

**TTU CELEBRATES THE LIFE, MUSIC OF  
CHARLES FAULKNER BRYAN**

By Laura Clemons, Herald-Citizen Staff  
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American music owes a debt of gratitude to Charles Faulkner Bryan, a young composer and educator whose respect for the folksongs of his rural homeland – the hills and hollows of Tennessee – manifested into both classical and popular music in the mid-1900s.



Bryan, born in 1911 in McMinnville, began his career in Cookeville, at Tennessee Tech, where he taught and studied during the Depression. The university is commemorating the centennial of his birth on Friday, Oct. 7, with a full day and evening of public presentations and performances.

(Pictured: An American original, Charles Faulkner Bryan helped lay the foundation for the folksong revival of the mid 1900s; his fascination with the folk music of Appalachia showed up in his classical compositions – a movement alive and well today in the work of such contemporary artist as Mark O’Connor and Edgar Meyer).

“I meet many people who come to the Bryan Fine Arts Building out of curiosity or who had a relationship with music at the university, and I’ve gotten to know several who knew Bryan,” says Arthur LaBar, chairperson of the Tennessee Tech department of Music and Art. “Without exception, these people speak with the highest respect, almost reverence, for Bryan. They recount how he, as their teacher, positively affected and inspired their lives. I’m very excited about the Bryan Centennial events.”

“A Celebration of the Life and Music of Charles Faulkner Bryan” takes place in Tennessee Tech’s Bryan Fine Arts Building. There is no admission charge for any of the public events, and everyone is welcome.

The program includes selections by Bryan, as well as dulcimer music by visiting artist Ralph Lee Smith. TTU’s director of university orchestras is Dan Alcott, and the university’s choral program is directed by Craig Zamer. of the Life and Music of Charles Faulkner Bryan” takes place in Tennessee Tech’s Bryan Fine Arts Building.

Classically trained in voice, piano and composition, Bryan wrote in several symphonic forms, often incorporating the simple melodies and lyrics of Appalachian songs. But he also performed the folksongs solo; on tour, he played them as originally written, on piano or dulcimer, the only alteration being his clear and formal tenor.

Landmarks in his career include the 1942 Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra premiere of the second movement of his “White Spiritual Symphony,” the 1945 Guggenheim Foundation composition fellowship based on his “Ballad of the Harp Weaver,” and the 1947 premiere of his “Bell Witch Cantata” by Robert Shaw and the Julliard Chorus and Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in New York.

These were all firsts for a Tennessee composer. Bryan appears to have struck a chord with audiences in both the South and the North.

From the beginning, his ambition was striking. The second son of a middle-class family who financed his way through the Nashville Conservatory of Music using the capital from an insurance policy, Bryan graduated in 1934 with a bachelor’s degree in public school music. The next year, he was appointed director of the music division at Tennessee Tech (then a college-level school known as Tennessee Polytechnic Institute).

Early upon his arrival at TPI, where the Tennessee Folklore Society had just formed, Bryan realized that there might be a way to combine his two passions: promoting folksongs and using them as inspiration for his larger works. Bryan heard great beauty in both the lyrics and music of folk-songs, in all their manifestations; from simple children’s ditties like “Skip to M’Lou” to ballads and field songs, but most especially to the sacred music of Appalachia – the spirituals heard in churches, which were still largely segregated institutions in the early to mid-1900s.

“Bryan was certainly ambitious,” says LaBar. “How else can you explain how a young man from rural Tennessee rose to national prominence in classical music? But he never lost touch with the music of the people who raised him. And he was also ambitious for those around him, especially his students.

“At the risk of his own position as a faculty member at a white college, Bryan befriended and mentored a young black singer from Memphis, J. Robert Bradley, which points out the other trait that seemed to guide Bryan through life – service to others. Bryan and his young family maintained a friendship with Bradley their entire lives, well after the teacher-student relationship had ended.”

Bradley went on to become one of the brightest lights on the gospel stage, leading the National Baptist Convention’s choral program for decades, and he always gave Bryan credit for his success.

When Nashville’s Peabody College offered Bryan a graduate fellowship for the 1939-40 academic year, Bryan left TPI. For his graduate thesis, he completed his first symphony – which he’d begun wiring at TPI – an ethereal and complex orchestration that includes

strains of two of the most popular hymns ever written, “Amazing Grace” and “Goin’ Over Jordan” (or “Wayfaring Stranger”).

