



“THE BULL  
WILL KILL  
YOU”

AND OTHER TRUTHS  
FROM THE  
LIFE OF  
PROFESSOR  
FRANK BRYAN

Frank Bryan faces the classroom squarely, feet planted; his black tee strains over muscles pumped by hard labor not health-club iron. Bryan's voice punches the air several decibels louder than necessary. His eyes lock on a student in the front row, and the effect is intimidating, even pugilistic. She shrinks in her seat, no doubt abandoning a weak hope that the blow will land on the guy behind her.

He hurls the initial question and srays with the student, drawing out information, subtly encouraging until she finds the courage to offer an opinion. "Good," he says, his eyes conveying a nanosecond's pleasure, his voice softening. "Where did you learn that? I'm impressed." Surprise, gratitude, palpable relaxation defuse the early-days classroom tension: The brawler has a heart.

Bryan, an associate professor of political science and, by many reckonings, a star in UVM's and Vermont's firmament, has been clutching chalk, motivating students, lecturing and writing, and, above all, caring-out-loud, for a long time. Genes may generate some of his trademark energy, but Bryan the action figure also draws power from Bryan the believer. His life and work are based on four tenets: people are fundamentally benign and humane; they behave better in small rather than large groups; the good ones finish first; and town meeting is "democracy's most glorious expression of human interaction." Bryan's private response to the occasional dismissal of his ideas as naive is a fervent hope that his faith proves a worthy master. He has served it well — researching town meetings since 1968, debating his ideas publicly, and writing about them fearlessly.

A Vermonter who cannot claim citizenship ("conceived in Newbury," but birthed at a New Hampshire hospital fifty miles away), Bryan has become for many the touchstone of what a real Vermonter is. Asked to name Bryan's outstanding quality, co-author John McClaughry, president of the Erhan Allen

Institute, replies without hesitation, "Authenticity. He's a real Vermonter and a real American. He understands how real people live, think, and work. He has kept his roots."

One of three children whose parents divorced when he was young, Bryan was brought up in Newbury by his mom, who had converted herself and the children to Catholicism and who was one of only two Democrats in town — the other being young Frank, soulful inheritor of his mother's Depression-era love of Roosevelt and Truman.

Bryan's second conversion came on the eve of the Kennedy-Nixon election, appropriately, at the hands of his soon-to-be-a-priest brother, David, who had early intimations of the evils of big government. He convinced Frank that the Democrats harbored a "grand centralist design," which they would deploy "in the name of secular humanism." Bryan, who "loves to argue," couldn't refute his brother's logic; he's been a Republican ever since but describes himself as "kind of a lefty."

Along with hunting, fishing, arguing, and trouble-making, the youthful Bryan's interests ran to writing; he entertained briefly that most romantic of career fantasies — of being a journalist who writes novels. Teaching wasn't part of the initial equation until his first "real job" after earning bachelor's and master's degrees at St. Michael's College and UVM respectively. He calls his posting to a high school in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom in the mid-sixties "a defining moment" and one of his best teaching experiences. The \$4,500 salary didn't seem too bad at the time, even to a husband with an expanding family (Bryan, who has seven children, calls kids "the cheap-

*"It's not that Vermonters don't like the flag. It's just that they like individual rights more. We've always been a state that doesn't want to put symbolic restrictions on people if we don't have to. . . . We just don't like anyone — especially the national government — telling us what we can and can't do."*

FROM *Burlington Free Press*  
INTERVIEW

BY LEE GRIFFIN

est entertainment.”) But that career path detoured when Bryan realized the educational bureaucracy left no room for individual ability to leverage success. One Ph.D. later (from UConn), Bryan was an associate professor and chair of political science at St. Michael's College, where the former middleweight Golden Glove also coached the boxing club. That was followed by two years at Montana State University.

