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Recommended Citation

Schnur, James Anthony, "Closet Crusaders, "Perverts" under the Palms, and Sunshine State Subversion" (1997). *USF St. Petersburg campus Faculty Publications*. 2995.
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Closet Crusaders, “Perverts” under the Palms, and Sunshine State Subversion

A Paper Submitted for Panel Session Entitled:
“Cold War Sweep: Chasing Teachers from Florida Closets and California Classrooms”
History of Education Society
St. Petersburg, Florida
7 November 2008

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Today, we will discuss a dark chapter of Florida history, a time a half century ago when a handful of lawmakers saw changes on the horizon that challenged the social structure and threatened their hegemony. Their actions, unfortunately, garnered widespread support among many Floridians, and prompted outrage among members of the academy, educators at all levels, and anyone concerned about the preservation of civil liberties and civil rights.

Florida is a unique place, geographically south but not quite Southern, where the “more north you go the more South you are.” We are a state of migrants, many of us still in search of our final destination. You may know that St. Petersburg was once referred to as “God’s Waiting Room—home of the newly wed and nearly dead.” Indeed, in the fall of 1986, the state hoped to increase tourism with an advertising campaign that promised those who visited the Sunshine State that their presence would lead to memorable experiences: “Florida—The Rules are Different Here.” Although the promotion has faded and others have replaced it, the use of that slogan has reappeared in our history, usually with a sarcastic or derisive tone. Florida does seem to be a place that attracts the strange and the weird. And,

unfortunately, our politicians often rise to the top when it comes to the “weird and dangerous” category.

Let me introduce you to Charley E. Johns and a group known as the “Porkchoppers.” A native of Starke in Bradford County, northeast Florida, Charley Eugene Johns first entered Florida politics as a representative in 1935. Johns sought public office to fulfill the aspirations of his brother and his father, both of whom died in office. With the opening of the 1937 biennial legislative session, Johns began a long senatorial career that lasted through the 1966 extraordinary session and included a fifteen-month term as acting governor of Florida. Floridians who opposed Johns and his propensity for requesting legislative investigations might have found irony in the state handbook that listed fishing, hunting, and collecting photographs among his favorite hobbies.¹

Charley Johns championed the brand of personal politics expected by his constituents. He understood that informal conversations at a barbeque, fish-fry, or the coffee shop carried great weight with residents of his district. Johns preferred hometown ways to the city life. He cultivated a populist image as a "spokesman for the little people." During the mid-1950s, advertisements regularly encouraged readers of his hometown newspaper, the Bradford County Telegraph, to purchase "gasoline with a 'Southern Accent'" from one of the family businesses. Johns became acting governor in the fall of 1953 after the untimely death of Governor Dan McCarty. At the time, the state's 1885 constitution did not have a clearly

¹ See Allen Morris, comp., People of Lawmaking in Florida; Morris, comp., Florida Handbook, 6th biennial ed., 375; and Allen Morris, comp., The Florida Handbook, 7th biennial ed., 388.

defined plan of succession if the governor died while in office. As senate president, Johns became the acting governor.”²

Two distinct factions appeared in Florida's Democratic Party after World War II. During the tumultuous 1955 reapportionment debates, lawmakers who hoped to perpetuate the legislative dominance of agrarian districts became known as "Porkchoppers." Those who sought fair representation for burgeoning cities along the peninsula took the nickname "Lambchoppers." As champions of business progressivism, Lamb Chop legislators wanted to provide equitable legislative apportionment and a substantial revision of the 1885 constitution. Let's put this in perspective: In 1950, (Miami-)Dade County's lone state senator spoke for nearly 500,000 constituents, while Jefferson County's delegate in northern Florida had barely 10,000 voters in his district. Thus, counties with less than fifteen percent of population controlled both houses.

Porkchoppers hailed largely from rural districts in the upper peninsula and Panhandle, regions that had held political dominance since the 1820s and that were bypassed by the postwar population growth and economic boom. Unreconstructed sons of Dixie, these powerbrokers unabashedly professed their belief in white supremacy and their desire to maintain the customs and traditions that had elevated their stature at the expense of others.³

Despite their parochial predilections, Porkchoppers did scrutinize events in faraway places. They witnessed the growth of a Cold War culture after World War II predicated on deferential patriotism, the defense of American institutions, and the defeat of a supposedly monolithic totalitarian menace. To preserve a sense of peace in their portion of an unstable

² Bradford County Telegraph, 27 March 1953, 2 October 1953, 9 October 1953, 10 September 1954; Charley Johns interview, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida.

