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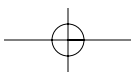
# Roots

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**E**gbert Roscoe Murrow was born on April 24, 1908, at Polecat Creek in Guilford County, North Carolina. He was the last of Roscoe Murrow and Ethel Lamb Murrow's four sons. The firstborn, Roscoe Jr., lived only a few hours. Lacey was four years old and Dewey was two years old when their little brother Egbert was born.

There was plenty in Egbert's ancestry to shape the man who would champion the underdog. The Murrows were Quaker abolitionists in slaveholding North Carolina, Republicans in Democratic territory, and grain farmers in tobacco country. The Lambs owned slaves, and Egbert's grandfather was a Confederate captain who fought to keep them.

Roscoe, Ethel, and their three boys lived in a log cabin that had no electricity, no plumbing, and no heat except for a fireplace that doubled as the cooking area. They had neither a car nor a telephone. Poor by some standards, the family didn't go hungry. Although the Murrows doubled



their acreage, the farm was still small, and the corn and hay brought in just a few hundred dollars a year. Roscoe's heart was not in farming, however, and he longed to try his luck elsewhere. When Egbert was five, the family moved to the state of Washington, where Ethel's cousin lived, and where the federal government was still granting land to homesteaders.

They settled well north of Seattle, on Samish Bay in the Skagit County town of Blanchard, just thirty miles from the Canadian border. The family struggled until Roscoe found work on a railroad that served the sawmills and the logging camps. He loved the railroad and became a locomotive engineer. Roscoe was a square-shouldered six-footer who taught his boys the value of hard work and the skills for doing it well. He also taught them how to shoot.

Ethel was tiny, had a flair for the dramatic, and every night required each of the boys to read aloud a chapter of the Bible. The Murrow boys also inherited their mother's sometimes archaic, inverted phrases, such as, "I'd not," "it pleasures me," and "this I believe."

The boys earned money working on nearby produce farms. Dewey and Lacey undoubtedly were the most profound influences on young Egbert. They likely would have taught him how to defend himself while also giving him reason to do so (although it's impossible to imagine any boy named Egbert not learning self-defense right away). It takes a younger brother to appreciate the influence of an older brother. If an older brother is vice president of his class, the younger brother must be president of his. If an

older brother averages twelve points a game at basketball, the younger brother must average fifteen or more. The boy who sees his older brother dating a pretty girl vows to make the homecoming queen his very own. That's how it worked for Egbert, and he had *two* older brothers. He didn't overachieve; he simply did what younger brothers must do.

When not in one of his silent black moods, Egbert was loud and outspoken. For that reason, the kids called him Eber Blowhard, or just "Blow" for short. His parents called him Egg. In his late teens he started going by the name of Ed.

The boys attended high school in the town of Edison, four miles south of Blanchard. Edison High had just fifty-five students and five faculty members when Ed Murrow was a freshman, but it accomplished quite a bit with limited resources. Ed was in the school orchestra, the glee club, sang solos in the school operettas, played baseball and basketball (Skagit County champs of 1925), drove the school bus, and was president of the student body in his senior year. English teacher Ruth Lawson was a mentor for Ed and convinced him to join three girls on the debating team. They were the best in their region, and Ed was their star. This appears to be the moment at which Edward R. Murrow was pulled into the great issues of the day ("Resolved, the United States should join the World Court"), and perhaps it's Ruth Lawson whom we modern broadcast journalists should thank for engaging our founder in world affairs.

The Murrows had to leave Blanchard in the summer of

1925 after the normally mild-mannered Roscoe silenced his abusive foreman by knocking him out. Fortunately, Roscoe found work a hundred miles west, at Beaver Camp, near the town of Forks on the Olympic Peninsula, about as far west as one could go in the then-forty-eight states. There was work for Ed, too.

After graduating from high school and having no money for college, Ed spent the next year working in the timber industry and saving his earnings. He was no stranger to the logging camps, for he had worked there every summer since he was fourteen. The camps were as much his school as Edison High, teaching him about hard and dangerous work. He also learned about labor's struggle with capital.

Throughout the time Ed was growing up, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), "the Wobblies," were organizing in the Pacific Northwest, pursuing their dream of "one big union." The powerful forces of industry and government were determined to snuff that dream. IWW organizers and members were jailed, beaten, lynched, and gunned down. A lumber strike during World War I was considered treason, and the IWW was labeled Bolshevik. Ed Murrow knew about red-baiting long before he took on Joe McCarthy. There was also background for a future broadcast in the deportations of the migrant workers the IWW was trying to organize. Near the end of his broadcasting career, Murrow's documentary "Harvest of Shame" was a powerful statement on conditions endured by migrant farm workers.

For the rest of his life, Ed Murrow recounted the stories

and retold the jokes he'd heard from millhands and lumberjacks. He also sang their songs, especially after several rounds of refreshments with fellow journalists.

