

The Life of Bryce Charles Porter

-as told to and by Gregory S. Duane

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Bryce Charles Porter was born in Scranton, PA on June 28, 1910. He was originally Charles Bryce Porter; his sister Fanella changed his name, in jest, in the official school records on his first day in school. His parents were Jeannette Hill and Alamanza (“Pat”) Porter. The Porter line in America reached back to colonial times and included an officer in George Washington’s army. The first Porter came to the New World from Africa through St. Kitts, and became an apprentice of the Dutch confectioner who invented ice cream. His descendants intermarried extensively with Native Americans; Bryce’s paternal grandmother was a full-blooded Delaware Indian. Bryce’s father was well off and influential in the coal-mining town of Scranton and in the Quaker community whose faith he had adopted. His holdings included a paper mill, two warehouses, and a law practice.

Jeannette Hill’s childhood had been interrupted as a consequence of an attempted sexual assault by a Mississippi landowner, that was to have taken place at an arranged meeting. Hearing of the landowner’s plans, Jeannette’s mother, a former slave, arrived with a gun and shot the landowner, but then needed to separate from Jeannette in the interest of her safety. Jeannette was subsequently adopted by one of the “missionaries” who were then touring the South so as to help rehabilitate former slaves in the Reconstruction era. A wealthy woman from Connecticut, she then raised Jeannette in high style; Jeannette became accustomed to the affluence she would find in the Porter family, after meeting Bryce’s father at a black debutantes’ affair.

As an infant, Bryce Porter had the first of many close encounters with death, when he almost succumbed to rheumatic fever. Following an old folk remedy, his mother saved him by burying him in the mud. This was perhaps the beginning of a very close relationship between them.

As a child, he dreamed of going to medical school. He kept a workshop where he followed his mother’s advice that if he wanted anything, he should make it. Other creative activities, such as locking the church doors shut from the outside during services, or painting his cousin Alice green, were ultimately forgiven.

This happy period of Bryce’s life ended at age fourteen with the departure of his mother, after a previous marital separation. Around the same time he suffered a tragic accident in his shop that resulted in the loss of a few fingers together with his memory of the surrounding events. The medical school dreams no longer seemed realizable. He would spend the rest of his life trying to reconstitute, in a sense, the life he had enjoyed before the departure of his mother. (His favorite poem in his teenage years, “Man Was Made to Mourn” by Robert Burns, tells something of his usual mood at the time.)

Bryce maintained a close but competitive relationship with his brother Louis. For a time, he would only approach girls with whom his brother had been unsuccessful. When Louis was accepted at MIT and moved to Boston to begin his studies there, Bryce went also with the goal of besting him by gaining admission to Harvard.

The depression brought an end to both Louis’ studies at MIT and Bryce’s dream of attending Harvard. Additionally, their father had recently suffered the loss of his fortune through a crooked business deal and was unable to regain it. The senior Porter’s success in business had been accompanied by a high degree of influence in local affairs, which more than once had been used to save Bryce from the consequences of his own mischief. The de-classing effect of the depression thus added to the loss of Bryce’s mother in creating a sense of a past world that needed to be regained.

Denied a job for the explicitly stated reason of his race at age 19, and then seeing the American flag as he walked across the Boston Common, Bryce Charles Porter began to compose a poem, never completely finished, declaring his own independence from America as a Negro. He decided at that point that he would never fight under the American flag. He remained steadfast in this position throughout his life, although he offered to serve other countries militarily for causes he deemed worthy of personal sacrifice.

During the depression, Bryce joined the egalitarian subculture of the hoboes, traversing the country in railroad cars. He enjoyed the system of primitive communism in which hoboes would leave food and clothing at each encampment for the next arriving group. A state of war existed between the hoboes and the “railroad dicks”, company police who would sometimes forcibly eject them from moving trains. Bryce Porter was an active participant in the conflict, probably causing the demise of a couple of “dicks”, in events whose memories never quite left his conscience.

Later, in New York, he obtained temporary lodging at a YMCA in Harlem and began to look for employment. Delinquent in his rent payments, he found his room sealed on one occasion when he needed a clean shirt for a job interview. He went to the roof of the building and rappelled down to the window of his room, leaving a note on the roof to indicate, in the event of an accident, that he had not intended suicide.

Bryce’s need for a clean shirt was characteristic. On any occasion requiring formal dress, his taste in clothing was typically unmatched. At no point in his adult life would he buy a dress shirt without French cuffs. On a trip through the midwest he was shot in the stomach, at point blank range, by a local police officer who then said simply “Did I get ‘ya?” According to Bryce’s account, the cop’s initial comments indicated that he was surprised by the appearance of a well-dressed Negro in the small Indiana town. No permanent injuries were sustained.

