

The Texas Aggie Bonfire: Ritual, Identity, and the Constitution of Place

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Between 1909, when legend says it began, and 1999, when it collapsed killing twelve students, the Texas Aggie Bonfire grew into a powerful symbol of the student community at Texas A&M University. Participation in Bonfire construction was an ordeal and rite of passage into the Aggie brotherhood. The validity of this conversion was verified by a powerful enthusiastic response to the sight of the burning logs. The Bonfire ritual was thus central to a more generalized form of life that gave rise to a strong Aggie identity. Like every identity, Aggie identity entailed a reorientation of the individual to the values of the group. These included valued locations, or places, that become apparent to inductees in the course of identity formation. Using Charles Taylor's model of identity formation and a phenomenological understanding of the formation of a lifeworld, this paper will use the relatively simple example of Bonfire to illustrate the connection between ritual, identity, and the constitution of place.