

RICE SPIRIT

A Story about the 1957 football game between Rice
Institute and Texas A. & M. College (Ranked Number
One in the Nation)

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PROLOGUE

The red candles in the Commons and in dormitory windows had long since flickered out as the morning light began to poke around the shadowy crannies on the South Main Street campus. Houston newspapers report that the sun rose at exactly 6:47 a.m., central standard time, on Saturday, November 16, 1957. Dwight Eisenhower was enjoying the first year of his second term as president of the United States. The Russian satellite, Sputnik 1, was beginning to slow in its complacency-shattering orbit around the earth. Scandalous Brigitte Bardot's titillating motion picture, "And God Created Woman" was coming to Houston's Tower Theater, while angelic Pat Boone's gentle "April Love" would provide a tame rebuttal at the Majestic. The Dow Jones Industrial Average had closed the week at 439.35, down from its July peak of 520.77.

The undefeated football team from Texas A. & M. College was ranked number one in the land by both the A. P. and

U.P.I, polls. And the Aggies were in town to play the Rice Institute Owls, tied with four other teams for fifteenth in the U.P.I, and number twenty in the A.P.

THE OWLS

Twenty five miles away, at the Houston Yacht Club, Rice football players began to rise from their fitful slumber and contemplate the day's challenge. They were fit and they were ready. Although rain had required indoor workouts on Monday and Tuesday, they had scrimmaged hard, until dark, on Wednesday. The team was healthy for the first time since early September and the week's drills had been the best of the year.

Line coach Joe Davis, who always scouted the Aggies and the University of Texas, had given an excellent scouting report on the Aggies and their vaunted senior All-American candidates, John David Crow and Charley Krueger. Coach Jess Neely had installed a nine man line defense to stall the Aggie power. He installed offensive plays using an unbalanced line and an overshifted backfield, to help the Owl's own running attack.

Although Rice and its starting quarterback, King Hill, led the Southwest Conference in total offense and passing, the Aggies had not allowed a passing touchdown all year, intercepting fourteen enemy aerials in their eight wins, shutting out four opponents. Rice intended to attack on the ground, play tough defense, challenge the Aggies to abandon their running attack, and play error-free football, to win the game.

Coach Neely had shrewdly decided to house the team out of town after Friday's practice, rather than in the customary

Plaza Hotel near the school. He explained that the student and team "spirit right now is as good as any since I've been at Rice", but he knew that the exploding enthusiasm had to be preserved until game time, not be allowed to burn out--so it could feed on the Aggies, not on itself. Thus the team was taken by bus to this rustic, out of the way place.

Many thoughts ran through the minds of senior tri-captains, King Hill, Matt Gorges and Larry Whitmire as they prepared to face A. & M. for the last time. Most aggravating was the gnawing realization that they had never beaten the Aggies. They lost by two touchdowns as freshmen. They were humiliated by the miraculous Aggie finish in 1955, their sophomore year. And last year's 21-7 thumping by the Aggie team that won the Southwest Conference title and finished the season with a 9-0-1 record had not been as close as the score would indicate.

Then there was the grating awareness that their Rice careers were winding down and they'd not yet challenged for the championship. The 1957 season had started well, with promising victories over L.S.U. and Stanford. But losses in three of the next four games had been characterized by uninspired play, especially against Clemson, when the Owls seemed simply to have run out of gas, and will, suffering an embarrassing 20-7 loss that some said was the worst game ever played in Rice stadium's eight seasons. After Clemson one Houston sportswriter commented that, "the deterioration of the Rice eleven since the Duke game has been steady--and shocking." Morale had been worse than shot; it had seemed non-existent.

But the minds of these three leaders and their compatriots dwelled mostly on the exciting developments

that had taken place on campus since that Clemson debacle; unbelievable developments that during the last ten days had unified the student body and converted a hang-dog whipped pup of a team into a fierce, proud, hungry, fired up unit whose members believed in themselves; believed in their ability to beat the number one ranked team in the country; believed they could win the conference championship; and were on fire to face those challenges.

THE SPIRIT

In the pain and discouragement that had followed the Clemson fiasco, some of the players had complained to the cheerleaders, Carolyn Dearmond, Harvin Moore, Mike Smelley and Homer Spencer. They accused the students of not caring about the team, revealing their feelings of separation, isolation. In response, the cheerleaders had prepared posters which were displayed in the men's residential colleges, with large photographs of the football player members of each college. The players were introduced at evening meals and were applauded by their fellow students.

On Friday night before the Arkansas game, at the homecoming bonfire, spirit seemed to be reviving. Then the team made a good effort against a strong Razorback eleven. With resurging fan support, the owls had withstood a strong Hog rally, winning 13-7, bringing the team's conference record to 2-1, good enough for second place. Though the Aggies were favored by 6 1/2 points, the Owls had a shot at the title.

Then it happened. Spurred by the Arkansas victory, challenged by the A. & M. number one ranking, the student body seemed to come alive, to catch fire. It began about ten

o'clock, Tuesday, when the misty night was shattered by a blast of bugles. From a window overlooking the Hanszen college quadrangle burst the rousing strains of the "Aggie War Hymn." From nearby Baker and Will Rice Colleges, and from Weiss, farther down the road, young men left their books and bull sessions, hastening to the sound, to find out what was happening.

The first rumor to circulate was that an Aggie had been caught on campus. This proved to be false, but to cheerleaders Moore and Spencer, and to team captain Gorges, the hundreds of milling students provided the perfect opportunity for a spontaneous pep rally. Gorges was called on for a speech. He held high a broomstick he had brought with him for some unexplained reason, like a scepter, and loudly proclaimed, "...". The details of the remarkable, well received comments have been lost in the sands of time, but the essence, loudly, approvingly received by the boisterous, rowdy throng, was that Rice would be ready to meet and beat the Aggies on Saturday. The students cheered wildly.

