

CHARACTER
COMRADE
LEADER
PRISONER
NEGOTIATOR
STATESMAN

The spirit of Nelson Mandela is an inspiration to millions of people around the world because of the quality of his character – a character that comprises such virtues as compassion, courage, integrity and hope.

What are the forces that shaped Mandela's early years?

What are the origins of the character that lies behind one of the most loved and respected leaders of our time?



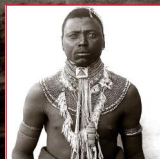
This photograph was taken in the district of Thembuland, in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela was born. In the picture, we see the local magistrate on the left, holding a stick, posing with a local headman and interpreter on the right, also holding a stick. The magistrate's stick is clearly a statement of his own authority, a symbol of the colonial challenge to traditional leadership.

This world of clashing cultures – the traditional versus the colonial, the customary versus the “modern” – was the world into which Mandela was born. Mandela's character was shaped by each of these worlds.

SON OF THEMBUGLAND

Mvezo is a tiny village on the banks of the Mbashe River in Thembuland in the Transkei. It sits on a precipice, overlooking the wooded river and thousands of streams that lie below. It was here that Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born on 18 July 1918.

Mandela was born to a people that were not free. In 1885, following long years of war and oppression, the kingdom of Thembuland was annexed by the British and became part of the Cape Colony.



Mandela's father, Gadi!a Henry Mphakanyiswa Mandela, was the chief of Mvezo. Represented here by this Thembu bridegroom, Nkosi (Chief) Mphakanyiswa Mandela was a tall and imposing man, who had four wives and 13 children. Mandela's father was a firm believer in traditional ways.

"My father was an unofficial priest and presided over ritual slaughtering of goats and calves and officiated at local traditional rites concerning planting, harvest, birth, marriage, initiation ceremonies and funerals." Nelson Mandela



Mandela's mother, Nosekeni Fanny, was his father's third wife. A reserved woman, she converted to Christianity and had her son and his two sisters baptised as Methodists. Like so many Africans of his day, Mandela would continue to be pulled in two directions for the rest of his life – between traditional values and customs, and modernity, represented largely by Christianity in his early years.



Mandela's father, though firmly traditional, was friendly with two educated brothers who were Christians. They suggested that his son should attend school. Nkosi Mphakanyiswa Mandela agreed to allow his youngest son to go to school – the first in the family ever to do so.

"... My father possessed a proud rebelliousness, a stubborn sense of fairness, that I recognise in myself ... He was asserting his traditional prerogative as a chief and was challenging the authority of the magistrate." Nelson Mandela

According to family legend, while Rolihlahla was still a small boy, his father clashed with the local magistrate, who called him to account for a ruling he made regarding an ox. As chief, he insisted that he was not accountable to the British magistrate. "Andizi, ndisaqula: I will not come. I am still girding for battle," he responded.

Nkosi Mphakanyiswa Mandela apparently refused to appear before the magistrate in court. This allegedly cost him his post, his stipend and the land that went with it. Now penniless, his wives went to stay at their respective parents' homes. Mandela's mother went to settle near friends and family in Qunu, a large village near Mthatha. Her children saw their father for one week every month.

VILLAGE LIFE

Despite Mandela's royal lineage and his fond memories of his childhood, his family's life in Qunu was as simple, indeed as poor, as that of all the other villagers in Qunu.

"On the first day of school my teacher gave each of us an English name. She called me Nelson. Why she bestowed this particular name upon me I have no idea. Perhaps it had something to do with the great British sea captain Lord Nelson, but that would only be a guess." Nelson Mandela



In the 1920s, Qunu's population, like so many other rural communities in South Africa, was disfigured by the system of migrant labour. Mandela remembered Qunu as a village mainly of women and children.

