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Freedom Movement Memories by Peter Kellman

It will soon be 50 years since I took a bus to Selma, Alabama. I was 19 years old. A few months earlier I had moved to an old farm in Voluntown, Connecticut, which was run by a peace activist organization called the New England Committee for Non-violent Action (CNVA). CNVA's focus at the time was stopping the War in Vietnam. I was sent out with others to speak and protest against the War. I was sent down to Washington to organize demonstrations when the bombing of North Vietnam by our government began. On returning from Washington, CNVA received a call asking for people to go down to Selma, Alabama.

As part of Voting Rights organizing project in Alabama, Jimmie Lee Jackson, an SCLC organizer, was murdered by a state trooper on February 18, 1965. Following Jimmie Lee Jackson's murder a call went out (mainly to clergy) to come to Selma to help give visibility to the struggle there. A march from Selma to Montgomery to protest the slaying of Jimmie Lee Jackson was called. One who answered the call was Unitarian minister named James Reeb. The march, known as Bloody Sunday, took place on March 7th. A few days later, Rev. Reeb was beaten in downtown Selma and died March 11th. Another call went out for people to come to Selma. CNVA responded by sending me.

I was given bus money and asked to go to Selma and represent CNVA. On the way down I was told to stop in New York City to talk to Bayard Rustin and get some advice about going south. He advised against my going, but at 19, I was on my way.

When the Greyhound bus passed the Mason-Dixon Line I started to feel some discomfort from the white people working at the bus stations. Maybe I was paranoid but at every stop they seemed to know who I was and where I was going. They let me know they didn't like what I was doing. Nothing heavy duty, just snide remarks like "Here is another one of those nigger lovers" and refusing to tell me when the next bus was going to leave or what bus I needed to take.

I finally made it to the Selma bus station and asked a person of color directions to Brown's Chapel Church. I was given directions on how to walk there somewhat safely. It was my introduction to how a Freedom Fighter got from one place to another in the deep South. In Selma, if you were on an unpaved street you were likely in a Black neighborhood. If the street was paved in a Black neighborhood it meant that street was used by whites to get from one white neighborhood to another.

Warily, I made my way over to Brown's Chapel. That is where the activity was. It seemed like hundreds of people were milling about. In a room behind the church was a place to check-in and eat. I was told I could room at the home of Lucy King, 1416 St. Philip Street. It was a place I stayed at often over the next two years. Lucy at that time was 45 and worked keeping house for a white woman. Also living there was a woman called Tennie. She was much older than Lucy, had no teeth and always wore slippers and a house coat. She had also kept house for a white woman but was too old to work outside of the home. There were two young kids around 6 years

old that lived in the house. Tennie kept things up in the house, cooked and looked after the kids who she kept in line with a rope. She beat them with it if they messed up. One day she couldn't catch the kids and she had me catch and hold them while she administered the rope. I think I took most of the beating. Tennie had a great sense of humor and maybe she just wanted to whip a white man once in her life. She also grew a patch of greens in the backyard and I helped her plant it once.

The kids had never been real close to an adult white person and were fascinated with the hair on my arms. They would run their hands over my forearms and giggle. Later on when I worked for SNCC and was in Selma for an Alabama staff meeting I brought two SNCC friends over to Lucy's for dinner. The man was Black and the woman white, so when we walked from the SNCC's downtown office to Lucy's house, the woman walked with me and the man always followed behind. When we got to the house I introduced them as a couple but the kids wouldn't believe that the white woman wasn't my girlfriend and teased me about my "girlfriend" thereafter.

The household stayed the same until James Stallworth moved in with Lucy and they were married shortly thereafter.

At first, Mr. James wouldn't talk to me much beyond a good morning and good night. If he had anything to say to me he would do it through Lucy. At some point they brought his dying Mother into the house. They told me she would be staying in the room I stayed in and I moved to a couch on the back porch. I was told she would never leave the room and I was never to go in there because they thought if she saw a white person in the house that might put her over the edge. So I never saw her.

A day or two after she died I saw Mr. James outside and went over to him. We had our first conversation. He told me about his Mother and afterwards we talked often. As the years went by I wrote and sometime called them. Lucy died in 1988 and James made it to 2012. I would often call him around the anniversary date of the March and he would say he always thought of me that time of year. He would tell me about the goings on in his view of things. Sadly, when I made it down to Selma in 2014, some neighborhood guys told me that Mr. James had died two years before.

Brown's Chapel was located at one end of a street that ran through the Black Housing Project, at the time segregation included separate black and white federal housing projects.