In the fall of 1926, Ed once again followed in his brothers' footsteps and enrolled at Washington State College in Pullman, in the far southeastern corner of the state. He earned money washing dishes at a sorority house and unloading freight at the railroad station. Halfway through his freshman year, he changed his major from business administration to speech. That's how he met one of the most important people in his life.

Ida Lou Anderson was only two years out of college, although she was twenty-six years old, her education having been interrupted for hospitalization. Childhood polio had left her deformed with double curvature of the spine, but she didn't let her handicap keep her from becoming the acting and public speaking star of Washington State College, joining the faculty immediately after graduation.

Ida Lou assigned prose and poetry to her students, then had them read the work aloud. She challenged students to express their feelings about the meaning of the words and whether the writer's ideas worked. Ed Murrow became her star pupil, and she recognized his potential immediately. She introduced him to the classics and tutored him privately for hours. Ida Lou had a serious crush on Ed, who escorted her to the college plays in which he starred. Years later, near the end of her life, Ida Lou critiqued Ed's wartime broadcasts. It was at her suggestion that Ed made that half-second pause after the first word of his signature opening phrase: "This—is London."

His fire for learning stoked and his confidence bolstered by Ida Lou, Ed conquered Washington State College as if it were no bigger than tiny Edison High. He was a leader of his fraternity, Kappa Sigma, played basketball, excelled as an actor and debater, served as ROTC cadet colonel, and was not only president of the student body but also head of the Pacific Student Presidents Association. He even managed to top all of that before he graduated.

In December 1929 Ed persuaded the college to send him to the annual convention of the National Student Federation of America (NSFA), being held at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. At the convention, Ed delivered a speech urging college students to become more interested in national and world affairs and less concerned with “fraternities, football, and fun.” The delegates (including future Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell) were so impressed with Ed that they elected him president. Ed returned to Pullman in glory. Often dismissed as a “cow college,” Washington State was now home to the president of the largest student organization in the United States.

Ed’s class of 1930 was trying to join the workforce in the first spring of the Great Depression. Banks were failing, plants were closing, and people stood in bread lines, but Ed Murrow was off to New York City to run the national office of the National Student Federation.

He was barely settled in New York before he made his first trip to Europe, attending a congress of the Confédération Internationale des Étudiants in Brussels. The conference accomplished nothing because divisions among

the delegates mirrored the divisions of the countries or ethnic groups from which the delegates emerged. This was Europe between the world wars. The one matter on which most delegates could agree was to shun the delegates from Germany. Murrow argued that those young Germans should not be punished for their elders' actions in the Great War. The Europeans were not convinced, but once again Ed made a great impression, and the delegates wanted to make him their president. This time he refused.

Returning to New York, Ed became an able fundraiser (no small task in the Depression) and a master publicist, too. He convinced the *New York Times* to quote the federation's student polls, and he cocreated and supplied guests for the *University of the Air* series on the two-year-old Columbia Broadcasting System. The arrangement with the young radio network was to the advantage of both organizations. Columbia enjoyed the prestige of having the great minds of the world delivering talks and filling out its program schedule.

The first NSFA convention with Ed as president was to be held in Atlanta at the end of 1930. Stunningly bold and years ahead of his time, Ed Murrow decided he would hold an integrated convention in the unofficial capital of deepest Dixie. Howard University was the only traditional black college that belonged to the NSFA. Murrow successfully recruited half a dozen more black schools and urged them to send delegates to Atlanta.

Next, Murrow negotiated a contract with the Biltmore Hotel in Atlanta and attached to the contract a list of the

member colleges. If the manager of the Biltmore failed to notice that the list included black colleges, well, that wasn't the fault of the NSFA or its president.

At a meeting of the federation's executive committee, Ed's plan faced opposition. Using techniques that decades later became standard procedure for diplomats and labor negotiators, Ed left committee members believing integration was their idea all along.

Then Ed made an appointment with Adolf Ochs, publisher of the *New York Times*. He told Ochs exactly what he intended to do and asked Ochs to assign a southern reporter to the convention. This later proved valuable when a Texas delegate threatened to disrupt the proceedings. The *Times* reporter, an Alabamian, asked the Texan if he wanted all this to end up in the Yankee newspaper for which he worked. The Texan backed off.

Housing the black delegates was not a problem, since all delegates stayed in local college dormitories, which were otherwise empty over the year-end break. The real test of Murrow's experiment was the closing banquet, because the Biltmore was not about to serve food to black people. Murrow solved this by having white delegates pass their plates to black delegates, an exercise that greatly amused the Biltmore serving staff, who, of course, were black.

Ed was reelected president by acclamation. Not for another thirty-four years would segregation of public facilities be outlawed.