

9-1-2012

Rumor Has It...

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Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Melanie Krone and Foley, Tim (2012) "Rumor Has It...," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 55 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol55/iss3/9>

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Rumor Has It . . .

A curious graduate takes it upon herself to investigate four tales that have become part of campus lore — and determine what's fact and what's fiction.

Your birthday begins innocently enough. You roll out of bed and walk to the dining hall for breakfast. But after enjoying a bowl of cereal, you suddenly feel a strange sense of foreboding.

And with good reason. Out of nowhere, a large group approaches and crowds around you. They grab you and head out the door. Kicking and screaming, you realize where you'll end up: in the Furman lake.

Splash! Geese and ducks and swans scurry as you struggle to regain your equilibrium in the murky water. You finally gather yourself and slosh back to shore, feet sinking into the soft, brown sludge.

Once you've overcome the thrill (or indignity) of being the latest victim of this grand Furman tradition — and you realize that, unlike some unfortunate past victims, you haven't suffered a broken ankle or other major injury — you settle down and reflect on what a fun experience it was.

Until a friend stops by wearing a surgeon's mask

and asks if you've gone to the infirmary for your round of antibiotics and Sucrets.

"Why would I need that?" you innocently inquire.

"Well," the friend says, "you don't want to get the lake flu, do you?"

Lake flu? Is there really such a thing?

Or is it just a Furman myth?

The lake flu is just one topic I've heard discussed during my years as a Furman student and employee. But what about some of the other tales floating around campus? Like, what's the truth behind how the black swans came to live here? Does the grounds crew really sneak around in the middle of the night and paint the grass green? And what's the deal with Furman teams being known as the Christian Knights?

Tired of not knowing, I decided to uncover the stories behind the stories. Herewith are the findings from my semi-exhaustive investigations.

By Melanie Krone Armstrong

Illustrations by Tim Foley



Don't Go in the Water

Pretty much everyone knows that the lake was open for swimming in the early years of the new campus. As best I can determine, no person who actually waded in the waters ever developed any lasting, lake-related medical disorders.

But at some point — evidence points to the early '80s, though no specific date could be found — swimming was banned because of poor water quality. Wind surfing was allowed for a while, and the crew team practiced on the lake into the '90s, but technically, no swimming.

And if you take a plunge in the lake today, you might very well get sick.

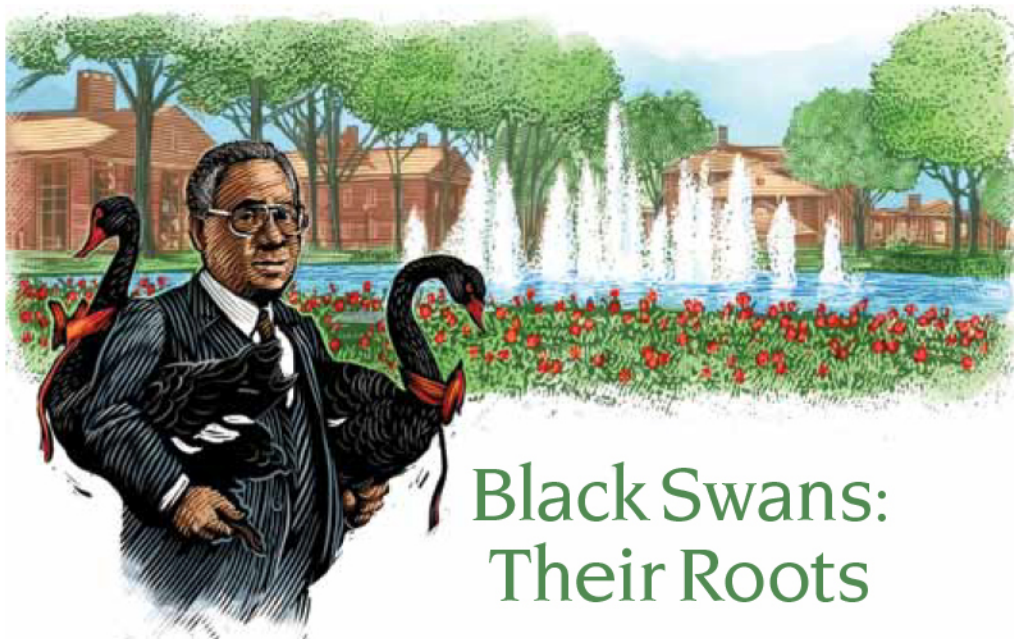
In 2005 a senior described in these very pages her most embarrassing Furman experience: "My freshman year I was thrown in the lake on my birthday and came out with a sickness that lasted for a week and then was passed around my hall. It might have been a coincidence, but if you've been in the lake recently. . . ."

It was no coincidence. Through the years the lake has developed high levels of *E. coli*, which can lead to infections both internal and external. *E. coli* is chloroform bacteria found, among other places, in the feces of waterfowl, of which Furman has plenty.

