Edward R. Murrow — Papers

Newly donated papers shed light on Edward R. Murrow's war broadcasts
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Sunday, February 12, 2006NEW YORK (AP) — The Second World War radio broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow are now regarded as high points in the history of journalism, vivid examples of how the spoken word can bring home events of infinite horror and complexity from thousands of kilometres away.
But when it came to preserving Murrow's scripts and other papers from that time, few people had the foresight or the luck to think of history. Some materials were lost when the Germans bombed CBS offices in London, where Murrow was based during the war. Others were simply misplaced in the rush to meet the next deadline.

But some, like a batch just donated to the Edward R. Murrow Center at the Fletcher School of Tufts University, have also turned up quite accidentally.

Back in the 1980s, CBS TV's London bureau was cleaning out files when producer Mark H. Harrington III spotted an unmarked "old brown envelope tossed into a box of other old files," according to his widow, Kyle Good, a former CBS producer and now a publicist with Scholastic, Inc.

"He was shocked when he opened it up," Good said in a recent interview. "When he first found them, he talked about where he might donate them, but I suspect he put them carefully away and just forgot about them. I suspect he thought about it from time to time, but just never got around to doing it."

Harrington died of cancer in 1998 and Good had thought little about the Murrow documents until a colleague urged her to donate them. Both Anne Sauer, who directs the digital collections and archives at Tufts, nor Murrow's son, Casey, say they've never seen the papers before. Linda Mason, a

senior vice president at CBS News, said the network has no original documents – although there are audio records – from Murrow's war years.

"They're a fascinating glimpse of Murrow's early years, when he was just coming into prominence," Sauer says of the papers.

Murrow, born in rural North Carolina in 1909, joined CBS in 1935 and two years later was transferred to London, where he served as chief of the network's European operations. When war came, he became famous for his detailed, emotional radio broadcasts from London during the German air raids, with bombs often exploding in the background.

In 1950s, the dark-haired, chain-smoking Murrow went on to even greater fame as a television newsman, notably for his attacks against Sen. Joseph McCarthy – the subject of Good Night, and Good Luck, the George Clooney-directed film that has received six Academy Award nominations. Murrow died of cancer in 1965.

The papers donated to Tufts include handmarked scripts of Murrow's London radio programs, reflections on life in the bomb shelters and other materials that reinforce his image as a journalist of grim passion and integrity.

In an undated, six-page manuscript, headlined Notes on the Way, Murrow frets that people have "lost the ability to feel," that they prefer stories of bravery to those of horror. He recalls returning to London after a visit to Vienna, Austria, and trying to tell friends about what he had seen.

"The long lines of Austrians outside the banks and travel bureaux; the screams and shots in the night; the looting of Jewish shops," Murrow writes. "All those things were either disbelieved, or dismissed as things that happened in a far away land to people who deserved what they got anyway."

The longest document, at 19 pages, is called London

Underground and appears to be a working draft for a magazine-style broadcast about the city's bomb shelters. The manuscript, heavily marked with cross-outs and handwritten inserts, is an impressionistic survey that includes overheard conversations, vignettes of shelter residents and a dismissal of media reports that the war has had a levelling effect on London society.

"Tales are told of the Duchess who plays bridge with her servants; and the man from the Stock Exchange who sleeps beside a taxi driver," he writes. "Most of that kind of talk is nonsense. Your degree of safety and comfort, and your underground neighbors still depend very largely on how much money you have."

Casey Murrow believes London Underground may have been co-authored by Murrow's wife, Janet. He says that the handwriting on the script was hers, and notes that she often assisted his father on stories.

"She spent more time underground than he did and she might have been asked to put in her ideas, too," says Murrow, who runs a nonprofit educational organization in Brattleboro, Vt. "Dad actually avoided bomb shelters because he was afraid if he started going into them he would never stop going into them."

Another undated manuscript, titled News-Chronicle, presents a behind-the-scenes account of Edward R. Murrow's radio broadcasts, from the technology ("Twice each day a trans-Atlantic telephone circuit is opened between London and New York") to British censorship ("It's always well-mannered though sometimes stupid") to British character.

"These Londoners are a patient lot," Murrow observed, "and they are sustained by a peculiar quiet arrogance – a feeling that they are superior to other people."

He also reviews CBS war coverage, noting how the network

reported “semi-official promises” of progress in the war and offering a statement of principles that recalls the high-minded speech framing Good Night, and Good Luck.

“We have recorded British victories and defeats,” he writes, “. . . believing always that the intrusion of personal prejudice and prophecy is useless if not harmful, and that the listener in America, if given sufficient information will make up his mind in accordance with the ultimate truth.”