

December 22, 2025

Cleveland Bryan

For our last story, we would like to honor the individual who is really an example of living history here on Daufuskie, Mr. Cleveland Bryan. Mr. Cleve, as he is known on the island, has achieved something of a celebrity status, being recently featured on NBC's Today show as he approaches his 101st birthday. But as you will see from the small snippets of his life story we can offer here, there is much to admire and respect about him.

Rather than compose material from various sources, this is a case where it is best to hear from Mr. Cleve himself. The museum is lucky enough to have an interview recording where he talks about his life. Here are just a few selected sections from that interview.

"My name is Cleveland Bryan. I was born in Daufuskie Island on February 26, 1925, in the section known as The Branch.

My grandmother Martha Bryan's house was only about a hundred yards away from our house, and I used to spend nights with her. Her mother was a Pender, Grandma Pender, and she lived across from Mr. Moses Ficklin, and I remember seeing her about twice. And every time I went to see her, she'd give me two large cookies.

Well, up until, say, 1930 or 31, I didn't see her anymore, so I guess she passed away. She was a former slave, and I was told that she lived to be 110 years old, and she was freed when she was 20 years old.

When I began going to school, there was a small house on the church ground. I think we called it the prayer house.

I used to love to draw, and I used to make some of my own toys, and for Christmas, we used to get like paper caps, and as you get older, you get BB guns, and then at 13, I was given 22, and then I began, before then, we used to make our own slingshot and pluffer. It was almost like a bean shooter, and then I met Norman Ward. He was like influence on my life, because he taught me how to hunt, and how to swim, and we used to cut wood, and make moonshine, and we had a lot of fun together.

I went to Sunday school at Union Baptist Church, and when I become a member, I had to give out hymns on Sundays. I remember a second teacher by the name

of Ms. Gertrude Bryan had also become a teacher at Maryfield School, and I think I was in the first grade, and I was halfway through. Well, they brought out a new book, Dick and Jane and stuff, and I was put back, and then I got very disgusted.

I spent a lot of time hunting. I used to hunt in the morning and in the evening, and I drop out at the fourth grade now. I used to go fishing with my father.

(... continuing ... 1942) My father told me that two men can't stay in the same house. My mother told me I don't have to leave..... I got a job working in a sawmill on Bulls Island. I worked there for a while, then I went back to Savannah Beach. I worked in Tybee Hotel..... I worked for luncheonette by the name of Mary Butler, I was the dishwasher there. And then I worked for Hodges. He had a service station. I pumped gas..... I decided to leave and go to Savannah, Georgia, and I went there. I was a longshoreman for a while. I went and worked across Savannah River there for the government in the government yard, and they gave me a pail full of paint, and all day long, I would paint the elbows and the 45s out in the field, and one day, I got disgusted.....

I just leave that job, and I went down to Florida, and I work on a dredge board..... I came back to the Fusky Island, and my brother was in World War II. He just came back from—he was in Belgium, and he just came back to New York, and he wrote me a letter, and he told me that why don't I come up to New York. And I sold the ox I had, Jerry, I sold him to Charlie Simmons for \$60, and I caught the—I think it was the Greyhound bus, and I came to New York. But at this point, I was—I felt like leaving America and all together, getting out of America.

New York wasn't any bed of roses. I worked as an elevator operator for six years, and I also worked in a hospital as a cleaner. And there were all the ways—sometimes you'd fill out an application, and then you'd never hear from them. Sometimes they'd claim you don't have enough education. Other times, you were overqualified for a job. And so it was always discrimination against you. It was always something. And at this point, I'm a self-made man. I read all the books I could, and I took some studies from Chicago, education. And I also went to New York School of Music, and I studied guitar. And I never liked to do one particular job. I like to do different jobs. One job, it gets monotonous.

I become a bodybuilder when I was 29 years old, and I'm still pumping iron. It helped me a lot in different jobs, because I went one time and got a job as a shafter and corrugated. Now, corrugated make cardboard boxes, and the paper—the rolls of paper is like 4,000 pounds.

Now, the shaft is about 10 feet long and three inches in diameter, weighing 230 pounds. Now, I had to shaft these papers by myself. Now, it was opening for—operator for the laminating machine. The laminating machine is a very large machine, and it made boxes for the meat and bacon. And this box is like made up with a—like the shape—the piece of cardboard in the back of the shape, and it got two pieces of paper laminated together. And this is run through a machine that have hot wax into the sliver.

And because I had this seniority, I went on a night shift, and I had a night differential, and I passed the test. And I got that job, but what happened—the father—after three years, the father passed away, and the two sons couldn't get along, so they sold the business.

I took an application for the police department as a cleaner, and I was called.... Now, after my probation was up, which was six months, and there was a test coming up for a laborer, and I figured that I don't want to be pushing a broom for the rest of my life, so I decided to take the labor test. There was 300 jobs, but 10,100 applications. So what happened, they charged something like \$4 an application, and they throw in a written test. Now, in order to take the physical, you had to pass the written test. So I was lucky. I passed the written test, and I was about 700-something on the list. But after I passed the written, I wasn't worried about the physical, because I knew I was pretty strong. I could deadlift 475 pounds, and I could press 85 pounds each hand easy, so there was no problem there. So when they finally took the physical, I pressed 85 pounds each hand overhead. I stood up with 60 pounds behind my neck, and the broad jump was 8 feet.....

The barrier shop was the place that made the barriers for the parade and stuff like that, but when I went over there, the sergeant knew me and knew that I was a dependable guy, so he put me in charge of the repair where they store the barriers now.... So that's the last job I had with the department... Cops, they come in there and they resent a civilian having a job like that. They figure a cop should have the job. But at that point, I had planned to retire, I had bought the sawmill, and the guys at me said, now that you've got a good job now, you don't have to retire, you can stay, but I had already made a plan, and so I went on through with the plan and retired.

I'm not through with Daufuskie yet, that's the only place I love.... I'm a country man at heart. I definitely don't like the city."

Editor's note: The interview audio is nearly an hour long. There are gaps in the posted story created by trying to write a summary, but we have tried to maintain some of the most significant events and stories. Any loss of information or

altering of the intended focus is entirely the fault of the editor, and this editor has nothing but respect and admiration for Mr. Bryan. He is truly, as he says, a self-made man and a self-educated man who has overcome many obstacles in his life, including discrimination.

There are many more stories, and among those not included in this audio history, his lifelong love of music drove him to attend concerts by such jazz legends as Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald. He also attended many professional fights featuring boxing greats, including Joe Lewis and Mohammed Ali (then Cassius Clay)

.
He will soon be celebrating his 101st birthday on February 26, 2026. While he is not one to seek attention, he appreciates cards and letters, so send him a Holiday greeting!

Mr. Cleveland Bryan
P.O. Box 53
Daufuskie Island, SC 29915
Merry Christmas, Mr. Cleve!