During World War II, Bryan directed several government programs related to music, but found little time for his own work. Eager to resume his musical career, he spent the post-war years performing, teaching, studying with German composer Paul Hindemith at Yale University – and composing, always composing.

It was a giddy time in American music, and Bryan occupied a transitional niche. Folksongs in all their mutations – from sacred to secular – were still largely confined to churches and front porches, but they were on the verge of finding a more mainstream audience. The golden age of gospel was beginning, and the protest music of the 1960s wasn’t far off.

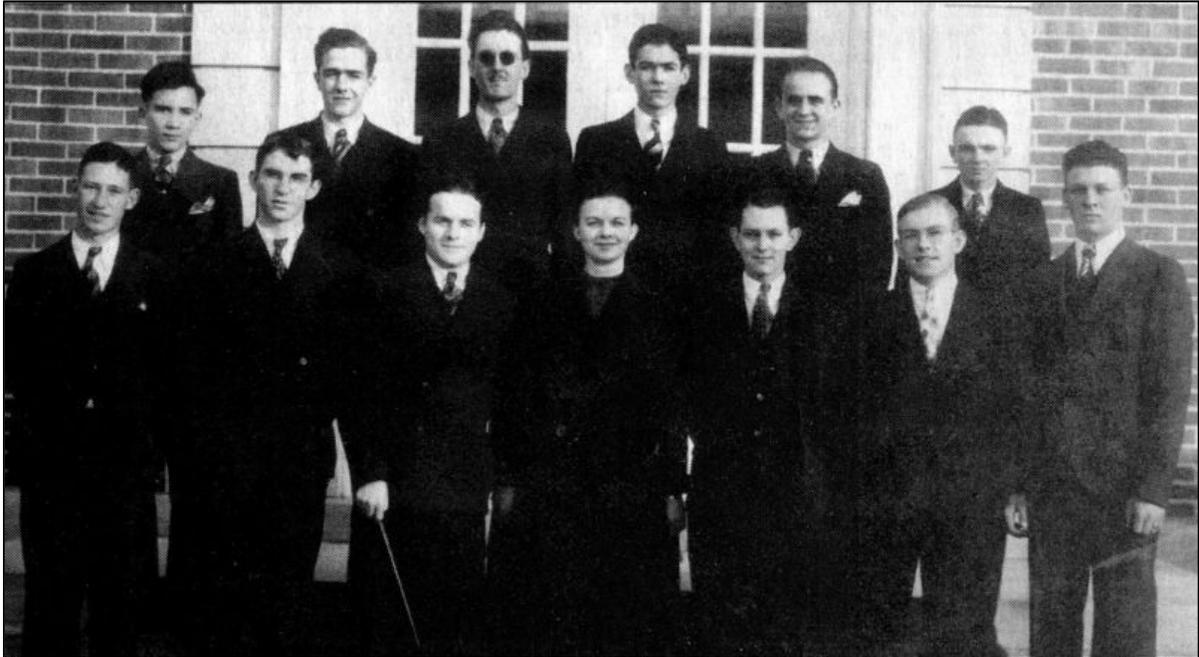
Bryan contributed to the folk music revival by collecting music at the source – recording songs in people’s living rooms – and going on the road as a performer and lecturer. Stylistically, he foreshadowed the classically smooth Burl Ives and the emerging Pete Seeger more so than the less-studied Woody Guthrie.

But by the time he reached his 40s, Bryan wasn’t well. NO one knew for sure what was wrong. He suffered inexplicable illnesses, and he’d been born with a heart murmur, which is why he stayed state-side during World War II. Doctors ruled out allergies, brain cancer, endocarditis, and still he suffered. He slowed his pace, taking on a faculty position at a private school in Alabama, and while he never really got well, he refused to let his physical ailment interrupt his career.

On July 7, 1955, Charles Faulkner Bryan died. He was 44 years old.

The potential was there, after such a promising start, to go on to wider acclaim, but dying at such a young age resulted in Bryan’s work being relegated to near-obscurity. His family donated his papers to the Tennessee Tech Archives, and the collection is extensive, including boxes and boxes of scores and notes, but most of the few existing recordings of this music are ravaged by time. Had it not been for the scholarly work of his biographer, Carolyn Livingston, the story of Charles Faulkner Bryan and his music would likely have been lost forever.