"My mother presided over three huts at Qunu which, as I remember, were always filled with the babies and children of my relations. In fact, I hardly recall any occasion as a child when I was alone." Nelson Mandela



In the absence of so many men, women shared their domestic burdens – fetching water from the river, hoeing, weeding and harvesting, gathering wood, cooking and raising the children collectively. This interdependence encouraged a spirit of humanism, or ubuntu – a concern for the well-being of others.

"Motho ke motho ka batho – A person is a person through other people." Nelson Mandela



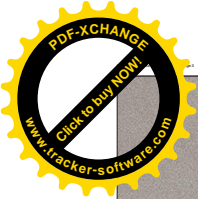
The school house in Qunu was a single room with a tin roof. It stood on the other side of the hill from the village. Mandela remembered his first 'school uniform'.

"My father took a pair of his trousers and cut them at the knee ... they were roughly the correct length, although the waist was far too large. My father then took a piece of string and drew the trousers in at the waist ... I have never owned a suit. I was prouder to wear than my father's cut-off trousers." Nelson Mandela



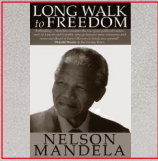
Then one day, when Mandela was nine years old, his life suddenly changed forever. Although his father arrived for his normal visit, his health was failing.

"He remained in the hut for several days without moving or speaking, and then one night he took a turn for the worse ... My father smoked his pipe and became calm. He continued smoking for perhaps an hour, and then his pipe still lit, he died." Nelson Mandela



MISTY MEMORIES

Mandela came from chiefly stock in the Thembu royal house. But there are signs that his chiefly pedigree was overstated by his family. Memories, above all family memories, can be selective and deceptive.



In Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he is at pains to correct the belief that he was a royal prince in direct line to rule the small Thembu people.

“...there have been many stories that I was in the line of succession to the Thembu throne... simple genealogy... exposes those tales as a myth... as a descendant of the Ikhiba house; I was groomed, like my father before me, to counsel the rulers of the tribe.” *Nelson Mandela*

At the same time, Mandela tells the story of how his father lost his chieftainship, land and stipend because he refused, as a matter of principle, to appear before the magistrate in a dispute over an ox.

