

JOHN MILTON BRYAN

Remarks of Bryan Simpson, Grandson and
Namesake of Above, at Lake County Court-
house, Tavares, Florida, Veterans' Day,
November 11, 1954, Incident to Unveiling
of Portrait of Mr. Bryan, at Ceremonies
Arranged by Board of County Commissioners,
Lake County.

Mr. Ware, Judge Futch, Judge Hunter, Reverend Hargrove, Mr. Lehman, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you sincerely, Karl, for your gracious introduction. It is a great pleasure for me to come here to Lake County this afternoon. I am introduced by Mr. Lehman as a Judge from Jacksonville. Actually, I am a Judge of the Southern District of Florida, of which Lake County is a most important part. I listened with much interest to Mr. Ware's stirring recital of your progress, but I did not need it to sell me on Lake County. It has long been one of the greatest gems in the diadem of great Florida counties. Your past is bright, your future is even brighter. It is also a great privilege, as far as I am concerned, to be permitted to speak to you on this occasion, and gratefully to acknowledge for the members of the family of my distinguished grandfather, John Milton Bryan, your gracious tribute to his memory today. For each of us here and the many others who could not come here, I thank you sincerely.

Also, may I be permitted to commend, as entirely praiseworthy, the motives which cause you to honor him, Judge Koonce, and Mr. Owens today, and the several others who have received similiar tribute on like occasions.

By keeping alive memories of our past, and the men and women who have moulded and shaped it, we can and do bring our hopes for the future within clearer focus.

The life of John Milton Bryan is truly representative of the early growth and development of Florida, and of the strength, the hardihood, the vision and the foresight of the pioneers who, against high insuperable odds, created a great state from an untracked wilderness. One of 8 children of William James Bryan and Mary Anne (Perry) Bryan, John Milton Bryan was born November 4, 1838, in Hamilton County, when Florida was yet 7 years away from Statehood. The narrow band of north and west Florida counties stretching along the Georgia and Alabama border, widening out a little in the east along the coast and up the St. Johns River, held very nearly all of the territory's 50,000 inhabitants (parenthetically that's roughly the number of people who live in Lake County today). The vast peninsula to the south contained only a few sparse and scattered settlements and military outposts. The bitter Seminole Indian Wars of 1836 to 1838 were just ending. His own grandfather, Philemon Bryan, had migrated to territorial Florida from New Bern, North Carolina, and settled

here near the end of the second Spanish occupation, before the change of flags.

John Milton Bryan's boyhood days were spent on the farm and in the forest. His formal schooling in the frontier life of that day was slight, spasmodic and occasional. There literally were no schools. Children learned at home, except when an itinerant schoolmaster appeared for a few months to teach the children of the neighborhood families in return for room and board and a few dollars.

The Seminole Wars broke out again with great violence in 1856, and volunteers were needed to protect the women and children of the settlements. Fair and blue-eyed, young Milt Bryan was a sturdy, well-knit, muscular lad, well over medium height and about 17 at this time. Born to the saddle, farm and frontier raised, hickory-hard, he was wise in the ways and weapons of the wilderness. He served for 3 years in this bloody and cruel war as a United States Mounted Volunteer at an age when our boys are at their books. In these years, in the camp and on the march, he saw much of the country to the south, and I think began to envision its tremendous possibilities. It is said in the family that while on a

solitary scouting mission from Fort Drum or Fort Bassenger, he climbed a tall cypress and looked on the vast expanse of Lake Okeechobee for the first time. At long last the Indians were moved away to reservations or pushed back into the Everglades and the fighting ended.

Soon thereafter, with his father and mother, he settled near this spot and busily began the clearing and cultivating of what was virgin wilderness a short time before.

But the ways of peace were not to be his for long. The young State of Florida joined her sisters of the Confederacy in the War Between the States. I know that my grandfather held the view that the solution of the South's problems lay within the Union, not outside it, in peace not war - that our Southern leaders were hot-headed and impulsive at a time when calmness, courage and deliberation were needed and might have saved the day. But loyalty to his State was first. He served throughout the War, first as Sergeant, later as Lieutenant in Company G, (the Madison Grey Eagles recruited up in Madison County) of the Third Florida Regiment. The Third Florida served gloriously in the western battles and campaigns from

Perryville and Shiloh to Lookout Mountain, Chickamauga and Atlanta and beyond. By midsummer 1862 it was so decimated by battle casualties (as was the First Florida) that the two were joined and served the balance of the War as a consolidated command. At the close of the War, when General Joe Johnston surrendered his command to General Sherman, our grandfather was not among the tattered little band of four officers and 109 men present for the last muster of the First and Third Florida, which had once numbered, between them, about 2500 strong. He had been captured in the late stages of the western fighting and was then a prisoner in a Union prison in Chicago.

