



THE NOBLE MEN OF KYLE

RIDE ALONG ON A NATIONALLY FAMOUS, FIGHTIN' TEXAS AGGIE BAND ROAD TRIP

By Stephanie Jeter Cannon '06



COURTESY OF THE CORPUS OF CADETS ASSOCIATION

IT WAS AROUND 2 A.M. ON NOV. 24 WHEN 440 AGGIE BANDSMEN AND WOMEN LEFT THEIR DORMS AND STARTED TOWARD THE BAND HALL. IT WAS COLD, IN THE UPPER 30S AT BEST, AND DRIZZLING.

As they gathered at the edge of Lewis Street, voices called out instructions. “The buses will have a number on the front window. Find your bus and get on board,” called an unseen student leader. “Unless you play something small, like a clarinet or piccolo, put your instrument below the bus.”

Campus was asleep, but for most of the Aggie Band, sleep was traded in for preparation. A great deal goes into getting the Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band to march at an away game, and it was finally game day.

Along the curb, cadets were packed dozens deep. Besides holding hanging luggage bags protecting their uniforms from the drizzle, cadets carried on their backs what they needed for the trip. Nothing could be forgotten. “We’ve been preparing the fish for this trip for days,” said Kevin Moss ’14, a mechanical engineering major from Houston and commander of B-Company. During each company’s



JESSICA KNOX '17 AND RACHEL BRANYON '17, MEMBERS OF A-BATTERY, ON THE BUS.

training time, upperclassmen walked freshmen through each item to pack, when to arrive and what to expect. “When you’ve never been on a band trip before you can only imagine what will happen,” he said.

What would happen?

The Aggie Band invited *Texas Aggie* magazine to come along and learn the answer to that question itself. For many former students, not much is known about how the band gets to away games. Aggies see the band on television or in person from their visitor-side seat in the competitor’s stadium, but they don’t know the steps taken to get them there. They may not even know that their gifts to The Association of Former Students help make it happen.

The football road trip is part of Aggie tradition, and everyone was invited on this one. Ten buses pulled up with tires pointed toward Baton Rouge, and the magazine had a seat.

As the brakes released with a hiss and the bus doors opened, the cold air was warmed with a foggy-breathed “whoop” from the Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band.

LOADING THE BUS

As soon as the buses came to a stop, a group of seven sophomore cadets wearing overalls and maroon toboggans ran full throttle to the vehicles. “That’s the loading crew,” said Moss. They are a group of cadets chosen by the past loading crew to be in charge of loading the buses and trailers when on a road trip. No one really knows how they’re chosen, but it is known that being on the loading crew is a badge of honor.

With only seven cadets and 10 buses, they raced back and forth to load instruments and bags into the lower storage compartment of the buses. If there was a lull on the job, they jogged in place to stay “ready to serve,” one of them said. They preferred not to share their names without permission from their upperclassmen.

In less than 15 minutes, everything was loaded and all 440 members were in their seats. Each bus was led by a captain who took roll and provided leadership over the cadets. Each captain was outfitted with a walkie-talkie



CADETS UNLOAD IN BATON ROUGE.

and a packet with the names of the cadets on their bus, the itinerary and instructions for what to do once the band arrives at its hotel.

Allison Fuss '14, an aerospace engineering major from Lubbock, stood near the front and confirmed with a silent sweep of her eyes that her bus was full.

Behind her sat some of A-Battery's leadership, Carter Ray '14, a management major from Floresville; Tyler Patton '14, a construction science major from Dallas; Eric Earle '14, a health major from Jacksonville; and the band's drum major, Steven Herring '14, a chemical engineering major from Bryan. In four years, they've been on at least a dozen road trips with the band. "The best one has to be last year when we went to Alabama," Patton said. The band drew some heckling when the game first started, but after halftime, "People came over to us and told us what a good job we did," Earl said. That and they had front-row seats as Texas A&M pulled the stunning upset of No. 1 Alabama. "It was amazing," he said. "Everyone was screaming."

They joined the band for these kinds of experiences, Ray said. His grandfather played the saxophone in the Aggie Band, but when the Korean War broke out in 1950, he left to serve his country. "I'm the first person in my family to complete the band experience," he said. He'd always had his grandfather's affection, but by making it through four years in the Fightin' Texas Aggie Band, he said he earned his grandfather's respect.

Patton said he's traveled with the band to perform at gubernatorial events, to march in parades in different states, and to perform at schools he otherwise would have never visited. The Aggie Band opened up the realm of possibilities for Patton and his college career.