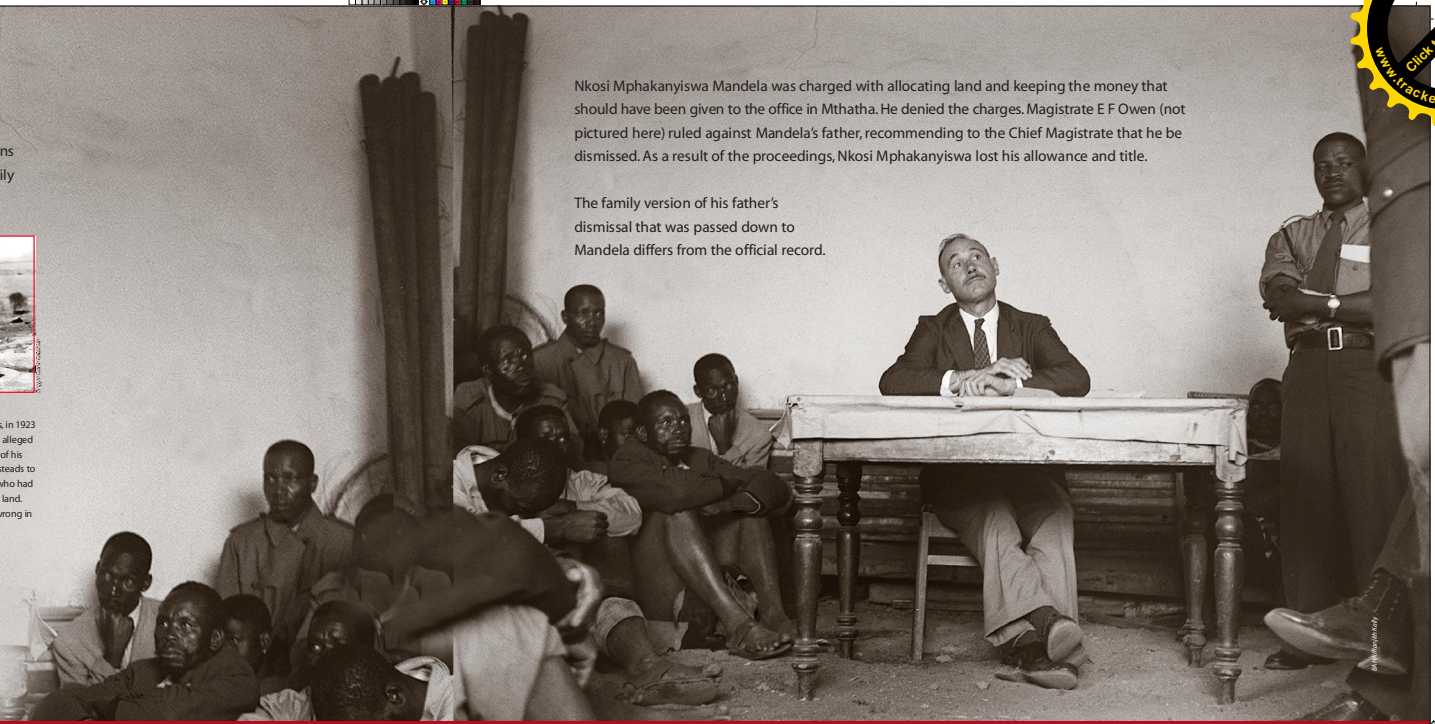


The dramatic story of how his father lost his chieftainship was absorbed by Mandela listening to storytellers at family gatherings in Qunu. It stirred in him a strong sense of his heritage and identity and cultivated the desire to emulate his father.

However, recently, an old court document came to light in the archives of Mthatha in the Transkei. It shows that, contrary to the family legend, Nkosi Mphakanyiswa Mandela did indeed appear before the white magistrate and attempted to defend himself.



According to the court records, in 1923 and 1924, Mandela's father is alleged to have tried to force several of his subjects to move their homesteads to make way for other families who had paid him for the rights to the land. Who was in the right or the wrong in this dispute is difficult, if not impossible, to decide.



Nkosi Mphakanyiswa Mandela was charged with allocating land and keeping the money that should have been given to the office in Mthatha. He denied the charges. Magistrate E F Owen (not pictured here) ruled against Mandela's father, recommending to the Chief Magistrate that he be dismissed. As a result of the proceedings, Nkosi Mphakanyiswa lost his allowance and title.

The family version of his father's dismissal that was passed down to Mandela differs from the official record.

“Good moral character is not something that we can achieve on our own. We need a culture that supports the conditions under which self-love and friendship flourish.” *Aristotle, ancient Greek philosopher*

THE GREAT PLACE



It was the dying wish of Mandela's father that his son should go and live with his kinsman, Jongintaba, the Regent of Thembuland, at the Great Place in the village of Mqhekezweni. Mandela and his mother walked for a full day before reaching Mqhekezweni.

“Ugnisufokotho, kwedini! Brace yourself, my boy,” were his mother's parting words. Jongintaba David Mtrara and his wife, NoEngland Mtrara, raised Rolihlahla as their own.

“They worried about me, guided me and punished me, all in a spirit of loving firmness. Jongintaba was stern, but I never doubted his love.” *Nelson Mandela*

The young Mandela was not to know that this pain of separation from his loved ones was to be repeated again and again throughout his life. Mandela remembered the excitement he felt about finding himself in such a grand place – a place that was at the same time both traditional and modern.



Mandela was deeply impressed by the way that the Regent presided over meetings with the amaphakathi, the elders at his court. He observed how Jongintaba would listen carefully to contending arguments before finally reaching a consensus decision. From this early age, he began to comprehend the value of an inclusive approach.

