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Roy Edwards - Of a Different Time

AUDIE MURPHY came from an America that no longer exists. . . a small-town America in which the lines clearly were drawn between right and wrong, good and evil.

Farmersville, I am certain, had a town baseball team when Audie Murphy was a youngster there, because small towns all over Texas—and America—did. They played the team from the next town on weekends and on Memorial Day and on July 4.

Youngsters played baseball then because they wanted to, not because their parents organized a league. They got together of themselves and played. In Longview, then a much-smaller town in deep East Texas than it is now, we played on the first Ward school grounds. there was a team of youngsters in each section of town, and proud was the team which had a graduate or two playing on the semi-pro club that represented the town in games with Kilgore and Gladewater and Henderson.

Our team had the best pitcher in town, Ray Tatum, who had the arm to be a major leaguer and the calling to be a Baptist preacher. We also had an outstanding athlete, T. A. Scott, who was ultimately to quarterback an Orange bowl team at the University of Kansas.

Youngsters played baseball and football and basketball and other sports then for sheer joy of playing and not for hope of any future financial windfall, such as college scholarship or professional contract.

THE NATION was just beginning to escape the devastating grip of the Great Depression, and there wasn't a lot of money floating around to promote the pleasures of the flesh. In Longview,

a crowd used to gather on Saturday night outside the ultra-modern new building of the Longview Morning Journal and Daily News to watch through a vast expanse of plate glass as the presses rolled the Sunday paper. In this sophisticated day, that's laughable and small-townish, but 30 years ago we were a nation of small towns. And it was a considerable experience actually to see the news produced before you very eyes.

Other things were different then. Officers of the law were friends of the people. No one called them pigs or fuzz. They were respected. It was a high calling, upholding the law. The only ones who need fear the law were those who had good cause to avoid encounters with the law.

Very few youngsters had wheels. We used to walk across town for a date, then walk from the girl's house to the movies, that is if we could scrape up the price of a movie.

Smoking a cigarette or drinking a beer was fast living for a youngster.

Audie Murphy came from my time, from my America. And when Pearl Harbor blew us violently into World War II, teen-age young men from Farmersville and from Longview and from all over these United States went to war without a backward glance, no questions asked.

THE ISSUES were clearly-defined. The rights and wrongs were there for all to see. Young men met their patriotic obligations as a matter of course. They didn't demand reasons because they had the best reason of all.

It had to be done.

There was no question of just or unjust war. For that matter, what is just about any war? And Audie Murphy knew far better than any of us of that time, than any of this time, the total hell that is war.

Not to have gone, even to have entertained a thought of not going, would have been unthinkable. Everybody went, and those few unfortunates among the young who were classified 4-F or essential in their jobs were look upon with jaundiced eye.

I have a few personal heroes, but Audie Murphy has long been one. I first read about him, I am sure, in the European edition of Stars and Stripes. Here was a young man of my time; a slight, freckle-faced sharecropper's son from a small Texas town thrown into a hell not of his own doing or choosing. But he did not run, he did not hide, he did not complain, he did not whine, he did not blame. He faced hell single-handedly. And he won.

Except for "The Red Badge of Courage," Murphy's movies were something less than classics. he once said that the only thing different from one picture to the next was his horse. But all the pain and powder and glamour of Hollywood never covered up the genuine qualities of the small-town boy from Texas. He remained what in East Texas we called "folks."

This is supposed to be a sports column. Today, it is not. I don't feel much like sports today. Audie Murphy is dead. And a part of my America is dead with him!