It is a privilege to be associated with the band, Herring said. They understand that the reason they're able to enjoy such experiences is because of the support of former students, Earle said.

And while none of them can quite remember all the details of their first

Aggie Band road trip, for the freshmen on the bus, memories were about to be made.

MILE ONE, COLLEGE STATION

As the buses took off, the Aggie Band grew silent. With miles ahead of them, they grabbed every bit of sleep they could. While the cadets slept, the bus caravan drove.

MILE 205, NEAR ORANGE, TEXAS

The sun was still dim when the bus drivers pulled into a rest stop. It was all part of the plan.

Months of preparation go into Aggie Band trips. Lodging, travel arrangements, food—Jean Stanley, the

business coordinator for the band, handles most of it behind the scenes. It's a treadmill of decision-making, and after 10 years on the job, "It's hard to think about everything that must be done," she said. Autopilot kicks in.

Almost a year in advance, talks begin about what games the band will attend. The evaluation and verdict are made by the band's director, Dr. Tim Rhea.

There are many moving parts, Rhea said. He and his team look at the football schedule, and while juggling class schedules, laws that limit the number of hours bus drivers can be on the road, and SEC scheduling rules, they start thinking through which games would best for the band to attend.

FEEDING A SMALL ARMY

According to the hotel that housed the Aggie band, when the Noble Men (and women) of Kyle sat down to eat, they had:



3,600

EGGS PER DAY



5,100

SLICES OF BACON PER DAY



30 GALLONS

ORANGE JUICE PER DAY



15 GALLONS

APPLE JUICE PER DAY



50 GALLONS

JAMBALAYA PER DAY



8 GALLONS

CRANBERRY JUICE PER DAY



66 GALLONS

GUMBO PER DAY



ONCE IN TIGER STADIUM, CADETS PLAY TO SUPPORT THE TEAM.

The goal is to visit each SEC school at least once, he said. They can now knock off Alabama, Ole Miss, and after this trip, LSU.

Once the games are selected, Stanley immediately works on lodging. “We need a hotel that will hold everybody,” she said. If they’re driving, she gets buses booked. If they’re flying, she looks into airfare. She oversees the making of the bus lists and the hotel room assignments.

When the band travels to an away game, parade, or bowl game, it can be up to a quarter-of-a-million-dollar operation. Last year when the band traveled to Alabama, it cost around \$300,000, Rhea said.

Between the cost of travel, lodging and food, “It takes a lot to travel with the band,” he said, especially with high fuel prices. The band depends on funding provided by The Association of Former Students and other funds to make its trip possible.

“We’re very lucky to have the support that we have,” he said.

The Aggie Band has grown to the

largest in school history. Despite the growth and the fact that the freshmen in the Aggie Band were mostly born in 1995, every member of the Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band is personally committed to preserving its “unique heritage,” he said. “It’s something we all recognize.”

They carry out that mission in the types of music they play—“We stick to standard marches,” Rhea said. And when they put movement to the music, “Everything is always square,” he said. They keep an organized presence and execute sharp angles, just like the Aggie Band decades before them.

The Aggie Band is the largest military marching band in the nation, according to the Corps of Cadets, a far cry from its 13-member crew in 1894.

The Aggie Band was started by Joseph Holick, the same man who started Holick’s, the makers of the Aggie boot. According to the book, *The Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band*, written by Donald B. ’56 and MaryJo Powell, in 1885, Holick and his brother jumped aboard an empty boxcar bound for Orange, Texas, to work at a lumber mill. When they woke up the following morning, they were sitting still; the boxcar had disconnected from



DURING THE BAND’S EVENING MEAL AFTER THE GAME, CADETS ATE 66 GALLONS OF GUMBO.

the train and had stranded them near Bryan.

Holick stayed and got a job as a cobbler, the book said. After repairing then University President Lawrence Sullivan Ross’ boots, he was recruited

to campus to be a cobbler located at the college. He was given a room in a dormitory. When it became known that Holick was a musician—he taught himself to play clarinet—he was quickly hired for an additional position on campus, that of bugler, with pay. Though, as the book wrote, “He figured the college ought to get more than just two tunes for its money,” so he got permission to start a band.

Its reputation grew, and before the end of the first year was already getting praise in the school’s yearbook. Now 119 years later, they are the “nationally famous Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band.”

MILE 366, BATON ROUGE, LA.

The Aggie Band is almost entirely led by students. They teach the drills, keep the traditions and build the camaraderie. If there are discipline issues, the cadets handle it. Leadership within the units carries out everything, Rhea said.

