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Echo of the Past

By Jim Stewart

In May of 1955, Furman's Faculty Committee on Student Publications confiscated and withheld distribution of the spring issue of the *Echo*, the student literary magazine, indicating that the decision was "in the best interest" of the university.

Not surprisingly, the seizure of the *Echo* set off a brief but stormy protest among the student editors and contributors, who felt their opinions and ideas were being stifled. They took their case to the local media, and the resulting story led to a brief flurry of national publicity.

All of this occurred during the last week of classes, however, and by the time the publicity had played out, the term was over and the principals had scattered. When school resumed in the fall everyone involved returned to their activities, putting the incident behind them.

But what happened to the 1,500 printed copies of the *Echo*? Were all of them destroyed? When they learned of the university's decision, the students had raced to Greenville's Hiott Press but were able to save only a handful of press proofs. Had anyone kept a final, printed version, if only for posterity's sake?

The question remained unanswered until a few years ago. During a meeting with former faculty, staff and alumni from the old campus, I brought up the "lost" *Echo* and asked if anyone happened to have a copy. Turned out someone did — Francis W. Bonner, a storied name in university history who was dean of men in 1955. A week later, he and his wife, Nilauoise, handed me a well-preserved, printed copy (not a proof) of the publication.

This year, in recognition of the 50th

anniversary of the spring 1955 *Echo*, editor Leah Coakley and art editor Greta Thielen chose to publish it as part of the 2005 issue, reproducing it in its original form. They did so, Coakley said, to provide "a glance at Furman's history, which both illustrates the past and demonstrates the ageless nature of art."

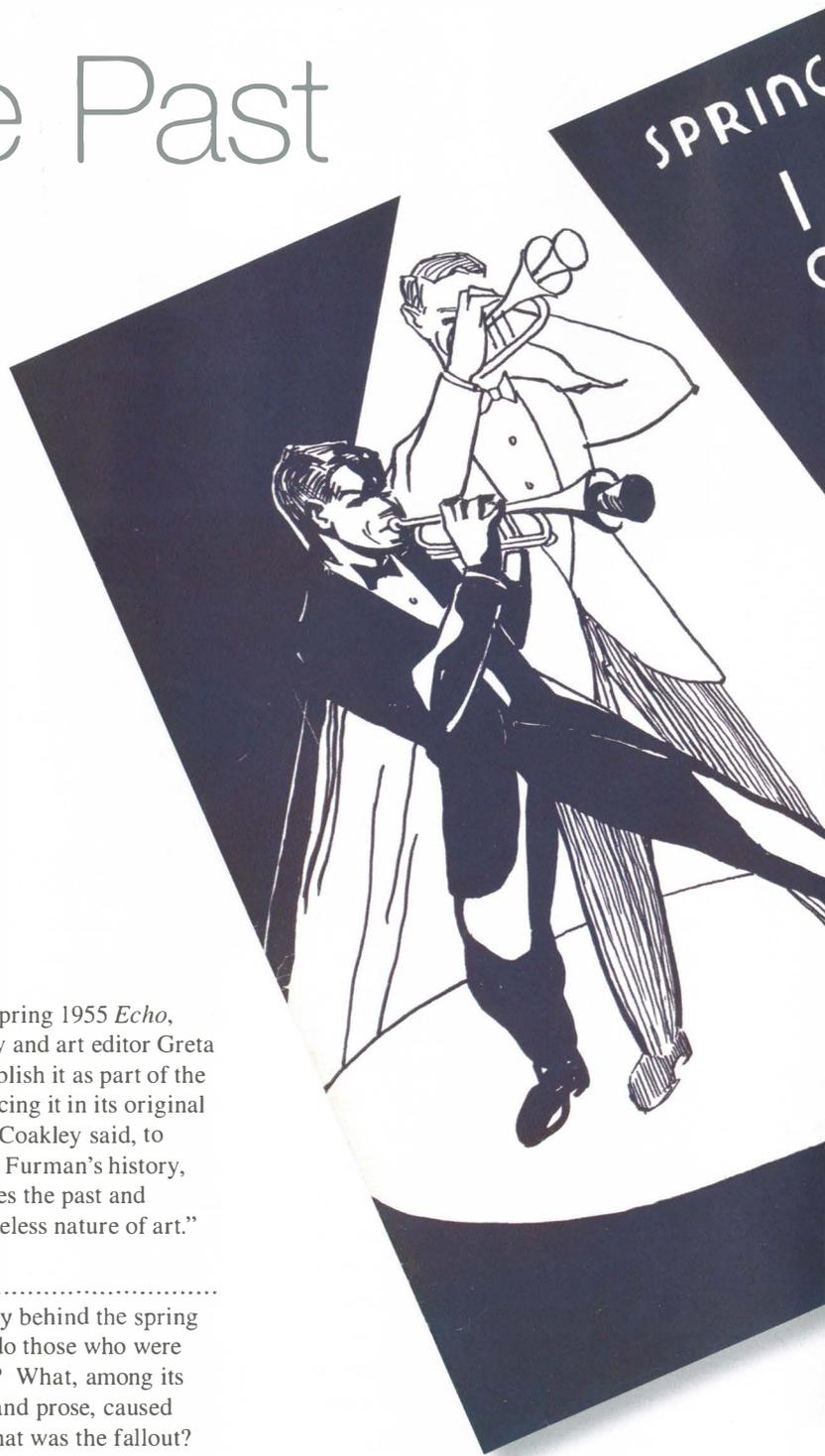
What was the story behind the spring 1955 *Echo*? What do those who were involved remember? What, among its 20 pages of poetry and prose, caused the uproar? And what was the fallout?