When I left the church I walked through the project across a main road, across the railroad tracks and into a Black neighborhood. 1416 St. Philips was a few blocks from the train tracks. The only exposure to whites was crossing the main road and that wasn't a big deal unless there was a long freight train passing and then one was trapped between the paved road and the train. I mentioned this because fear was a big part of my life in the South. Fear of being beaten or killed. I rarely had access to a car so most of the traveling around town was on foot. Hitchhiking was out of the question. If you needed a ride, you asked around to find someone going your way.

My first days in Selma before the March that went to Montgomery (as opposed to the first one which is referred to as “Bloody Sunday” and the second where MLK turned the march around on the bridge) was spent hanging around Brown’s Chapel church. As people arrived at the church in chartered busses and cars cheers would go up from the people in front of the church.

There were marches that began from the church on a number of occasions. First people went through non-violent training in the church and then the strategy of the march would be explained and it went like this: The law enforcement officials would try to stop the marchers from leaving the projects, so when the police stopped the front of the march, the march would break in two. The back-half would head in another direction. When the new column was stopped the tactic would be repeated. During this period there was an injunction on demonstrations and we never made it to the courthouse.

The context of these marches was that the focus of the Selma Project was getting the right to vote and before you vote, you have to register to vote. Voter registration centered on the courthouse because that is where you had to go to register. Before Bloody Sunday there had been a series of demonstrations leading to mass arrests and violence against the demonstrators. These demonstrations centered on the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma.

After the March I participated in several demonstrations at the courthouse on registration day. At one I stepped off the sidewalk and was jabbed with a cattle prod. That got my attention.

I have vivid memories of those demonstrations and watching several hundred people standing on the sidewalk for hours waiting to get into see the registrar, then having to wait outside every day the office was open to have their names called to go back in and fill out the forms. If they weren’t waiting outside when their name was called they had to start over. This drove home to me the reality of one of the things Black people went through that led to the Marches that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

In the days before the March, I ate breakfast and lunch at Brown’s Chapel Church and went back to Lucy King’s for supper. Then back to the church for what seemed like a Mass Meeting almost every night. It was at the breakfast in the back of the church where I met people like Rev James Bevel, Rev James Orange from SCLC, Stokely Carmichael and others from SNCC. Meanwhile, the big march to Montgomery was put on hold until a Federal judge lifted the injunction. This period before the March was very electric, exciting, and scary. More than anything else, I learned a lot. For starters it was my first time living in a Black community and the Deep South. It took me a while to learn the dialect. Then I got to hear firsthand stories about the Freedom Movement from its participants like the SNCC people who had worked in Mississippi before coming to Selma.

In order to get people to come to the mass meetings the rumor would start that Dr. King was coming to speak. I don’t remember ever hearing him speak at one of those mass meetings. Not that it mattered. Those meetings were alive. There was no lack of really good orator-activists who spoke but the most moving part was the singing. A shiver goes down my spine just thinking about that music.

In the discussions going on around the church I began to hear about the differences between SCLC and SNCC and being a 19-year-old radical I identified with the SNCC people. (Later on I went to work for SNCC in its attempt to organize an independent political party in Sumter County, Alabama, about 80 miles west of Selma.)

Meanwhile, more and more people kept arriving at the church. Finally the injunction was lifted and President Johnson said he would send federal troops to protect the marchers. I don't remember how it came to be but I was asked to organize the setting up and taking down of the tent sites where the marchers would stay each night. I was assigned a crew composed of 50 seminarians who I think had come from California as well as the actor Gary Merrill.

Each morning we would get on a truck in front of Brown's Chapel and head out to take the tents down and move on to set up that night's campsite. Everyone who wanted to march the first day but I have no memory of marching that day. I think it is likely I didn't and that we just went ahead to work on the campsite. After the first day about 200 people actually marched and spent the nights in the tents. It was no picnic. Mostly I remember being happy, working hard, being wet, and each morning when we'd get to the new campsite being very scared.

Our routine went like this: After we took down the tents we would take them to the next campsite. When we arrived we looked over the new site and tried to find the driest place for the tents. Then the crew would line up shoulder to shoulder and walk slowly across the entire campsite looking for bombs. Basically we were searching for bombs with our bodies. Luckily we never found one. When we were done the Army would have men with bomb sensing equipment go over the site. Then we would start putting up the tents. It seemed like it was always raining and I was always wet.

Sometimes a celebrity would stop by and drive a few of the big iron spikes that anchored the tents down. Pete Seeger showed up with his banjo once and sang while we worked. On at least one occasion hay bales were delivered to spread under the tents supposedly to soak up the water where people were to sleep but it didn't do any good. People spent the night on top of plastic sheets to keep them off the mud. I'm not sure if we had plastic sheets or just plastic garbage bags. I don't remember for sure how many tents we put up but they were big almost circus-like tents with two poles down the middle. There was probably one tent for the men, one for the women, one for food, and one for first aid for a total of four (but I really don't remember for sure).