With the close of the War and his parole, he came back to this section of Florida and with the other young old veterans, under the handicaps and hardships of reconstruction, began the slow building and rebuilding that was the lot of this part of the country in those harsh years. In January 1867 he married Miss Louise Margaret Norton, daughter of Captain Nathan Norton of Clay County and brought her to live in a log house on what was known as the old Ballard Place near Umatilla. She was a strength and inspiration, a devoted partner and

loyal helpmate, wife and mother for every day of their forty-four years together. He began about this time acquiring and developing the new place at Fort Mason, and moved there about 1874 or 1875. Seven of his ten children were born here in Lake County, and one of them, the oldest boy, Henry, who died at six, is buried at Fort Mason, together with John Milton Bryan's mother and father.

This was then raw frontier territory. The problems of daily living in a new, small, weak and impoverished State were great. There were no railroads. Paddle-wheel, log-burning steamers on the St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers were the main means of commerce, of travel and of communication.

With a partner named Smith, whose first name I am sorry I cannot give you, and Mr. John Wofford, he established a store and trading post on Lake Eustis. The firm name was Smith, Bryan and Wofford. Goods and supplies came up-river on the St. Johns and Ocklawaha and to the lakes from Jacksonville by boat; skins and furs, cattle, fruit and vegetables went back in return.

There were no schools. He gave the land and built thereon the first schoolhouse in this county. He

planted citrus groves and crops, he bred and raised cattle and horses and helped others to do so. A number of men were encouraged and materially aided by him to better their own lot by education. For several men who later made their mark in the practice of law in this state, he bought law books and helped feed their families, so that they could study.

If Florida was to advance, control of the State and County governments had to be wrested from the scallawags and carpet-baggers infesting Florida under reconstruction. From this stirring struggle, which lasted years, he emerged as a trusted leader of his people, a man to whom others instinctively turned when either advice or action was needed. For 8 years commencing in 1875, he represented Orange County in the State Legislature, and for 4 years commencing in 1886, he represented Orange County in the Florida State Senate. He was a commanding figure in both those bodies. During the latter term of service in the 1887 Session of the Senate, he successfully sponsored the legislation creating Lake County from the western part of Orange, and Osceola County from southern Orange and western Brevard.

In the meantime, about 1883, he had again followed the frontier southward, and moved his family near the

new settlement of Kissimmee. The Plant System, now the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, had reached that point, in the lower part of Orange County, and it was booming. Badly needed rail transportation was now available for Florida's products of field, forest and farm. New settlers were coming in daily and new towns and developments springing up nearly overnight. From 1870 to 1900 Florida's population of 170,000 more than trebled.

Times were bustling. Groves had to be cleared, set out and tended, crops made, trees felled to build homes, stores and warehouses, pasture lands acquired and better breeds of cattle brought in. In the new raw settlement the same pattern was repeated of service to community and state, and of helping every man within reach willing to help himself. The land for the first schoolhouse in Osceola County was given by him, as was the block on which the Osceola County Court House was built and stands today. These were busy, fruitful years, with the large family growing, developing and being educated. I think his own lack of formal schooling was the inspiration and driving force for my grandfather's lifetime interest in education. He knew that the State's future development depended upon

proper rearing and training of its boys and girls. He continued his own education by study and reading to the end of his life. I think he felt books to be almost as necessary as bread. College education was a must for the 9 children. He was never a wealthy man, and sacrifices were often necessary. They were cheerfully made, for the common good. All of the children lived lives of usefulness and honor in this State, and each of them, in his or her own way, has made a lasting contribution to its growth and development. Two of them, Will Bryan and Nathan P. Bryan, were United States Senators from Florida. My mother, over here, is the only child now living. I am especially proud and happy that she is here today. (As you also can see from the samples we've brought along over here, his race is not dying out, and the fourth and fifth generations are coming along).

With the rapid development of the State, and increasing dependence upon rail transportation, it became clear to men with the interests of the common people at heart, that the railroads, the colonization companies and the great special interests represented by them were not always activated by entirely unselfish motives. Particularly apparent was the necessity for some method of restraining

the railroads with the fair regulation of their rates and their relations with the public. The grower, the shipper, the small merchant, needed protection. Similiar problems on a national scale had led to the creation of the Interstate Commerce Commission a few years earlier. The special interests were by then well entrenched in positions of power throughout the State, but John Milton Bryan successfully led the long fight to create the Railroad Commission of Florida and give it broad powers. He was appointed by Governor Bloxham to the Commission when it was created in 1897, and served as its first Chairman. After being elected to succeed himself in 1899, with most of the needed reforms under way, he declined to run again and retired at the end of his term in 1903. He did not again hold public office, but his wise counsel was time and again sought and followed by the leaders of this State as long as he lived.

