first proposed in the 1930s. The concept was approved on April 22, 1942 and the first miniatures were contracted for April 10, 1944. These rings were available until women began receiving A&M degrees in the 1960s. The "sweetheart" rings were discontinued after 1972 and are now available only for classes prior to 1973.

There is little doubt that more senior rings are purchased at Texas A&M than at any other school in the nation. Between 1938 and 1951, more than 15,000 rings were ordered and in the 1948-49 school year alone, Aggies purchased nearly 2,000 rings. The purchase of rings has kept pace with the fantastic growth of the university over the past two decades.

The ring cost \$37 in 1969, \$48 in 1971, \$77 in 1973, \$91.56 in 1974, \$100 in 1978-79, and then jumped to \$338 in 1980. The cost continued to climb as the price of gold escalated and today the man's ring sells for \$260 to \$350, depending on style and weight. The woman's ring costs from \$148 to \$170.

Newly qualified seniors order their rings on the second floor of the Clayton W. Williams Jr. Alumni Center. The pride shows in their faces as they slip the rings on for the first time. The rings shine in testimony to their achievements.

After graduation, the rings symbolize the graduates' love for Texas A&M and help identify them to Aggies the world over.

Once a lonely Aggie in a hotel halfway around the globe heard the distinctive sound of an Aggie Ring striking the bar. "I knew it was an Aggie and was on my feet even before he turned around. We were from different classes, but it seemed like we had known one another all our lives."

Three special collections of A&M Rings are kept in the Alumni Center library. The J. B. "Josh" Sterns Collection of "A&M College of Texas" rings, presented in 1970, contains rings ranging from Charles D. Evans' 1899 ring through Lt. Colin E. Lamb's 1964 gold nugget, which is the only "university" ring in the collection. It took Sterns, a member of the Class of 1899, more than six years, some 4,000 "ring letters" and the help of

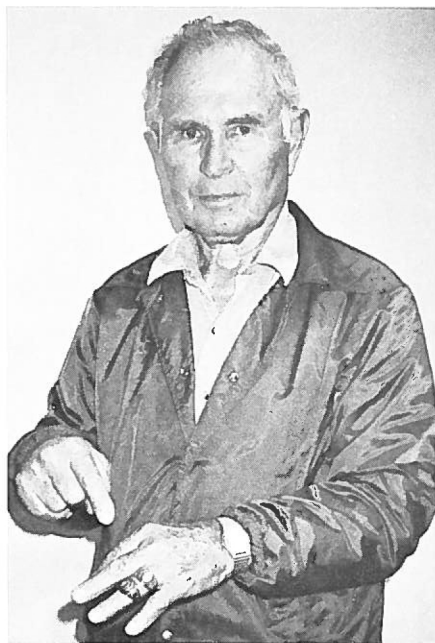
Aggie Ring Returned, Four Years Too Late

Willard S. Thomas '39 is proud of both of his Aggie Rings.

He got his second A&M ring as a gift from his wife when they thought his original ring had been lost in World War II.

Thomas was flying B-17s as a first lieutenant flight commander with the 379th when he was assigned to bomb the submarine pens from which the Germans launched attacks against Allied shipping. Cautioned not to wear or take anything that might give the enemy information, he removed his Aggie Ring and gave it to a major heading his maintenance crew. He told the major on May 29, 1943 to forward the ring to his wife if he didn't come back.

After his bomber was shot down, Thomas spent almost two years as a POW in Stalag Luft III, where as many as 20,000 air force men were held. On Jan. 27, 1945, he recalls, the prisoners could hear Russian guns surrounding the camps. After that, the prisoners were marched across Germany and used by the Germans as "cover" before they were finally liberated by General George Patton.



Willard Thomas '39 displays his original class ring and its replacement.

"They fought over us for 2 hours," Thomas told the *Weatherford Democrat*. "The U.S. soldiers had to shoot over us to

hit the Germans. There were all kinds of shells hitting around us. We were finally released April 29 at Nooseburg, Germany."

When he got home in June, he learned his wife had never received his ring.