³ Klein, "Pork Chop Gang," 135-140; Thomas R. Wagy, Governor LeRoy Collins of Florida: Spokesman of the New South, (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 46-55.

planet, Pork Chop politicians learned tactics from others, such as Senator Joe McCarthy and, later, Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, who brought his Congressional investigative committee to Miami and Tampa. Have no doubt that the May 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision certainly added fuel to the conspiratorial view of the world that burned within the Pork Chop lawmakers.

Joining their colleagues in other southern states, they demanded massive resistance to *Brown*. The year 1956 marked a pivotal turning point in the organized backlash against the civil rights movement. Federal courts and local boards of public instruction avoided implementing *Brown*. President Eisenhower pleaded ignorance and refused to intervene. Resistance also appeared on Capitol Hill when ninety-six members of Congress signed a Declaration of Constitutional Principles in March, the "Southern Manifesto." Of course, events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott inspired the civil rights movement and harsh responses from segregationists. A similar boycott in Florida—what some historians consider to be the first major student-led protest of the postwar South—actually took place in the late spring of 1956 and provoked a stern response.

The Tallahassee bus boycott began in late May, when police arrested two Florida A & M University students after they refused to follow the bus driver's order to move from seats in a white section of a Cities Transit Company bus. Like Rosa Parks in Montgomery, the FAMU students claimed fatigue as the motivation for their actions. Unlike the protest in Montgomery, however, the boycott in Tallahassee grew out of a student movement. Some white students at nearby Florida State University also began to participate. Financial losses prompted the bus company to suspend service a little more than a month after the protest began. Public safety officers responded to the boycott as lawmakers monitored events throughout Florida.

Tallahassee's police chief dispatched Remus J. Strickland, his lead investigator, to monitor activities and to arrest carpoolers for operating "illegal taxis." Meanwhile, angry whites burned crosses in the students' yard and legislators burned the midnight oil in a special session to craft legislation to contain such agitation.⁴

During a special legislative session that summer, lawmakers passed a bill creating the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee. Governor LeRoy Collins, already battling his legislative colleagues on other measures and knowing a veto would kill support for other programs, allowed this bill to become law without his signature. By the fall, the FLIC launched a variety of investigations against the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other targets with the goal of connecting the boycotts and other civil rights activities to a larger communist conspiracy. They sought membership lists. They hired investigators such as R. J. Strickland to "do their dirty work." From late 1956 to mid-1958, they waged an unsuccessful battle to eradicate any supporters of integration. Since the Committee—one that by then was chaired by Senator Johns—was an interim committee, they needed to justify their existence at each legislative session. It was clear that they needed a new game plan.

After McCarthyite tactics failed to destroy the NAACP and similar integrationist groups, the FLIC launched a relentless probe against a contrived "homosexual menace." Senator Johns quietly dispatched an investigator to search for homosexuals at the University of Florida during the summer of 1958. Rumors and innuendo offered the FLIC a long-awaited opportunity to create a conspiracy that linked homosexuality, subversion, and integration. Jerome Johns, the senator's son and a UF student, told his father he believed that

⁴ *Tallahassee Democrat*, 22 August 1993; Gregory B. Padgett, "C. K. Steele and the Tallahassee Bus Boycott," (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Florida State University, 1977), 25-26; Glenda A. Rabby, "Out of the Past: The Civil Rights Movement in Tallahassee, Florida," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Florida State University, 1984), 11-19.

“effeminate” instructors corrupted the curriculum. Soon thereafter, Strickland met an African-American man who claimed that he had engaged in lascivious acts with male faculty members at the university—this created a perfect storm—homosexual miscegenation! Johns urged Strickland to conduct his inquiry with the utmost secrecy because the 1957 enabling act did not permit the Committee to search for homosexuals. The chief investigator also operated covertly for practical reasons: Strickland hoped to maintain an element of surprise and to avoid attracting negative publicity that might threaten the Committee. Johns sent assignments to Strickland through the Committee's chief counsel, Mark Hawes.⁵