I wasn't privy to the actual organization of the march but it seemed minute-to-minute from where I stood. And for good reason. Think about trying to find a tent site for the marchers. Who is going to say you can stay at my place! Most of the land was owned by whites so that wouldn't work and then how many blacks were willing to open up their land? The price they might pay could be loss of a job or life. But sites were found, often at the last minute. I think on one occasion my crew left Selma in the morning not knowing exactly where we were to set up that evening's campsite. Keep in mind we didn't have cell phones, communication was a problem. When we drove from the old campsite to the new one each day we would pass the marchers on the road. The troops who were supposedly guarding the marchers faced the

marchers on the road. Why weren't they looking into the woods to see if someone might be coming up to the March? Who were they really guarding?

The marchers were tough. Many didn't have rain gear so they put holes in plastic garbage bags and wore them. It seemed like Most of their shoes were wet for most of the March. But when they got to camp they would often be singing. We never stayed very long once the site was ready, we headed back to Selma. The last night was on the outskirts of Montgomery at a church facility and a stage was set up there for the evening's entertainment. A big crowd showed up. It was a safe, happy place that night.

On the last leg to the State Capitol steps they say that upwards of 25,000 people marched. My job on that day was to be a marshal and walk beside the march and keep reminding people not to return the insults to the hecklers. I really didn't have much to do but ended up at the back of the crowd where I could barely see the podium and can't say I remember hearing much of King's speech. In fact it was only until recently -2015- that I read the speech he gave in Montgomery that day.

To give you an idea of how wet it was during the March, several days after it was over, all the calluses on my feet came off from being constantly wet for an extended period. Unlike the people on the March, I got to sleep in a dry bed every night.

That evening when we returned from Montgomery my job was to stand guard at the entrance to the room, in a church basement up the street from Brown's Chapel, out of which transportation back from Montgomery was being coordinated.

At some point I noticed a young black man in the street. He seemed to be in shock and so I went over to him and saw that he had dried blood on his clothes. I brought him downstairs to the people in the room coordinating rides and went back outside. Shortly thereafter a white man came up to me and identified himself as a Selma police detective. He asked me if I had seen Leroy Moton. I said no and he pushed me aside and went downstairs where Leroy was being interviewed by the people in the office.

I followed the detective down the stairs. Someone asked the detective why he was looking for Leroy Moton and I will never forget the answer, "The FBI asked us to look for him." The question in my mind then was how did the FBI already know what happened? Of course we know the answer now. There was an FBI informant in the car that did the shooting and it was the FBI man who was the catalyst for the murder. I then went back outside and have no memory of what happened to Leroy Molton next. I have read that he was arrested and taken off to jail.

Later on I went to work with SNCC trying to organize an independent, county wide, political party in Sumter County, Alabama. Leroy went on to work for SCLC and I saw him once more in York, Alabama (he did remember me from "That Night") where SCLC was working on getting people to register to vote and join the Democratic Party.

After the March I stayed on in Selma along with a number of people who had come down for the March but weren't associated with either of the SCLC or SNCC projects. SCLC assigned one of its organizers, Chuck Fager, to work with those who remained. We were part of a loose knit organization called The Selma Committee for Community Development. Some of us spent

time with Chuck in meetings with student leaders at Selma University who formed the student core that was involved in the many demonstrations that took place before Bloody Sunday. Then Dennis Coleman, Donna Smith and myself took on the project of building a Selma Free Library. We rented a store front at 801 First Avenue in Selma. The library was located near Selma University and the Black High School. It was owned by Mr. Brown who lived next door and if memory serves, he worked for the Post Office. Trips were made north to college campuses collecting books. Dennis and Donna did most of the work. I had my tool box sent down and Dennis and I built the shelves. The library soon housed several thousand books. Some local people helped out along with volunteers who came down.

The library was a place where people came to borrow books, help out and hangout. We had a good selection of works by Black authors and Black history books.

After the library was up and running for a while it was turned over to a group of Black librarians in Dallas County.

CNVA gave me some money to get to Selma and to subsist on for a while. After the March the seminarians that made up the tent site crew sent me money but a few months later they wrote and told me they had another project that the money was going to and wished me well. When I told Lucy King I didn't have any more money for room and board she said not to worry, "You are family and can stay here as long as you want." Hearing that from her meant a lot to me.