The depression years in Harlem were not without joy. Bryce joined a neighborhood gang, the “Longfellows”, none of whose members were shorter than he was at 6’1”. The ritual for those who crossed the Longfellows was to stand them on their heads in front of a neighborhood drug store, for an extended period of time, with two Longfellows on either side. All was good natured. Set up for a seduction of an attractive local girl, Josephine, Bryce decided to adopt her as a sister instead. She remained his sister until her death just a few years before his own.

Bryce’s romantic liasons were numerous, passionate, and complex. A psychiatrist later commented that Bryce was engaged in a never- ending futile attempt to reconstitute his lost relationship with his mother. He married Margaret Waters, who sprung from a well-to-do real estate family. Her wealth was both a source of attraction, since she reminded him of his own origins, and a problem, since his current means were so much less. They eventually divorced.

Bryce’s occupations were also numerous. Around the start of WWII, he applied for a job with a company that produced nurses’ uniforms. Again denied employment for reason of his race, he fashioned a response that would serve him repeatedly: He told the company that if he couldn’t work for them, he would instead compete with them. He set up his own nurses’ uniform shop in Harlem and proceeded to do that.

A later line of work, that he found particularly gratifying, was labor organizing. Bryce was an organizer for the Electrical Workers, the UE, a progressive union that to the present day has maintained a rule that no union official can earn more than the highest paid worker in the trade. Bryce organized a factory, Minerva, that the union leaders believed could not be organized. By strategically limiting communication, and organizing only in small groups, Bryce was able to conceal his activities completely until seconds before the decisive vote was taken.

But of all his occupations, the one that he would remember most fondly until the end of his life was photography. Bryce acquired a studio in Greenwich Village where he developed a successful career as a portrait photographer. His subjects included many prominent people, most notably Eleanor Roosevelt. He was guided in the development of his art by a cherished friend, Buford Delaney, an accomplished artist, who taught Bryce about the use of light. Unfortunately, due to later marital difficulties, almost all of Bryce’s photographs were lost or destroyed. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that in photography, Bryce found an avenue of expression for an important natural gift of vision and imagination.

The studio was also the center of an extensive social network. For a time, when people in the Village referred to “the studio,” they meant Bryce Porter’s studio. Despite difficult economic circumstances, life in the Village was generally rich in those years. There was a spirit of camaraderie and mutual assistance. Bryce’s circle included people of various means and talents. A close friend was labor lawyer Manny Block, best known for his unsuccessful defense of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

His most meaningful relationship in those years was with girlfriend Florence Robinson. He would credit her as the person responsible for his political education. The American Communist Party commanded a huge following in the Depression years and the subsequent period of World War II. In Harlem, Bryce had perceived the Communists as using, or attempting to use the Black population. He had begun to hate white Americans, and Jews in particular, because of their commonly held role as exploitive landlords in

the Harlem tenements. He had admired nationalist leader Marcus Garvey. Florence, he would later say, changed his views. As a Jew and a Communist Party member, she convinced Bryce to see the political conflict in which he was engaged in broader terms. While such relationships between Black men and white CP women were often opportunistically motivated, the friendship between Bryce and Florence was genuine. A particularly touching moment came when Florence's parents sent a limousine to Bryce's studio to invite him to a Passover seder in New Jersey.

Bryce became a "fellow traveller" of the Communist Party but never a member. In retrospect, his individualism would have precluded membership. He differed with the CP, for instance, in regard to their support of the Allied side in World War II, instead adhering to his own position that he would never fight under the American flag. He successfully avoided the draft by finding one reason after another that he was unable to submit to the required physical exam, and then personally threatening a local draft board head who implied that Bryce's induction would be put through illegally without the physical. His tactics presaged those of the more popular opposition to the Vietnam War two decades later.

Around this time, another fellow traveller, Genevieve Duane, became romantically involved with Bryce. (They had originally met at a nightspot in the Village, frequented by left-wingers, that was co-owned by singer Harry Belafonte.) To the surprise of both parties, Gene conceived a son, Gregory. Bryce, having failed in his early attempts to convince Gene to abort the pregnancy, chose the name "Gregory Christian," because it had the sound of the name of the strong leader he wanted Gregory to become. Florence pointed out that the name was inappropriate for the son of a Jewish mother, and so the middle name "Christian" became "Steven." But despite the urgings of a large circle of left-wing women, Bryce clung to his belief that inter-racial families were not viable in the U.S. He believed that no one would have to know of Gregory's Negro parentage, if he were not involved. Additionally, it was not the time in his life for another marriage. Gene eventually left for California, and Bryce would not see his son again for another 48 years.

