‘Rice Owl’ Banned But Never

By Griffin Smith

Thresher Staff

The Divine Comedy, King Lear, Grapes of Wrath, Candide, The Rice Campanile—these are just a part of the “Banned Books Exhibit” on the second floor of the Library.

But if The Campanile is included, so should The Rice Owl—a former campus literary and humor magazine which was forced to halt publication in 1946.

Begun in 1926

Although The Owl was begun as a literary publication of the students in 1926, it added the humor angle in 1932 when the “Rack” section of the Campanile was halted for “crude.”

By early 1937, the dose of humor which The Owl had received proved almost too much for it. The Student Association presented a petition to Dean H. B. Weiser stating that they believed the quality of the magazine had declined, and since the publication was sent to other educational institutions as representative of Rice they asked that he take immediate steps to improve it.

Same Song . . .

Of course, this precipitated no small controversy. General consensus of the student body was that The Owl needed revision, but as Bob Illes of the Thresher noted in an editorial: “The Owl should not be done away with.” The Student Association was given the authority in the Constitution “to control all student publications,” he said, and to petition the Dean to correct it “seems to be a case of forcing faculty censorship of the press . . . The Council is right in wishing to raise The Owl’s literary level and it is its right to do so. They should not set a precedent of faculty supervision of publications, which might cause dissention in the future.”

Tactful Administering

Dean Weiser did not act on the petition, however. Instead he conferred with The Owl staff for 1938 about the problem.

The staff agreed to work for improvement, and no restrictive action was taken.

The Owl improved, until after its merger with The Alumni News, editor Bill Ballew of the 1940 Thresher was able to say: “The Rice Owl is getting progressively better. With its Christmas issue it hit a new high in interest both to the student . . . and for the alumni.”

Suspension In 1946

The War years unfortunately saw another decline in the quality of The Owl. A Student Association committee in 1946 charged that “recently there has been a tendency toward an accent on smutty jokes.” A faculty-student Board of Standards was proposed, but to no avail. Student apathy for literary contributions and support of The Owl prompted the administration to force suspension of publication.

It is significant to note that throughout the ups and downs of The Owl’s history, the students—with the aid of an apparently understanding administration—determined the fate of the magazine, without ever resorting to administrative censorship as the only way to keep lusty humor in check.

Literary Successors

The literary portion was resumed first as The Rice Magazine from 1947 to 1951, which folded because of debts; and later as The Mill, at first a Thresher supplement and finally a separate magazine in 1958.

The humor portion, however, died with the last of the Owls in June of 1946. Since then The Thresher and until recently The Campanile have become the sole outlets for Rice campus humor.