Money and cars were things many civil rights workers lived without. The whole time I lived in Selma we never had a car. Just walked and money was very hard to come by. One time Jonathan Daniels lent Dennis and me his car. Jonathan was murdered two weeks later on August 20, 1965, in Lowndes County, the same county where Viola Liuzzo was murdered after the March on March 25, 1965 and the county where SNCC was organizing their first independent countywide political party. Food came with the work both in Selma and Sumter County. We called it organizing meals. In Selma I often had breakfast and dinner at Lucy King's but in Sumter County every meal was "organized." That is, as you walked the neighborhoods talking to people, around whatever project you were working on, come meal time you hoped someone would invite you in to eat with them. It was hard not to end at a place around meal time that had invited you in before to eat.

I got to know the income status of people by the corn bread they served. Very poor people made their cornbread out of water and cornmeal. The next level would make it with milk and sometimes cream. Very poor people didn't have anything to put on their cornbread, as you went up the ladder you might get butter, jelly, molasses or syrup. When I went down to Selma I was a vegetarian but soon gave it up because most food was cooked with pork fat. I did get to eat every part of the pig as they say except the squeal. With the exception of pigs ears I liked it all. Breakfast at Lucy Kings was grits with 'Bama jelly and white toast. Poor people had surplus grits and if you had some money it was white grits. Plenty of fried chicken and pork chops. One time in York some people I knew had slaughtered a pig and we hung around a fire while the fat back was rendered in a huge iron pot. We got to eat the crackling that fried up but didn't melt down.

There were little places around that were the front room of people's homes where you could buy a meal and single cigarettes among other things, all small quantities.

The whole time I lived in Selma I stayed with Lucy King and maybe spent a few nights at the SNCC Freedom House. In Sumter County we lived in a SCLC/SNCC Freedom House in the neighborhood. It was a shotgun shack that had two rooms. At some point the SNCC folks were told we could stay at an old abandoned farm house in an old field a ways off the road. The place didn't have running water, electricity or even an outhouse and you could see between the floor boards to the ground. You got to the place by walking from the Black neighborhood that most of our work took place in, through the woods to this old place, so it seemed safe. Although once word got out we were staying there we didn't sleep that well at night knowing if the Klan ever showed up it would be a while before anyone came looking for us.

One day when I was walking through the woods I heard a pig grunting. I followed the sound and came upon a pig pen in the woods. I asked around about the pig in the woods and was told that Black people used to raise them in their backyards around town. There was a freight train hauling corn that came through town at night and when it stopped corn would come out of cracks in the cars on to the tracks. People would go out and collect the corn and feed it to their pigs. Because this raising of pigs by Black people cut into the buying of pork from merchants in town an ordinance was passed making it illegal to raise pigs in the town limits. So the fallback position was to hide the pigs in the woods and raise them there.

I got to know people who didn't have refrigeration. Deer were plentiful and they would be hunted, then smoked. You would often find one hanging in a porch or shed covered with cheese cloth to protect it from flies. If you wanted some meat all you had to do was pull back the cheese cloth and cut off a piece.

As I got to know people in York, mainly women because they were more often home in the daytime than the men, I sometimes heard them talking about a time when they took a vacation in explaining why they weren't around town for a period of time a number of years before. I knew that most of these women didn't take "vacations," in fact it was only in this context that I had heard the word "vacation" used. I started asking around about where they had gone on this "vacation." Most people were evasive in their answers, finally somebody gave me a straight answer. The State of Alabama had at one time a policy of sterilizing poor black women. They would be taken from their homes and brought to a state facility where they were sterilized, kept for a period of time and then returned home. In order to account for this period of time the women involved would say they had taken a "vacation."

Back in Selma we often went to a place called the Shack on Friday nights where they served beer and drinks. We rarely had money to buy our own but that never was a problem because the locals always bought us drinks. We also went to Blind Pigs. These were in people's homes where they served moonshine. Once in a while we went to the Black Elks club that was downtown near the SNCC and SCLC offices across from the county jail. At the Elks you needed to pay admission to get in. We usually raised the money by standing outside and asking people for change until we had enough to get in. The Selma Black Elks Club was on the Chitlin Circuit and so we went there for the music.

At these hangouts we got to know people we didn't run into canvassing the neighborhoods. Many were men who worked out of town and came home on the weekends. They tended to make good money while they were away and usually left a fair amount of it in Selma on the weekends. One I remember worked at a steel mill in Birmingham.

The SNCC and SCLC offices were downtown in a building across from the County jail. The SCLC office was on the second floor and the SNCC office was above it on the top floor. I think Mrs. Boynton's office was on the ground floor. She was a leader of the Movement in Selma and sold insurance. If memory serves Chuck Fager and James Bevel stayed at her house which wasn't too far from Selma University.

Some other events that have stayed with me from my time in Selma.

One day Dennis and I were invited to help with putting sugar cane into a mill that squeezed the juice out of the cane. The cane had already been cut and we carried it from piles to a mill that was run by a mule harnessed to a long pole connected to the millstone. The mule moved slowly but you still had to time carrying your cane to the mill so as not to get hit by the mule or the long pole. At the end of the day we were given a jar of juice and some sugar cane to chew on.

