

On Friday, March 12, 2004 Ocracoke native, Muzel Bryant, had her 100th birthday. The next day approximately 200 people came to the school gymnasium for a community celebration in honor of Miss Muze.



Muze's grandmother, Winnie, ("Aunt Winnie" to nearly everyone on the island), came to Ocracoke soon after the end of the Civil War. Unconfirmed evidence suggests that Aunt Winnie may have lived on Portsmouth Island before emancipation.

At any rate, Aunt Winnie was living in Blount's Creek, North Carolina during the conflict and came to Ocracoke ca. 1865/66 with a Williams family. Many Outer Banks residents fled the islands when Union forces invaded the area at the beginning of the war, only to return after hostilities ended. No one knows if this Williams family was originally from Ocracoke or not.

Aunt Winnie Blount:



Soon after her arrival on the island Aunt Winnie married Harkus (Hercules) Blount, also from Blount's Creek, who was already living on Ocracoke and working as a carpenter and furniture maker. Together they purchased a large tract of land from Mary Jane Bragg (the daughter of John Bragg, with whom Aunt Winnie appears to have had a family connection). Unfortunately, no photographs of Harkus Blount have survived. Aunt Winnie and Harkus built a small frame home on their land, just south of where the Island Inn sits today.

Aunt Winnie and Harkus Blount had two daughters, Laura and Jane. As a young lady, Laura met Sam Dudley, a cook working aboard an oyster boat. They courted, he stayed, and

eventually they married.

Laura and Sam built their modest home near Laura's parents. Their first child, Sammy, was born soon afterwards. When Sammy was about one year old he fell into a water barrel and drowned. After this tragedy, Laura and Sam moved to Bellhaven, North Carolina, where they had three other children, Winnie, Cora, and Samuel. Laura and Sam never returned to the island.

Meanwhile, Jane took work at the Doxee Clam Factory, a turn-of-the-twentieth-century enterprise established on Cockle Creek (now often known as Silver Lake), across the "ditch" from the present-day Coast Guard station.

Jane Blount:



As it happened, another Blount's Creek resident, Leonard Bryant, was also working at the Doxee Clam Factory. Jane and Leonard married, and moved into Laura and Sam's house.

Leonard Bryant:



Jane and Leonard had thirteen children:

- Twins (died at birth)
- Twins (also died at birth)
- Artis (born 1902)

- Muzel (born 1904)
- Mildred (born 1907)
- Lewis (born ca.1909)
- Mamie (born 1912)
- Anna Laura (born 1915)
- Joffrey (born ca. 1918)
- Julius (born 1921)
- John Thomas (born 1924)

Aunt Winnie died on January 08, 1925, soon after her grandson, John Thomas, was born. She was reported to have been about 100 years old when she died.

Leonard supported his growing family by doing carpentry, growing vegetables in his garden, and by cutting hair. He had a heavy barber's chair that he often set up in his yard in warm weather, under a large live oak tree. Leonard was also the sexton at the Methodist Church for a number of years. Many people remember that Leonard always liked to eat his dinner at a table with a clean, white tablecloth, often dining alone.

Leonard died in 1960. He was 81 years old. Jane died four years later.

Muze and her two younger sisters, Mamie and Anna Laura, are the last surviving members of Ocracoke's only historic black family. Only Muze still lives on the island.

Artis left the island as a young man and joined the Merchant Marines. He had been gone sixteen years when the oil tanker on which he was serving was torpedoed off shore of Ocracoke during World War II. He was rescued and brought to the Ocracoke Coast Guard Station. His family was notified, and they walked to the station to visit Artis briefly before he departed once more, never again to return to the island. His only additional contact was years later when he sent his family a photo of the ship on which he had served and which was torpedoed in 1942.

Mamie moved to the northeast, working in New Haven, Connecticut, at Yale University, and later working for a school teacher in New York City, where she lives today with her daughter, Mary.

Lewis went to New Jersey where he operated a thrift store for many years.

Joffrey, like many other island men, worked for the Army Corps of Engineers, mostly in the Philadelphia area.

Anna Laura left the island for a number of years, but returned in the 1980's to live with her two sisters. She is now on the mainland of Hyde County in a nursing home.

Mildred, know to many as "Babe," moved off-island in 1929 and worked in Washington, North Carolina and Baltimore. She returned home in 1943 and worked for 14 years for Carlton Kelly.

John Thomas made his home in Elkin, North Carolina where he worked as a chauffeur for Mrs. Reynolds of the tobacco family.

Although Julius worked on a hopper dredge in Philadelphia for a few years in the early 1940's, he soon returned to the island where he made a living fishing and shrimping. He also worked for the National Park Service. Julius was very gregarious, and many people will remember his ready smile, easy manner, and winning personality.

Muze also lived in Philadelphia for several years (1920-1924), but she came back home when she was twenty years old to work for Walter and Armeda O'Neal, and then later, for Kathleen Bragg, Ocracoke's nurse and only medical care-giver for many years. She also cared for Alton, Kenny, & Kathy Ballance when they were children. Muze has lived with Kenny for a number of years now.

By all appearances Muze had a wonderful time at her birthday party!

Muze arriving at the school gym by limo:



Cutting her birthday cake:



After dinner and cake at the school, everyone, including Muze, continued the party at Howard's Pub.

Muze posing for photos at the Pub with her niece, Mary, and Philip Howard:



Muze and Kenny share a moment before the champagne toast:



Muze stayed at the Pub and continued to celebrate until nearly 1 a.m., chatting with well-wishers, posing for photos, listening to the music of the "Ocracoke Rockers," and enjoying the attention this kind, gentle-hearted, and young-spirited Ocracoker deserves.

If you happen to see Muze sitting on her porch on the Back Road this summer, stop and wish her all the best in her second century. She is a delightful person.

Until next month,

Philip and the entire crew at Village Craftsmen