The University of Florida investigations serve as a microcosm for the Committee's blatant violation of basic rights. The men's lavatory at the Alachua County courthouse, more than one mile from campus, actually served as the focal point for much of the UF investigation. The county sheriff, who had once served as chief of the university's police department, agreed to give the Johns Committee full authority to monitor the building's public rest rooms. In this corrupt bargain, the sheriff even supported Strickland's plan to keep the facilities open during the evening to attract traffic. Strickland persuaded the UF police chief to reassign a few campus officers from their regular duties so they could serve as decoys and provide surveillance of the courthouse restrooms. Those arrested were shown photographs of UF faculty members and asked if they had ever seen certain professors near the courthouse. Strickland preferred guilt by association.⁶

The Committee intimidated the faculty members it interrogated. Strickland hired student informants with FLIC funds, used highway patrolmen to remove professors from the

⁵ Charles W. Arnade, interview by Author; Charles W. Arnade interview, Silver Anniversary Oral History Program, University of South Florida; Chapter 57-125, Laws of Florida.

⁶ Document 2-75 (22 January 1959), Document 4-8 (7 January 1959), Document 4-70 (6 December 1958), Document 2-77 (8 January 1959), Document 3-145 (25 May 1960), Florida Legislative Investigation Committee Papers, State Archives of Florida, Tallahassee.

classroom in front of their students, and telephoned some instructors late at night, demanding that they provide testimony in his motel room at his convenience. The faculty member would often sit on one bed, with Committee investigators and occasionally legislators sitting on a bed next to them, and a reel-to-reel tape recorder in between. For example, some UF professors were called before the Committee after a single student deemed them to be "queer" by "observation of them in class . . . the way they act . . . nothing specific," and another instructor was named because he wore Bermuda shorts on campus. Many interviewees cowered under such pressure. Some resigned, some left the state, some surrendered their teaching certificates, and some attempted suicide. In February 1959, the Committee offered a nearly 2000-page report on its probe entitled "Crimes against Nature at the University of Florida." Indeed, the rules are different here.⁷

Using a "domino effect" analogy that exacerbated Cold War fears, the FLIC report warned that some instructors in higher education have enticed their students to engage in homosexual practices and that "these young people have been and are becoming teachers in the public school system of Florida." Although they spoke in general terms and gave few specific details, FLIC members used the "homosexual menace" to persuade the legislature to extend the Committee's life for two more years so it could "investigate any agitator who may appear in Florida." Even the dismissal of more than fifty students and the termination of over twenty employees by 1959 did not satisfy Johns, as the University of Florida continued to suffer from probes into the 1960s ... and the numbers would grow.⁸

⁷ Bonnie Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida: Charley Johns and the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, July 1956 to July 1965," (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 1985), 96-97, 100-101; FLIC Minutes, 27 September 1958, box 9, FLIC Papers in the Clerk of the House of Representatives, State Library of Florida; Document 4-11 (21 January 1959), Document 3-158 (19 August 1959), Document 1-180 (1 October 1958), Document 4-8 (7 January 1959), Document 3-153 (15 December 1958), Document 4-43 (5 January 1959), FLIC Papers, State Archives.

⁸ Report of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee to the 1959 Session of the Legislature, Document 10-19 (13 April 1959), Document 10-23 (14 April 1959), Document 10-55, (13 April 1959), Document 10-58 (13 April 1959), FLIC Papers, State Archives; Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida," 109-111; Chapter 59-207, Laws of Florida; Florida Times Union, 30 April 1959.

In her excellent 2000 documentary film about the Johns Committee investigations, Allyson Beutke-DeVito captured the voices of some of the victims of UF probe. One person she interviewed was Art Copleston, a returning veteran who hid his homosexuality. He remembered seeing agents track him and other male students at an off-campus bar, watched UF police officers camp-out by campus dorms, and held a great fear for his future. His scariest day on campus was when the Dean of Men summoned him to his office. The door was closed, the Dean—with a somber face—passed along the bad news: Art's father had died. As Art later related in an interview—his response was “Oh, thank God—my father has died but I am still alive.” The Committee never succeeded at “outing” him.⁹

Homophobic witch hunts soon besieged Florida State University in Tallahassee. The Committee worked with FSU campus security officers to entrap students, faculty, and staff. In addition to the informants who frequented parks and other public facilities, the state hired an agent who invited male students to congregate at a house in suburban Tallahassee. The agent gained the confidence of the young men by providing parties and other social events, and by expressing an overt interest to meet their friends. When the intended victims trusted their host, they went with him into a bedroom and talked about others at the party. The agent secretly taped these conversations and sent them to the investigator, who summoned participants to his office, questioned them, and had them expelled. Similar to the tactics used at the Alachua County courthouse, Committee agents and local deputies served as decoys at the Greyhound and Trailways bus station rest rooms. Strickland and the city's police officers planted a tape machine in their vehicle, thereby allowing them to record conversations secretly before placing suspects under oath in a formal interrogation session.¹⁰

⁹ Allyson A. Beutke and Scott Litvack, “Behind Closed Doors: The Dark Legacy of the Johns Committee,” VHS Tape (M.A. Project, Documentary Institute, University of Florida, 2000).