On another occasion we went out to a farm in the county where they were plowing a field with a mule. Dennis tried and the mule didn't seem to want to plow a straight furrow. As Dennis said it seemed to him that when he said gee the mule heard haw and vice versa. We all had a good laugh and when they asked me if I wanted to try, I respectfully declined.

Then I was invited to go hunting one day. The men lent me a 4-10 shotgun. It was one that broke down pretty easy. I was told that when we were near a road or if we ran into any white people I was to break the gun down and hide it under my clothes. These Brothers didn't want the "Man" to know they had guns which they used for hunting and if necessary self-defense.

Sumter County

SNCC research had discovered an old law put on the books by Klan members after Reconstruction. Under the law any three people could form a county wide political party. After their experiences in Mississippi and the seating of the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party delegation over the delegation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Convention, some SNCC workers settled in to Lowndes County, Alabama after the Selma March. They organized a political party that had as its symbol a Black Panther. In Alabama at the time the symbol of the Democratic Party was a white rooster. Because many people were illiterate they voted for party candidates based on the symbol.

After getting things under way in Lowndes, SNCC decided to start projects in other Black Belt counties of Alabama. By this time I had gotten to know a number of SNCC people and had been invited to go to Atlanta where SNCC was having a meeting where new volunteers for the project were being selected and trained. There was a caravan of cars coming from Mississippi that would be picking people up at the Selma SNCC office and Dennis and I could catch a ride

with them. We waited a day and Dennis gave up and went home. I came back the next day and the next and finally the cars came through.

In Atlanta we were educated about the project at the SNCC office during the day and stayed the nights with SNCC people living in Atlanta. While we were there Julian Bond, a SNCC officer, was running for the Georgia legislature and we did a little work for him. He was elected and then thrown out of the legislature because he was opposed to the war in Vietnam.

The meetings were very interesting. We learned the history of the law making the county parties legal and learned something about the county we would be working in. I was assigned to Sumter County with Stu House who headed up the project there. A few others as well were to come with us but only Stu and I had worked in the Deep South before and the others didn't last long. We were assigned a SNCC car but after one trip from Selma to York, Alabama it broke down and never ran again, so we got rides to York from people who lived in York and traveled to Selma on a regular basis and walked while we were working the neighborhoods. SCLC also had a project in Sumter County in which they were working on voter registration but they were getting people into the Democratic Party and we were trying to organize a new one.

We worked with SCLC on voter registration but went our separate ways on the party. The party work didn't go that well. We had few resources compared to SCLC. They had some money, the national Democratic Party and most importantly most of the local church leaders, and the volunteers we had were not experienced for the most part and didn't stay. Stu and I spent a lot of time trying to get local people to start a party. A delegation from Lowndes County, where the party was up and running, was scheduled to come to York one Sunday to talk with the people who had shown some interest in the Party in Sumter County. We had put a lot of time organizing this meeting. On the Sunday of the meeting the Lowndes County folks and some SNCC organizers failed to show at the designated time. Our folks hung around for a few hours and then left. The delegation showed up about four hours late to an empty room and so with it went our potential Party.

One Sunday afternoon in York, Alabama, Stu House and myself went over to visit and drink a little moonshine with a friend who worked at a local sawmill and lived in a small house behind the mill. There was no road going to his house. We went to his house through the woods so as not to pass through the mill yard on the main road.

We had a few drinks and were setting outside around a fire feeling no pain and having a good time. At one point we looked up and saw a middle aged white man approaching us from the mill. Stu and I got quite nervous. We weren't packing and if he was we weren't near any cover. But the guy we were visiting with said the white man was a friend of his and we need not worry. But worry we did. A friendly southern white man approaching two civil rights workers, one white and one Black - this kind of situation was out of our experience..

The man could see we weren't comfortable and he made this statement: "I'm from Northern Alabama and I come from a family that has always voted Republican." Well, at 19 I didn't yet know much history but I did know Lincoln was Republican and the Democrats ruled Alabama since Reconstruction ended. I looked at Stu and we relaxed just a little. The man hung

out with us for a little while and then left. Obviously, this man was conscious of a history I wasn't and I always wonder how prevalent that history was.

On another occasion I had a run-in with the local mayor and police chief one night after a mass meeting, mass in name only because probably there were 20 people at the meeting. By the way, at these meetings someone always set outside with a shotgun watching the street. Anyway, the meeting was in the "Negro quarter." After the meeting the mayor and the chief of police were waiting for me on the street. The meeting hall was about 100 feet off the road and down a hill. The mayor called me over and asked me a question I didn't understand and I kept asking him to repeat it until I finally understood he was asking for identification so I gave him my driver's license. He wasn't happy with that and finally I understood that he wanted my draft card. When that became apparent I smiled and said I don't have one. While this conversation was going on more and more people came out of their homes and soon the police car, the mayor and police chief were surrounded by a large group of people. The mayor was getting pretty nervous and so they drove off as the crowd parted to let him leave.