As the roar subsided, a few began a vulgar chant about Aggies (once again, the passage of time has had its blurring effect, and the precise wording is lost, however, the reference to what Aggies "eat" was not complimentary) and the catchy epithet was soon being hurled skyward off the tongues of four hundred male voices, loudly, fiercely, defiantly. More students came running, the dorms nearly emptying.

Moore and Spencer then led a few of the more refined, traditional Rice cheers, members of the band played the fight song, and there were several more speeches before the rally broke up around ten-thirty. Students wandered back to their rooms, adrenalin flowing.

The next day mock graves appeared on the grounds, between the men's colleges and the library—large mounds of earth, each bearing a cross, each cross containing the name of a different Aggie--Crow --Bryant--Krueger--Taylor. The phrase, "Beat the Aggies", began to appear on chalkboards in every classroom, on bulletin boards, on walls, posters, everywhere.

Aloofness, separation, and apathy disappeared. Encouragement, cohesiveness, and a palpable sense of unity took their place. A song was composed, a letter was penned from the student body to the team, created just for the Aggie game, expressly in support of the Rice team's effort against the number one ranked team in the country. The students considered the Aggie Corps' legendary "twelfth man" to be a challenge to their own school spirit and were prepared to respond.

There were rallies every night following the ten o'clock closing of the library, each heralded by the piercing blast of the "Aggie War Hymn". The roaring enthusiasm that permeated the campus reached new heights each night, but it reached a crescendo on Thursday. Coaches Davis and Neely, the full band, and the entire football team turned out for that one. The players were introduced, the coaches gave short talks. The senior football players were called out individually, and those who were not overcome with emotion gave short, fiery speeches about Saturday's impending fight. Cheers followed cheers, lusty songs led to fervent chants. Never had cheers reverberated through the cloisters of this beautiful campus with more intensity. Some who were there believe that no Rice student body had ever felt more at one with a team about to defend Rice's Honor on the gridiron than

that student body, going into that November contest with Texas A. & M. And perhaps no football team ever felt closer to a student body than that football team did as they prepared, and looked forward to their greatest gridiron challenge. Perhaps as no other Rice team before them had, they felt that they represented their school, realizing that their classmates were really behind them, supporting them, and the students feeling that they shared the challenge with the team on the field. It was awesome. Palpable.

THE AGGIES

Less than a mile from the Rice campus, the Aggies had spent the night at the luxurious Shamrock Hotel. One imagines that the number one team in the land slept deeply and trouble-free. They were, after all, eight and zero for the year, leading the conference in defense, allowing more than one score in only their first game, and they were riding the crest of an eighteen game undefeated string that went back to the beginning of the 1956 season.

Four years earlier, when the seniors on this team had been recruited by the new coach, Paul W. "Bear" Bryant, one of them had scrawled on a meeting room blackboard, the heady prediction: "Conference Championship--1956--National Championship--1957", and they were right on schedule. Last year their record had been 9-0-1, a tie to the University of Houston in Rice Stadium being the only blemish. And this year they had only 4-3 Rice and 5-2-1 Texas in their path. How could they miss?

The Aggie line was anchored by All American, Charley Krueger. Its backfield was led by John David Crow, at six feet two inches and two hundred ten pounds, bigger than many

of the Rice linemen who would have to tackle him. Crow's running and defense, his power and speed, made him the favorite to win the Heisman trophy, awarded annually to the outstanding college football player in the country.

If the Aggies had a weakness it was lack of depth. Ten starters had averaged fifty minutes per game, quality substitutes providing respite for only a few of the first stringers. Their last two games had been extremely close. Were the Aggies getting tired?

Texas A. & M. football players had their own special memories of their three-year mastery over Rice. As sophomores they had engineered the most miraculous comeback in the history of the Southwest Conference, right there in Rice Stadium. The heavily favored Ags trailed 12-0 with just over four minutes to play in the game. Crow had been knocked out of the game. Then Lloyd Taylor, a sophomore third string halfback, caught a punt on his own forty-two yard line and raced fifty-five yards to the Rice three. Two plays later he scored a touchdown and kicked the extra point, narrowing the lead to 12-7 with only 3:18 to go.

The Aggies then recovered the onside kick everyone knew was coming. On the first play from scrimmage another sophomore, Jimmy Wright from Edinburg, lofted a forty-three yard pass to Taylor, who hauled it in going full speed at the five yard line and scampered into the end zone for a touchdown. After tacking on the extra point, Taylor's fourteen points in forty-six seconds had put the Aggies ahead 14-12, with 2:32 still left to play. A desperation Rice pass was intercepted and the Aggies scored yet a third touchdown, completing Rice's

humiliation with 1:10 left in the game. The final score was 20-12 and the miracle Aggies were on their way.

THE COACHES

"Bear" Bryant

If John David Crow was to be the Joshua who would lead the Fighting Farmers into the promised land of a national championship, then the mastermind, the Moses who had started them on their journey and etched in stone the rules by which they would be governed, was their tall, dark, raw boned, gruff, slow drawling, stormy head coach, Paul W. "Bear" Bryant. Forty-three years old, from Fordyce, Arkansas, he had been hired away from the University of Kentucky four years earlier for the express purpose of bringing the Aggies a national championship, a mightily coveted prize they had won before, in 1939.

Bryant was considered by many to be nothing but a hired gun, a bully, a ruffian with a win-at-all cost philosophy that made the genteel old timers in the conference feel more than a little uncomfortable. His first year at Aggieland enhanced the rough and tumble image. He took two bus loads of players, over 75 remnants of a losing team, to a Devil's Island of a training camp at Junction, Texas in August. He drilled them twice a day, before dawn, in the scorching sunlight, and until after dark, "finding out", he said, "just who wanted to play football." When the smoke cleared, only twenty-nine players had stuck it out. The rest had quit. As Gene Stallings, one of the survivors, said, "we went out there on two buses, but it only took one to bring us back."