Wade Worthen, professor of biology, has monitored *E. coli* levels in the lake since 2006. Periodically, he says, the levels spike to as much as 50 times greater than the Environmental Protection Agency's upper limit for recreational swimming. Worthen does say he has seen a slight reduction in the bacteria levels as the number of Canada geese, longtime campus pests, has decreased. But that number tends to fluctuate with the sporadic geese invasions.

Will the lake ever be swimmable again? It's possible. Worthen, chair of the Lake Restoration Task Force, says steps have been taken to improve the water quality. Wildflowers and other flora have been planted to absorb the nutrients and runoff of fertilizer and feces from around the lake. And Furman now discourages the feeding of the waterfowl so that visiting birds will migrate rather than stick around, because when the bird population grows, the level of bacteria in the lake rises.

So what should students — or alumni — do if thrown in the lake? Worthen's advice: "Get out and take a good hot shower. And don't drink the water — try to keep your mouth shut."



Black Swans: Their Roots

Black swans are majestic creatures, but how much are they worth? Is it true they cost almost as much as a year's tuition at Furman? And were Furman's black swans a gift from a famous author?

According to Sheree Wright, senior groundskeeper, the swans aren't pricey. A pair of Australian black swans may be purchased for \$750. White swans cost about the same.

Wright adds that the cost of caring for Furman's swans is provided by donations from alumni and parents. "Without alumni donations for the care of our swans, we would have to put them down when they become sick or wounded," she says.

According to Wright, black swans are extremely social and prefer to exist in flocks. In contrast, white swans are highly territorial — so much so that Wright says she's found it's best to have only two of them (one of each sex) co-existing on the lake at one time.

Currently Furman has only one black swan, and its name is not Natalie Portman. It's Isabelle. Her longtime mate, Thomas, died last fall, the victim of an attack by a snapping turtle.

As for how Furman first acquired its black swans, the tale oft repeated is that they were a gift from Alex Haley, author of *Roots*. One story is that Haley donated the swans after speaking on campus in the late '70s. We could find no report in Furman media from that time of a Haley sighting, but if the January 24, 1986 issue of *The Paladin* can be believed, here's how the swan story may have started:

A political science professor, Saundra Ardrey, had at some point invited Haley to speak at Furman, but had never received a response. One day in early January, however, Haley and a friend were passing through Greenville on their way to Savannah, Ga., when they decided, for whatever reason, to stop by Furman. Jim Pitts, university chaplain, alerted Ardrey to Haley's presence at the lake, where he was admiring the black swans. Ardrey wound up taking Haley to dinner.

Afterward Haley and Co. returned to Furman, where the Student League for Black Culture Gospel Choir was singing in the student center. He wound up staying a while, joining in on "Amazing Grace" and giving an impromptu talk that left some students in tears.

Normally, *The Paladin* reported, a formal lecture by Haley would have cost \$7,000. Since Haley had expressed interest in the black swans, Furman president John Johns agreed to give him a pair as thanks for his visit. (At the time, according to another *Paladin* article, Furman had four black swans.)

Since the swans were already here in '86, it is likely Furman first acquired them in the early '80s. *The Paladin* provides some help again; in its issue dated October 5, 1984, it reported that a new pair of black swans had arrived as replacements for the solo black swan then living on the lake. Because black swans mate for life, it was felt it would be better to have a couple than for the single swan to continue its lonely existence. (Ah, poor Isabelle.) Furman agreed to swap several white swans for the black ones. An outside party purchased the loner black swan for \$200.

Wearin' of the Green

Part of Furman's mystique and appeal is the luscious green grass throughout campus. But why does the grass seem to look extra green during special events?

The campus myth is that the grounds crew spray-paints the grass. David Manning, grounds superintendent, says he has heard this story many times — and states unequivocally that it is false.