“It’s very rewarding to watch how responsible these cadets become,” Rhea said.

When the buses pull up to the hotel, the directors are the first ones off the bus, and then the bus captain gives

her orders.

“Fish are eating on the second floor,” said Fuss. “There are changing rooms provided for you. You will get your room key after the game. Seniors, you eat at the buffet on the first floor.”

Outside the bus windows, the loading crew was already halfway done unloading all the instruments and uniforms.

Inside the hotel, band members split into their proper eating stations.

Hundreds of uniform bags, boot bags and backpacks lined the main lobby’s walls.

Upstairs, where freshmen were slated to eat, Gregory Obi ’17, a clarinet player and petroleum engineering major from Houston, waited his turn at the buffet. “I’m pretty excited,” he



STEVEN HERING '14 LEADS THE BAND ACROSS THE FIELD OF TIGER STADIUM.

said. After looking forward to this trip for weeks, he was ready to be in the stadium. Travis Hunter '17, a trumpet player and business administration major from The Woodlands, said this first road trip is just one of "several new precedents for the Aggie Band." The freshmen Class of 2017 came in to make the Aggie Band the largest it's ever been. They were also the last Class to march on "the old Kyle Field" and will be in their senior boots when it reopens.

"We're just really ready and excited to see what LSU is like," Hunter said.

TIGER STADIUM

The operations order provided to all cadets said that the buses would depart for the stadium at 1200 hours. Cadets were dressed and in their seats at about 11:45. "We keep a tight schedule," said Rhea. At 12:01, 10 band buses and two buses of football players headed to LSU's Tiger Stadium, escorted by four state police on motorcycles, one police car, one police SUV, and a smattering of LSU campus police. As the buses made their first turn, a few officers on motorcycles sped ahead to cut off any traffic that could separate the buses. When the buses entered the ramp for I-10 toward the stadium, officers had completely shut down the interstate's

traffic. The buses were allowed to go the wrong way down a one-way street near campus.

"This is so exciting," said a bandsman in the back of the bus.

"Wait," said another. "Are they flipping us off?"

As the buses entered the main tailgating area, hundreds of LSU fans lined the streets. Crowding the curb, about one in three offered the buses a one-finger salute. All chanted, "Tiger bait! Tiger bait!"

When the buses stopped a block or two from the stadium so the band could march in, uniformed and plain-clothes policemen joined the band's step off. Other members of the Corps of Cadets who also made the trip formed up in front of the band with their cadences. "Back in 1944, Texas Aggies went to war," they shouted. As the band opened up with the starting notes of the War Hymn, it started to rain. (Listen to audio of the band's march in at tx.ag/LSUMarchIn).

The band stayed in perfect step, pitch and composure as they marched through shouting LSU fans, whooping Ags, and puddles of rain.

They marched right into the stadium and took their seats.

Stadiums can be loud, said Kasey Korbacher '15, a clarinet player and civil engineering major from Oceans-

ide, Cal. So to communicate, drum majors depend on using hand signals. For example, to share that the band needs to play Patton March, the drum major will make a saluting motion. Each of the band's arrangements have a different hand signal.

Located right in the end zone, the band has great seats, but, "Our first job is to play for the team," said Korbacher. "As much as we'd like to be normal spectators, that's not our job here."

So, that's what they did. For the entire first half, the Aggie Band stayed focused on what was happening on the field. They watched their director. They stayed standing. Their attention was on one thing, supporting the team and being the 12th man.

With a few minutes left in the second quarter, band members started preparing for their halftime performance. Ditching their long trench coats, they opened themselves up to the rain and cold and lined up on the south end zone to shouts from the opposing team's fans.

"Ladies and gentlemen, now forming at the south end of Tiger Stadium, the nationally famous Fightin' Texas Aggie Band," the speakers echoed. The drum major took his first steps as the bugle line spaced out to form a V.

"Recall! Step off on Hullabaloo!" he



TO WATCH THE BAND'S PERFORMANCE, VISIT TX.AG/AGGIEBANDLSU.

COURTESY OF THE CORPS OF CADETS ASSOCIATION

commanded, and the band responded with a powerful whoop. He blew his whistle twice, and the band opened up with the opening notes of the Aggie War Hymn.

They stepped off into the initial formation to move into contained countermarches, flanks, obliques, and moved to a Block T.

Among the hundreds of Aggies in the stands watching were Tyler Toppenberg '15, Brian Ellis '14, and Michael Diggs '14. They made the trip from College Station to support the football team and their fellow cadets. "It's an honor to stand for our band," said Toppenberg. "The band gives us so much to be proud of. We want to give them all the support we can, especially when they are on a rival's field."