Bryant's 1954 freshmen were among the most prized high school athletes in America, recruited to provide the foundation for the national championship team. And the exuberance of the effort had been expensive--two years N.C.A.A. and Southwest Conference probation for recruiting excesses. One could almost hear the tongues clucking, as the establishment shook its collective head in disapproval at what A. & M. had brought into their rarified midst. Though the Aggies had won the conference championship in 1956, their disgrace denied them the champion's right of playing in the Cotton Bowl, runner-up T.C.U. filling the slot. But that penance had now been served, and this year's team was to provide the fulfillment of the prophecy. Those 1954 freshmen were now seniors. This was what it had all been about.

Bryant was a good coach as well as being slick and a persuasive recruiter. He saw to it that his players were tough, well conditioned, grounded in the basics of blocking and tackling. He played what became known as "hard-nosed" football--ram it down their throats offense and defense.

But, even in the midst of nailing the lid on the national championship, controversy haunted Bryant. Nasty rumors were being spread that he would leave College Station at the end of the season and become head coach at his alma mater, the University of Alabama. The president of that institution had been quoted as saying that the Crimson Tide would be hiring a coach with a tough winning tradition, using comparative terms that pointed to no one so much as they pointed to Bryant. The story broke in an article by Jack Gallagher in the Houston Post on the morning of the Rice game, along with Bryant's evasive quasi-denial: "I have recommended a coach for Alabama, and it isn't Bear Bryant."

It was a fascinating distraction, providing an intangible dimension to a game that wasn't lacking for "hype" to begin with.

Jess Neely

By comparison, Rice's quiet, graying Jess Neely was rather dull copy. He'd been at Rice since 1940. His recruiting had always been conducted without fanfare. When high school seniors visited Rice, Neely didn't promise gridiron championships, but talked about the education they would receive. His teams were never picked to win the conference title. But they were steeped in fundamental skills, adhered to conservative game plans, relied heavily on the kicking game, developed slowly during the season, generally with a nucleus of seniors, and played their fiercest, best football during the month of November.

Since Neely's arrival on South Main, the Rice Owls had won or tied for the conference championship with relentless regularity, at intervals of three or four years, tying Arkansas in 1946 and winning outright in 1949 and 1953. Neely championship teams always had big quarterbacks who could run with the football as well as pass it; a cadre of tough, usually unheralded, linemen who blocked and tackled effectively, surely. Neely had also developed two All American ends, both of whom wore number 84, James "Froggy" Williams in 1949 and Bill Howton in 1951.

Neely was regarded as a southern gentleman, a man of class and character, genuinely genteel, traditionally traditional. He suited to a tee the image Rice wanted its coach to have. He was reserved, humble, quiet, scholarly. He had a law degree from Vanderbilt. Neely worked under a year-to-year gentleman's agreement, for an undisclosed salary,

while Bryant had a highly publicized pact with seven years left, at a high salary and with a fringe benefit package that were pretty much common knowledge. Yet Neely seemed more permanent, almost an institution, Bryant ephemeral, like a truck driving through town in the middle of the night. It should be noted that by 1957 Bryant was becoming something of an institution himself, four of the seven Southwest Conference coaches having come to work more recently than he.

It is worth mentioning that despite its October disappointments, Neely's 1957 Rice team had lost only one conference game; was characterized by a crew of tough quick linemen; had two of the best running and passing quarterbacks in the country (King Hill and Frank Ryan); and had a junior end, leading the conference in pass receiving, who wore the number 84 (Buddy Dial). The team was comprised mostly of seniors. It was now November. And it had been four years since the Southwest Conference champion had worn the blue and gray of Rice. Could this be another "Neely November?"

GAME DAY

Red candles had been left burning in the Commons and in dormitory windows through Friday night, a rarely invoked tradition designed to ward off evil (Aggie) spirits.

The same evening a banner proclaiming, "Texas A&M-- National Champs," spanning Main Street near a large downtown hotel, had been pirated away by a group of Rice students, and appeared the next day, hanging from the top of the Fondren library, saying "Chumps" instead.

On Saturday morning a crowd estimated at 50,000 turned out to watch the Aggie corps loosen up for the game with a march down Main Street behind their impressive band, while

students on the Rice campus tried unsuccessfully to concentrate on classroom lectures.

At noon, as fans of both schools moved toward Rice stadium with moist palms and heightened pulse rates, the temperature neared eighty degrees, the humidity stood at a civilized, though still draining, seventy-four percent.

This was it! Tomorrow was here! Rice students, athletes and non, felt butterflies in their stomachs--all were peculiarly involved, terribly involved, magnificently involved.

The approach to Rice Stadium was noted on a hundred signs directing motorists, to the parking lots. Within the hour seventy-two thousand screaming partisans would occupy the double-decked concrete oval east of the Rice campus. Men and women carrying binocular cases, chair backs, programs and pennants were streaming toward the concrete battleground that today would hold its largest crowd in history. Visitors from College Station in knee length chocolate colored boots, gray flared trousers and olive jackets, khaki shirts and ties, swaggered toward the game site as only Aggie seniors can, campaign hats at a jaunty angle. Pliant dates with gleaming teeth, and white chrysanthemums streaming maroon and white silk ribbons, adorned their flexed olive elbows. Rice fans in wilting starched shirts, some in coats and ties, some already in shirtsleeves, with dates whose 'mums trailed blue and gray streamers, noted their numerical disadvantage and quietly headed for their vantage point in the lower east stands where they would raise their voices with those of their comrades.

Blue jacketed attendants and uniformed policemen waved and whistled the flood of cars and people across the Stadium's asphalt and grass borders. Scouts and their masters in olive uniforms and bright kerchiefs punctuated every entry way and aisle of the two levels of stands, ushering to their seats the throngs thrust through the turnstiles by ticket tearing attendants. Nearby, men and boys offered a cushioned deliverance from the stadium's backless board benches, while on the promenade that lay behind both decks, sellers of popcorn, peanuts, crackerjacks, hotdogs, soft drinks, and other necessities of life, set up shop and sold their wares. Other vendors with racks of souvenirs hawked pennants; pins; ribbons; buttons; toy footballs, Owls, and Aggies; and numerous other precious souvenirs. And, of course, there were the ubiquitous purveyors hollering that one "couldn't tell the players without a program," marketing their *sine qua non*, inside and out. The stands were full an hour before the scheduled two p.m. kickoff.

