We come to this place with heavy hearts. We grieve for a father, a grandfather, a friend, a kinsman and a man who touched lives not only in this area, South Carolina, and our country, but the world. He was a hero of the 20th Century, along with many others — Roosevelt, Churchill to name two. But we come together in this place to give thanks to God for a life well lived and a life that did good and a life that will inspire us and generations unborn to do good.

William Jennings Bryan Dorn was a man of the people, as his autobiography proclaims. He is remembered for many accomplishments — a medical school, highways, railroads, industrial expansion, education and humankind at its best. This afternoon, though, I would like to talk about Bryan Dorn the man, the person, the human being that made all of us love him so. I want to talk about some things he did and some things he said that stand out in my long memory of our association together. I want to mention two of his races and some laughable things said and done. This is not to exclude the other races, the magnificent accomplishments, and the great things he did for other people. All of us know Bryan from the perspective of our relationships, these are mine — many perhaps also known to most of you here today.

I believe that Bryan Dorn is the only person in the history of the United States to defeat two incumbent congressmen in four years who were father and son. In 1946, the young, dashing, handsome war hero, then only thirty years old, ran for Congress in the 3rd District of South Carolina. The incumbent congressman was the Honorable Butler Black Hare of Saluda, who had served in Congress with
distinction for sixteen years. There was little to divide the people of the 3rd District on issues because one would expect both Dorn and Hare to vote alike on most issues, but Bryan was thirty and Butler was seventy, and therein lay the tale.

Bryan describes it beautifully in his book, “Generally, Congressman Hare and I subscribed to the same political philosophy, so the campaign gradually developed into youth vs. age. I told the people at every meeting that the greatest generals were young men. Napoleon was a Lt. General at age twenty-seven. Alexander the Great conquered the known world before he was thirty-three. Hannibal was commander in chief of the Carthaginian army at twenty-five and Gustavus Adolphus commanded the Swedish army at nineteen.”

He would go further and say, “Alexander Hamilton was George Washington’s chief of staff at twenty-six. Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence at thirty-three. Henry Clay was a U.S. Senator at twenty-nine. William Pitt, the greatest Prime Minister of Great Britain was twenty-four. William Cullen Bryant wrote his greatest poem, “Thanatopsis,” at seventeen. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart played before the kings and queens of Europe at nine. Joan of Arc commanded the French army at seventeen and Jesus Christ hung on the cross at thirty-three.” Finally, Congressman Hare got enough and at Anderson, before a large crowd, said he was seventy years old but that’s not too old because, “Moses wrote the ten commandments when he was eighty years old.”

At the next meeting of the candidates, Congressman Hare spoke first. When Bryan’s turn came he said, “I never engage in mudslinging, my opponent is a fine gentleman, but I wish our congressman would familiarize himself more with the Holy Bible. Moses didn’t write the Ten Commandments at age eighty or any age. God wrote the Ten Commandments on a tablet of stone and gave that to Moses to take to the children of Israel — just read Genesis.
The next day, the headline in the *The Greenville News* read, “Both Candidates Wrong about the Bible.” The newspaper reported that the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments was in the book of Exodus not Genesis. Bryan lamented, “I think some of the Bible Belt voters wished they had a third man to vote for after that.” Bryan Dorn was elected to Congress and began his career on the national stage.

In 1948, after serving only one term in the House, he ran for the U.S. Senate against the incumbent, Senator Burnet R. Maybank. Many things worked against him this time and he lost. In his autobiography, he starts Chapter Five this way, “Broke, I decided to run for Congress again in 1950.” His opponent was Congressman James B. Hare, the son of former Congressman Butler B. Hare, the man Bryan had defeated in 1946. But the issues were different. They were the same age, had both served the country in World War II, and their voting records were almost identical. The issue was, Bryan had given up his seat in the House and ran for the Senate. “Look at that boy,” people were saying. “He didn’t get his seat warm good before he started running for the Senate.” “He threw his seat away.” “He’s too big for his britches!”
He had no money and a ‘37 Chevrolet auto that only ran some of the time. He had no staff. Miss Millie was home sick. “Most days,” Bryan said of the 1950 campaign, “I would share a watermelon with my driver, Steve Griffith, Jr., a first cousin, and that was our big meal of the day.” One hot day the car would not start. I got about ten guys to push and there we went down Main Street with ‘Bryan Dorn for Congress’ signs all over it and the car was putting out smoke and back firing all the way. But the hard work, about twenty hours a day, six days a week, and the story Bryan told — “I made a mistake. I want one more opportunity to serve” — paid off with a victory.

It was December 20, 1970, when Bryan wrote the people of the 3rd District of South Carolina a Christmas letter from Washington. Congress, he said, was still in session and he wrote of going to church at Calvary Baptist Church and later visiting the National Gallery of Art where he saw the portraits of John C. Calhoun and Joel R. Poinsett, who both served as Secretary of War. He recalled the beautiful decorations all over Washington, especially the poinsettias. Poinsett had brought the flower back from Mexico when he was ambassador there and the flower was given his name. Poinsett, Bryan wrote, would forever be associated with the birthday of the Prince of Peace.

“He did it with a flower. Not a sword, a brilliant speech or even the pen, but with a beautiful tropical flower. Throughout the world, the poinsettia is known and admired — virtually every hearthstone will be warmed and blessed by a flower — the poinsettia.”

But look back to Bryan’s marriage to Millie Johnson. He wrote, “In 1948, before I left Washington at the end of my term, I married Millie Johnson of Coats, North Carolina, who was the associate editor of U.S. News and World Report. Through the years, she would become my closest and most trusted advisor.” They had five wonderful children — and I believe every one of
them would say a lively, exciting life with many happy times. Marrying Miss Millie, as he liked to say, was perhaps the best thing he ever did. She was beautiful, smart, full of energy, and had lots of ideas. They truly loved each other and each had the greatest respect for the other.

One incident, after Bryan’s near-fatal auto accident — in the hospital room were a number of the family and friends. Out of the blue, Bryan said, “Excuse us but I need to have a private talk with Miss Millie.” Everyone left the room.

It’s been about fifteen years since she died and was buried at Bethel Church graveyard. As I thought about this eulogy, I thought of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem, “Annabel Lee.” Poe lost his wife, and it is believed that this poem is about the two of them. The last verses are so poignant to Bryan and Millie; I will take the liberty of substituting Miss Millie for Annabel Lee.

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Miss Millie Dorn,
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Miss Millie Dorn.
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride.

So, they are together side by side this very day.

From Caroliniana Columns, the newsletter of the University South Caroliniana Society
Fall Issue, 2005