Instead his legacy continues. In 1981, Tennessee Tech acknowledged his contributions to American music by naming its cultural arts center in his honor. And in 1992, when the board of the Tech Community Symphony Orchestra decided to change the orchestra’s name, it chose Bryan in tribute to the Upper Cumberland native with the talent, drive and devotion required to help roots music reach a wider audience.



The 1935-1936 Tennessee Tech student yearbook published this photo of members of Charles Faulkner Bryan's first student orchestra. In front, from left, Sanford Shipley; Charles Pigg; Charles Bryan, chairman of Music Division and conductor of the orchestra; Esther Piepmeyer, accompanist; Dillard White; William Thomas Walker; and Luther Green Puckett. In back, from left, Eugene Huddleston; unidentified; Sydney Roller, Music Division assistant; William L. Anderson, assistant; Thomas Park; and Don Russell.

(**Charles Faulkner Bryan**, b. 26 July 1911, McMinnville, TN – d. 7 August 1955, md on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1935 to **Edith Inez (Hills) Bryan**. Charles Faulkner Bryan, s/o **Clarence Justus Bryan** (1883-1970) & **Ala May Faulkner** (1884-1956). He and his wife had two children: Betty Lynn, born on March 17, 1941, and Charles, Jr., born on December 10, 1946.

### Career

Bryan was born in [McMinnville, Tennessee](#). He is considered by many to be one of Tennessee's greatest composers and musicians. Bryan served on the faculty of George Peabody College (1947–1952) in [Nashville](#), and served as president of the Tennessee Folklore Society. Bryan also taught at Tennessee Polytechnic Institute in [Cookeville, Tennessee](#) and the Indian Spring School for Boys in [Alabama](#). He worked as a director of music and library projects of the [Works Projects Administration](#) in their southeastern region, and engaged in folklore studies. He died in 1955 in [Pinson, Alabama](#).

### Legacy

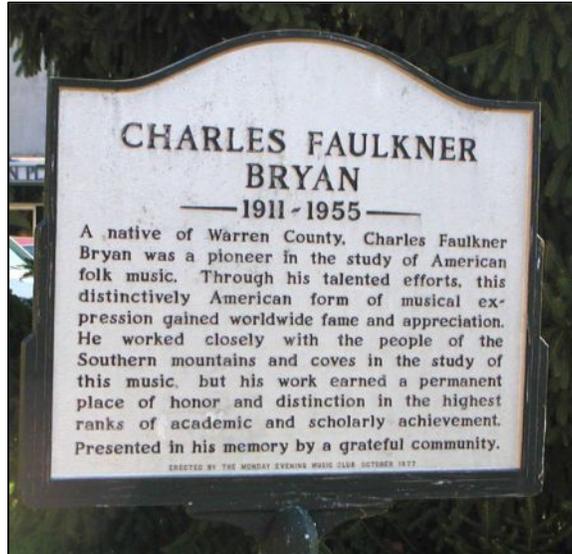
According to his biographer, Carolyn Livingston, Bryan was "a pioneer in the study of American folk music" who created in his students "a sense of value for the folk ballads and hymns of Appalachia". He composed the music "Singin' Billy: A Folk Opera" (1952), possibly his best known, with Donald Davidson as author of the text. "Singin' Billy" was the nickname of [shape note](#) composer and publisher [William Walker](#). With [George Pullen Jackson](#) he wrote *American Folk Music for High School and other Choral Groups*.

Bryan's namesake son served as president and CEO of the [Virginia Historical Society](#) until retiring in November 2008.

In 1977, an historical marker honoring Bryan was erected in front of the [Warren County](#) courthouse in McMinnville. It reads, "A native of Warren County, Bryan was a pioneer in the study of American folk music. Through his talented efforts this distinctively American form of musical expression gained worldwide fame and appreciation. He worked closely with the people of the Southern mountains and coves in the study of this music, but his work earned a permanent place of honor and distinction in the highest ranks of academic and scholarly achievement. Presented in his memory by a grateful community."

