A&M’s First ‘Twelfth Man’ Tells How Tradition Was Born

Every football fan in the Southwest knows of the great Aggie tradition of the Twelfth Man. But many of them have classified it as one of the gridiron’s thrilling legends. Even many Aggies, past and present, know very little of the real story. But The Press has found the Twelfth Man. And here, for the first time, he tells his complete story.—THE EDITOR.

By VERNON SMYTHE
Press Special Writer

It’s a raw, wintry day Jan. 2 in Dallas, and the year is 1922. A young coach named D. X. Bible walks along the sideline of a windswept football field and ponders a strange predicament.

His Texas Aggies are playing Centre College’s famed Praying Colonels in a game tabbed as the Dixie classic. You’ve heard of these Praying Colonels.

They’re the bunch who smashed Harvard in one of football’s most thunderous upset of all time.

They placed three men on the all-American team, and their quarterback, a round-faced youngster named Bo McMillan, has been acclaimed as the finest football performer in the nation.

Aggies in Trouble

Now the first quarter is ending and the inspired Aggies are playing the highly-favored Colonels to a standstill. Yet the Aggies are in trouble — big trouble.

Already the 18-man A&M football team has been reduced to 11 men as a result of injuries. The bench has been wiped clean. And there are three long quarters still to play.

D. X. Bible glances at his empty bench. Something has to be done. It has to be done fast, too.

And what he does gives birth to one of America’s greatest collegiate traditions.

Turning toward the wooden bleachers, D. X. Bible summons a young man from the stands to take a place in a Texas A&M uniform, to sit on the Texas Aggie bench, and to be prepared to enter the game if he is needed.

Spirit of Aggieland

And thus came into being the tradition of Texas A&M’s Twelfth Man—that symbol of the Spirit of Aggieland which demands that every Texas Aggie shall hold himself ready at all times to serve as he is needed.

And from it, too, has grown the ritual that brings all members of the Texas A&M cadet corps to their feet at the start of every Aggie football game and keeps them there until the game ends.

"The complete story?"

Dr. E. King Gill of Corpus Christi smiles at the question.

"Sure, I’ll be glad to tell you about it exactly as I remember it.

"But, don’t forget, that was a long time ago.

Dr. Gill’s Own Story

If anyone can tell the full story, Dr. Gill can.

Today, he is a physician—an eye, ear, nose and throat specialist. He has practiced medicine in Corpus Christi since 1934.

But back on that day in 1922, he was the young man singled out by D. X. Bible to step from the stands and to uphold the name of Texas A. & M.

"Let me start at the very first and I think you will understand better how this thing came about,” Dr. Gill says.

"I got out of high school in Dallas in the spring of 1920 and entered A. & M. that fall.

"I went to the old Oak Cliff High School. They call it Adelphi now. I always liked athletics. At Oak Cliff, I lettered in football, basketball and baseball. I also was captain of the basketball team.

"During my freshman year at A. & M., I won numbers in all three sports. But I guess my favorite sport of the three was basketball. That probably was because I seemed to play it best.

"I point out these things because they have a bearing on what happened Jan. 2, 1922, in Dallas.

A Cage Star

"It was during my sophomore year that the Dixie Classic was played.

"I went out for the football team that fall and I was a substitute back. But I dropped off the team about the middle of the season to start work with the basketball squad. I was in line for a regular spot on the basketball team, and the coaches figured I ought to give my full attention.

"We really had a fine football team that year.

"As well as I can remember, the game against Centre College was one of the first major intercollegiate games that a team from the Southwest had been able to schedule.

"But there was no doubt that Centre was favored. 'Favored decisively — in fact.

"The Colonels had that victory over Harvard under their belts, and, besides Bo McMillan, they had a couple of new boys in Ted Weaver and Red Robertson, who could play just about any position.

"All three of them—McMillan, Weaver and Robertson—were all Americans.
Worked for Jinx

"Nothing could have been more removed from my mind that day than the thought of playing or even getting into uniform.