Bryce survived the McCarthy years handily. On one occasion, he advised fellow photographer Hugh Bell, who was being questioned about his own political involvements, to deny any real interest in political issues and to tell the questioners that he "was just there to meet the white girls", an approach that successfully ended the investigation.

A few years later, Bryce married Erica ———, a native of Germany, whose parents had sympathized with the Nazis. Erica corroborated Bryce's view that the ideological reasons for the war had been exaggerated. "Roosevelt," Bryce would say, "was not against fascism," as commonly believed, "-he was against *German* fascism." Erica was something of a trophy, whose resemblance to Marlene Dietrich, together with brains, Bryce often pointed out. The marriage ended when Erica expressed a desire for children and Bryce refused, again because of his practical position against inter-racial families.

In the 1960's, Bryce embarked on a project that was to consume much of his imagination and energy for the second half of his life. He founded the Heritage Group, a movement whose goal was to change the prevailing attitude toward academic achievement in the Black community. For this purpose he purchased land in upstate NY. Children, starting in the fourth grade, were to be brought there for weekends and summers. They were to enter a covenant with the organization to excel, independently of the mainstream academic establishment, but within it. Bryce rejected the prevailing emphasis on integration; the Heritage motto was "not to equal, but to excel". He achieved some notoriety for his efforts, and was invited by Governor George Wallace to set up a similar program in Alabama. He refused. Unfortunately, the scope of Bryce's initial plans exceeded his means - he lost the entire plot of land due to his refusal to part with a fraction of it. But he never ceased to promote the Heritage vision.

In 1963, Bryce and his friend Walter Winter embarked on a walk across the U.S. in a ploy to raise money for Heritage. Bryce believed that Frank Sinatra could be convinced to make a large donation, if somehow the nature and goals of the organization could be brought to the celebrity's attention. So Bryce and Walter set out from the George Washington Bridge, with the expectation that Sinatra, if told of their having walked from New York to see him, would at least give them an audience. After a couple of months, the pair had reached Oklahoma City, when Bryce had to return to New York to attend to urgent business. Walter eventually arrived in Los Angeles, but Sinatra was away for an extended period, and so the plan was scrapped.

At one promotional event for Heritage, Bryce met Joan Hamilton, a New York high school teacher 26 years his junior. Bryce would say later that he knew immediately that Joan would become his wife, as she did. This final marriage, which lasted until his death, was initially troubled but slowly grew on Bryce. He

would say that he felt increasingly married as the years and decades passed. At age 57, he again became a father. Bryce and Joan bore a daughter, the second Jeannette Hill.

By this time, Bryce, sadly, had given up his photography career largely for reasons of self-doubt. His next occupation sprung from a conversation with a couple of teenagers in Union Square Park, near his current, second studio. The teenagers were bemoaning the apparent lack of opportunity facing them. Bryce said that if he had even 75 cents in his pocket, as they did, he could start a business, and set out to prove himself right. He knew several people in the shoemaking business and was familiar with their language. He used the change to call a supply house, announcing himself as “Moe Ginsberg” of “ABC Shoes”. He was calling to give advance notice of a large order that would be placed in a few months, and requested some samples immediately, for which he was sending over his “help”. Bryce arrived at the supply house himself as the “help” that they had been told to expect, and picked up a fairly large quantity of materials with which to make shoes. Over time, he became successful in the shoe business, in part due to a loyal base of customers who appreciated the very flexible policy for return of merchandise that he had put in place initially, while still in the learning phase.

The shoe business ultimately came to an end, as had his prior occupations. Bryce’s next professional foray was in private investigation. He answered an ad placed by a reputable investigations firm, Bishops. There followed a mutual discovery that Bryce’s intelligence and personality were well suited to tasks of sleuthing. Working mostly by telephone, he was able to uncover information that had escaped others. There was additional satisfaction in that the information Bryce uncovered would not be used against anyone he truly liked. The typical clients ranged from insurance companies to parents of love-stricken young women who contracted Bryce to investigate their daughters’ intended spouses.

While still in the investigations business, Bryce launched a private business venture that was intended to alter the global geopolitical balance. Supported by financier Richard Zirinsky, Bryce’s goal was to construct a “Pan-African Building” near the UN, that would house the consulates and diplomatic offices of all the African countries in one place. The existing situation, in Bryce’s view, served the State Department’s divide-and-conquer strategy in Africa. African diplomats were courted by the US government, in a surprisingly extravagant manner, so as to further US economic interests at the expense of the African populace. Simply having offices that were co-located might lead to discussions among the individual representatives that would heighten awareness of the Americans’ true goals.