¹⁰ Document 11-713 (23 January 1961), Document 11-1682 (22 March 1963), Document 2-104 (9 May 1960), Document 2-106 (19 May 1960), FLIC Papers, State Archives; Stark, “McCarthyism in Florida,” 93

Investigators derived a perverse pleasure from discrediting African Americans at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee and at Jim Crow schools throughout Florida. At the same time Southern whites supremacists perpetuated the myth that black males possessed an insatiable lust which endangered white womanhood, the Committee hoped its probes would debase black homosexuals by portraying them as less than human. Committee operatives painstakingly recorded volumes of hearsay in their quest to destroy African-American educators. For example, they maintained a rap sheet of black school administrators who allegedly "derive(d) sex satisfaction through the rectum." In one specific example, Strickland visited the Clearwater offices of the Pinellas County school board to interrogate educators from all-black Gibbs Junior College. Strickland grilled a music instructor for nearly eight hours. When the teacher refused to submit to Strickland's tactics, the temperamental investigator warned him that he would never teach anywhere in America. During the interrogation, Strickland referred to him as an "educated nigra," constantly reminded him he was under oath, asked if he knew the statutory penalties for perjury, and wondered if he had committed crimes "up North." Shortly after this session, the state revoked the teacher's certification and he relocated to Maryland.¹¹

Regardless of their race, educators targeted by the Committee had much to fear, including the prospect of immediate personal humiliation and professional alienation, as one teacher quickly learned when Strickland asked in McCarthyite fashion, "Do you know now, or have you known in the past any teacher in the public school system of this state who is a homosexual?"¹²

¹¹ Document 11-256 (20 March 1962), Document 1-95 (13 October 1960), Document 1-78 (13 October 1960), Document 1-79 (13 October 1960), FLIC Papers, State Archives; St. Petersburg Times, 2 July 1993.

¹² Karen M. Harbeck, "Gay and Lesbian Educators: Past History/Future Prospects," in Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers, and Curricula, ed. Karen M. Harbeck (New York: Harrington, 1992), 123-125; Document 1-114 (19 September 1960), Document 11-1675 (7 October 1960), FLIC Papers, State Archives.

These investigations continued into the early 1960s. In February 1962, after asking a state employee to explain, "What pleasure do you derive from looking at a picture of a person in the nude?," Strickland inquired if he practiced mutual or self masturbation. In October of that year, an investigator asked another man if he and his roommate enjoyed "poking each other in the butt." Reporters who challenged the Committee in their newspaper articles also faced entrapment and arrest—such as when an Orlando reporter named Bob Delaney knocked on a motel door, was thrown on a bed with a nude woman, and Committee agents took pictures. The woman, by the way, was a hired investigator paid for with our tax dollars. And so it goes.¹³

Throughout the investigations at UF and elsewhere, the Committee maintained definitions of "homosexuality" that could be, at best, described as "situation-specific": The Committee often equated homosexuality with the "crimes against nature" statute. Thus, state employees who admitted to heterosexual oral-genital contact faced possible dismissal for committing sodomy because the Committee defined homosexuality as "the sexual relation between two people of the same sex usually, although it can be practiced by two people of the opposite sex." Strickland often took this terminology to the absurd extreme, as when he asked one gay man, "Have you ever thought of having homosexual relations with a woman just to find out what it's all about?" To obscure matters further, Strickland told a different subject that "a homosexual act is a sexual act between two people of the same sex . . . regardless of what the degree of the act itself might be whether it's a petting act or a fondling act or goes beyond that degree."¹⁴

¹³ Document 2-56 (20 February 1962), Document 3-128 (3 April 1962), FLIC Papers, State Archives.

¹⁴ Document 3-12 (undated), Document 3-60 (13 October 1958), Document 2-175 (24 May 1961), Document 4-36 (undated), Document 1-56 (undated), FLIC Papers, State Archives.