Alfred S. Reid's 1976 history, *Furman University: Toward a New Identity*, devotes a page to the *Echo* in a chapter titled "Crisis Over Fraternities, 1954-61," a period in which Furman and its founding body, the South Carolina Baptist Convention, frequently clashed over issues that today might seem trivial, but at the time were quite serious.

Reid surmises that the *Echo* was confiscated "partly because the articles

were controversial and partly because the editors, Joan Lipscomb and Hubert Cooper, Jr., had bypassed their faculty advisor." He writes:

Lipscomb's own article, "No Way Back," called the recent 1954 United States Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation a "fact which



The story of the controversial spring 1955 issue of Furman's student literary magazine.



work with African blacks while ignoring blacks in white kitchens and white backyards. Lipscomb's sensational headline "Ice Cream Jesus" [actual headline: "Ice Cream Christ"] for an article by Evelyn Cleveland about vacation Bible school satirized the practice of enticing slum children into church with offers of ice cream.

When the faculty committee learned about the contents of the Echo on 18 May, the committee members went to Hiott Press to examine them. After a long and agonizing session with the editors, the committee concluded that release of the issue was "not in the best interest of Furman" and promptly ordered destruction of all 1,500 copies.

Student author King was incensed. Taking a cast-off proof from a trash can, he reported the incident to the Greenville newspapers, charging the committee with censorship and repudiation of the purpose of a liberal education, which, he said, is to teach students to think and to put thoughts into words and deeds. The Associated Press carried the story to the nation . . . Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, saw the story in Jet and sent Lipscomb a note of congratulation and sympathy.

To prevent any further occurrence of this kind, in the spring of 1956 the student government created a student publications board to supervise publications [and] to elect editors, who had previously been selected openly . . . Editors would be responsible for their publications, and there would be no "precensorship" of contents.

During the 1954-55 school year construction of the new campus was well under way, and by the spring a residence hall and the first classroom building were nearly complete. University officials envisioned that the beautiful new campus

would attract stronger students and faculty and help propel Furman into the upper ranks of the nation's liberal arts colleges.

As Reid's history points out, 1954-55 also brought a series of skirmishes between Furman and assorted groups within the South Carolina Baptist Convention, the university's most consistent source of financial support. Although friction with the Baptists was not uncommon, during this particular period factions within the convention stepped up their complaints about such issues as dancing and fraternities on campus — and hinted that they would work to withhold funding if the university did not eliminate such sinful activities.