The Regent was able to manage with grace the tensions between traditional and modern society, a trait that Mandela was to master in years to come.



In flickering firelight after the day's long proceedings, Mandela would listen to the elders tell the epic tales of colonial dispossession and valiant resistance. The young Mandela began to gain a wider understanding of his roots and identity.

“My imagination was fired by the glory of these African warriors... In pantomime, Chief Jovi would fling his spear and creep along the veld as he narrated the victories and defeats.” *Nelson Mandela*

When Mandela was growing up, stick-fighting was immensely popular with boys and young men. In contests of strength, endurance, dexterity and tactical ability – the qualities developed by stick-fighting – Rohlhlahlala absorbed values that would be vital to the ultimate resolution of the momentous struggles that lay ahead.

"I learned that to humiliate another person is to make him suffer an unnecessarily cruel fate. Even as a boy, I defeated my opponents without dishonouring them." Nelson Mandela



After the initiation ceremony, Chief Meligqili spoke to the young men. Mandela never forgot the words of the old chief: "There sit our sons ... young, healthy and handsome, the flower of the Xhosa tribe, the pride of our nation. We have just circumcised them in a ritual that promises them manhood ... a promise that can never be fulfilled. For we Xhosas, and all black South Africans are a conquered people."

"I AM A MAN!"



When Rohlhlahlala arrived at Mpephelweni he moved in with Justice, the Regent's son.

"Justice ... became my first hero after my father ... Tall, handsome and muscular, he was a fine sportsman, excelling in track and field events, cricket, rugby and soccer." Nelson Mandela

When he was 16, Mandela attended the initiation school with Justice. The circumcision ceremony took place on the banks of the Mbashe River.



"... in a single motion, he brought down his assegai ... the pain was so intense that I buried my chin in my chest ... and then I recovered and called out, 'Ndiyindoda, I am a man!'" Nelson Mandela

Until 2008, this bookshelf was still inside the hut that Justice and Mandela had shared in the 1930s. The books on the bookshelf date to this period. The Nelson Mandela Museum now makes this artefact available for display in museums.

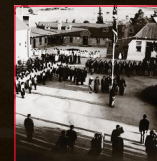
"I quickly realised that I had to make my way on the basis of my ability, not my heritage." Nelson Mandela



After his initiation ceremony, Mandela was sent to Clarkebury, a famous mission school founded by a Thembu king in the 19th century. Clarkebury was where Mandela first shook hands with a white man, the headmaster.

A WESTERN EDUCATION

Missionary teachers contributed to the building of Mandela's character. They set high standards of morality. An important aspect of Christianity was forgiveness – to harbour grievances would be to lessen one's own character.