"During training for the game, we had lost our regular fullback—a boy named Buckner—but I don't guess anybody thought we would run out of players.

"Just before the game started, I was standing down near the Aggie bench.

"Jinx Tucker, the old Waco sports writer, came by.

"We knew each other casually.

"Jinx was on his way to the press box and he wanted somebody to spot A&M players for him.

"He asked me if I would. Naturally I was glad to do it.

"The game was played in an old wooden stadium that was torn down long ago. I can't even remember its name. It wasn't far, though, from where the Cotton Bowl now is located.

"The trouble started right after the game got under way.

Deeper in Trouble

"I don't guess A&M has played more inspired ball. And I don't guess there ever has been a time when a team suffered more casualties.

"Our entire starting backfield and one backfield replacement went out in the first quarter.

"Sammy Sanders, if I'm not mistaken, was the first to go out.

"Sammy was one of our halfbacks, and, incidentally, he is an eye, ear, nose and throat man himself now. Practiced in Memphis, Tenn.

"I think they knocked Sammy cold.

"At any rate, he had to be taken off the field.

"Heinie Weir, our captain, ran down through the bleachers and jumped onto the field.

"'Tll never forget what he said to me.

"'Hey,' he said, 'it doesn't look like I'm going to have enough players to finish the game. You may have to go in there and stand around for a while.'

"That was all there was to it.

"The next thing I knew, they hustled me under the grandstand.

"They didn't have dressing rooms in those days.

"They handed me Heinie Weir's uniform and told me to get into it.

"I got into it, all right—as fast as I could.

"I don't know what they put on Heinie.

"My clothes, maybe.

"Frankly, I don't remember.

"I do remember, though, that I was the only player on the bench.

"I stayed there all the rest of the game.

A&M Won, Too

"All of our boys managed to survive from that point forward, and they even went on to win the game.

"That is the story—exactly as it happened.

"I wish I could say I ran for the winning touchdown.

"But I didn't.

"I simply got ready and waited—just in case I was needed.

"It took the tradition of the Twelfth Man several years to come into its own.

"King Gill moved faster.

"The following season, he became a regular fullback on the Aggie grid team and emerged as an on-the-field hero of A&M's 14-1 romp over the University of Texas Longhorns.

"He smashed over for one touchdown and provided the long-gainer that set up the other one.

"The game was played at old Clark Field in Austin, and it remains to this day as the last Aggie victory over a Longhorn eleven in Austin."

From there he went back to Greenville—as commanding officer of the base hospital at Majors Army Air Field. He wound up his duty with the Far Eastern Air Forces at Fort McKinley in the Philippine Islands.

He left service with the rank of colonel.

Dr. Gill has been active in both professional and civic circles in Corpus Christi and South Texas. He and Mrs. Gill live quietly in one of Corpus Christi's top residential areas.

Tradition Was Born

The Twelfth Man tradition? "I really couldn't say for sure how it caught hold," Dr. Gill says.

"Somebody else would be much better qualified to answer that one.

"There was, of course, some talk about the incident immediately after the game.

"I know it was mentioned in a few newspapers.

"But there wasn't a whole lot said.

"I really didn't hear much about it until about 15 years later.

"It caught hold. I think, at the time A. & M. football teams were on top of the heap—when John Kimbrough and those boys were in school.

"But by that time, of course, the cadet corps had begun the practice of standing at football games."

Still a Fan

Dr. Gill still attends a good many A&M football games.

But the original Twelfth Man uses the same factors to urge him to games as does the ordinary football fan.

"I guess the number of games I attend each season usually is dictated by just how good our first 11 men are," he says.

mechanical engineering. That fall, he coached at Greenville High School. A year later, he entered the Baylor University School of Medicine in Dallas.

Graduating from Baylor in 1928, Gill went directly into the Army Medical Corps. He remained in service until 1934, when he returned to civilian life and took up residence in Corpus Christi.

During World War II, Dr. Gill returned to the Medical Corps for five years, serving at Goodfellow Field in San Angelo and at the School of Aviation Medicine at Randolph Field near San Antonio.