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**DEAN ROBB**

An Unlikely  
Radical



Dean Robb, featured speaker at the Americana Hotel, New York City, 1964

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An Unlikely  
Radical

by Matthew Z. Robb

foreword by Richard Goodman

LOST PRAIRIE PRESS

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*“We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty.*

*We must remember always that accusation is not proof, and that conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law.*

*We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason. If we dig deep into our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men, not from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate, and to defend causes that were for the moment unpopular.”*

— Edward R. Murrow, 1954





## Foreword

Who are the greatest American trial lawyers? Lawyers who have fought the battles for the disinherited and the dispossessed both in and out of the courtrooms of this sprawling democracy over the last two hundred years. Three names rise immediately to mind: Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow. And it is no accident that all three were sons of the Midwestern heartland. Time and time again it was this part of America that was the sparkplug for social change, progressivism, and social justice, “The conscience of the nation” as George Norris once remarked.

Dean Robb, the subject of this intimate and inspiring biography, never painted his name in the stars as did Lincoln, Bryan, and Darrow. But his life, his struggles and his voice reflect their tradition and shine just as brightly in the hearts of those whose lives he has touched. Dean’s journey from southern Illinois farm boy to pioneering jury lawyer in the Detroit industrial caldron embodies in every way the face of the Midwest whose character he reflects. A dedicated passion for justice rooted in his mother’s Presbyterian religiosity coupled with a down home, plain-spoken way of showing juries and others what was right, and equally important, what was not right. There is hardly a cause for social justice that failed



Richard and Ernie Goodman

to enlist his energies, the battle for ‘fair employment practices’ in the forties, the rights of immigrants, the rights of the newly organized labor unions, the fight for free speech and against the McCarthyism of the forties and fifties, his defiance against the red scare, his refusal to go along with the blind and mindless atomic arms race, and the equally foul wars in Vietnam and elsewhere. Dean reported ready, willing and able in all these national and local campaigns. Today almost all these domestic issues—assailed as communist plots back then—are the law of the land.

In the '50s and '60s, lawyers, especially in the south, feared that even touching 'civil rights' cases could cost them their law practice, their reputation, and their livelihoods. Dean was among the first to recognize that lawyers could help finance their civil rights work by representing injury victims against insurance companies and big business. Dean travelled the south with this message and the ways and means of accomplishing the goal. This formula worked and allowed many small law offices to significantly contribute to the legal fight throughout the south in those historic years.

I had the good luck to work with Dean in the courtroom in his salad days in Detroit when many judges thought that if you represented an injured person against an insurance company, you were either a communist or an apostate or both. Dean was dismissive of the power of money. He would say that the insurance companies thought they owned the money they collected in premiums when all they really had a right to do was to hold that money in trust for his clients and the other victims whose money it really was. There were few juries that —whatever their biases beforehand—failed to respect his passion, his spirit, and his plain-spoken honesty.

No foreword could ever truly capture this man and his life's work. Suffice it to say that those of us who have known and loved him all these years are blessed beyond measure by the stark fact that he continues to this very day to do what he has always done—never letting us forget who we are and what we owe to ourselves and to our communities. He never lets us give less than what we can. This is his legacy. We must never forget it.

—Richard Goodman



Matthew and Mary Brown Robb with their two sons, at top, Willard and in front, Zenas Allen, 1906



## Acknowledgments

At age eighty-six, there are so many people that have shaped my life, my story, and my character. Unfortunately, too many of them are no longer with us. I owe all that I am to my Robb and Cunningham grandparents and my parents, Zenas and Mary Robb. I hope this book stands to honor their legacy.

There may be no group that shaped my character more than the five Robb country cousins. To this date, Matt is the only one who is no longer with us. He was a devoted family man who is deeply missed. I thank him, as well as Don and his wife Jean, who now own a flight school in Mclean, Virginia. Thanks to Bill and his wife Rose, who still farm in Swanwick, Illinois—the gateway to Lost Prairie! Thank you to Dale and his wife Arlene, who are living in Urbana, Illinois. Dale is a retired Presbyterian minister and the family historian. So I particularly thank him in advance for not mentioning the inaccuracies in my version of the story.

