

Edward R. Murrow: a personal word of appreciation

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Article:

Edward R. Murrow was born 100 years ago today in Guilford County. He became a pioneer in broadcast TV who was known for the high quality of his work as well as the high standards he sought for his profession.

Broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, born in Guilford County on April 25, 1908, has been one of my heroes for as long as I can remember. As a teenager, I watched rebroadcasts of Murrow television documentaries during the 1950s — especially the epic battle with Sen. Joseph McCarthy. I remember hearing radio broadcasts of Murrow reporting from World War II London during the Blitz and from the Buchenwald concentration camp during the liberation.

To this day, I never hear the "Simple Gifts" melody from Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" without recalling that the music opened Murrow's last great CBS broadcast, "Harvest of Shame," in which Murrow's team updated "The Grapes of Wrath" for Americans who had just eaten their Thanksgiving dinners in 1960. Using remarkably simple but powerful interviews with the migrants, the documentary ennobled the lives of "the humans who harvest the food for the best-fed people in the world." Murrow's show often used the "small picture" and the individual story to illuminate the big issues of the day.

Always, always, I remember the sound of Murrow's authoritative baritone voice.

When a Friends of the UNCG Libraries member came to us some time ago suggesting that we do something to honor Murrow at UNCG, I was at first skeptical that there was much we could offer. While Murrow was a native of Guilford County, his papers are at Tufts and Washington State, and he left North Carolina as a young man. Charles Kuralt once chronicled his career for the North Carolina Historical Review, but what could we do?

Upon realizing that 2008 is the centennial of Murrow's birth, I was determined that we in his home county should celebrate this man, to see and hear his voice once again, to sit and observe the power of great television, but also to introduce new generations to the still very significant issues that even a close examination of his career leaves unresolved.

One of his biographers, Ann Sperber, said of Murrow:

"He was a distinct American type, the product of an older social order, preindustrial, Calvinistic, with heavy overtones of guilt, a stern morality, and a sense of right and wrong that owed more to the Bible — 'doing the right thing' — than to any set political doctrine. He came from the Anglo-Celtic stock that first settled the inland frontier, those historian Bernard De Voto called 'the tall, gaunt, powerful, sallow, saturnine men,' his basic values those of a society reflected in the pages of Hawthorne and Fenimore Cooper."

In reading Sperber's biography, I realized that, to a greater extent than I had known, Ed Murrow's example had helped define my own values, my own sense of right and wrong. He had taught me about justice and injustice, and I realized that, lo, these many years later, I still measure courage, journalism and television by the standard of Murrow. If I am sometimes disappointed in what I see, so was he. His speech to the Radio-Television News Directors Association in 1958 has the air of prophecy in its warnings about the dangers facing television if it continued on the path of distracting, deluding, amusing and insulating us.

As I explored Murrow's life and career more deeply, I felt a need to raise again for our community the questions Sperber puts so well: "How does a responsible broadcaster function in an industry caught between government licensing and the marketplace? Where does individual responsibility assert itself? How does one react when society no longer supports the just, when the absolutes of one age become the gray areas of another? When does going along turn into acquiescence? Can one, in fact, remain within the system and stay effective?"

These questions, dear reader, were not only for Murrow's time, they are questions for our time as well.

Please join the University Libraries at UNCG this October in examining Murrow's career in a series of programs we have developed in collaboration with others in the university and with our friends in the Greensboro Historical Museum. This man from humble Polecat Creek casts a long shadow, even now.