## References

- *Charles F. Bryan: His Life and Music*, by Carolyn Livingston. University of Tennessee Press. [ISBN 1-57233-220-4](#)



Historical Marker for Charles Faulkner (1911-1955) in front of the Warren Co., TN Courthouse. Photo by Audrey J. Lambert – 2004.

### Clarence Justus Bryan Obt.

b. 15 November 1883 – d. January 1970, md on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 1908, Warren Co., TN to **Allie May (Faulkner) Bryan**, b. 16 January 1883 – d. 1956. Clarence Justus Bryan, s/o **Wilson Turner Brayn** (1849-1918) & **Margret Jane Patton** (1848-1938). Clarence and Allie (Faulkner) Bryan are both buried in Mount View Cemetery, McMinnville, Warren Co., TN.

C. J. Bryan, 86, Warren, Dies: Retired Businessman Rites on Wednesday:

**MCMINNVILLE**, Tenn. – Clarence J. Bryan, 86, retired Warren County businessman and manufacturer, died Sunday night in Hillhaven Convalescent Home at Nashville, TN.



Funeral services will be held Wednesday at 10:30 a.m. CST at Magness Memorial Baptist Church here. The Rev. Harold White, pastor of the church, will conduct the rites. Burial will be in Mt. View Cemetery.

A pioneer area manufacturer, Mr. Bryan was affiliated in a management capacity with Tennessee Woolen Mills from 1903 to 1939 and remained with that firm until retiring. He was a native of Wilson County.

(Pictured: Clarence Justus Bryan and his wife Allie May Faulkner).

Active in the work of Magness Memorial Baptist Church, he served as Sunday School superintendent and as a deacon for a number of years. Mr. Bryan resided in the Faulkner Springs community. His wife, the former Miss Allie May Faulkner, preceded him in death in 1956.

Survivors include three sons, Clarence Jennings Bryan, Kingsport; Dr. Thomas Bryan, Nashville, and Clyde Bryan, Jackson, MS; a daughter, Mrs. Ralph Bohannon, Clarksburg, WV; a sister, Mrs. French B. Patton, Shop Springs, TN; 14 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren. Another son, Charles Bryan, internationally-known composer, died in 1955.

High's Inc., is in charge of arrangement. The body will remain at the funeral home here until the hour of the service.

**CHARLES FAULKNER BRYAN COLLECTION**  
**Papers, 1892-1978**  
**(Predominantly, 1941-1955)**

**East Tennessee State University**  
**Archives of Appalachia**  
**Box 70295**  
**Johnson City, Tennessee 37614**

**E-mail: [archives@etsu.edu](mailto:archives@etsu.edu)**

**Telephone: (423) <http://www.etsu.edu/cass/archives/Collections/afindaaid/a104.html> 439-4338**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**Title:** Charles Faulkner Bryan Collection

**Collection Number:** Accession No. 104

**Physical Description:** 4 linear feet; 2 oversized folders; 1 oversized box; Archives - 9 reels of microfilm

**Creator:** Charles Faulkner Bryan

**Repository:** Tennessee Technological University; Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University

## **ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION**

**Provenance:** The papers of Charles Faulkner Bryan were donated to Tennessee Technological University on July 14, 1981 by Mrs. Charles Bryan. The music scores were donated to Tennessee Technological University by Mrs. Bryan prior to January 1980. As part of a cooperative agreement with Tennessee Tech, in 1981 the Archives of Appalachia processed the Bryan papers which were transferred back to Tennessee Tech in 1982. The Archives of Appalachia retains microfilmed copies of these papers.

**Access:** The collection is open for research.

**Processing Information:** Norma Myers completed processing and the collection was opened for research in 1982. Marie Tedesco revised the Finding Aid in 1993.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Charles Faulkner Bryan was born on July 26, 1911 near McMinnville, Tennessee. He attended Warren County public schools and graduated from McMinnville High School in 1930. His education in music began at the age of ten when he started studying piano under Mrs. Maimie Worley. Upon graduation from high school Bryan entered the Nashville Conservatory School of Music. In 1934 he graduated from the Conservatory with a Bachelor of Music degree with certification in voice, piano, and public school music.

