

As many of our readers know, Muzel Bryant, Ocracoke's oldest resident, died last month at the age of 103. I was unable to attend her funeral, but was kindly given the eulogy which was delivered by Alton Ballance. I include it here as a tribute to a kind and humble woman whom I was delighted to count for a time some years ago as my next door neighbor.

Muzel Belle Bryant at 100 Years Old:



March 12, 1904 - February 18, 2008

*"While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,
Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free,
Let us all be grateful for a land so fair,
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer. "*

God Bless America,
Land that I love.
Stand beside her, and guide her
Thru the night with a light from above.
From the mountains, to the prairies,
To the oceans, white with foam
God bless America, My home sweet home

How do you represent a life that spanned a century? I have lived half as long as Musie, and I'm often amazed at all the local and global changes which have taken place during my life.

For Musie, after all, it began over a century ago. Let's see, Teddy Roosevelt was president; the Wright Brothers had made their first flight at Kitty Hawk only three months before her birth; and sailing vessels were still moving in and out of Ocracoke Inlet. Not even 103 new verses of the Billy Joel song "We Didn't Start the Fire" would cover Musie's life.

She was alive when the Titanic sank, she was alive during World War I, she was alive during Prohibition, she was alive during the Great Depression, and she was alive to witness all the

changes to her island home that followed World War II: electricity, paved roads, ferries, a central water system, and cable TV.

Muzel Belle Bryant was born on March 12, 1904, to Leonard and Jane Bryant in the old home place which stood to the left of where Farris lives now. Only a few elderly Ocracokers call her Muzel. To me she was Muse. Her sister Mildred always called her Musa. To Kenny and most people she was Musie, so we'll call her Musie.

Leonard & Jane Bryant:



Leonard and Jane also had eight other children: Artis, Lewis, Mildred, Mamie, Annie Laura, Joffery, Julius, and John Thomas. Two sets of twins which followed Mildred did not survive. Only Annie Laura, who lives in a nursing home in Swan Quarter, and Mamie, who lives in New York City, are left.

Musie's grandmother was a slave. Winnie Blount came from around Washington, NC, with her husband Harkus to live on Ocracoke after the slaves were freed. Harkus was a carpenter and boat builder and the couple managed to acquire the land along the lighthouse road. They had two daughters, Jane and Annie Laura. Jane eventually met and married Leonard Bryant from Engelhard while she and Winnie were working at the old Doxsee Clam Factory, which was located near the entrance to the harbor. Annie Laura also lived on the island with her husband, but they moved to the mainland after their little boy fell off the back porch into the water barrel and drowned.

Winnie Blount:



While the Bryants as well as the other Ocracokers living at this time recognized their racial differences, for the most part the Bryants were accepted and they lived, worked, and played along with everyone else. They enjoyed spending time in the Creek in Leonard's boats, rambled all over the island with their grandmother picking yaupon to make tea, and they'd sometimes take late afternoon trips to the beach when everyone else was gone. Mildred once told me, "I'll never forget one time me, Ma, and Musa walked across the beach. It was a purty evening and we started wading and just having the best time. It gradually got darker and Ma started to walk home and called for us to come on. But we kept waiting for the big wave to come, wurn't satisfied with the smaller ones. Well, just as Ma was a-going over the sand dunes, this big ole wave comes a-rolling up on the beach and goes clear past our knees and knocks us down. When it went back out, it was all we could do to keep from being pulled out it was so strong. I held onto Musa and started hollering for Ma, but she was on over the hill by then. When we finally did get out of the water, we ran and ran till we caught up with Ma. I always thought God sent that breaker to drive us home."

During another childhood adventure, Mildred and Musie were playing up around Oyster Creek, not far from where Julia Hutcherson lives today, and Musie got stuck in quick sand and started going down. Mildred managed to get her out. Musie told Kenny this story not long ago, and added, "Kenny, if I would have gone then, you wouldn't have had all this worry with me."

The Bryant children did not attend school like other Ocracokers. Some received schooling at home from a woman Leonard brought to the island, others were taught evenings, and some went to school off island. When she was a teenager, Musie went to live with an uncle in Philadelphia and attended school there for about two years.