While Furman officials consistently defended both their policies and the quality and character of the student body, they were forced to tread gingerly so that the problems would not escalate, given the implied threats to the well-being of the school.

all the emotionalism of Southern politicians cannot alter" and urged Southern leaders to comply. There is "simply no way back to the way things once were," she said, adding that many Furman students favored integration.

An article by Charles King, "Perversion of the Baptist Heritage," a review of Wesley Shrader's satiric [novel] Dear Charles, rebuked Baptists for what King called their alleged "obsession" with numbers at the expense of spirit. . . . King berated the Baptists for racial bigotry that encouraged missionary



Students, however, felt no such constraints. As they had before, and as they would for the next 37 years (until Furman and state Baptists agreed to sever ties), they openly voiced their objections to what they considered the Baptists' antiquated thinking and micromanagement of the university.

Charles King '56 edited the student newspaper, *The Hornet*, in 1954-55. Now retired from a management career with such publications as *Esquire*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Time*, among others, the New York City resident recalls that student editors were "under constant attack from radical Baptist ministers who wanted to make Furman over in the image of Bob Jones."

For example, he says that when he argued in print against a university decision not to distribute "the usual free tickets" for a local performance by a traveling ballet corps ("A knowledge of dance," he wrote, "is essential to a well-rounded liberal arts education"), a group of ministers responded that he was leading students "down the pathway to sinful ballroom dancing." Another "flurry of hysteria," he says, emerged from a misunderstanding about a mention in one of his columns of some "articles" being sold by a fraternity. The ministers, failing to check their facts before denouncing the fraternity's actions, had assumed the articles in question were condoms; actually, they were mugs.

Says King, "We felt besieged by their attacks that were spread far and wide in the state."

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And so we come to late spring 1955 and the *Echo*, with King's article scolding the Baptists, Cleveland's take on religious hypocrisy and Lipscomb's push for a more progressive, tolerant society in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*. All were hot-button issues likely to raise more denominational hackles

than dancing and fraternities ever had. Given the tenor of the times — even 10 years later, when Furman integrated, it would do so against the convention's wishes — perhaps it's not surprising that the *Echo* came under such scrutiny.

King and *Echo* co-editor Bert (Huby) Cooper '56 have virtually identical memories of what happened after King received the call from Hiott Press that faculty representatives had taken possession of the magazine: The students raced to the printer, pulled page proofs from the trash and returned to campus, where they stapled the pages together in an effort to preserve some semblance of the publication.

King then took the story to Gil Rowland, a seasoned *Greenville News* reporter. Because *The Hornet* had published its final issue for the year, King says, there was no other way to let the student body know what had happened.

Rowland's article appeared Thursday morning, May 19, citing King's opinion that "the magazines were seized because of objections to an article sympathetic to racial integration and a review of the book, *Dear Charles*," and quoting King's contention that the seizure was antithetical to the purposes of the university. That afternoon the *Greenville Piedmont* ran a follow-up story, quoting at length from the articles in question.

Furman officials were restrained in their comments, saying little other than that the decision was made "after long and serious study" by the Faculty Committee on Publications. Privately, they had emphasized their concerns to the students that the *Echo's* advisor, Meta Eppler Gilpatrick, an esteemed and influential professor, had not been afforded the chance to review the



publication's contents until it was essentially on press.

Looking back, the student players say that they were never aware of a requirement regarding faculty supervision of publications, and if there was such a rule, it was not applied consistently. Editors Cooper and Lipscomb had already overseen the fall version of the *Echo*, and Lipscomb (Joan Lipscomb Solomon '56), who also wrote for *The Hornet*, says, "We were never conscious of close supervision. We took things and ran with them."

Hardly anyone remains who can discuss the *Echo* from the university's viewpoint. One who has a limited recollection of the events is Ernest E. Harrill, retired professor of political science.

Harrill, who was on the faculty publications committee, remembers that its members were concerned less with the content of the *Echo* than with "the use of certain words," although he doesn't recall specifics. His other strong memory is of a meeting with Lipscomb the day after the controversy erupted. He says, "I recall very clearly her stopping by and saying, 'I was always told that pain would help you grow. Well, I must have grown an awful lot in the last day.'"