I was in violation of the Selective Service Act and the FBI had prepared a report on me for my draft board in Kennebunk, Maine. At a hearing as part of the draft process - I had applied for CO (conscientious objector) and was turned down by the local and state boards already - a lawyer working for the "Justice Department" was interviewing me and was to make a recommendation to the national authorities who were to make the last ruling on my case. He gave me a short version of the FBI report. In the report was an interview they had done with the Mayor of York. His interview gave me some insight into how the mayor and maybe how others like him viewed someone like myself.

"A public official in York, Alabama advised that the registrant, who is presently associated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, did not possess a selective Service Card. He noted that the registrant is active in voter registration and recalled that the registrant came to York, Alabama around February 1, 1966. The registrant does not have a permanent residence in the city but drifts from house to house in the Negro quarters, staying with any family that would except (sic) him. He considers the registrant very arrogant and self-opinionated but was not aware of the registrant having been arrested. He feels the registrant is somewhat of a misfit and also believes that the registrant should not be allowed to escape the draft just because he holds agnostic beliefs. (It begs the question how did the mayor know I had agnostic beliefs unless the FBI told him?) He said the registrant should be required to fight, but added that he did not care to be on the front lines with him. "

Another interview with someone else in York stated:

"The registrant associated mainly with Negroes involved in the civil rights movement and was never seen to associate with any of the white residents in the county".

Still another:

“He stated that the registrant participated in numerous marches in York, Alabama and worked throughout the county trying to solicit Negroes to come to the Court House and register to vote. He noted that the registrant wanted to for a distinct and separate Negro party in order that they might take over the local county government.” (At least they got that part right.)

Probably my most scary event took place in Sumter County. One of the provisions of the Voting Rights Act was that a Federal Registrar would be available to register people to vote because the local ones had refused to register Black people since the end of Reconstruction. The Federal Registrar was at the Sumter County courthouse in Livingston once a month to register people to vote. My work on a daily basis was to walk the two Black neighborhoods in York encouraging people to register, other civil rights workers canvased other parts of the County. Because few people had cars we organized rides on registration day for people who wanted to register.

On one of those days I was riding in the backseat of a car. We drove onto an old plantation where an old woman lived in a shack which was several hundred feet off the dirt plantation road. By this time the land had been taken out of cotton and put into pastures for beef cows, so there were very few people needed to run the place. The owner of the land let this old woman live out her days on the place where she had worked most of her life.

As we pulled to the side of the road in front of her place we could see her sitting on her porch all dressed up waiting for us to take her down to the courthouse. Before she could stand up a pickup truck pulled alongside us and the man driving pointed a shotgun in my direction and said we had better get off his property and if the woman registered to vote he would throw her off the land. Quite shaken we left and brought the people already with us to the Courthouse.

While I was waiting for them to register I heard a strange voice with a New York accent call my name. I turned around and a redheaded white man was walking towards me with a smile on his face. He introduced himself and said he worked for the FBI and wanted to talk with me. I said I wanted to talk with him as well and lodge a complaint about what had happened earlier. Clearly I was still very shook up. Having a loaded shotgun pointed in your face will do that.

We went to his car where he interviewed me. It was about the draft and he also asked questions about other Civil Rights workers from SNCC. I didn't answer his questions about the other workers just the questions relating to my draft status. After 45 minutes he was done questioning me and I said now it's my turn and he said sorry he didn't have the time. I still shake when I think about that day and wonder how that old woman made out.

There were two neighborhoods I worked in York for SNNC. One was up on a hill where there was a new Black public grade school and a small Black housing project along with many single family homes. Most of the people were poor.

The other neighborhood was on flat land about a 15 minute walk from the first. Many of the people in this part of town were Choctaw Indians and their descendants that married African Americans over the years. In both neighborhoods I worked on getting people to go to

Courthouse on Registration Day and tried to lay the groundwork for forming an independent county wide political party.

Sammy Younge Jr.

One day I went with a group of Alabama SNCC workers over to Tuskegee University to hear a Congressman speak, meet with local SNCC people and party. One of the SNCC people who was at the party and working on the SNCC “Black Panther Party” project in Macon County, where Tuskegee is located, was Sammy Younge Jr. Several weeks later on January 3, 1966, Sammy Younge was murdered. That night I was at the Free Library in Selma with a delegation from SNCC including Stokely Carmichael and Gloria Larry. They brought news of Sammy Younge’s murder.