After the routine of the pre-game meal and the taping of knees and ankles had been completed, the thirty-six Rice athletes grimly, intently, filed into their dressing room beneath the south end of the stadium, to repeat, as they had so often, the ritual donning of their splendid dark blue and steel gray game uniforms: short-sleeved dark blue jerseys with steel gray numbers front and back, a steel gray band flanked by narrower steel gray stripes encircling the sleeves; knee length pants, a matching blue, bearing a single narrow, steel gray stripe down each side; a white cord belt with a two ring buckle; hard blue plastic headgear bisected by a single, narrow,

steel gray front to back stripe. The helmets had single and double bar metal face masks as well as adjustable dark brown fitted chin-straps, the latter being much sought after souvenirs by the adoring moppets who flooded onto the field after games. Shoulder, kidney, knee and thigh pads of hard plastic, foam rubber and kapok comprised the gladiatorial armor. White mid-calf socks matched the white laces of the freshly polished, cleat-soled, black shoes. They would look magnificently elegant as they trooped down the dark ramp into the sultry, overcast daylight.

Inside the arena, the sixteen hundred Rice students and their dates were squeezed in tight. Wedged among them were fifty or so blue and gray clad band members, hundreds of green and white costumed freshmen. And before them on the field loomed the large blue and gray plastic owl, "Sammy", the Institute's mascot idol, which was ceremoniously perched on the turf in front of the "worshiping" students, facing the field of battle. The few, the proud,...the LOUD!

There was no mistaking the Aggie section, either. A mosaic of khaki, interspersed with thousands of splotches of bright fall hues struck the eye in a kaleidoscope of color in the north end of the east stands. The gold of the brass trumpets, trombones, tubas, the glistening white of drums and the flashing silver of as many bugles, left no doubt as to the whereabouts of the Aggie band and their supporters, from the fifty yard line north, forty rows deep, stretching half way behind the north end zone, extending upward into the second deck. They constituted an impressive, noisy presence, representing well the nation's number one ranked team.

Blue and gray crepe adorned the crossbar and the uprights of the south goal posts, maroon and white, the

north. The soft green Bermuda carpet was beginning to show the brown traces of an earlier frost and the wear of too many cleats and too many sprawling athletes. Stark white chalk lines bound and measured the field. Small red flags sprouted from the corners of the field and at the goal lines whose crossing would mean so much to the gathering throng.

An ovation like they'd never heard before met the blue-clad Owls as they trotted onto the field first, to do their pre-game exercises. Keyed up, they felt like they were a foot off the ground as they entered the already full arena. There had never been a moment like it in their football lives. A rousing cheer greeted Jess Neely as he strolled onto the sunken stadium floor.

After Rice had been warming up for about five minutes, there was another rise in the noise level; first like the sound of a roaring train, then like the thunder of a thousand storms, it rose from the northeast stands, then from the entire assembled throng, as the white clad Aggie football team emerged from the ramp to make its entrance, once again, on a Houston gridiron.

There weren't many of them, a smallish squad. They moved slowly, effortlessly past the Rice team and student section, apparently oblivious of the thirty-six young men in blue football gear who would be their opponents that day. Their white uniforms bulged with pads and muscle. They were huge.

Then, through the tumult of the Aggie welcome, there was suddenly heard the chant of the Rice students: "KILL CROW!... KILL CROW!...KILL CROW!..." Loud. Louder than this group of students had ever yelled—audible over the Aggie din. Crow was the focus of their wrath. He seemed to

epitomize the enemy. He was the heart, mind, soul of the Aggie team; he was the roadblock, the Goliath who must be slain, the personification of evil who had to be destroyed. The Aggies scarcely glanced up, perhaps noted a volume they'd not heard from this group before, then passed on by, calmly, slowly, nonchalantly moving up the field to their warm-ups.

They'd been there before. They'd heard it all. Just like the old gunfighter in the west used to hear it. The upstart Owls were standing in the middle of the street, calling them out for one more showdown. They'd have to be taught a lesson. The white clad villains tightened their gun belts, emptied their glasses, adjusted their hats, and strolled through the swinging door into the blaze of the mid-afternoon sun.

And a few steps behind came the Aggies' paladin, their creator, their coach, Bear Bryant. Hat brim pulled low, tie loosened, white shirt unbuttoned at the collar, jacket open, grim, unperturbed by the uproar that met his entry, Bryant strolled in the footsteps of his team, between the derisive Rice students and their team, towards the tumultuous welcome of his adoring, worshipful followers.

THE GAME

Then, almost too quickly, it seemed, the warmup was over and the teams had trooped up the ramp for their last minute instructions. Just as suddenly they were back on the field, entering to earth shaking ovations. Then Hill, Gorges and Whitmire were at mid-field, shaking hands with Crow and Krueger, the Aggie co-captains. The official was about to flip the coin when the Aggie band began to play and the khaki mosaic began to sing the moving "Spirit of Aggieland".

Krueger and Crow doffed their helmets, followed by Hill and Whitmire. Only Gorges's head remained covered as he listened, jaw taut, eyes ablaze, fists clenched. He'd pay this foe no homage, nor temper his hate one whit. When Bryant had recruited Matt he'd told him that if he wanted to be on a championship team, he would choose A. & M. If not, he ought to go ahead and go to Rice. Gorges had chosen Rice, but if the Aggies thought they were champions, they'd have to prove it today.