When Bryan began teaching at UVM in 1976, he opened his classroom to the study of Vermont. Paul Eschholz, professor of English and publisher of several Bryan books, says Bryan has made studying the state respectable. “Back when Frank first started teaching at UVM, you could count the Vermont-related courses on one hand, and two of the fingers were Frank's courses. Today, the number approaches forty.”

Bryan's favorite course is “American Political Systems and Intergovernmental Relations,” in which students conduct a mock trial surrounding controversial, real issues, such as the state Environmental Board's denial of Wal-Mart's request for an Act 250 permit. (They sided with Wal-Mart.) Bryan's preparation for this class is almost double the usual investment. Although students make a similar claim, many evaluate it as “the best class they every had.” “Conflict stimulates excellence,” says Bryan, who has high praise for the students' commitment and hard work, despite the student-jury's tendency to be pragmatic and “rule in favor of efficiency and technology.”

Bryan has turned an equally inno-

*Things real  
Vermonters don't  
comprehend:  
mezzanines, exact  
change lines,  
catching rays,  
Reaganomics,  
starter houses,  
10K runs,  
lo-cal beer.”*

FROM *Real Vermonters  
Don't Milk Goats*

ventive eye toward the state itself and its unique strain of democracy known as Town Meeting Day. “It has been his laboratory,” says department colleague Bob Taylor, acknowledging that Bryan “knows more about how democracy works than anyone I've ever known.” Bryan's brave-new-world prescriptions pivot on local control or “closer government,” with Vermont modeling the way. In *The Vermont Papers*, he and co-author McClaughry propose a system of shires, communities larger than towns, smaller than counties, with a town-meeting-style governance known as a moot, in which Reeves represent the shire's residents. In the Bryan-McClaughry vision, state and national governments would focus on “doing much less, much better,” primarily in overarching areas such as environmental protection, civil rights and liberties, and foreign trade.

Bryan lives the vision he espouses. His Starksboro homestead is a personal statement, a retreat protected from invasive flatlanders and others by fifty hilly acres, where Bryan, his wife, Lee, son, Frank, Jr., and daughter, Rachel, pay homage to husbandry through sweat equity and conservative consumption. With a miles-to-go woodpile ever in mind, “you don't stay under that hot shower too long,” he says. Their house is rustic and,

like Bryan's *magnum opus* on town meeting, a work-in-progress. The back deck needs just the final handrail, the kids' bedrooms still need a little work, and of course, there's a small animal kingdom to care for — a new beagle pup; a Chesapeake-black Lab who lives to retrieve from the sizable pond fronting the property; a shepherd-mix; and several cats. The showpiece critters, however, are Seth and Saul, oxen whose beautiful faces reflect their one-quarter Jersey heritage.

Bryan yokes the pair to skid logs from his toppled trees; what isn't needed to heat water and the house is sold to a neighbor who hauls it to the millyard. “Real Vermonters would probably laugh at me for not using a tractor,” he says. “It might even be cheaper to buy the wood.”

Although the work is dangerous and increasingly harder for Bryan, who recently turned 55, there seems little doubt that he will continue to

push physical and mental boundaries. One sometimes feeds the other, Bryan explains, describing his experience riding Brahmas in Montana rodeos. “You have very little fear the first time you ride,” he says, “but the second takes real courage. I've never known fear like that second time.” He holds up his hand and announces: “Important insight, the bull will kill you, but he has nothing against you — that's what's scary. As a boxer, you can fall on your knees and beg, and your opponent will stop. But,” (dramatic pause, slight smile) . . . “the bull will kill you.” ■

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*Secessionist's  
aptitude test:  
“What should  
Vermont do about  
Ohio's dumping of  
acid rain on her  
mountains?”  
Answer: “Vermont  
should arm  
missiles directed at  
Ohio smokestacks,  
triggered by acid  
rain gauges on  
Camel's Hump —  
thus triggering  
their own fate.”*

FROM *Out! The Vermont  
Secession Book*