The story I remember went like this: Younge had gone into a white-owned service station and asked to use the bathroom. He was refused. He then went out and pissed on a bus tire. Shortly after he was murdered. This may not jive with the official version but it is how I remember the story. We were all sitting on the floor of the library talking, telling stories and sang a favorite song for times like that went, “This may be the last time we all get together, it may be the last time I don’t know”. (I’m not sure if this get together at the library took place after Sammy Younge’s murder or Jonathan Daniel’s - I am sure of the song)

I have mentioned three people I was acquainted with who were murdered in Alabama when I was there. I do this because one of the hardest things for civil rights workers to deal with was fear. Fear of being killed or beaten - fear of being disappeared. That fear hung over me most of the time. It influenced where I went, when I went and who I talked to. It was very stressful to say the least. Yes, there were times and places where you felt safe but as long as I was in the Deep South fear of death was present. How could it not be? I knew three people who were murdered in the cause.

Organizing.

When I went South most of the hard work had been done. Black activists had been working for many years in the churches, building the NAACP, conducting Citizenship Schools, and ideas and training were coming from all over especially from the Highlander Center in Tennessee. After the protest in Selma and the passage of the Voting Rights Act the work was to get most of the people who were not activists to register to vote. And that wasn’t easy because people were fearful that although it was possible now for them to register with the Federal Registrars they could still be kicked off rented land, fired from their jobs or lynched because they did try to register to vote.

So much of my time was spent going door to door all day long getting to know people and asking them if they wanted to register. Week after week I would knock on the same doors. I also spent time trying to raise expectations around what could happen if enough Black people registered and became active in the political process. It wasn’t easy, for people who had never thought in those terms, thinking about: Is the risk worth the possibilities of having your road paved and having a stop sign at the end of your street? (As an aside, when I stopped in Selma in

2014 one of the first things I noticed was that the streets in the Black community were paved, there were stop signs, speed bumps and lights everywhere.)

At a workshop for local people organized by SNCC in Selma, SNCC staff people spoke on different aspects of organizing a party, I was asked to talk about what you can do with the vote. I remember I talked about voting in a sheriff who would not beat up demonstrators but protect them, sheriffs that would protect them when they tried to organize a union so their wages would go up, elect tax collectors who would not be used to remove people from their land and elect people to office who would really represent them and appropriate tax money for the things they and their children really needed like a good education system.

It all sounded good but consider this: I wasn't yet 20. What did I know? I was denied the vote myself because I wasn't 21. What experience did I have with the political system? Not much. What I did have, and what I was trying to raise in the people I worked with was the expectation that they could get involved and make a difference.

My people came from Russia, around 1900, where they were denied the expectation that they could be involved in the political process, where they were considered and treated as sub-humans, but when they came to the United States that changed, not without a fight, but it did change significantly for the first generation. An experience that the people I was working with had been denied for some 300 years. I grew up with, and through my parents, at school, in the community, on TV and through the books I read, that not only did I have the right but I had the responsibility to be politically involved. It was my birthright.

Through its organizing of independent political parties SNCC hoped to, among other things, use the political process to influence the economic system. The reason I mentioned union organizing in the workshop was because there was drive in Selma to organize people who worked locally for Coke.

SNCC's work in Alabama hit the national stage when Stokely Carmichael was covered giving speech in which he used the term Black Power. That term changed the national dialogue on race. Meanwhile, although there were some successes, the Black Panther parties of Alabama soon fell by the wayside and newly registered Black people joined the Democratic Party where they still are today.

Two years later MLK and SCLC came to address the economic question with their "Poor Peoples March." As someone said "King realized that the Poor Peoples March had to go through Memphis to get to Washington." King was murdered in Memphis where he went to support Black sanitation workers who were on strike demanding that the City of Memphis recognize their union.

Alabama SNCC had staff meetings about once a month in Selma. Here we talked about the project and how our work was going and also had discussions about race, politics, economics and philosophy, and yes, we also partied. At one meeting the white organizers were asked why they were involved trying to organize Black people. I remembered that I said I was a revolutionary and SNCC and this project was the best hope I saw at the time for addressing the unjust economic system in this country.

Ten years later I became involved in unions because I thought they were the best hope to change the economic system. After 50 years as an activist, looking back, it is clear that the country has been desegregated. People can register to vote and not pay a poll tax and eat anywhere they can afford to eat, take any seat on the bus with everyone else who rides the bus because they can't afford to fly. The buses aren't segregated but the planes are. Try and use the bathroom in First Class if you are flying coach. Legal racial segregation is dead but wages today for non-supervisory hourly workers are less than they were in 1973. As a few families now control more and more of the wealth the rest of us are forced to fight over and live on a smaller and smaller piece of the pie.