After she returned to the island, Musie started doing housekeeping, laundry, and cooking in the homes of people like Mr. Walter & Metta O'Neal, Mary Elizabeth Gaskins, Mrs. Laura Bragg and Kathleen & Malby Bragg. Even at the age of 83, Musie would walk to Thurston and Nora Gaskill's house to spend much of the day with them.

She had a son, Charles Donald Bryant, on October 26, 1925. After he was grown, he lived in Plymouth, NC, until he died in 1988 at the age of 63.

In 1983, Musie moved from the Bragg household back to the land of her birth. Her sister Mildred was living in an old life saving station boat house—where Farris lives today. When Mildred bought the structure in 1949, the sandy beach stretched to the edge of this property. Kenny helped Musie move her possessions, most which had been kept in paper sacks.

She shared a bedroom with Mildred and within a few years they had to make room for their sister Annie Laura, who had retired from working for Yale University and decided to move back home.

Musie was a night owl. She loved to stay up late and get up late. Annie was the opposite. Musie was more outgoing. When she lived with them at the old boat house, she'd often leave home and take walks, always curious to see who drove by, sometimes engaging people in conversation along the sides of the road. When a car would pass by suddenly, she'd quickly turn her whole body around to look in its direction.

She left Thurston Gaskill's one time, heading home, but did not show up until several hours later. Come to find out, Mark Gibbons, who used to be in the Coast Guard here, had picked her up in his old weapons carrier vehicle and rode her around for several hours, including a beach ride. Another time when she was two hours late getting home, they discovered her alongside the road talking with Washie Spencer.

Let me pause here and say a few words about our family's long friendship with the Bryants. As a child I remember Mildred as a regular visitor at our house. My grandmother Brittie loved her. Ma Brittie, as she was known, would also go see Winnie Blount at the old home place. During one visit, my grandmother and several other island women were invited to sit down and have dinner with Winnie. Mildred and the other children stood nearby staring at the unusual visitors at their grandmother's table.

I also remember Mildred taking me, Kenny, and Kathy for walks along the shoreline and helping our mother with household chores. My father would help Mildred get her heaters running or bring her things from his many trips back to the island while working on the dredge. As Kenny, Kathy, and I got older, it was only natural for us to continue the friendship and support our grandparents and parents had given the Bryant sisters. After all, they had become part of our family.

1994 and 1995 brought great changes to both our families. In 1994 Musie's brother Julius died. Julius was loved by many Ocracokers and visitors. When he was in the hospital in Greenville one time, quite a few Ocracokers went to visit him. This visitation caught the eye of one nurse, who asked an Ocracoke man, "Sir, can I ask you a question? That man, Mr. Julius, does he have any black friends?" Our own mother also died that year.

In 1995—the same year our father died—Mildred also died and Annie Laura decided she needed 24 hour nursing home care. Kenny told Musie, "Either you move in with me, or I'll move down there with you." She moved on the Back Road with him and never went back to the old boat house home again.

When she moved in with Kenny, she began perhaps her greatest journey in life. It was here at the house on the Back Road that she learned about VCR's, cable TV, and met Kenny's many friends, of whom she'd ask, "Where are you from?" She was eager to hear about far away places. People brought her candy and stuffed animals.

"When she first moved here," recalled Kenny, "she wouldn't eat at the table with us. She always thought she had to wait until we were finished. I broke that up one day when a friend was visiting. I told her that my friend refused to eat unless she sat with us."

Musie spent her time reading the VA Pilot and the Almanac and listening to Jim Reeves tapes. She watched TV shows such as Lawrence Welk, Wheel of Fortune, The Price is Right, numerous religious shows, wrestling, and bull fighting with John Carter. Occasionally while channel surfing late at night she would happen across a late night Cinemax movie that also captured her attention.

Musie received a few hundred dollars each month from a social security supplement and would often tell Kenny, "We better spend this money before it gets too old." She bought dolls and stuffed animals and her special collection grew to 34, most of which were given to her by friends and family during Christmas, birthdays, or other holidays.