I would like to give special thanks to my brother Lyle, the fifth of the cousins. Lyle and his wife Ruth had four children, Richard, Candace, Jim and Becky. Ruth passed away several years ago and Lyle remains very close to all his children who multiplied really well. He has a large contingent of grandkids and great grandkids who are just a ton of fun! Lyle retired from

Illinois Light & Power twenty years ago and spends his time rebuilding airplanes and has his pilot's license.

In 1946, when I walked through the doors of the Dodge Community House, I didn't expect that Reverend and Mrs. Henry Jones, directors of the Dodge House, would transform my life's path and hold such a special place in my heart to this day.

My many friends during the 1946 FEPC Campaign, notably Ernie Goodman, Ann Shore, Professor Clarence Anderson, Professor Edward McFarland, and Jack Raskin stand out most in my memory but there were so many more great people who worked just as hard as I did to end discrimination in employment.

In the writing of this book, my son, Matt, has taken me on a trip down memory lane and thinking back to my law school days at Wayne State University has been heartwarming as I really have been too busy to think back on some of these people and experiences otherwise. Here is my short list of my many lifelong friends from law school: Kermit Bailer, who has passed. I miss his sense of humor and wild ways. Bill Davidson who later came to own the *Detroit Pistons* after owning a chain of drug stores and various other business ventures. Bill became one of Michigan's richest men. Back in school, Bill, Harold Berry and I talked about practicing law together. Although I chose the road to the left, I will never forget our special friendship and the fun we all had back in school. Bill passed on last year but Harold and his lovely wife, Barbara, still live in Bloomfield Hills and are very loyal Michigan citizens. I want to thank them both for going to great lengths to dig up the photograph that appears on the cover of this book. It was taken in 1949 in Ann Arbor, Michigan the day we finished taking our bar exam just outside of the law quad. Other good law school friends include Henry

