

The First Tree of Light

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November 29, 2021, marked 100 years since the original Tree of Light ceremony took place at Sam Houston State University (SHSU). The Tree of Light ceremony has been a long standing and honored tradition, beginning in 1921, and is the oldest tradition at SHSU. The ceremony consists of students, faculty, and the surrounding community coming together to celebrate the holiday season and view the illumination of the tree. During the ceremony, university groups, like the Orange Pride Dance Team, perform and SHSU organizations are invited to decorate the tree with an ornament, while onlookers drink hot chocolate and donate food to a canned food drive. The Tree of Light ceremony exemplifies the university motto, “The Measure of a Life is its Service,” by showing SHSU’s eagerness to come together and support their community members. Bearkats embody the SHSU motto through donating food and sharing their holiday spirit, and the ceremony serves as a reminder to live out the university motto and remember that helping others is the Bearkat way. This sentiment has been evident since Sam Houston State University was founded in 1879, and will continue to live on, just as the original Tree of Light does.



Fig. 1. Aerial shot from 1940. Sam Houston State University Archives, SHSU Tree of Light Tradition online materials.

History of the Tree

An evergreen cedar served as the first Tree of Light in 1921 (see Fig. 1.), and remained the tree used for the ceremony until 1965. A newspaper article from *The Houstonian*, dated December 21, 1921, announced the first Tree of Light ceremony, stating “The beautiful cedar west of the training school will be used, and the children are making the decorations” (1921). In 1966, the tree used for the ceremony was changed to an evergreen cedar in front of Old Main to increase visibility after the Evans English Building was constructed in between the Music and Graphic Arts

buildings, obscuring the view of the tree across parts of campus. This tree was a casualty to the fire that destroyed Old Main on Feb. 12, 1982 (Binetti 2017). In the 1980s, the tree used was in a large circular planter where the Bell Tower is now located. However, when the Bell Tower was constructed in 2004, the ceremony was moved yet again to the mall area. In 2005, an artificial tree began being used for the ceremony for preservation reasons.

Through the miracle of modern construction technology, in the late-1980s, Music 1 and the Evans English Building were combined with the construction of a bridged middle section (Building SHSU). With the Music and English buildings now connected, the original evergreen cedar sits surrounded by the Evans Complex. Throughout construction, the tree was scheduled to be demolished twice, but was never actually destroyed. The amount of nearby construction the tree has faced, and the years that it has stood tall, show its resilience. In fact, an article from the *Huntsville Item* from 1989 states, “Early in the century, the hill where the Evans Complex is now located was bare except for the Agricultural Building at the north end and a cluster of large cedars. The cedar outside the Evans Complex is the only survivor” (Anderson 1989). Throughout every change the university has endured, the original Tree of Light stands and to this day, the tree is admired by students on their way to classes. The Tree of Light continues to stand as a beacon of Sam Houston State University students’ holiday spirit and giving nature (see Fig. 2).

How the Tree Serves SHSU Today

In front of the tree stands a plaque dedicated on November 29, 2021, by President Alisa White; Vice President for Student Affairs Frank Parker; Student Government Association President LaYauna Bonds; and Director of Student Activities Brandon Cooper. This plaque denotes the importance of the tree to SHSU (Crandall 2021). The tree is being taken care of by The Sam Houston State University Building and Landscape Services De-

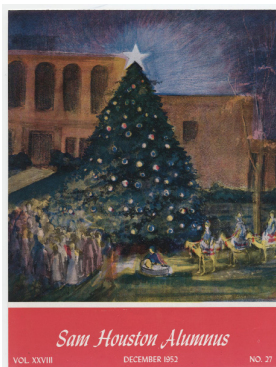


Fig. 2. The cover of the *Sam Houston Alumnus* from 1952. Sam Houston State University Archives, SHSU Tree of Light online materials.

partment, which works to ensure that trees on campus are taken care of properly and allowed to thrive. To do this, SHSU has created a Campus Tree Care Plan, which outlines specific objectives such as: set standards for new tree selection and planting procedures, define the guidelines for maintenance and removal of campus trees, explain the SHSU tree protection program, and map the future goals and targets for the campus urban forestry program (2020). SHSU has a Tree Advisory Committee, whose members analyze topics that impact trees on campus and discuss management techniques, which helps ensure that SHSU's trees are being considered when impactful events, such as construction, occur. In 1921, Sam Houston State University and its students used the evergreen cedar in the Tree of Light Ceremony, hanging lights and ornaments on its branches. Today, however, campus arborists have taken a more environmentally friendly route with the Tree of Light ceremony and have used an artificial tree since 2005. Additionally, as outlined in the Campus Tree Care Plan "Prohibited Practices," "Campus trees will not be used in art, leisure, or advertising activities. This includes implanting or attaching anything to tree trunks, limbs, roots, or foliage" (2020). The use of a real tree for the Tree of Light ceremony might have felt more festive, but Sam Houston State University has chosen to value trees' health and wellness above all else. According to *The Huntsville Item*, in 2016, for the second year in a row, the Arbor Day Foundation recognized Sam Houston State University as a Tree Campus USA for its commitment to urban forest management and engaging students and staff about the importance of trees (Bergeron 2016). With SHSU's continuing dedication to keeping the original Tree of Light thriving, its legacy may live on for future Bearkats to appreciate (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. The tree in the present. Photo courtesy of Kristen Kilgore and the Department of English.

Works Cited

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