Bryce’s work on the Pan-African building was interrupted by a serious traffic accident, in which Bryce was struck by a speeding car. (Bryce was convinced of foul play, but no evidence ever emerged.) He was taken to what is now Cabrini Hospital. The number and severity of his injuries were such that Joan was told by the doctors not to expect recovery. Bryce’s magnetic personality again served him. He formed a strong friendship with a nurse, Julie Dodd, whom he subsequently credited with saving his life. Working tirelessly and skillfully with the many injuries, as well as tending to his spiritual health in a manner that one does not typically encounter in a hospital setting, she was able to negate the initial predictions. Bryce recovered fully, except for a permanently defective shoulder.

Bryce’s last paid position was as manager of an airport bus company. The company’s owners were a small group of business people whom he affectionately referred to as the “Jewish Mafia.” They chose Bryce to manage their operation, he explained, because they all trusted him with their affairs more than they would have trusted each other.

In retirement, Bryce devoted himself to fatherhood and to furthering the Heritage program. He had given up the studio and had moved to an apartment in the Bronx with Joan, and then to Coop City. He still spent much time in the Village, regularly walking from Washington Square Park to Coop City on Sunday afternoons.

Heritage had morphed into the slightly less ambitious Elementary Education Reinforcement Association (ELEDRA), conceived as an after-school program. In return for their pledge to excel academically, children were to receive a special desk that would symbolize their covenant with ELEDRA. Bryce was effective in motivating supporters. His public speeches left an impression that was not easily forgotten. His abilities as an organizational leader were somewhat less. While the idea of ELEDRA probably contributed to the motivation of similar after-school programs, the national political/cultural movement that Bryce envisioned never came to be.

The philosophy of ELEDRA carried over into fatherhood. Bryce was highly involved in Jeannette’s upbringing, and was effective in encouraging academic excellence. Jeannette was selectively admitted to

Hunter High School, and then to Swarthmore College. Bryce was demanding in regard to personal conduct as well as academic performance. Faced with Jeannette's desire to date a white schoolmate, who obviously adored her, Bryce adamantly objected, commenting "I didn't raise a black princess so that she could have a white slave." Jeannette ultimately yielded, but there was a growing tension that eventually led to a reversal of the close relationship with her father that had existed in her childhood. It was as if Bryce's high standards and ultimate dissatisfaction with himself were projected onto Jeannette, causing her to feel deeply rejected, despite Bryce's claims of esteem and devotion.

Bryce cultivated close relationships with children and young adults generally. Bryce was "Pop" to a group of children who met at the Community Center in Coop City across the street from his residence. One of Joan's high school students, Jeannais Brodie, who was later to find a career in college administration, joined the Porter family as an "adopted niece." Some years later, Bryce met a young man on a bus, Raymond Miller, who taught English to prisoners on Rikers' Island. Raymond was also adopted into the family.

Upon Joan's retirement in 2000, Bryce, Joan, and Jeannette moved to rural Virginia. Shortly thereafter, Bryce's son Gregory re-entered his 90-year-old father's life. The true identity of Gregory's father had been concealed from him until after his mother's death. Only through his own determined detective work some years later was Gregory able to identify and locate Bryce. The re-union process was initially euphoric, but was then aborted. The process resumed upon Gregory's suggestion that ELEDRA should become a joint project. Over the next few years the father-son relationship reached a level resembling normalcy.

Although Bryce did not specifically recall discussing the Heritage/ELEDRA ideas with Gregory's mother, Gene had raised Gregory in a manner surprisingly consistent with those ideas.¹ Gregory and Bryce made several trips to New York in an attempt to seed the program. On one such excursion, a friend, Adrienne Hayes, had organized a small group at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn to meet with Bryce. Age had not diminished Bryce's obvious gift with language, both spoken and written. He eloquently described his plan to flood the special high schools in New York with students from neighborhoods that don't usually produce them, and the plan to kick off the program with a rally of 5,000 people in Central Park. Both goals were made to seem attainable, but due to organizational difficulties there had been a delay in Bryce's arrival, and this last memorable speech was given to an audience consisting (except for the organizers) of a single person.

Travel was becoming increasingly difficult for Bryce, who having once walked half the length of the country, could no longer comfortably reach the end of his own driveway. Despite his plan to live to be 115, Bryce's years ended at age 95. This description of his life has been set forth so that his dreams may one day be realized, and so that the playful spirit that spawned the dreams may continue.

¹The stories of Gregory's upbringing and of his discovery of his father will be the subjects of a separate narrative.