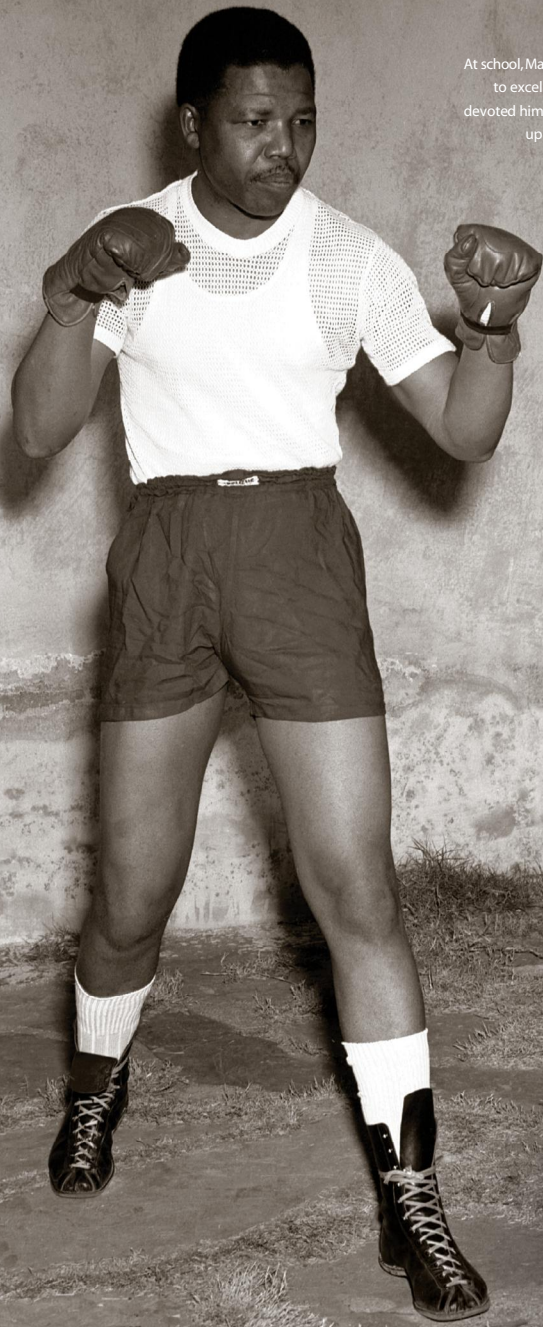
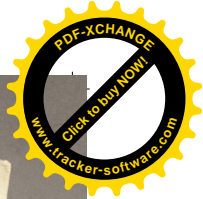
Mandela's high school years were spent at Healdtown, an elite Methodist mission school beyond Thembuland, near the old colonial military station of Fort Beaufort.

Healdtown was suffused with British character, and Mandela was to retain an enduring respect for many aspects of British culture. Years later, in 1962, as an accused in court, he would describe the British Houses of Parliament as "the most democratic institution in the world".



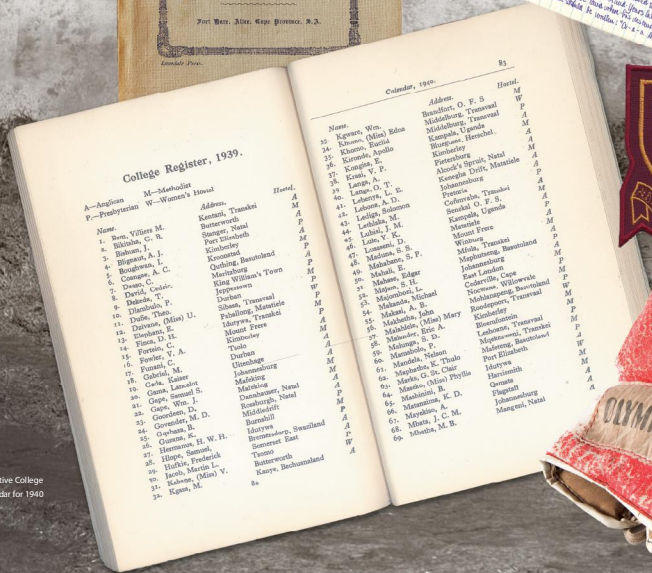
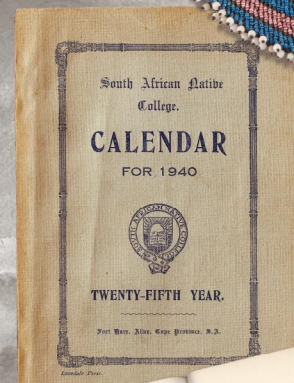
This is the earliest known photograph of Mandela. It shows Nelson Mandela in the top row, fifth from the right, in his Healdtown class in 1938. The white woman in the second row from the front is Miss Myrtle Workman, who was in charge of the girls' hostel. To her left is Dr Arthur Wellington, headmaster of the school. To his left is Rev S S Mokitimi, head of the boys' hostel, who later became the first African president of the Methodist Church of South Africa.