As the last strains were rolling down, when the last "...fight, fight, fight....Farmers, Farmers, Fight, Haaay!" had died to a mere rumble, the small Rice band struck up "Rice's Honor," and every student sang as loud as he or she had ever sung. Gorges's helmet was in his hand. He stood at attention. His lips moved softly. Alumni in the stands and Houstonians who had adopted Rice as their school joined in to produce a volume and strength to the anthem that has never been equaled. Tears glistened in the eyes of a few who realized the intensity and depth of the student and athlete commitment that met in this moment.

Then the coin was flipping end over end, and the Aggies won the toss. Cheers from the ever standing khaki mosaic. The maroon and white elected to start with the twenty mile per hour wind at their backs. They would defend the south goal. Cheers from Rice--they'd get the ball first.

Then the teams lined up, and it all seemed to have developed so quickly, after building for so long. Four long years were winding down; a ten game season was two-thirds done; an electrifying week was fused in a Saturday meeting; an intense morning had become an explosive afternoon. Seventy-two thousand people were on their feet, roaring. The

referee's whistle blew, though no one heard it; his arm descended. Lloyd Taylor advanced toward the ball, kicking it end-over-end, floating northward, high in the breeze. The giants in white charged. The underdogs in blue grouped toward the center of the field, then threw themselves into the charging white mass. Bodies went flying. After a respectable return, the receiver disappeared beneath an avalanche of white.

Rice put the ball in play in front of the noisy Aggie fans, but the constant clamor didn't seem to bother them. The Aggie team seemed troubled by the unbalanced line, but held as Rice played very conservatively. After several exchanges of punts, the Aggies mounted a drive to the Rice thirty-five yard line, relying on the sharp passing of back-up quarterback, Charley Milstead. As the Ags were exhorted by their partisans to go for a touchdown, the Rice students urged: "HOLD THAT LINE!--HOLD THAT LINE!"

Milstead faded to pass again. He threw toward the Rice goal line. The beautiful spiral was right on target. At the last moment Hill cut in front of the intended receiver, leaped, grabbed the ball surely, like a picker plucks a grapefruit, at the Rice nine yard line, and returned the interception to the twenty-one. The stands erupted.

The Rice first team headed to the sideline for a well earned rest, and the second unit entered the game with Frank Ryan at the helm and three speed merchants, senior David Kelley, sophomores Gordon Speer and Sonny Searcy, in the backfield. Ryan masterminded a memorable drive.

Kelley hit the line twice, gaining seven yards. Then Ryan faked a hand-off and rolled wide, eluding the end and

scrambling for sixteen yards and a first down at the Rice forty-three. The Rice stands went wild: "GO RICE GO!...GO RICE GO!". The second unit was gouging out huge swaths of yardage against the number one team in the country!

Kelley hit the left side for four. Then Ryan pitched left to Searcy, and the speedster from Fort Worth raced wide for twelve yards. First down at the Aggie forty-one! Now the action was in front of the Rice students and they really let loose, quieting only when the team reached the line of scrimmage. Chilton came in for Kelley who had suffered a deep cut on his face, and was tackled for a one-yard loss in an effort aimed at the heart of the Aggie defense. Quiet in the Rice stands--joy in the corps seats. On second down Ryan faked to Chilton and pitched to Speer, a 9.8 sprinter who cleared the vaunted Aggie left side, turned up field and sped for sixteen yards before being knocked out of bounds at the A. & M. twenty-six.

"GO!...GO!...GO!...", thundered the Owl partisans, and go they did. The pitches to the outside had spread the Aggie middle, so with their linebackers leaning to the outside, Ryan handed the ball to the hard charging Chilton, who quickly burst up the middle past precision blocking. Crow made the touchdown saving tackle, after a gain of fifteen yards. First and ten at the Aggie ELEVEN yard line!

"WE WANT A TOUCHDOWN!--WE WANT A TOUCHDOWN!--" screamed the mob. Freshmen salaamed their blue and gray idol. Ryan barked the signals and took the snap; Chilton leapt toward the middle of the line; Ryan stepped to his left, held out the ball, faking to Chilton who smacked into the regrouped Aggies' midsection; Ryan tucked the ball under his own left arm, eluded defensive end John Tracy, and headed into the

secondary. Up came Crow to make the stop, but a Ryan stiff-arm left the All American sprawled on the turf. Ryan drove for the double stripes of the goal line, lunging, stumbling. He passed the five yard line, leaning forward, reaching out with the ball as he dove for the end zone. The ball CAME LOOSE and bounced around the one yard line. It lay there, a brown oval on a field of green, for an eternity--a fraction of a second. From a flock of blue-clad players, J.D.Smith* emerged and fell on the ball cradling it safely in his arms. Pandemonium! [*News reports credited Smith with recovery; Lester Veltman, with some support in the game films, has told the writer that it was he who recovered the ball] Although, arguably Ryan had reached across the goal line with the ball before his knee hit the turf, the referee marked the ball at the one yard line, second down, inches to go for a first down; a yard to go for a touchdown, as time ran out ending the first quarter.

As the tired Aggies headed north to defend that goal line, King Hill came back into the game replacing the quarterback who had engineered the brilliant drive. Ryan received a standing ovation as he moved toward the bench. Under prevailing substitution rules, players leaving the game could return only once in the same quarter. Neely had deliberated whether to remove Ryan, but decided he'd need Hill in the game to kick the extra point if Rice scored.

Rice put the ball in play at the Aggie one yard line, right in front of the A. & M. corps of cadets. Their yell leaders called for cheers and the chorus came down, drowning out thought, obliterating signals being called by Hill as he hunched behind his giant center. The snap came to Hill who gained a few inches with a sneak up the middle. First down!

"We're gonna do it! WE WANT A TOUCHDOWN!...WE WANT A TOUCHDOWN!" Gillis led the team to the line of scrimmage. Hill bowed under. Gillis snapped the ball. It popped into the air! It hung there, head high for an eternal instant, as the lines surged toward one another. Gillis, Gusler, Knight, Cawley, Smith, Veltman, Miller, the entire Rice offensive line, drove forward, pushing the charging Aggies back toward the goal line. Hill juggled the brown oval, then clasped it against his steel gray number twenty-six, and drove his cleats into the spongy turf. He dove over his spent linemen, over the prone Aggie defenders, into the end zone! TOUCHDOWN! The crescendo was deafening, the joy intense. Rice students in the stands were delirious; those on the field were elated.