One last move to yet another undeveloped section of the State was in store for the family of this energetic and resourceful man. He suffered the devastating losses common to citrus growers in the freezes of '95 and '96. Shortly thereafter he both bought and homesteaded lands below the frost line in Dade County, near Dania, which

point Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway had by then reached. He planted new groves with seeds saved from the frozen trees at Kissimmee. He moved with his family to the new home in about 1905.

In the years from then until his death, he appeared as I remember him, and as your portrait shows him. With the weight of 70 years of a strenuous and active life on his shoulders, he was still strong and vigorous, still carried himself with the proud erect bearing of an old soldier. His hair was about gone, and the full beard, once reddish blonde, was nearly white, but the bright blue eyes flashed with the fire of old. He was a man of cheerful, sunny disposition, but capable of lightning temper and high indignation on occasion. We little ones knew these were times to stay out of the way. His faith in God and God's Providence was devout. He was open-handed, without guile, of scrupulous honor, and utterly without fear. Throughout his life I think he never dodged an issue, or compromised a principle.

After an illness of a few months, the end came quietly at Tigertail, the home place near Dania, August 14, 1911, near the end of his 73rd year. Following simple services

at the little Episcopal Church which he attended in Dania, he was buried at Jacksonville, in Evergreen Cemetery. Resolutions of regret by the Railroad Commission, and by Governor Gilchrist and The Cabinet followed, along with laudatory editorials in the great daily papers of the State. A rare and unusual mark of tribute to a private citizen was the display of the flag at the State Capitol at half-mast for 30 days by order of the Governor and his Cabinet.

In this connection, here are the closing lines of the lead editorial of the Florida Times Union of August 17, 1911. I quote:

"He made for himself an enviable position, though none envied him, for all know that what he had accomplished was not at the expense of others but was the result of a clear mind and a willing body, both acting within the boundaries prescribed by the highest honor.

"Mr. Bryan was a power in Florida. *** He leaves a long public record as well as a long private record, and both are stainless.

"Mr. Bryan gave his children the best educational advantages that money could buy and lived to see two of his sons in the United States Senate. We do not know that any

other man ever enjoyed this distinction. But some of those who knew him best say that the brightest, the clearest, the strongest mind of the family belonged to the man who was laid to rest yesterday in Evergreen Cemetery - the man who climbed up unaided and helped to lift up others".

What is the worth of the contribution such a man makes to his State? What are the benefits, the lasting values of a life of usefulness and service such as John Milton Bryan lived in this State? Where do you start, where do you end, and what may you fairly include in the making of such appraisal? These are questions that I leave unanswered for a later time, for I submit that his mark is still strongly upon our land, upon its men and women in all walks of life, and the weight of his influence in our State still increases, still goes forward. The full meaning of his contribution to Florida must wait longer to be measured.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your kind attention.

Memorandum Added at Jacksonville, November 16, 1954.

For some three weeks prior to the Tavares ceremony, I was holding Court in Ocala and had limited access to needed material. I remembered that Jim Carson's last book, "Florida Law of the Family, Marriage and Divorce", published 1950 by The Harrison Company, Atlanta, Georgia, was dedicated to John Milton Bryan in simple and beautiful language. I had hoped to locate the dedication and quote from it at Tavares. When I was not able to do so, I used part of the Times Union editorial. I have now located Jim's book and reproduce the dedication below. It occurred to me that those of the family who had not seen it would like to read it at this time. It is as follows:

"Carson, James M., 'Florida Law of the Family,
Marriage and Divorce.'

"Copyright 1950 by The Harrison Company, Atlanta,
Georgia.

"Dedication

"This book is respectfully dedicated to the memory of
the strongest man I ever knew, my grandfather,

John-Milton Bryan.

"He lived from his birth in 1838 until his death in
1911 as a citizen of Florida. He fought as a soldier under

the flag of the United States in the last war against the Seminoles, and from 1861 to 1865, under the Confederate flag as a soldier of Florida in that war. He served for many years after 1865, during the difficult period of Reconstruction, as a member of the House of Representatives and of the Senate of the State of Florida from Orange County. After the great freeze of 1895 he served for some six years as State Railroad Commissioner.

"He gave two sons to the service of his country as Senators of the United States, from the State of Florida, and one son who lost his life in the First World War.

"He was the only private citizen for whom, after his death, the flag of the State was kept at half-mast for thirty days.

"His influence on the future of the State from his early youth has been incalculable. Although he died in 1911, his shadow in Florida continues to grow longer."

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