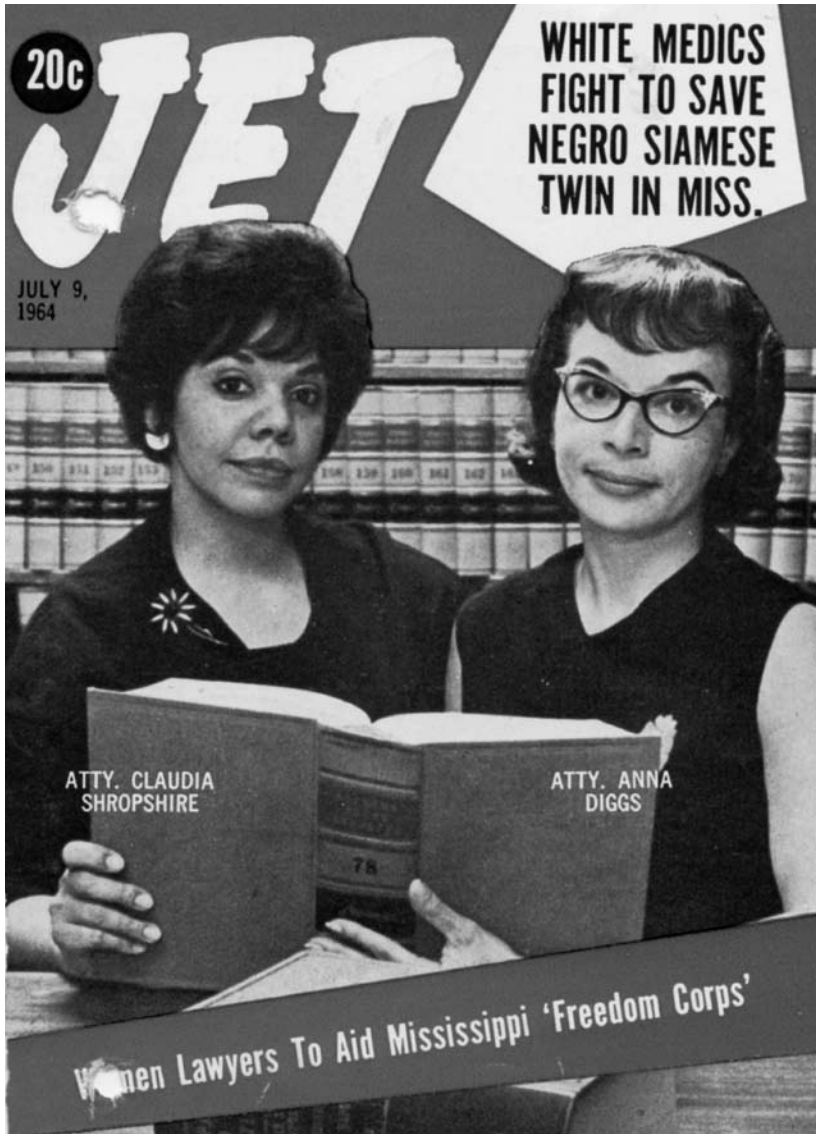


Marsh, who went on to be not only a very successful lawyer but also mayor of Saginaw. Victor Hanson and Felix League and I always crammed for law school finals together and Vic went on to become a leading labor lawyer for Great Lakes seaman. Felix and Kermit were the friends close enough to educate me, their green-horned country white boy, to the ways of women. For this, I owe a huge debt of gratitude.

Charlie Farmer, who later became one of Detroit's most celebrated judges, was my neighbor in Lafayette Park. Charlie's post war journey to Detroit from Tennessee was much like my journey from southern Illinois except that Charlie is black and his sharing with me his experience in segregated Detroit will always be burned into my heart because as parallel as our journeys were, our experience could not have been more different. I know that the difference in our experiences was a direct result of the difference in the color of our skin. How unjust and unfair. I am grateful that Charlie and I still enjoy each others company to this day. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the many black friends I've had over the years who were courageous enough to get close enough with me that they could share their most intimate feelings. It has always helped me to understand prejudice in a way that outrages me and has allowed me to make my life's work successful.

The lawyers and judges that have influenced my life before 1971 are far too numerous to name. There have been hundreds but there are some who stand out in my mind as having had such a strong influence that I feel compelled to mention them. The National Lawyers Guild members who were heroes in the McCarthy period and the civil rights movement included Maurice Sugar, Bernie Fieger, Judge Patrick H. O'Brian, Ernie Goodman, George Crockett Jr., Mort Eden, Harold Cranefield, Harold Norris, Chester Smith, Judge James Montante,

Arthur Kinoy, Ben Probe, William Kunstler, Claudia Morcom, Anna Diggs, Richard and Bill Goodman, Larry Sperber, Chuck Morgan, Phil Hirschkop, and Al Millstein.



Attorneys Claudia Morcom and Anna Diggs on the cover of "Jet" magazine, 1964

## Acknowledgments

The American Trial Lawyers are again too numerous, but most notable for me include, Melvin Belli, Gerry Spence, Phil Corboy, Bill Colson, JD Lee, Joe Cotchett, Peter Perlman, Bill Trine, Ted Warshafsky, Bob Cartwright, Sal Licarrdo, Bill Snead, Murray Sams, Vern Lawyer, Lex Hawkins, Vivian Lawyer, Ed Rood, Perry Nichols, Billy Gaither, Jack and Abe Fuchsberg, Bill Thorpe, Bill Hicks, Dan Sullivan, and Morris Dees.

There are people who have been a special help in putting this book together. First I would like to thank Angela and Erik Saxon, our design team, who were not only a personal pleasure to work with but felt more like partners in this production and now feel like friends. A very special thanks to Pat Green who has been a dear friend for years and has been a big part of Matt's life, so when we asked her to come out of retirement as city editor of the Toledo *Blade* to do the first edit on this book she did not hesitate! What a joy it was for both Matt and I to work with Pat in this way. Pat's husband Tim has always been one of my best friends and you will hear a lot more about him if I ever write up the second half of my life. Thanks also to Todd Mercer who came highly recommended by my friend, Mike Delp, to edit the book and he did a superb job. Rose Hollander and her late husband, Stuart, published a very successful book, *Saving the Family Cottage*. Rose was a wealth of information and we very much appreciated her good and sound advice. Thanks Rose.

Finally, thanks to Richard Goodman, a dear friend, who wrote the heartfelt and insightful introduction to the book.

I'd like to thank our good friend, Joyce Bahle, for taking the time to read some of our roughest drafts and still be willing to shout encouragement. We appreciate the honest and open critique of the first draft by the LIWDA Book Club. Others who read early versions and clips of the book or supported us in the process include, Dale Mathias (I want strokes after all this

work), Dean and Kay Mathias (sorry we didn't go with your title), Gary Mathias, Dale Robb, Rusty Glenn, Robin Buchner, Larry and Lou Fay, Jim and Leslie Saffell, Marian Kromkowski and Matthew Posner, Steve Morse, Steve Babson, Joyce Braithwaite, George Weeks, Jeff Erno, and Mary Fisher. Thank you for taking the time, it was most helpful.