Neither Neely nor Bryant betrayed any emotion. The Aggies on the field looked downcast, slightly dejected. It was only the second time that year they'd been behind.

Since the teams had changed ends of the field for the second quarter, Hill's extra point try would be with the wind. Bobby Williams took the perfect snap from center, placed the ball squarely on the hard flat tee, Hill kicked true and Rice led, 7-0. The band tuned up and the Rice students sang gleefully.

After the kickoff and an Aggie punt, Milstead intercepted a Hill pass near mid-field. He pushed the Maroon and White to the Rice eighteen with a beautiful pass to Gordon LeBoeuf. Gene Jones, Rice's stalwart first team right end chased Aggie quarterback Roddy Osborn for a thirteen yard loss, back to the Rice twenty-eight, on third down. Fourth and twenty-one. A. & M. lined up for what looked like a forty-five yard field goal attempt. The snap was to Osborn, waiting to hold for Taylor. Instead of placing the ball on

the kicking tee, he jumped to his feet and sprinted to the left. It looked like he was going to run until the last instant, when he looked down field and lofted a pass to Crow, who caught it near the sideline at about the fifteen yard line. Ryan hit him solidly, knocking him out of bounds at the twelve yard line, short of a first down. Delirium!

The half ended with the score still 7-0 and an appreciative roar went up from the crowd as both teams disappeared into the tunnel. The Aggie band put on its usual fine halftime show and the Rice band sounded unusually good following them. Thirty minutes of football to go.

The heat and intense action had taken their toll on both squads. Neely elected to start the second half with the rested and imminently successful number two unit. Hill started at quarterback because Ryan had re-injured his knee tackling Crow on the fake field goal pass play.

A clip on the kickoff forced Rice to start on its own five yard line. A short Hill punt against the twenty mile per hour wind gave the Aggies excellent field position on the Rice thirty-seven. The Aggies moved steadily against stubborn resistance to inside the twenty, when a jarring Chilton tackle stopped Crow and the Maroon one yard shy of a first down at the Rice sixteen.

Another promising A. & M. drive came a cropper when Gillis knocked the ball loose from McClelland after a nifty pass reception, recovering it at the Rice eleven. Rice was holding on, but barely, rising up again and again to knock the ball loose or head off an Aggie assault. The first team was back in as shadows began to edge across the field.

Relentless Aggie pressure finally hit pay dirt. On third down, Hoelscher was hit, fumbled, and the alert Aggies recovered at the Rice fourteen yard line.

The Aggie band played--the corps roared--and the throng wondered whether the Aggies would finally get their express train back on the track. Three plays right in front of the khaki mosaic yielded eight yards. Would Rice hold again? Fourth and two at the six. Osborn took the snap, slid to his right, faked a handoff up the middle, and bolted four yards to the Rice two yard line. First down!

"HOLD THAT LINE!...HOLD THAT LINE!" But now the Aggies would not be denied. And there would be no resort to finesse here, either--no risk of another costly fumble. Osborn carried, once--twice--thrice. Rice held on, grimly determined. As time ran out in the third quarter, the Aggies were still inches short of the goal line. The fourth down attempt would be made in front of the Rice students. They rose to exhort their tired blue-clad compatriots for one last valiant effort. But the number one team had its pride and courage too and this time Osborn's plunge was good enough, though barely. Rice 7--A. & M. 6, try for point still to come. 14:58 to play in the game.

Interestingly, the Aggie touchdown came immediately after a change of goals, just as had Rice's, but the Aggie try for point would be *against* the twenty mile per hour south breeze. Taylor stepped back to kick--he'd been automatic all year. Osborn would hold. The snap was on target, Osborn neatly placed the ball on the hard rubber tee. Taylor's leg traced its familiar arc, swung through. The ball took off, spinning end-over-end, sailing, leaning, to the right! It's WIDE! "HE MISSED IT! HE MISSED IT!" The score remained 7-6.

The Aggies couldn't believe it. Taylor couldn't believe it. He shook his head, looked down, looked at the 18 1/2 foot span he'd just missed, then turned and trotted back up field for the kickoff. Bryant looked at the ground. Neely looked at the ground, then to his team. Rice freshmen salaamed their plastic idol, fervently.

Taylor, still shook from the missed extra point, twice failed to keep his kickoff in the field of play, giving Rice the ball on the fifty yard line. Buoyed by their good fortune and greatly aided by good field position, Ken and Bobby Williams alternated with Chilton, gouging out yardage on the ground and minutes on the clock. But the drive for an insurance tally ended at the Aggie five yard line when a fourth down pass from Hill to Ken Williams was broken up in the end zone by Lloyd Taylor.

With less than ten minutes to go in the game, the Aggies again began to grind out yardage in small chunks. They had reached their own forty yard line when lightning struck them again. Second team end Lester Veltman applied a crunching tackle to the much larger Crow and Crow coughed up the football, recovered by Ryan, who reinjured his knee on the play.

In came Hill to direct the team. Several running plays gained scant yardage as the Aggie defense stiffened. As Hill dropped back to punt, the clock showed just over four minutes left in the game. He aimed for the left sideline. The kick was a high arching spiral that landed inside the ten yard line, then rolled end over end, bouncing to the left and toward the goal line, at last rolling out of bounds at the ONE FOOT LINE! The clock was stopped with 4:06 to go in the game.

Surely the Aggie fate was sealed with that mammoth, magnificent punt. Surely no additional fortitude or heroics would be required of the gallant Rice eleven, this afternoon. Surely the Aggies would realize the game was lost, would surrender, admit defeat. But they didn't.