In 1935 Bryan was appointed as the director of the Music Department at Tennessee Polytechnic Institute (changed in 1965 to Tennessee Technological University) in Cookeville, Tennessee. He remained in this position until 1939. While at Cookeville Bryan began his extensive study of folk music, and his compositions began to reflect folk themes. During this time he and his wife, Edith Hillis Bryan, wrote and produced an operetta, Rebel Academy. He also developed techniques for teaching music in elementary and secondary schools. By the time he left Tennessee Technological University, he had received a Bachelor of Science degree with majors in English and languages.

In 1939 Bryan accepted a teaching fellowship at George Peabody College for Teachers to teach choral music at the Peabody Demonstration School. In 1940 he received his Master of Arts degree in music education from Peabody. For his thesis Bryan submitted the White Spiritual Symphony. This was the first time an original musical composition had ever been used as a thesis at Peabody.

In 1940 Bryan was appointed to direct the state music project of the Work Projects Administration. In 1941 he was placed in charge of the state programs of music, education, art, writers, recreation, and library projects. He was promoted to supervisor of these projects for the southeastern region in 1942. From 1942 to 1944 Bryan served as the Regional Consultant for Civilian Defense; in 1944 he returned to Tennessee as the Assistant State Director of Civilian Defense. Bryan's work in music was not neglected during his years of government service. In 1942 his White Spiritual Symphony was performed by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Eugene Goossens.

Bryan received the Guggenheim Fellowship in Music in 1945, but he decided to postpone the award for one year to further his education. From 1945 to 1946 he studied composition under the famous composer Paul Hindemith at Yale University. The resulting work of the Guggenheim award was the folk cantata, The Bell Witch, which premiered in April 1947 at Carnegie Hall under the direction of Robert Shaw. American Folk Music, a textbook written with George Pullen Jackson, was published in 1947.

In the fall of 1947 Bryan began teaching at George Peabody College for Teachers. While at Peabody he directed five summer operas and the high school choral music programs, gave folk music lectures and concerts, worked in high school music festivals, and became an active member of the Tennessee Folklore Society. In 1950 Bryan and Brainerd Cheney collaborated in writing the musical, Strangers in this World. In 1950 Bryan received a Carnegie Grant, which in 1952 resulted in the completion of his folk opera, Singin' Billy, written with Donald Davidson. This opera was one of his most important works.

In the summer of 1952 Bryan wrote and recorded the music for Florida Aflame, a musical about the Seminole Indians. In the fall, he left Peabody to accept the position of music master at Indian Springs School for Boys in Alabama. During the summer of 1954 Bryan and his wife made a trip to Europe, where he investigated the origin of the dulcimer. On July 7, 1955, Bryan died of a heart attack at the age of 43.

During his career Bryan achieved a national reputation as a composer, recitalist, and authority on folk music. Bryan is accredited with one hundred twenty-two works, including fifty-five choral, ten instrumental, eight choral and instrumental, forty-one vocal solos, and eight essays. He also acquired a collection of dulcimers, folk music, and folklore.

Bryan married to Edith Inez Hillis on December 21, 1935. He and his wife had two children: Betty Lynn, born on March 17, 1941, and Charles, Jr., born on December 10, 1946.

## **SCOPE AND CONTENT**

The collection reflects Bryan's career as a composer, folklore collector, performer, and teacher. The collection includes correspondence, biographical and financial papers, newspaper clippings, programs, teaching notes, folk music and folklore collections, professional publications, composition scores and scripts, posters, and photographs.

### **Important subjects covered in the collection are:**

Bain, Wilfred C. (Wilfred Conwell), 1908-  
Bradley, J. Robert  
Bryan, Charles Faulkner  
Bryan, Charles Faulkner. Bell witch cantata  
Bryan, Charles Faulkner. Florida aflame  
Bryan, Charles Faulkner. Singin' Billy  
Bryan, Charles Faulkner. White spiritual symphony  
Davidson, Donald, 1893-1968  
Dulcimer  
Fischer, Joseph A.  
Folk music  
Folklore  
Goosens, Eugene, Sir, 1893-1962  
Indian Springs School (Helena, Ala.)  
Jackson, George Pullen, 1874-1953  
John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation  
Luttrell, Woodrow  
Music  
Pitcher, Gladys, 1890  
United States. Work Projects Administration  
Wolfe, Irving  
Yale University

\*Read more about the schools of Putnam Co. TN and surrounding areas at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>