

CHAPTER 24
HENRY E. ALLEN, JR.

(BA Degree- First African American Fire Chief in Selma)

*What a fellowship, what a joy divine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Freedom Song*



“I grew up in a wretchedly poor family. My father was illiterate, and my mother had to quit school when she was nine years old in order to take care of her mother who had suffered a

massive stroke. My mother did read and write, though. Our household was big, my parents, my grandmother, and three brothers and one sister, in addition to me. It meant we had nothing, and often not enough food.

We lived in a three-room shotgun house. We didn't have any fans, but there were holes in the walls which we plugged with newspapers and rags in the winter to stay warm, and which we opened in the summer for air to circulate. We did have electricity, and an outdoor toilet with running water. To wash clothes, the women set a huge pot outside over an open fire for stain removal. Water was also heated indoors on the stove to use for the wash outside. The clothes were washed by hand on a rubbing board. We made our own starch and used bluing. The irons for the clothes were heated by the fire. While I was a kid, I went across the street to a neighbor's house to watch television, programs like Bonanza, the Lone Ranger, Amos and Andy, and lots of Westerns. I also remember listening to baseball games on the radio.

Our neighbor was white, and the kids played together and ate at each other's houses, but in public places we didn't interact. When I was nine, I started working for a white business, and I bonded with the Pepper family. I had a very close relationship with them until I was about 19 years old. I worked for them during all of that time; they bought my first pair of glasses for me, and they also paid my graduation fees. They even offered to pay for a college education in electronics for me because they had a television and radio business, and Mr. Pepper could not understand why I did not want to pursue that business since he had taught me all about the business, but I told him that I wished to study building in order to become a contractor.

In 1963, Bernard LaFayette arrived in Selma. His description of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) made a strong impact on me. I made a decision to participate in the work and attended meetings to learn about nonviolence. I also recruited other classmates to attend the meetings and training in the basement of Tabernacle Baptist Church. Often the training lasted all night, but I lived in east Selma, further away from the church and had a harder time getting there than the students who lived closer, so sometimes I could not

attend. They taught us about the importance of the right to vote, how to fall and how to react to violence. We were also taught how to fill out the application to vote so we could teach the adults.

The first mass meeting at Tabernacle Baptist Church almost didn't happen. Mr. LaFayette had asked Rev. Anderson whether we could use his church, but the deacons didn't want to have the meeting because they were afraid they would lose their jobs. Rev. Anderson threatened to hold the meeting on the lawn outside if they did not agree to let us use the church, and finally the deacons found their courage. This first mass meeting was led by John Lewis who was the chairman of SNCC at that time.

Our first protest in 1963 was prompted by the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Mr. LaFayette left when he heard of the bombing because his pregnant wife was in Birmingham and had been injured in the protest there, so we had no leadership from SNCC. Charles Bonner, one of our student leaders, organized a protest in response to the church bombing. We protested in large numbers, and a month later, a new leader was sent by SNCC, Mr. Worth Long. He continued Mr. LaFayette's work.

By 1964, the passage of the Civil Rights Act had opened public accommodations to black people, and we identified the public facilities in Selma we were banned from accessing. We decided to go downtown to begin desegregating the facilities. We went to places like the Thirsty Boy Diner and the drug stores to desegregate them. Several hundred of us students were arrested and jailed in the early part of 1964. Worth Long was severely beaten for his role in the protests, and he ultimately left Selma. John Lewis replaced him, and he followed the same plans Mr. LaFayette and Mr. Long had.

Sheriff Jim Clark was the man in charge of enforcing the law in Selma. My classmates and I didn't really know or understand the details of the "Jim Crow" laws, we just knew we would be arrested because we demonstrated and marched without permits, which would never have been granted anyway. We purposely broke the law in massive numbers in order to fill the jails and prison camps to capacity. In addition to the city and county jails, we filled camps in West Selma, Camden, and

Thomaston (Marengo County). We kept marching. Jim Clark and his posse actively tried to chase the students out of Selma. We finally asked Dr. Reese and the teachers to get involved because it was getting so dangerous for the students. In 1965, Rev. Reese and the teachers finally participated in their first march, from Clark Elementary School to the courthouse.

None of us had any idea that there were whites in town who quietly supported the march, but any whites who were known to support us would have been treated worse than the marchers themselves. The only whites who openly supported us were the Fathers of St. Edmund, led by Father Maurice Ouellet. I was brought up in the black Catholic Church, St. Elizabeth, which operated independently of the White Catholic Church. Bishop O'Toole, a "first-class racist", opposed the work of the Edmundites and threatened to excommunicate Father Ouellet for his involvement, but Father Ouellet never backed down. When Dr. King came to Selma, his first stop was to see the Edmundites because they had resources our black community lacked altogether. The Edmundites helped to fund the work in Selma.

Working in the civil rights movement taught me character and cooperation. We didn't have time for hatred, even for Sheriff Jim Clark, the Ku Klux Klan or Joe Smitherman. The movement was focused solely on obtaining what was just and right, and that was a lesson I took to heart and used throughout my life. I believe that those of my classmates who were not involved in the movement never learned that strong sense of teamwork, love and respect for each other."