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Towering Sounds

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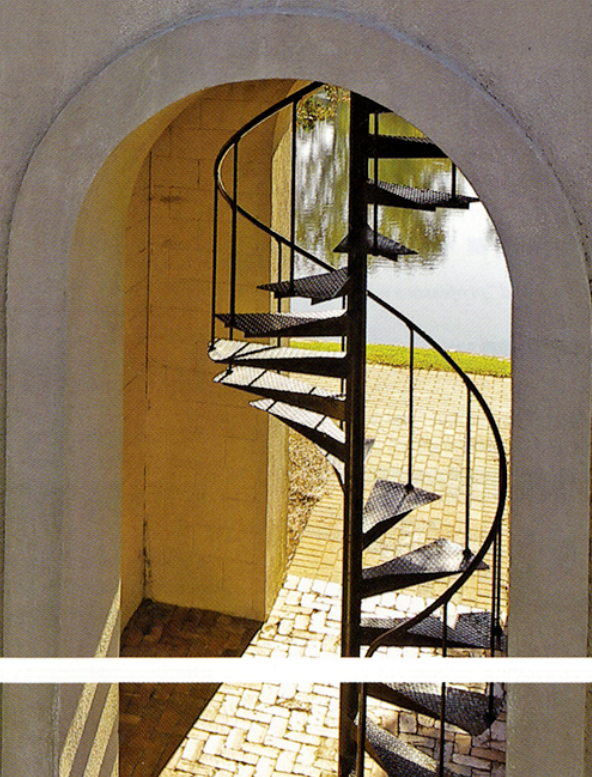
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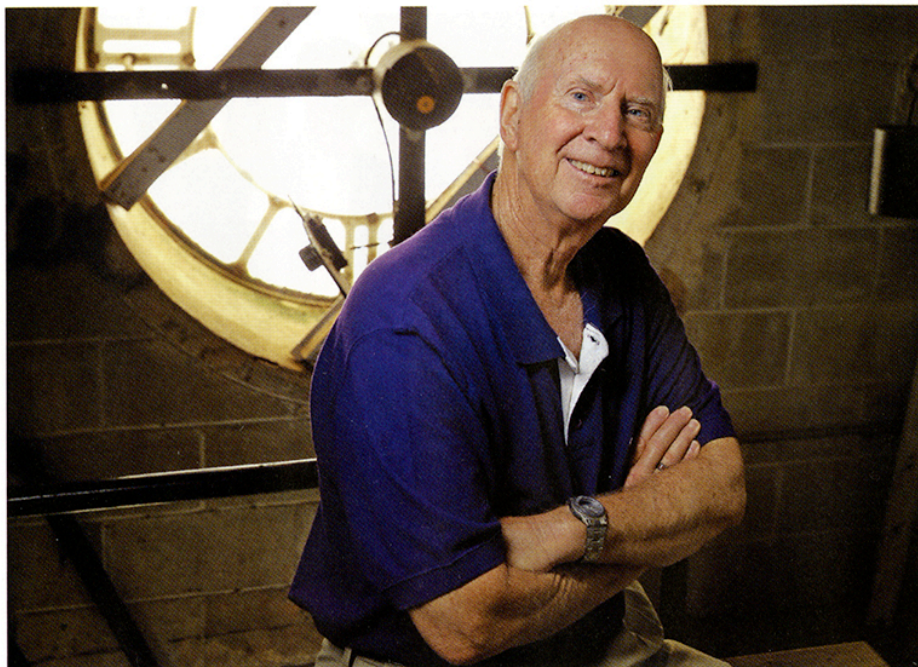
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Around the Lake



Howard Thompson '68, Furman's original carillonneur, revisits the Bell Tower, which he used to ascend, hymnal in hand, when he was a student.



Howard Thompson '68, who taught himself to play the carillon at Furman, hopes future students will learn to play the instrument.

Towering Sounds

Howard Thompson '68 ascended the Bell Tower as Furman's first carillonneur

BY KELLEY BRUSS

Standing in the chamber behind the clock faces of Furman's iconic bell tower, Howard Thompson '68 remembers sensations as vividly as sounds: vibrations that would fill the space as he struck the batons connected to clappers in 60 bells just above him. The mechanical clacking that a carillonneur experiences is as prominent as the bell tones themselves.

The weather, too, is an inescapable part of playing a carillon in an open tower.

"It's a fun instrument to play," Thompson says. "You freeze in the winter, you burn in the summer, but that's just part of it."

Thompson is Furman's original carillonneur. He was in school when the

current bell tower was completed and its bells installed. Curiosity drew many music students up the spiral staircase in those years, but Thompson was the one who brought along a hymnal when he made the climb.

He taught himself to play in practice sessions that rang out across campus.

When he retired to Greenville in 2016, Thompson hoped to moonlight in his old role. But the bells are only rung electronically now. The mechanism that allowed them to be played by hand fell into disrepair and was removed more than a decade ago. Thompson, who spent his career teaching music in Texas, would love for a new generation of students to experience the instrument as he did.

"It deserves to be heard, more than just to chime the hour," he says.

'A really cool feeling'

A carillon is played using a clavier, wooden batons arranged as a keyboard with transmission wires connected to clappers in the bells.

When the musician strikes a baton – typically with the side of a loose fist – the wire pulls the clapper and rings the bell. The lowest bells sometimes are played by foot using batons arranged near the floor.

"It's a direct connection to the clapper, which is a really cool feeling," Thompson says.

In the tower, a concrete floor separates the carillonneur from the bells – an inches-wide gap in the concrete allows the transmission wires to move between levels.

"You actually heard more of the clack of the mechanism than you did the bells," Thompson says.

From manual to electronic

Once Thompson left, the carillon was rarely played manually. Another student played it in the 1980s, but for the most part, the clavier sat unused for decades. When Thompson finished at Furman, he headed to Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He spent his career as a music teacher and organist and continued to play the carillon in churches and universities. His wife, Mary Ann, who is also a musician, learned to play as well and became known for her Broadway on the Bells concerts.

When they were retiring to Greenville, Thompson reached out to Furman to say he and his wife would love to play the carillon if their services were needed. It was then he learned the manual clavier had been removed and the instrument was only played electronically. He was devastated.

"It kind of died for lack of use," he says.

Thompson would love to see the day when it could again be played manually. That would mean a new clavier, transmission lines and clappers. It would also have to mean commitment outside of the Thompson family.

"We really can't restore this so my wife and I can play it," he says, smiling. ●