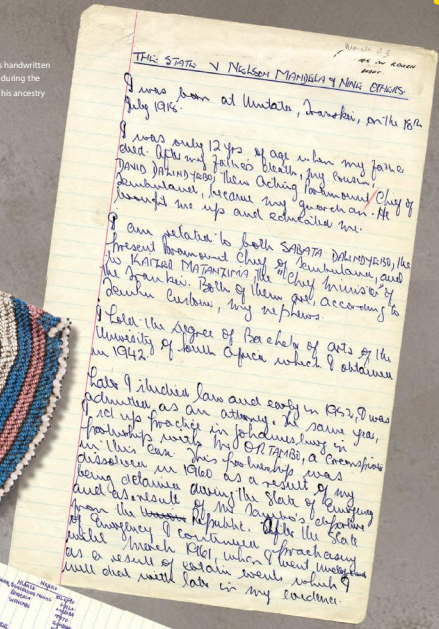


At school, Mandela was not sufficiently well co-ordinated to excel in sports like soccer or cricket. Instead, he devoted himself to long-distance running. He also took up boxing, which became a lifelong passion.

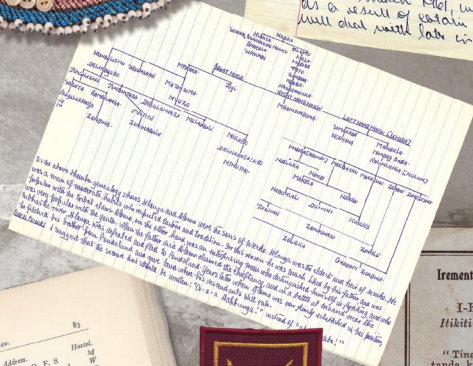
South African Native College (Fort Hare) Calendar for 1940



First page of Mandela's handwritten speech from the Dock during the Rivonia Trial, outlining his ancestry



A Thembu beaded collar worn by a bridegroom at a traditional wedding ceremony



Mandela family tree



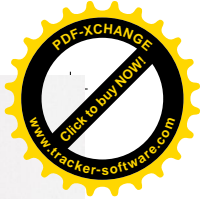
Mandela's 1929 Methodist Church membership card



Coat of Arms of Healdtown School



Boxing gloves donated to the Apartheid Museum in 2008 by Healdtown School



FORT HARE

Mandela passed his matric exams at Healdtown and was accepted for a BA degree at the University of Fort Hare in the town of Alice in the Eastern Cape.



Mandela's plan was to become an interpreter in the courts of Transkei homeland, persuaded him that law was a more powerful and influential profession. Mandela readily agreed.



At Fort Hare Mandela was exposed to a wider world and his political horizon broadened. He was excited by the number of students who came from all over the country, and even beyond South Africa's borders, such as Seretse Khama (above left), who was to become the first president of independent Botswana.



During his second year, Mandela was nominated for election as a prefect. He accepted – only to find that the majority of students were boycotting the elections. A few students voted and Mandela was elected as a prefect. He decided that he could not accept the position, even though the principal threatened to expel him if he refused.



Mandela wears the Fort Hare University blazer at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in 2006.



“... at the moment when I needed to compromise, I simply could not do so. Something inside me would not let me.”

Nelson Mandela

Mandela stubbornly refused to return to Fort Hare. The Regent was angry at Mandela's disobedience and decided it was time to teach him and his son Justice a lesson about real responsibility. He arranged marriages for both young men.

Fort Hare Library



To escape an arranged marriage, for the first time ever Mandela disobeyed the Regent. Mandela and Justice ran away to Johannesburg. At a stroke, his entire future and golden prospects of becoming a royal adviser and civil servant were destroyed.

Mandela had by now developed distinct character traits instilled in him by his family, community and education – courage, an eagerness to learn, the sensitivity of a boy who had experienced loss and separation, and an air of dignity as befitted his royal status. He had also learnt from an early age to find a synthesis between traditional African ways and “modern” western ways.