Thanks also to Tom and Martha Phillips, Helmut and Charlene Goral, Warren and Sheila Hanson, Tom and Sandy Davis, Tom and Diane Lammy, Tim and Patti Greene, Lea Ann and Lanny Sterling, Frank and Cheryl Smith, Joe and Donna Kelly, Bill Smith, Doug and Denise Price, Jim and Karen Jordan, Ron and Claudia Bahrie, and Collette and the Belanger family for entertaining me and being such close friends for so many years.

There have been numerous other great friends and family members who have been telling me for years, "Dean, you've got to write your memoirs!" Mary Fisher even bought me a tape recorder and a ton of tapes for Christmas several years ago but even that did not get me going on this project. Nancy Sundstrom finally talked me into letting her write a book about my life. Around 1992 we met once a week for several months taping our conversations. Unfortunately, Nancy's untimely death aborted the only attempt I had made to put my life on paper. If there is a heaven she is surely there and I hope she is smiling that this project is finally finished.

I'd like to especially thank Helen Milliken, Gerry Spence, Jim Harrison, Kathleen Glynn, Michael Moore, Geoffrey Fieger, and Michael Delp for taking the time to read our manuscript and make such kind comments about Matt's work. You are all very busy people and we are heartfelt in thanking you.

Tom Davis has been a dear friend of our family for years and has always cheered Matt on in his life. We thank him for

sending Matt the quote by Edward R. Murrow, which was an inspiration to him while he was in school. It was meaningful enough to Matt that he had saved Tom's handwritten note, including the quote, all these years and it was perfect for the book. Thanks Tom, and congratulations on your own steady rise to greatness—Michigan Supreme Court Justice Alton T. Davis!

I'd like to thank Barbara Robb, my first wife, for sharing several of her photos for the book and a marriage that was a great partnership for most of those seventeen years and bringing into this world Laura, Al, and Blair. You were also an unlikely radical and I have always been proud of the work you have done in your own right to make our world a better place.

To Laura, Al, and Blair: thank you for joining in all the marches and protests, even though you may not have fully understood at the time. You are a gift to me and to the world, and I'm sorry if I got too wrapped up in some of my causes during those early years to pay you the attention you deserved. I hope you are as proud of me as I am of you. I love you all with everything that I am, and the three beautiful granddaughters, Sarah, Leslie, and Gretta, you've blessed us with.

Cindy and I have been married for twenty-seven years and on our wedding day I got an incredible son, Ben, whom I love so much. Ben and his husband Ray are our pride and joy and I am so proud of them. Who would have imagined for the price of one marriage license I got this great package deal and in the package were grandparents (It had been sixty years since I'd had grandparents!), a new mom and dad, aunts and uncles, and cousins galore! Amazingly for such a big gregarious family I am close to all of them and love it. I think the best thing we ever did was to have Matt. It made us a family. Cindy has been an almost daily part of this book. She fed us, encouraged us, untangled us when we became frustrated, and was our num-

ber one cheerleader. Thanks for rounding up, organizing and captioning the photos for this book, and always honoring my life and my past.

Thank you for teaching me how to love again. You have made me feel more alive since the day I met you, and together we have made such a beautiful life and family. We have been through so much and through it all you are the love of my life. Thank you, Cindy.

I would like to thank Angie Rider, Matt's girlfriend for over five years. She has encouraged and supported Matt and was very helpful and enthusiastic in the research and development of this book. We appreciate all your help and time. Most of all, thank you for being such a welcome and loving part of our lives!

My largest debt is owed to Matt. His writing has captured emotions and triggered memories for me that are priceless, and sharing the intimate details of my life through two marriages and three children who came before him has been an experience that I know many fathers don't get to enjoy. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the time we had together while he wrote this book, and the fact that my twenty-four year old son wanted to know enough about my life to write about it, even on sunny days when I'm sure he'd much rather have been out golfing than trying to keep my aging mind on track. A great writer comes out of a person with a great heart and a great mind. You have both. Thanks son. I could not be more proud of your work. I love you.

