“The value of a man is not measured by what he does for himself to make his life easier, but measured by what he does for others to make their lives easier.” – Eric E. Thomas

Joella “Ella” M. (Mackey) Murphy, a Berea graduate, was well known for her actions of making others’ lives easier. In fact, she thrived off it. Joella Murphy lived her life in a successful career teaching – a dream she’d had since she was 13 years old. Ella was born on May 6, 1868 in Madison County, Kentucky. Her childhood was primarily based in Richmond, where she then attended Berea College. Berea College then changed Ella Murphy’s life.

Ella attended Berea College from 1881-1889 focusing on studying music and education. From 1881-1883, Ella was a student in the Normal Prep Program. Normal Prep was a course for students interested in becoming teachers. From grade school, Ella knew that her passion for teaching would help her become successful in her future career. Following Normal Prep, Ella attended College Prep in 1884 then General Prep from 1885-1886. In 1888, Ella was mentioned in the Richard Climax Newspaper for her remarkable instrumental solo during the Kentucky State Colored Teachers Association meeting. In addition to her solo coverage, she was written about for marrying Herman Murphy, a former citizen of Danville and a renown prominent colored citizen of California – “December 23, 1890, Herman Murphy in her father’s house by John G. Fee, founder of Berea College.” (The Climax, 1888). Herman and Ella met at Berea College and it was love at first sight. We know this because as soon as Ella graduated, her wedding was being planned – officially getting married 5 months after graduating college. Furthermore, when Ella and Herman had children the Berea Citizen Newspaper wrote an article as well. “Herman and Ella reside in an “elegant” home in Berkley California with 7 children. Herman is a prosperous realtor. Both were formers students of Berea College a quarter century ago” (Berea Citizen Newspaper, 1909). According to the 1910 Census, Alameda County, California, their kids were Helen – 19, Howard – 17, Herman – 15, Margaret – 13, Ellen – 8, Edward – 5, and Robert – 1.
If I were to meet Mrs. Murphy, I would ask her two questions. First, how did you feel about the Day Law being established? You and your husband were fortunate enough to attend Berea prior to it, but how did it feel that the opportunity you had to attend Berea was now taken from other potential students? Also, if given the opportunity, would you choose another career that wasn’t teaching? I know it was in your community’s culture for women to either become a nurse or teacher. But did you ever want to branch out to become something new?

After diligently spending many hours researching Ella’s life and the era she lived in, I believe I’ve found the answers to these questions myself without asking her. In January of 1904, the state of Kentucky introduced a House Bill stating it should be against the law for people considered of “color” (the outgroup) and whites (the ingroup) to attend the same school. The penalty for any person or corporation convicted of violation was $1000 (Kentucky Journal of House of Representatives 201, 1904, p. 523). “Berea College President William G. Frost, accompanied by Mrs. Eleanor Frost and others of the faculty, traveled to Frankfort to remonstrate against the bill.” (Burnside). They were unsuccessful. Democrat Carl Day introduced this law and quite frankly he could be considered as a racist. Racism is defined as “the linking of biological conditions with alleged abilities and behavior to assert the superiority of one race” Understanding Race and Ethnic Relations, 2012, Parillo pg. 12). He stated that he did not want blacks located less than 25 miles from a whites-only school – creating a mindset that whites are better than anyone else. The individuals that agreed to this law are also at fault for being ethnocentric because they judged the “colored” as if they had a disease. Ella Murphy must’ve been appalled when this bill was passed in March of 1904. At the same time, I believe she was very thankful she graduated prior to this law being passed. Berea College was her home and for her own home state to pass a law to prevent Berea College specifically for teaching a diverse classroom of students is quite upsetting.

Occupational mobility is defined as “the ability of individuals to improve their job position” (Parillo pg.68). I believe this concept was a main reason as to why Ella decided to become a teacher – It was much easier for blacks to become successful in teaching compared to other career choice during that time. In addition, “Negros will work cheaper” (Selling Black History for Carter G. Woodson: A Diary, pg. 336). She knew she could always find a job; she also loved teaching so everything worked out well. Unfortunately, if Ella wanted to be a doctor
or lawyer during her time, those were not common jobs for African Americans and finding a job and moving up the ladder in occupational mobility would be much more difficult. If her community’s culture was more accepting to other careers for black females, then she might have strongly considered a different pathway. I believe her passion for teaching would have led to educating others at some point in her career or life.

Ella Murphy died November 16, 1939 in Oakland, California. She was then buried in Mountain View Cemetery, also located in Oakland, California. She lived a life she loved and truly changed the lives of others. With the help of Berea College, she became the best she could be.
Works Cited


Hambleton Tapp and James Klotter, Kentucky Decades of Discord, 1865-1900 (Frankfort, Kentucky, 1977).