Two years later, a letter from A&M classmate Col. Henry "Pelly" Dittman '39 (now deceased) told of being approached at a barbecue he was giving at Castle AFB in Merced, California, by a man who said he had a ring like the one Dittman was wearing. He then told the story of Thomas leaving the ring with him and asking him to send it home, if Thomas didn't come back. But, the major had put the ring in his footlocker and, when he found it there later, had lost Thomas' address.

Dittman wrote to A&M and his letter was forwarded to Thomas, whose wife had already bought him a new ring.

So, it was four years after Thomas was shot down before he got his ring back. While he still wears the newer ring, he proudly displays both and says he is grateful his original ring was returned to him.

Photo by Gale Bradford, Weatherford Democrat.

Your Texas Aggie Ring

Design of the class ring at A&M is as deep in symbolism as it is in tradition. The shield on the top of the ring symbolizes protection of the good reputation of the alma mater. The 13 stripes in the shield refer to the 13 original states and symbolize the intense patriotism of graduates and undergraduates of A&M. The five stars in the shield refer to phases of development of the student: mind or intellect, body, spiritual attainment, emotional poise, and integrity of character. The eagle is symbolic of agility and power, and ability to reach great heights as ambitions.

One side of the ring symbolizes the seal of the State of Texas authorized by the Constitution of 1845. The five-pointed star is encircled with a wreath of olive or laurel leaves symbolizing achievement and a desire for peace and live-oak leaves symbolizing the strength to fight. They are joined at the bottom by an encircling ribbon to show the necessity of joining these two traits to accomplish one's ambition to serve.

The other side with its ancient cannon, saber, and rifle symbolizes that the citizens of Texas fought for their land and are determined to defend their homeland. The saber stands for valor and confidence. The rifle and cannon are symbols of preparedness and defense. The crossed flags of the United States and Texas recognize the dual allegiance to nation and state.

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Major changes were made in the 1933 ring. Here it is compared to the 1932 ring.



a lot of his friends to gather the rings. Some are worn smooth from years of wear while others, such as the duplicate ring purchased for the collection by then A&M head football coach Gene Stallings '57, are in perfect condition. The Texas A&M University Memorial Ring Collection contains rings of deceased Aggies beginning with 1965 and has room for rings through the turn of the century.

Certain unique rings, including some of those mentioned above, are displayed in another case next to the large collections. You will find J. Earl Rudder's 1932 ring, which he wore while leading "Rudder's Rangers" up the French cliffs to begin the Normandy invasion in World War II and continued to wear as Texas land commissioner and president of Texas A&M and the Texas A&M University System.

Nearby is the ring of Rudder's classmate, longtime Congressman Olin E. "Tiger" Teague '32 and that of H. B. "Pat" Zachry '22, whose construction company built major international projects, highways crisscrossing the state and San Antonio's Hilton Palacio del Rio Hotel, which redefined the meaning of pre-fabricated building. Other rings belonged to M. T. Harrington '22, the first graduate to serve as president of Texas A&M and Ernest Langford '13,



The 1963 ring is representative of those cast from 1935 to 1967.

who served as mayor of College Station and director of A&M's School of Architecture.

Also in the case is a ring that belonged to Kermit E. "Dutch" Voelkel '30 of Austin. It is one of the few rings to ever have a large stone set in place of the eagle on the crest. Spread eagles decorate each side of the ring.

Unusual Facts About The Aggie Ring

- In at least one case during D-Day preparations in England, an Aggie ring and proper answers to questions about the Texas A&M campus identified an officer for admission to a top secret zone.

- A 1967 Aggie ring was nearly destroyed when it was used as the first target for A&M's new \$6 million cyclotron. The idea was to make the ring a slightly radioactive keepsake. However, when the scientists blasted the ring with a 65-million electron volt beam of alpha particles, a portion of the 14-carat gold crest was melted. After being retrieved, the ring measured a healthy 200 milliroentgens per hours of radioactivity and had to be kept in a thick lead container.

- The Aggie Ring owned by former Secretary of the Air Force Edward E. "Pete" Aldridge '60 has been in space twice — aboard the STS-51C in January 1985 and aboard the STS-27 in December 1988.