— Dean Robb, September 2010



## Introduction

From a pretty early age, I started to get the feeling that my Dad was a little different from the other dads. When I was seven years old, he walked me down to the corner of Michigan and Trumbull to watch a ball game at the old Tiger Stadium.

As I handed my ticket to the man at the gate, he told me, “Have fun at the game with Grandpa!”

With a glove in my left hand and a ball cap on, I looked up at him and said, “He’s not Grandpa! He’s my dad!”

At restaurants, movie theatres, and golf courses, for my entire childhood, the same thing kept happening. And I had to keep explaining to people that the man standing next to me was actually my dad. Why did everyone think he was my grandpa?

Being a kid, I never really understood. Even though he began collecting social security when I was four years old, he still managed to coach my little league baseball team, walk miles without rest to watch me play golf in high school, and take me around the world with few boundaries or handicaps—aside from his chronic misplacement of his Day-timer.

Everything seemed normal to me. Everyone knew Dean Robb, and everyone always remarked in disbelief at his age. I

became all too familiar with comments like, “There is no way you’re seventy-eight!”

It wasn’t until one morning in the summer of 2009 that I was struck with the inevitability of his growing old.

My girlfriend and I were visiting Northern Michigan for a vacation to the Traverse City Film Festival. We had been up late watching a film and were enjoying a lazy, inhibition-free morning. I brushed my teeth and laid back down in bed. Rolling to my left, I reached over and pulled my phone free from its charger.

When I looked over at it, a sudden electricity of fear awakened my senses.

Seventeen missed calls.

Before I could even look through the stream of missed calls, the phone buzzed again. My mom was calling.

“Hello. What’s going on Mom?”

With an unusually calculated calmness, she replied, “Matt, your dad was taken to the hospital in an ambulance. His heart rate is down to thirty and he is in congestive heart failure. Get down here as soon as you can.”

We rushed out of bed. I don’t remember much at all with the flood of thoughts, fears, and insecurities running through my head, but it seemed as if it didn’t take more than ten seconds to get dressed and out the door.

On the twenty minute drive to the hospital, two thoughts perpetuated through my mind. The first was, ‘Please be okay. You can do it Dad.’ I pleaded and prayed and hoped and denied—all of the tools that the human mind uses to cope with an uncertain fate.

The second thought was infinitely more profound. Pondering over the last thing I had said to my dad and wondering whether it was the last time I would see him alive, I thought, “Not now. There is so much more that I want to know.”





Matt and Dean Robb, 2009

This book is the product of that thought.

We were lucky that day. The doctors did some amazing things, and one pacemaker later he came back to his energetic and exuberant self.

In December, I graduated from Michigan State University in just a shade less than seven years. It's not a race. With about six months between graduation and the start of my new job, I was blessed with just enough time to sit down with my dad and write his biography.

Every morning, my dad and I would sit down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and (if we were lucky) a fresh cooked breakfast compliments of Mom. He would tell me his stories, and I would figure out a way to write them out. Dad's talent has always been communicating and relating to people. He is always willing to embarrass himself to make others feel

comfortable, and people are drawn to his rich body language and his eagerness to engage them personally. However, his skill has never been computers. Maybe there is an advantage to having a son nearly three generations behind.

Over the course of about four months, we were able to finish our first draft of the early part of his life. Having the opportunity to spend this time with my dad was such a privilege. Regardless of whether anyone actually reads the book, I now have a much better understanding of my dad's career and it gives me great comfort to know that I, and my family, will always be able to look back at this book and remember him.

My hope is that the following book has told his story well. I hope that you will learn about a generation that began on the farm and was beckoned onto the world stage by the call of history. I hope you learn about the challenges of starting a career and the triumphs and frustrations of trying to make an impact on the world. I hope you learn about the use of fear by government agents and politicians to rally people against one another. I hope you learn that often times the most practical ideas can be the most radical. I hope you learn that dedicating yourself not to your own personal well-being but to the needs and demands of others can lead to greater happiness. I hope you learn that nobody is perfect, and that life can take you only as far as you are willing to go. Most of all, I hope that you learn something meaningful about yourself.

I know I did.

—Matthew Z. Robb

## Introduction



Senator Barack Obama and Matt, working together during Obama's run for the presidency, Iowa, 2007