Although, Toppenberg said, "It's easy to defend them because they defend themselves with their skill and professionalism."

The Aggie Band stands for everything that is good at Texas A&M, the men said. "They are pride and preci-

sion," Ellis said. "They are a great example of leadership," said Diggs.

Several members of the band are commissioned in the U.S. Armed Forces. "You're watching future officers march," Toppenberg said. The Corps of Cadets serves as an emblem for the selfless servanthood of all Aggies, he said. "The band is part of

that," he said.

Also in the stands was Ashley Armatys. "I love football," she said, "but one of the reasons I came to this game was to watch the Aggie Band perform."

When the band did its signature exit from the field in full sprint, the crowd cheered. (To watch the



THE FIGHTIN' TEXAS AGGIE BAND AT TIGER STADIUM.

COURTESY OF THE CORPS OF CADETS ASSOCIATION

band's halftime performance, visit tx.ag/AggieBandLSU.) Samantha Oudie '15, a piccolo player from San Antonio, said that some of the same LSU fans who were jeering her before the performance were the same ones with compliments after.

"Wherever they go, people are amazed at their precision and their unique style," said Bruce Bockhorn '71, host and writer of the *Texas Aggie Band Show*. While at the game, Bockhorn was told by an LSU fan that she came to the game specifically to see the Aggie Band "as she was told she would never forget the experience," he said. "When we went to Iowa State some years back, the gentleman that hosted us in the press box told us a similar story and how ISU had run newspaper ads promoting the band—and that was the only game that they sold out the entire season."

"All of the intelligence, music ability and marching ability in the world" cannot guarantee that an Aggie Bandsman will succeed, said Capt. Travis Almany, associate director of bands. "It's only through perseverance can these remarkable people do it," he said.

An Aggie Bandsman finds out their senior year that "they were good enough and proud enough and tough enough to be called the Noble Men of Kyle," said Lt. Col. Jay Brewer '81, senior associate director.

GAME OVER

Texas A&M was outscored by LSU during that football game, but as Kaci Bramhall '11, another Aggie fan in the stands, said: "As Aggies, we never lose halftime."

Before the game, some opposing fans lined the streets in aggression against the Aggies. But, when the game was over, and the band lined up to walk back to the buses, about 50 LSU fans stayed back to clap in appreciation for the band.

"Great job, band. Good game. Great job," said Scott Thorn, of Lake Charles. He and his wife, Bonnie, were waiting by the buses to share their encouragement. "I don't always stay to watch the different bands' halftime performances, but I stayed to watch yours," he said. It was the precision that captured his attention. "Just pure military precision. There were no mistakes. You don't get that with other college bands," he said.

The Aggie Band slept in Baton Rouge that night and loaded the bus the next morning for home.

These band members have to keep up with classes, Corps of Cadets responsibilities, plus daily 7 a.m. band practice during football season. "There's really something different about the Aggie Band," said David Alfano '16. His high school friends know he marches in the Aggie Band, "But it is so much more than that. It's everything."

"That's such a broad answer but

SPREADING THE AGGIE SPIRIT

861,122

NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO SAW THE AGGIE BAND BAND PERFORM IN PERSON AT THE HALFTIMES OF EIGHT HOME GAMES, ONE AWAY GAME AND ONE BOWL GAME IN 2013.

...

3.5 MILLION

NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE WATCHED THE CLASS OF 2014 BAND MEMBERS AFTER A TOTAL OF 46 PERFORMANCES OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS.

he's completely right," said Adam Trahan '16.

Even with practice two hours a day added to the weight of being a student, Justin O'Connor '16 said, "I look forward to the opportunity to see what happens. The Aggie Band is the place to be."

The band shares a camaraderie with former students like very few current students experience, said Jessica Knox '16. "Even though the band is made up of different outfits, we still feel like more of a group," she said. "When we meet former students who were in the band, there's a cool connection there."

The Aggie Band changes lives, said Fuss, the bus captain. She's traveled and grown in her leadership. She's made unforgettable connections with her buddies, including an earthquake in Oklahoma one year.

As band members spotted the sign marking the Texas border, she said she was proud of the band and the job they did in Louisiana. "Someone who despises our football team can still connect and appreciate A&M's band. We represent our organization very well." 🍌



TO READ A CONVERSATION WITH THE THREE DIRECTORS OF THE AGGIE BAND, VISIT TX.AG/AGGIEBANDDIRECTORS.