

PROFILE

Jim Bray

FULL NAME: James Russell Bray
OCCUPATION: Retired Teacher,
 "Professional Substitute Teacher"
BIRTHPLACE: Elkin
AGE: 79
FAMILY: Wife, LuEva Bray;
 Children, Jim Bray,
 Katy Hoyng
EDUCATION: Mount Airy High
 School; Virginia
 Military Institute;
 Julliard School;
 Appalachian State
 University (Master's Degree)
HOBBIES: Teaching And
 Communicating
 With Young People

By TIM PRESTON
 News Staff Writer

God, country, wife, children and lots of good music — all are part of Jim Bray's secret for long life and happiness.

Bray, 79, says his childhood days in Mount Airy offer some significant memories, but only one that truly influenced his life.

"When I was small we had three things which stood out. The most important was when my mom and dad (Molly R. and James S. Bray) went to church, we went with them. They didn't ask, we just did it — I went to church with them from the time I was just a small boy until the time I graduated from high school," Bray recalled.

The remaining two things that stand out in Jim Bray's memory are the "Chatagua," a traveling summer program that came to town for two weeks each summer, and 10-cent movies.

"We went to The Earle (theater) a lot. It was down there across the street from the Snappy Lunch. Saturday afternoons, the show cost a dime and it was a nickel for popcorn. I had to scour the linoleum floor and get a bath to make the fifteen cents for Saturday afternoon, and I still had to be home by suppertime."

Bray says entertainment took simpler forms during that era. "We went swimming in the rivers, which were very safe in those days. We would go to see the train come in every night. We liked to watch all the people get off and ride in jitneys. A lot of people would take a jitney out to White Sulphur Springs. Let me tell you, White Sulphur Springs was a beautiful place, a resort," he continued.

"They had peacocks — of course, we are talking back in the '20s here. It was very popular as a resort, a health resort. They had bowling there, a pavilion and dances, and the springs," Bray said.

"But that was how people traveled, by train. Every night that was a ritual, go down and see the train."

When he wasn't watching trains, swimming in the rivers or attending "protracted revival meetings," Bray worked in a feed mill with his father.

"He always had something for me to do, even if it was sacking cobs. I liked to think I worked just as hard as he did. If I wasn't dirty enough to look like I had worked hard I would go by the flour bin and rub some of that on my shirt. That way I looked like I had really been at it," the longtime Mount Airy resident said.

School and education in general also were much different in Bray's formative years, he said. "We kept down to the basics. I got one of the best educations in math from H.M. Finch, he's the one the (Mount Airy High) gym is named after."

Bray said there were no large classes at Mount Airy High School and that athletics did not travel to games by bus. "If you want you took a taxi or just a private car."

By the time he graduated in 1930 he says he knew where he wanted to go next, Virginia Military Institute.

"I think I was greatly influenced by one local fellow, Bob Foy. He is the brother of Sis Hennis. He'd come home with that uniform and I had seen all the marching and everything. Boy did that look good to me!" Bray recalled.

"When I got there (to VMI) it just seemed that I belonged. Not that I am really a military person, but I felt that I needed that discipline for college. I went right in the Depression, 1930. It was tough. It cost \$905 for the complete year — uniforms, books and everything."

After his days at VMI, Bray returned home and worked stringing tobacco bags until he had saved enough money to pursue his dreams of music. When the money looked right he packed his bags and enrolled for two years at the Julliard School of music in New York. It was there he met music legend Burl Ives, the man who would introduce Bray to his future wife.

"Burl introduced me to a girl from Iowa named LuEva. She was a much better musician than I was," he said. Ives must have known what he was doing. The two were married in 1938.

"I took the whole family to a concert (Burl Ives) played at the Stevens Center (in Winston-Salem) last year," Bray said. "When it was over I said, 'Look what you started,' and he said, 'I did a pretty good job.'"



Tim Preston/The Mount Airy News

to serve his country in 1941. Two years later while at Camp Polk in DeRidder, La., Kathleen LuEva Bray, the couple's first child, was born. Bray served in the 11th Armored Division of Patton's Third Army until leaving the service in 1945.

"My commission paid off and I came out a lieutenant colonel," said Bray.

When his tour of duty ended he said he and his wife and child packed everything they had into an old Buick "with truck tires" and hit the road. "My wife and little girl were with me everywhere I went," Bray said. "We could put everything we had in that old Buick."

Jim and LuEva Bray spent their time singing and performing in various community and church events and were blessed with a second child in 1946. James Donnelly Bray was born while the couple lived on Cherry Street in Mount Airy.

Thinking back on his old days in show biz, Bray said Burl Ives is not the only talent he worked with before stardom came. A young man named Andy Griffith was also a cohort. The two were both featured in a local production of "The Bartered Bride."

"He always had that humorous spark in him. He inherited a lot of that from his mom," Bray said of the Mount Airy native. Jim Bray has long since forsaken his dreams of being a singing star. These days he says his rewards come from his church and the young people he works with as a tutor and "professional substitute teacher."

"How can you have anything but a positive outlook on life if you're surrounded by all those young energetic people?" he theorized.

Those young people tend to ask the same question, according to Bray. "They all ask, 'How did you lose your finger?' I always tell them I got my ring caught on a rivet and got blood poisoning. They wanted to take my whole hand, but Mama said 'wait and let me pray about it a little more.' They looked at it

"You know, I had a roommate for three months that never even noticed it was gone until I mentioned it," Bray continued. "I always tell the kids to learn a lesson from it — and I always ask them, if I had it back what would I do with it?"

Working with young people serves to inspire Jim Bray and he says he wants to return that inspiration through education and learning. That would explain why he has decided to write a book to help students with one of their major troubles, math.

"I have taken notes through all these years. I know what gives these kids the most problems and I know what they like," Bray explained. "I'm cutting out all the frills, I'm making it simple. I'm planning to call it Math Pure and Simple (Learning Can Be Fun)."

The book will emphasize common sense and logic and should be quite useful to adults who want to help their children with math, Bray believes.

As a person who has lived an extremely rich and varied lifestyle — as a musician, soldier, teacher, pilot and father, Jim Bray could choose any number of accomplishments to list as his proudest. He says the jewel in his crown has been shining since 1938.

"Being married to a wonderful woman, LuEva, for 53 years, that is the accomplishment that makes me proudest."

Favorite Book:

The Bible

Favorite Food: "Homemade pan-fried chicken, homemade gravy and biscuits"

Favorite Movie:

"Ben Hur"

Favorite Song:

"If With All Your Heart"