



Gig 'Em, Tessies

Harking Back To A Flirting Time Between Texas A&M And TSCW

BY LANE STEPHENSON '77

Remember when Texas A&M and Texas Woman's University had a cozy tie-in?

Older "ol' Ags" may be in the best position to remember—and some may well still be enjoying blissful marriages as a result of that institutional relationship, but how many proverbially "tied the knot" will never be known.

It all goes back to a time when both institutions were far different from what they are today. For starters: the names and enrollment restrictions. Back in the heyday of the institutional courtship, it was the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas and the Texas State College for Women. Texas A&M was then all male, and the other institution, as its name clearly indicated, all female. They were the only two public colleges in Texas so segregated, so to speak. Natural attractions, hence, were in play.

Going even further back, to the late 1800s, when the idea was first broached of creating a "girls' industrial school," there was a time when the distinct possibility existed that the two institutions would be co-located in College Station, or what back then might have been better described as the fringe of Bryan. According to Texas A&M Professor of History Emeritus Henry Dethloff in *A Centennial History of Texas A&M University, 1876-1976*, his two-volume history of the institution published as part of its 100-year celebration, the idea started during Lawrence Sullivan "Sully" Ross' time as governor and continued when he became president of Texas A&M in 1891. At some

Aggies and Sweetheart candidates enjoying a meal in 1941 or '42. Photo courtesy of the TWU Libraries Woman's Collection, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

point soon thereafter he was reportedly "besieged" by promoters of the idea, who included Bryan businessmen seeing the potential for economic gains. A committee formed to pursue the idea published a brochure titled *Reasons for Locating the Girls' Industrial School at the A&M College*. In addition to underscoring the potential economic bonanza for the region, the proponents reasoned that the young women would have a "refining influence" on "the boys at A&M."

Folks at the University of Texas also were enamored with the idea of hosting the proposed school for women. They petitioned the Legislature to establish it as an adjunct to UT, arguing that the Austin locale "was better suited for girls." Aggie backers countered that Aggieland would provide a "more moral environment for women." The battle was on. Texas A&M was favored in a 11-10 vote in the Texas Senate, but the bill failed to win approval in the House of Representatives. The rest is history: The new college was established some 200 miles away from both institutions, in Denton, and initially took the name of the College of Industrial Arts—the first CIA.

Even so, as Dethloff notes in his book, the Texas A&M Board of Directors—as the Board of Regents was then known—still took action to adopt the new institution as Texas A&M's "sister school."

From that perspective, it's perhaps more than coincidence that TWU boasts maroon and white as its school colors.

Even the Dallas Morning News paid attention when the relationship between the two schools was flying high. For example, in its Oct. 24,



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1940, edition, the paper ran a story with a headline proclaiming “2,000 College Girls Have Date With 5,000 A.-M. Boys Nov. 9.” The article started off thusly: “It will be boy meets girl on a scale to stagger the imagination of any movie producer when the student body of Texas State College for Women at Denton comes to Dallas Nov. 9 for its annual mass date with Texas A&M College.” The article went on to explain that the dating revolves around the Texas A&M-SMU football game and SMU’s homecoming. The hometown school and its homecoming received decidedly second billing.

Somewhere along the way, students at the Denton school became known as “Tessies”—at least in Aggieland. Whether it was universally embraced as a term of endearment is unclear.

What is known is that only a “Tessie” was for decades eligible to become the official “Aggie Sweetheart.” Selection of a new one each year was a major event for students at both institutions. Typically, several young ladies from TWU—“nominees”—were invited to College Station for a round of activities that included interviews, social events and Sunday morning services at All Faiths Chapel (where some Tessies and Aggies later tied the knot, just as, presumably, some did at TWU’s landmark Chapel in the Woods), with the selection announced that afternoon. The new “Aggie Sweetheart” was then formally introduced at halftime of the Aggies’ football game with SMU or TCU, depending on which school the Aggies were playing that particular year in either Dallas or Fort Worth.

The “Aggie Sweetheart” tradition faded out in the mid-1970s shortly after women became eligible to at-

tend Texas A&M. By that time approximately 4,000 women—then unflatteringly called “Maggies”—were enrolled. While other factors might have figured in, it was a fact of life that Aggie guys had increasingly fewer reasons to look further north than Northgate for potential sweethearts.

(The female enrollment now at Texas A&M—almost 30,000 when including its two branch campuses, Health Science Center and School of Law—is about twice as large as the size of the overall TWU student body, which now includes some men.)

When the relationship between Texas A&M and TWU was at its zenith, Aggies and Tessies didn’t just date. They competed, too—in endeavors ranging from debating to rifle team matches. Regarding marksmanship, the initial story about such competition in *The Battalion* in 1940 reported the Aggies won the regular match but then lost when they gave the Tessies a handicap. A 1942 story reported the Tessies winning the match with no mention of a handicap. Perhaps reflecting on how relations progressed, a 1948 *Batt* article focused on Aggies and Tessies holding a panel discussion about family relations.

Thanks to research by Bill Page of University Archives in Cushing Memorial Library, some other interesting articles have come to light concerning romantic links between Aggies and Tessies. One from the Bryan Eagle



Aggie football players with TSCW Sweetheart Anna Ruth Ashe in 1941 or '42. Photo courtesy of the TWU Libraries Woman’s Collection, Texas Woman’s University, Denton, Texas.

in 1927 spoke volumes: “C. I. A. Girls Know Writing of Letters,” notes the headline, followed by “Letters Written. Terms Reasonable. Reductions on those to Aggies . . .” The Battalion headlined this in 1945: “Other Girls Just Don’t Compare With the TESSIES, Student Poll Reveals.”

Some ol’ Ags will remember the well-organized—with institutional involvement—annual Corps Trips north when the Aggie footballers played SMU or TCU back in the old Southwest Conference heyday. Many of the Aggies found their way a bit further north to Denton and the TWU campus—or had made arrangements to meet their would-be Tessie sweethearts in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. In some instances, the arrangements included organized train trips from Denton, just as there were some train trips from College Station.

However, just as the train doesn’t stop in Aggieland anymore—passenger trains don’t even pass through anymore—the romantic embers that once glowed between countless Aggies and Tessies have unquestionably dimmed. Still, who is to say there are not occasionally instances of love popping up today between contemporary Aggies and Tessies—and even leading to matrimonial bliss matching that of yesteryear? Not yours truly.

P. S. The romance may be gone, but the two universities have continued over the years to be institutionally engaged—cooperating in several academic and service endeavors.



LEFT: Cadets carry a sign announcing a 1938 postgame dance in Dallas. Photo courtesy of the TWU Libraries Woman’s Collection, Texas Woman’s University, Denton, Texas.