

Billy F. Bryant

Billy F. Bryant, Professor of Mathematics, Emeritus, taught at Vanderbilt University from 1948 to 1986. Bryant received a B.S. from the University of South Carolina, a master's degree from Peabody College, and his doctoral degree from Vanderbilt University. He was very active in the Southeastern Section holding positions as Vice-Chair (1964), Secretary-Treasurer (1969-1972), Governor (1973-1976), Chair (1980), and Section Lecturer (1980). In 1992 he received the Section Distinguished Service Award and in 1994 he received the Meritorious Service Award.

Billy Bryant sent written answers to submitted interview questions in July 2011.

MAA SE: Where were you born?

BB: McKenzie, TN.

MAA SE: What was your earliest experience with mathematics?

BB: My mother taught me the multiplication table up to 12 by 12 before I started to school.

MAA SE: Have you always liked mathematics?

BB: Yes.

MAA SE: Who was your greatest mathematical influence when you were young?

BB: I did not focus on mathematics.

MAA SE: What hobbies or other interests did you have? Do you still have them?

BB: I played basketball in H.S. and loved it. All my life my family and I had planned for me to go to medical school so I took as much science as was available in our small H.S. (Bells, TN). In mathematics, I only took first-year algebra and plane geometry. But everything changed abruptly when my father died shortly before I finished H.S. leaving the family with almost no resources. College was no longer possible, and I had to go to work to support my mother and younger brother. Fortunately, I got a job in the Post Office of our small town.

MAA SE: What undergraduate school did you attend? What was your major?

BB: Then came WWII, and I enlisted in the Navy in August, 1942. After about a year, the Navy started the V-12 college program, and I was selected for the program as one of eleven from our base. Dreams of college were reborn. The Navy sent me to Carson-Newman College for two semesters and to The University of South Carolina for five semesters. The curriculum was fixed for those of us who had come from “the fleet” with no college experience. I was allowed only one elective during the entire time. I had two semesters of calculus. My major was Naval Science.

MAA SE: What were your favorite subjects in undergraduate school?

BB: Mathematics.

MAA SE: How did you decide on a career in mathematics?

BB: When I got out of the Navy in 1946, I married Mary Nelle Park. We have now been married 65 years and are still going strong (well, not really strong). I decided against a medical career and planned to be a mathematics teacher, so I enrolled in George Peabody College for Teachers and got my M.A. there.

MAA SE: Who would you consider your mentor(s)?

BB: My favorite teacher was Dr. F. Lynwood Wren of Peabody.

MAA SE: What graduate school(s) did you attend? Why did you choose those schools? Where was your first job and why did you choose that job?

BB: Dr. Wren recommended that Vanderbilt (across the street) make me an instructor and I could work on my Ph.D. I needed more money than one got as a graduate student because a baby was now on the way and I still had obligations to my mother.

MAA SE: When and why did you first join the MAA? When and why did you come to the Southeastern Section?

BB: I joined the MAA in 1949, and attended my first meeting that Spring at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.

MAA SE: Who or what inspired you into service for the MAA?

BB: Dr. Wren of Peabody and Dr. Hyden of Vanderbilt.

MAA SE: What leadership roles have you had in the MAA?

BB: Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary-Treasurer, Governor, Section Lecturer, Short Course Instructor.

MAA SE: What accomplishments are you most proud of with regard to the MAA?

BB: All of the above.

MAA SE: Who were the Southeastern Section “stars” when you first joined the Section?

BB: Tomlinson Fort and F. Lynwood Wren.

MAA SE: How has the section changed since you have been a member? How has the section remained the same since you have been a member?

BB: I wrote an article for The Southeastern Section, 1922-1992 (pages 33 and 34) which John Neff put together. It still expresses my feelings. I haven't been able to attend meetings for several years, and I am sure that things have changed but always for the better.