They remembered their own heroics of two years ago and tried for another miracle. The seniors knew this would be their last shot at the national championship they had signed on to win, four short years ago. The others knew that if the rumors about Bryant leaving were true, it would be their last chance too. So the Aggies weren't dead and they hadn't given up.

For Rice, whose minions had withstood so many assaults this day, it must have seemed that after four long years of coming up empty against this maroon and white adversary, surely this game was now in the bag. They had passed all the quizzes and done well on every test so far, but Rice's courage, determination and heart would have to submit to one more, awesome, final examination.

Beginning at the one foot line, three Aggie tries netted only nine yards. Fourth and one at the Aggie ten yard line. The Aggies had to go for it. Seven men in blue were nose up on seven men in white, with two Rice defenders wide to either side, just two defensive backs; the nine man front that had been so successful all day, that had contained the dangerous running game of Bear Bryant's hard nosed team. Rice's victory seemed so close—just hold them one more down.

The Aggies gave the ball to Crow, of course, and their meal ticket thrust at the line with every ounce of his strength, every fiber of his young being insisting that the first down would not be denied. He smashed into the open!

Cutting to the outside, he headed up field with no one in front of him. As a roar filled the autumn air it looked for an instant, several instants, like he might go all the way. But, once again, there was King Hill, eluding a block, angling in, surely, securely, to make a game-saving tackle at the Aggie thirty-one yard line. Groans amidst the cheers from the Aggies; sighs of relief from the Rice faithful.

First and ten. Near the A. & M. bench, a player in a clean white uniform pulled on his helmet, received an encouraging slap on the rear from Bryant, and trotted purposefully to the waiting Aggie huddle. He was greeted by an avalanche of thunder from the khaki mosaic. It was Jimmy Wright, passing hero of the 1955 game. Deja vu.

Everyone, including the Rice players, knew that with less than two minutes to go, Wright was in the game to throw passes--to move the football into scoring range--to pull out the victory as he'd done before--the victory that the Aggie ground game had not been able to secure this day; that the Rice defense had thus far thwarted. This was Rice's opportunity to wilt, to fold, to cave in. For mortals can't prevent miracles and everyone knew that Wright was the miracle worker himself. Gulp! Sinking feelings in the stands gave way to encouragement: "HOLD THAT LINE! HOLD THAT LINE!" The noise was overpowering, rolling in from all sides, echoing, rebounding, crashing. But it was lifting too, bringing out in both teams the extra measure of adrenalin, the special tolerance to fatigue and pain they would need to endure the final scenes of this already epic contest.

Wright's first pass was complete to Tracy for an eleven yard gain to the forty-two. Then he crossed up

everyone and ran the ball for a gain of six, to the Rice forty-eight. Gillis pounded him out of bounds with 1:27 to go. Then it was Wright throwing complete to Taylor. Hill smacked him, but he broke free, racing down the sideline, losing his balance and stumbling to the Rice twenty-three, a gain of twenty-five. Bedlam in the Aggie section. The clock ticked on.

The Rice cheers were to "HOLD 'EM OWLS, HOLD'EM! HOLD 'EM OWLS, HOLD 'EM!" There was no sanity in the stadium except in the two huddles of players on the field, and, of course, the two stolid coaches on the' sideline. There was terror in the Rice hearts. Would lightning strike twice?

Wright faded to pass again, this time throwing incomplete. The clock stopped. Rice declined a procedure penalty even though the Aggies appeared to be in field goal range. "HOLD THAT LINE!" thundered the Owl student body.

Second down. Wright faded back to pass. Receivers sprinted goalward. Then suddenly Matt Gorges' blue jersey broke through the line of Aggie blockers; down on his knees, crawling, then up, lunging at Wright. Wright ducked, but Gorges came down on top of him, smothering him for a twelve yard loss! Out of field goal range, less than a minute to go, the clock ticking away the seconds, the Aggies moved slowly into their huddle. Pandemonium!

The Aggies were still in the huddle...still in the huddle... clock moving...time running out... finally they were at the line of scrimmage. Less than thirty seconds to go. Wright called signals, took the snap, pitched to Taylor, running to the left. He sped past the line of scrimmage,

inside the thirty, inside the twenty-five. There he was met solidly by Hill, and buried under a host of blue jerseys. He came down near the sideline, but in bounds. The clock continued to run. The Aggies were out of time outs. Fifteen seconds... 14, 13, 12,...the blue jerseys slowly unplied off of Taylor...11, 10, 9,...the Aggies were trying to regroup, to line up. Linemen back up field were scrambling toward the new line of scrimmage. Now the Rice partisans were screaming, shouting..."EIGHT, SEVEN, SIX,"...Wright was still not under center, the center wasn't over the ball,..."We're gonna win!" "FIVE, FOUR,"...Krueger was shouting, "Hurry up, line up!", but he was too late. "THREE, TWO, ONE,... IT'S ALL OVER! IT'S ALL OVER! WE DID IT! WE DID IT!"

The officials ran in, but Matt Gorges had already claimed the game ball, for Rice. There was unbounded joy in the Rice stands. Students were hugging each other, leaping in the air, making their way onto the playing field to swarm their winning team, to hoist their heroes on their shoulders, just as the players were lifting coaches Neely and Davis on theirs. The players on the field were jumping in the air too. Bear Bryant made his way to midfield where he graciously shook hands with Jess Neely.

The white clad Aggies, their uniforms bearing the soil and grass stains of Rice stadium, the sweat of combat in Houston humidity, the blood of scrapes with the upstarts in blue, walked slowly, heads down, back into the black gloomy tunnel and up the lonely ramp.

The Rice team members carried Neely and Davis on their shoulders into the happy tunnel, where they skipped up that joyous ramp, to the steamy dressing room where incredulous

sports-writers were gathering to assemble the quotes for their stories--the story for this and for many years in the Southwest Conference.