Indeed, because so much time has passed, everyone involved in the incident has trouble remembering the details of meetings and discussions. Often, only impressions remain. One thing that is clear, however, is that today the student principals view the events surrounding the *Echo* in a more understanding light.

Cooper, who lives in Washington, D.C., and is retired from the Congressional Research Service, a division of the Library of Congress, suggests somewhat jokingly that banning the issue was actually a good thing. “We had saved the page proofs,” he says, “and once the word was out about what had happened, people wanted to see them. They came by in droves. It was probably the best-read issue ever.”

Solomon is a retired teacher living in Rochester, N.Y., where she writes a column for the *Chautauquan Daily*, a publication of the Chautauqua (N.Y.) Institution. She says, “I don’t remember who, but I recall a professor saying something to the effect of, ‘That Charles King should’ve been given his walking papers.’”

“But looking back, we didn’t understand all the ramifications of what we were doing. It was a different time, and I believe that the university acted as it did to protect the institution.”

Cooper agrees. When asked how he would have responded, he points to

Furman’s dependence on Baptist support and the potential threat to its plans for the future and says, “I suspect that had I been in the university’s position, I’d have done the exact same thing.”

King is less conciliatory, saying he still sees the seizure as “a moral issue. We should have been able to publish controversial material as long as it didn’t libel or hurt somebody.”

Yet he commends the university for its subsequent efforts to turn the incident into a positive by creating the new student publications board, and he’s proud that he was asked to help organize the board and serve as its first chair. He believes that the *Echo* controversy ultimately led to improved communication between university officials and students, and he points out that, contrary to giving him his walking papers, Furman never took any action against him or his cohorts.

For the 1955-56 year, in fact, Cooper and Lipscomb were given the plum job of co-editing the student handbook. King was asked to be one of two student representatives on the *Who’s Who* selection committee, and Evelyn Cleveland (Davis) ’56, author of “Ice Cream Christ,” edited the *Echo*. “All was forgotten and forgiven,” says Solomon. “There were no hard feelings toward us.”

King recalls an encounter with Dean Bonner in the fall of 1955 that illustrates Solomon’s point. Ever primed for battle, King had just written a column for *The Hornet* complaining about the “oppression students felt from the constant attacks on their social life by the radical Baptists.”

Soon thereafter he ran into Bonner, and they had this conversation:

Bonner: “I thought you got all that rebelliousness out of your system last year.”

King: “I doubt if I’ll ever lose it.”

Bonner (with a mix of resignation and affection): “Yes, I suppose you never will.”

“And that was it,” King says today. “A not unpleasant exchange.”

Given these comments and others from the principals — and given Furman’s tempered response in the aftermath of the incident — one gets the feeling that university officials, while not thrilled with its timing, may have actually appreciated the sense of commitment and social consciousness that the *Echo* displayed. After all, isn’t a liberal arts institution supposed to instill in its students the value of critical thought and expression? Hadn’t the students demonstrated that they had learned those lessons? And why else, if their actions had been so egregious, would Furman subsequently ask them to assume other positions of responsibility?

Granted, this is just speculation. But it is apparent that the students and the university learned from the *Echo* incident and ultimately used it to improve the publications climate on campus.

In hindsight, the students harbor no resentment. “Time helps,” says Cooper. “You mellow a bit, and you learn something.”

All state unequivocally that they value and appreciate their Furman experience. And now, thanks to the passage of years and the forces of change, they are delighted that the spring 1955 *Echo* has been rediscovered — and published.

“Looking back,” says King, “I’d say we did a good job. I’m proud that a group of student writers in the Bible Belt during the ‘Happy Days’ generation could produce such a tribute and call for social consciousness — what we might call today social justice.

“I’m glad it’s finally seeing the light of day.”

A limited number of copies of the 1955/2005 Echo are available. If you are interested in acquiring one, e-mail jim.stewart@furman.edu.

The illustrations for the 1955 *Echo*, some of which are reproduced here, were credited to Jackie Truluck (Jackque Truluck Warren ’58).