Kenny organized her 100th birthday party in the school gym, complete with a dinner, music, and speeches and attended by over 200 friends. She later wound up at the Pub as the celebration continued until after midnight.

Muze & Kenny at the Pub:



Musie's life was featured in numerous articles and she never shied away from the many visitors who found their way into her life. I once introduced her to a group of NCCAT teachers. As I led her into the living you would have thought a movie star was present as all the camera flashes went off. She had one question, "Where are you'all from?"

She loved Babe, John Carter's bulldog, and after she moved to Kenny's new house in 2005, she missed the dog very much. When John would visit she wouldn't ask how he was doing before asking about Babe. Most of the time when I entered her room she'd also ask first about my daughter Maddie, saying, "How's your baby?" before anything else was said.

The move to Kenny's current house happened on Thanksgiving Day, 2005. When she saw the many steps, Musie wondered how she would ever get up and down. Kenny told her, "Just worry about getting up the steps right now. Twiford will take you back down them."

Sometimes when she wasn't feeling well Musie would tell Kenny, "Kenny, I think I'm getting ready to die." Kenny would often tell her, "Musie, you can't die right now. You'll have to wait. It's too hot to bury you and I'm too busy at work." She'd then reply, "Yes, yes, I will."

Even during this last year of her life, Musie had a great memory. Years ago during trips off the island with Charlotte Bragg she memorized all the names of the bridges now being replaced, all the names of the ferries, the birthdays, weddings, and ages of many family and friends, some of which have been gone for decades.

Musie left Kenny's new house only twice while she lived there: once for a trip to the eye doctor in Nags Head, and when Kathy got married. As several hundred people were gathered in Kenny's yard before the wedding ceremony, Bobby O'Neal and Jamie Jackson hauled Musie down the steps in a wheelchair so she could stand next to Kathy as one of her maids of honor. None of us had ever seen her dressed in a blue suit with a white hat. Few had ever seen her without her print dresses, cotton stockings, and her head wrapped in a blue bandana. One person said, "She looked like an African Queen coming down those steps."

Kathy & Tommy, Farris & Chrissy, Erick & Marissa, John and others spent many nights with

Musie while Kenny was off the island. Kathy was sometimes left with the duty to give Musie a bath. Musie didn't like it when Kathy gave her a bath. A few stories developed from these exchanges, but they can't be told here.

As Musie's health declined during recent months, she never complained and was always grateful for the meals, visits, and extra nursing care she received.

When she passed away on that stormy morning earlier this week, Kenny was by her side. He and Kathy made sure she had a final bath before they took her down those steps, and he would travel to the funeral home in Manteo to make sure her signature bandana was tied correctly around her head before they placed her in this coffin.

In closing, let me say that Musie was a nucleus for our family, that special person or circumstance in our lives that brings everyone together for a common mission. For someone who had gotten so little from the material world, Musie was certainly blessed during the final decades of her century long life with the dedicated attention that Kenny and his network of family and friends provided her.

A month ago a friend of mine was visiting with her child. We were at Kenny's for a big dinner with family and friends, and while the adults were eating in the dining and living room, the child had found her way into Musie's room. We soon heard an assortment of sounds coming from the bedroom and we knew that Musie was excitedly sharing her collection with someone 96 years younger. We heard the gorilla that played Elvis Presley's "Burning Love," the yellow chicken doing the chicken dance, and, perhaps Musie's favorite, a bear that sings "God Bless America." When I went in the room to check on them, Musie was staring intently at her feet where the child was presenting her own collection of stuffed animals.

Musie traveled very little in her life: the diamond of her experiences stretched from Ocracoke to Philadelphia to Elkin, NC, where her brother lived, to Beaufort and back to Ocracoke. Kenny got her to spend several days once at his house in Norfolk, but after a few days she was ready to go home.

The land that Musie loved, the century of life that she lived, was spent here, her home sweet home. God blessed her life here, the land that she loved, next to her ocean white with foam, and all of the lives that have passed her way since 1904 have been richer because of her, Musie.

Alton Ballance

February 23, 2008