

United States: Remembering George Bryant 1932-2022

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The socialist movement lost a long-time organizer and master builder with the death on December 26, 2022, of George Bryant at the age of 91. George and his life partner Beatrice Bryant were influential figures in the Ontario socialist movement from the 1950s. Bea Bryant died in 2016 (see *A Life for Socialism*).

Working from their home in Richmond Hill, just north of Toronto, George and Bea set the pace in community-based social-movement organizing. They were instrumental in rallying opposition to Canada's complicity in the U.S.-led war against Vietnam and in building solidarity with socialist Cuba.

In their later years, George and Bea lived in the village of Dealtown in southwest Ontario, while maintaining links with socialist and antiwar activists in Chatham, Detroit, and Toronto.

Largely self-educated, George grew up in a working-class community in Toronto. In the 1940s he became active in the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), predecessor of today's NDP.

Ernie Tate, who met George in the 1950s, recalled that George "worked at renovating homes to make a living, but his real passion was photography and documentary film making." George had worked with John Grierson on documentary film making at the National Film Board," Ernie reports. [1]

George met Bea at a square dance at St. Andrews United Church in Toronto. George and Bea quickly discovered a shared commitment to progressive social action. "George was a feminist, even then," Bea later commented. "He felt that I had as much right to get into politics as he had."

George and Bea gravitated to the CCF's left wing, and linked up with some other CCF leftists in forming the League for Socialist Action (LSA). In 1958 George and Bea joined the effort to launch a new labour-based left political party, which was born in 1961 as the New Democratic Party (NDP). George, Bea, and their young son David joined in a tour that year to revolutionary Cuba.

The Cuba trip deeply affected their subsequent course, Bea later recalled. "We stayed at a hotel in Havana that had just been taken over by the workers. There was a sign on the hotel, 'Free territory of Cuba.' It was filled with brigadistas (young participants in Cuba's great literacy campaign), with their little lanterns, going out to teach in the countryside."

"When we came back I gave a talk on Cuba," Bea added. "That was a public forum with quite a few people there, organized by the [Richmond Hill] Fair Play for Cuba Committee." This fledgling effort won attention among left activists across the country.

Three years later, George and Bea took a similar initiative in response to the U.S. war in Vietnam,

which aimed to crush an uprising for national liberation. Committees to end the war sprang up across Canada.

George and Bea took an initiative in Richmond Hill on the Vietnam war issue that stood out in terms of originality and impact.

At that time it was common for charities to raise funds by holding “tag days” on street corners and in malls across the community. “Just the thing,” thought Bea and George. “We’ll have a tag day to assist the victims of the Vietnam war.” The York Committee to End the War in Vietnam applied to the local authorities for a tag day permit. They were met by a curt refusal.

The York Committee appealed for reconsideration. Support poured in from across the community, including from local resident Pierre Berton, then Canada’s best-known English-language writer. In the end, the abashed city council gave way. The dust-up in Richmond Hill made the news across Canada and beyond.

Over the years, George worked at many jobs, most of them in carpentry, a field in which he was an expert craftsman. This skill carried over readily to his political work, where he was called upon to fix up and rebuild socialist movement bookstores, meeting halls, and offices in Toronto and beyond.

George’s carpentry skills were applied to a particularly ambitious project in the late 1960s, when a League for Socialist Action member acquired a vacation property north of Deseronto, Ontario, and invited the LSA to use it for educational purposes. George designed and managed construction of a fine meeting and dining hall and accompanying tent floors and cabins. The centre was named Camp Poundmaker, after the renowned Indigenous leader of the late 1800s. Many weekend discussion circles and recreational evenings were held there on summer evenings.

The LSA was then expanding rapidly, and it was hoped that the League would grow into full utilization of this handsome property. Unfortunately, that was not to be, and the League’s leading role in Camp Poundmaker did not survive a spate of factional discord in the 1970s.

During the 1980s, I lived in New York City and had little touch with George and Bea. On my return to Canada I found the situation vastly changed. George and Bea had moved to Dealtown, in south-west Ontario. George rebuilt their little Dealtown home, with sculpted flower beds, raised to ease Bea’s work as master gardener. The large south-facing window looked into a little pond designed to attract the birds and comfort the resident goldfish.

Their son, David, lived close by. After many years of separation, close-knit family life was restored. Bea and George worked closely with social activists in nearby Chatham and Detroit.

George and Bea were convinced ecologists, long before this approach came to be widely shared among left-wing activists. These convictions found expression in all the Bryants’ varied activities in and around Dealtown.

As always, George and Bea’s actions pointed to the road ahead.

John Riddell, Toronto

[1]. Ernest Tate, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s & 60s A Memoir*, vol. 1, p. 29.

P.S.

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<https://johnriddell.com/2023/02/03/remembering-george-bryant-1932-2022/>