* * *

While the Rice players gave their interviews in the sweltering din of the locker room, the Rice students and band made their way around to the stadium's south entrance and patiently awaited their heroes in the fast fading daylight.

As seems invariably to happen, the losing Aggie team finished showering and dressing first and began to file out before any of the Rice athletes. All looked tired, flushed, bruised, some had eyes still red from crying, beaten. Their dreams of a national championship left glimmering on the soft turf of Rice stadium, they silently made their way through the pack of suddenly quiet, thoughtful students. There were no remarks, taunts or wise cracks. Rice had barely beaten a fine, courageous football team and the Aggies were allowed to leave with dignity and respect.

Then the Rice team began to emerge. Each member was greeted with loud, sustained, hearty cheers. The loudest were reserved for the tough gutty linemen who had performed so brilliantly, and, of course, for Hill.

Rice's heroes were many but it was essentially a magnificent team effort that had won the victory. Six backs had gained twenty yards or more. Rice hitting had caused six Aggie fumbles. Gene Jones was credited with eleven tackles; Gillis with ten; and Dial, Whitmire and Gusler with nine each. Ryan's first quarter leadership had moved the Owls seventy-nine yards to the lip of the cup in their touchdown

drive. He had reinjured his fragile knee on two vital defensive plays.

King Hill had clinched All American honors with his performance that day. He played forty-five minutes; scored the Rice touchdown; kicked the extra point by which the margin of victory was measured; intercepted two passes, one at the Rice nine yard line; punted the ball out of bounds at the one foot line to put the Aggies almost the entire length of the field away from the goal line with just over four minutes to go; then stopped Crow when it appeared that he might break away for the winning touchdown; and tackled Taylor on the game's last play.

Hill was magnanimous in victory:

"Crow, Osborn and Krueger are all they say. They're great boys. But it was our line that brought us through. I thought it was the best blocking we've had this year. Don Gillis was great."

And he added:

"Don't forget to say something about the Rice students. They had a lot to do with the way we played. They were behind us all the way this week...."

Neely confirmed this sentiment:

"The boys won this one for the student body."

And he added:

"It was desire mainly that did it. We wanted it worse than they did."

Clark Nealon's Houston Post article the next day declared:

"Football lightning has a way of striking Rice

Stadium when Rice meets Texas A. & M., and Saturday the bolt was Blue."

Elsewhere he declared, "No Rice team ever gave more..."

Homer Norton, a Post columnist who had been coach of the 1939 Aggie national championship team said:

"The Rice Owls demonstrated before 72,000 witnesses that there is no slide rule with which to measure heart, for that is what achieved Rice's 7-6 triumph Saturday."

EPILOGUE

On Monday, the Rice students revived an old tradition, staging a lock-out, blocking the gates and declaring a school holiday. A noon pep rally boosted the team in its final push for the champion-ship.

Victories over T.C.U. and Baylor, coupled with Texas' Thanksgiving Day upset of A. & M., clinched the conference crown and Cotton Bowl berth for the Owls, who wound up the year ranked eighth in the country.

When the Rice team returned to Houston after beating T.C.U., several hundred of their fellow students met them at the airport. A grinning(!) Jess Neely commented that that was the first time in all his years at Rice that he could remember such a greeting. Hill commented once again, "And the student body is sure behind us. They gave us a big boost when we had that mid-season slump."

At the end of the season, the team leaders met to award the game ball for each of Rice's seven victories. Traditionally these treasured mementoes of team triumphs are presented to the player whose efforts are considered to have been most instrumental in achieving the victory. In a

matchless gesture of unity and comradeship, the captains awarded the A. & M. game ball to the Rice student body.

Rice played Navy in the 1958 Cotton Bowl but was not able to regain its mid-season form. The Midshipmen prevailed 20-7.

What happened then? Well, 1600 students, including 36 football players, finished their careers at Rice and got on with the business of living their lives. Hill, Ryan and Dial were all successful in professional football, Ryan leading the Cleveland Browns to an N.F.L. Championship in 1964. Gorges and Whitmire pursued careers in business and science, respectively. Jess Neely coached nine more teams at Rice before "retiring" to the position of Athletic Director at Vanderbilt University.

And after the Texas game, Bear Bryant confirmed the rumor about Alabama, saying he, "heard his mother calling for help," and accepted the head coaching job at his alma mater.

* * *

There is no song or poem to commemorate or praise the spirit on the Rice campus during November of 1957, that so inspired the play of the Owl football team. Nor to praise the "heart" of a football team that so inspired the student body. That spirit generated cohesiveness and unity among a heterogeneous student body. It brought committed involvement to a group of men and women who, perhaps, had previously been too cautious in their enthusiasm; too reserved in their support; too afraid of risking their feelings too freely, of daring to care too much.

That spirit and heart helped 1600 students at times out-yell the legendary cheering section of a school with an enrollment of over 10,000. That spirit and heart helped a

dedicated group of athletes and coaches defeat the number one ranked team in the nation.

King Hill and Jess Neely both mentioned it in their remarks to sports reporters. Houston Press writer, Bob Rule commented on it in his write-up of the A. & M. game: "Old time fans say they can't recall a Rice cheering section 'on fire' like this one was."

Even the skeptical editor of the Rice "Thresher" paid homage to it in his November 22, 1957 editorial: "...We never believed much in school spirit until we saw it work last Saturday. Now we know what it can do."

Was it *really* so special? In 1981, Matt Gorges was asked if he remembered the week of the 1957 Aggie-Rice game. "Like it was yesterday," was his instant reply. "It was unbelievable," he continued, "For a fleeting moment, Rice captured a school spirit that had never existed until that moment, either at Rice or anywhere else, as far as I know. And that hasn't been approached anywhere since then."

Where did it come from? Where did it go? Will it return again? The only thing certain is that for that shining moment there was a oneness between students on the athletic field and students in the stands that generated an energy and a power that were very special; as unique in its own right as the Blue and Gray victory it helped create.
IT WAS FABULOUS!