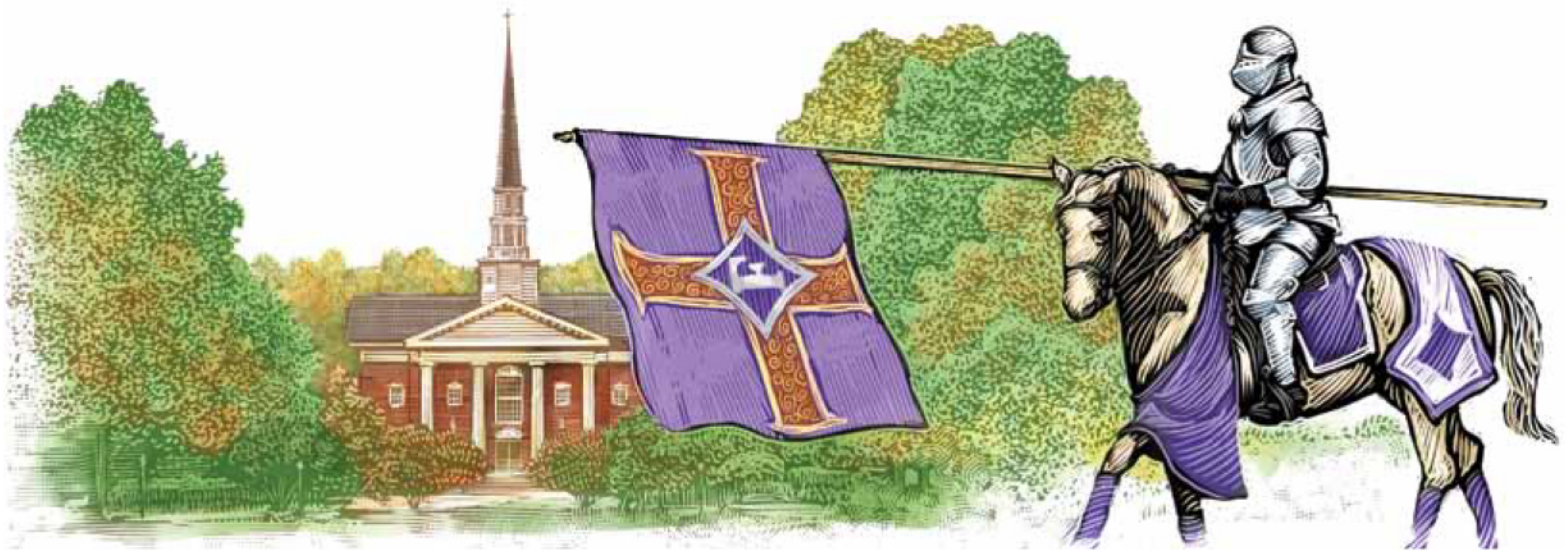
"It's a yearlong planning process of anticipating events and knowing when we want the grass to have the most color. Our biggest times are Homecoming [mid-fall], graduation [spring], Family Weekend [early fall] and the Scottish Games [late spring]," says Manning.

Furman has a team of former golf course superintendents who take soil samples and maintain a "feeding" schedule to keep the grass at its peak during certain times of the year. "When people drive into Furman and see the beautiful campus, we hope we've made a difference in getting students to come to school here," says Manning.

In the past, he says, Furman did mix a blue dye into its fertilizer to mark areas that had already been sprayed. To cut costs, this dye was eliminated. Today Manning says nothing of color is sprayed on the grass.

So if anyone asks, just tell them that the color is real — and it's spectacular.





Paladins and Christian Knights

Among the newest and strangest Furman myths is a story that, as best could be determined, began floating around among prospective students and their families: that the university's teams were (or are) known as the Christian Knights — thus giving Furman University an unfortunate acronym.

Laura Brown Simmons '84, Atlanta regional representative for Admission, says, "I get asked about some variation of the Christian Knights about once a year. Sometimes they ask if we used to be Christian Knights. Sometimes they ask if a Paladin is a Christian knight. Some 16-year-old boy at a college fair will dare some other 16-year-old boy to ask me. I usually tell him that not only

is it not true, but maybe I'll tell his counselor he asked me.

"I figure it came from some crazy chat room or something else online where unsupervised children spread such nonsense."

Granted, Furman teams have not always been the Paladins. According to Hunter Reid, long-time director of sports information, before 1961 Furman's baseball team was the "Hornets," the football team the "Hurricanes" and the basketball team the "Paladins." In 1961 — the same year the women's and men's campuses were united — the student body voted to adopt one nickname, and Paladins took the prize.

While paladins were (are) good and noble,

they apparently have no religious affiliation.

Francis W. Bonner, a longtime vice president and provost of the university, indicated as much in an article titled "What Is a Paladin?" in the Summer 1992 *Furman Magazine*. Bonner quoted Webster's *Third New International Dictionary*, which defined a paladin as "a champion of a medieval prince; a legendary hero; a person of outstanding worth or quality who is firm in support of some cause or objective."

Furman used to be Baptist. Its motto is still "For Christ and Learning." We probably even sang "Onward Christian Soldiers" at some point. But we've never been Christian Knights. If you doubt it, snopes.com will confirm.



So what have we learned from these investigations?

Basically, when you walk around Furman's beautiful campus, you should not be tempted to take a swim in the lake. Instead, plant yourself on the shore on some succulent, legitimately green grass and say hello to Isabelle, the reasonably priced Australian black swan who was not a gift from Alex Haley. When you stand up to leave, don't worry; your pants won't be covered in paint. So head over to Paladin Stadium and admire the statue of the valorous man on a horse, without fretting that he is associated with anything naughty. |F|

The author, a 1994 graduate — which, by definition, makes her a person of outstanding worth — works with the Office of Constituent Relations and Alumni Programs. Email melanie.armstrong@furman.edu if you have a Furman tale you would like investigated. She hastens to point out that she is not infallible, so if you have information that clarifies or debunks any stories mentioned here, she welcomes your input.