Committee investigators frequently asked prurient questions: Rather than engaging in a pursuit of evidence, agents chose to intimidate their subjects by forcing them to reveal private matters of no investigative value. When interrogating one man, Charley Johns flipperly asked, "Now, when you suck another man's penis, do you get the same sensation out of it as when you have yours sucked?" How many governors or lawmakers in your home states have ever asked that question? However, even that seemed tame when compared with the verbal groping commonly practiced by the Committee. While interviewing one lesbian, an investigator said, "I want you to tell me exactly what happened, go into details, everything that you did, stripped your clothes, you were in the nude, lay down in bed, what position you got into and what she did." A few children faced inquisitions that no parent would knowingly tolerate. When agents discovered a teenager who had innocently kissed and held hands with another girl, they wanted her to give them the details. They also lectured her by stating, "Have you ever seen what (homosexuality) can really do to a person? . . . It can completely destroy you. . . . You haven't turned against the male sex then have you?"¹⁵

These perverted and homophobic investigations ultimately led to the Committee's demise. In January 1964, it released the infamous report entitled *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida*. Known as the "purple pamphlet" for its strange cover, it created a firestorm of controversy with revealing photographs and an interesting, to say the least, glossary. The Committee tried to save face as others claimed it was pandering pornography. Committee member C. W. "Bill" Young, then a Republican state senator from Pinellas County . . . and our current Congressional Representative, warned that residents cannot "stick (their) heads in the sand. The legislature has responsibilities to the public to expose these people

¹⁵ Document 4-11 (21 January 1959), Document 3-23 (28 June 1962), Document 1-146 (undated), Document 11-1678 (13 July 1964), FLIC Papers, State Archives.

who have been preying on young people." To Young, the glossary allowed police officers "to recognize a homosexual from some words he used." By the way, USF—another school victimized by the Committee—has buildings named in Young's honor on both the St. Petersburg and Tampa campuses.¹⁶

Ultimately, the Johns Committee was abolished in 1965, ending a nine-year assault on civil liberties. But that's not the entire story. For twenty-eight years, the state sequestered the records and tried to eradicate any trace of the Committee's terrible legacy. Finally, after court battles and many attempts to get Florida to live up to its "Government in the Sunshine" provisions, the official—and heavily redacted—records were opened in July 1993. Florida's secret of shame finally came out of the closet.

In summary, the Johns Committee and its supporters created the image of a diseased relationship between communism and homosexuality in Florida that supposedly infected and weakened American institutions. Florida's homophobic investigations served as a microcosm for Cold War crackdowns throughout the nation. But, the rules were different here: Unlike other legislative committees and sovereignty commissions of the period, the Johns Committee went beyond race, academic freedom, loyalty, and subversion: They became "Peeping Johns" seeking "perverts" under the palms. In their conspiratorial paradigm, suspect Floridians—especially those in fields such as education—threatened the family, the church, and other bulwarks of democracy by eschewing the nuclear family--America's vanguard against internal subversion--as well as by living outside of "traditional" Southern customs. We must remember that many at the time praised the Committee for doing "God's work" and

¹⁶ Tampa Tribune, 30 January 1964; St. Petersburg Times, 19 March 1964; St. Petersburg Independent, 21 March 1964, Johns Committee Clippings, University of South Florida Special Collections; FLIC Papers, Document 4-73 (18 April 1964); "Homosex Report," 30 May 1964, box 1, FLIC Papers, State Archives; Professor Anonymous (pseud.), "Perverts Under the Palms," Confidential Magazine, February 1964, 48, box 1, John Egerton File on the Johns Committee, University of South Florida Special Collections, Tampa.

Johns later said that it was all worthwhile if the Committee saved at least one child from “becoming a homosexual.” Florida—the rules are different here. Thank you.¹⁷

¹⁷ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). 282-284, 288-289; Sumter Lowry to Bryant, 14 March 1963, box 27, C. Farris Bryant Administrative Files, State Archives of Florida; St. Petersburg Times, 4 March 1962, "Sunday" Magazine; Stephen J. Whitfield, Culture of the Cold War, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 43-45; John D'Emilio, Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 59-60, 62-66; John D'Emilio, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 17-18; James T. Sears, Growing Up Gay in the South: Race, Gender, and Journeys of the Spirit, (New York: Harworth, 1991), 13, 64-65; Morris Dickstein, Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties, (New York: Penguin, 1989), 26-29, 40.