Back in the Deep South things were changing. Sometime in 1966 I was traveling with a Black civil rights worker from Selma to Nashville by bus to attend a meeting on organizing in the South to stop the War in Vietnam. We had a few hours between buses in Birmingham and decided to leave the bus station and get something to eat. We stopped a Black woman on the street and asked her where we could get something to eat and not be harassed. She gave us an annoyed look and then scolded us saying, "You can now eat anywhere you want in Birmingham!"

Back in Selma, James Stallworth, with whom I lived, had worked his adult life as a carpenter. He was paid "segregated" wages. That is to say very little compared to what he was worth. A paper mill was being built outside of Selma and because of the national civil rights movement Blacks were hired to work on the project and were paid the same as their white coworkers. Shortly after Mr. James received his first pay check the house had a new roof and soon a car was in the yard that wasn't held together by bailing wire.

Going North for Christmas 1965.

Dennis and I decided to visit his folks in Wisconsin for Christmas. We had saved up enough money to buy bus tickets to Milwaukee and then we planned on hitchhiking the rest of the way to Neenah, Wisconsin, where his folks lived.

The first leg on the bus trip went from Selma to Jackson, Mississippi where we had a layover of several hours. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 included the desegregation of public facilities like interstate bus stations, it hadn't completely taken hold yet in Jackson. The station had white and colored waiting rooms and water fountains. Dennis and I, both white, had a discussion about which waiting room we would sit in. We decided on the colored waiting room because it had the better jukebox. We sat there for awhile and no one paid us any mind. Then a delegation of SCLC workers, some of whom we knew including Jesse Jackson, got off a bus heading East and they had a layover as well. As you can imagine they sat in the white waiting room and were being harassed so Dennis and I joined them until our bus was ready to leave.

On several occasions I took buses out of Selma in 1965 and went to the back of the bus. In every case the bus had white people in the front and when I headed for the back they told me to sit in front. I never felt threatened but they gave me a fair amount of verbal abuse. Had I done the same thing in 1961 it would have been much worse. By late in 1966 the bus scene, in my experience, was less confrontational. In early 2002 I took a bus through the Deep South. The segregated waiting rooms and water fountains were gone and the people driving the busses and

working behind the counters who were all white and male in 1965 have been replaced by Black men and women.

Cracker

One evening a SNCC Field Secretary who had worked on the Selma Project in 1964 asked me if I wanted to find out what was going on in the white side of town. We went over to the railroad tracks not far from Selma, University. On the side of the tracks were a number of shotgun shacks, these had two rooms, one behind the other. We went to the third or fourth one where a middle aged Black man lived who operated a coal burning boiler someplace in town on third shift. We went in and talked for awhile and probably had a drink. After a bit this working-class white man shows up. He was introduced to me as Cracker. Cracker and the Black man hung out often and they both played guitar.

Cracker came only at night and kept his friendship with his Black friend secret. He lived on the white working-class side of town and told us about what was going on among the regular white people while the Blacks were getting so much attention. I went back on a number of occasions to hang out with these guys and listen to them play and pick up the gossip.

Observation

The bar we hung out in in Selma was named the Chicken Shack but was known as just the Shack. It was an illegal operation. I think the Sheriff was being paid off so it was rarely raided and operated quite openly. The only white people I ever saw in there were civil rights workers and we mostly went on Friday or Saturday nights when things were hopping.

Most of the people who went there had full-time jobs and were not involved directly in the Movement but were very supportive of those who were.

I started going there shortly after the end of the March and the people were ecstatic about the March. I don't remember any fights at the Shack for several months and then slowly things went back to the way I was told that had been in the past. Fights became more and more frequent. It seems that when people were focused on the source of their oppression they didn't take it out on each other. That is the positive force of a movement that had taken over, at least for awhile. I later observed the same thing in strikes. The energy of the community moves outward against the common foe and inward fights and bickering is subsumed by Solidarity.

Speaking Truth to Power.

One evening after the March I had been to a Mass Meeting at Brown's Chapel Church and was walking through the projects with Rev. James Bevel. Bevel had headed up the Selma project for SCLS. He was a small, light skinned African American who shaved his head and wore a Jewish Yamaka. He often spoke at the Mass Meetings and is credited with bringing children into civil rights demonstrations and with the idea to have the March from Selma to Montgomery.

As we walked away from the church we noticed a group of young Black men just off the sidewalk in the projects playground. It sounded like there was going to be a fight. My instincts

told me maybe it wasn't a good place to be at that time but I was with Bevel and he walked right over to those young men and started talking to them. He talked to them about how they need to turn their energy against the real enemy and not each other. Soon he had them in the palm of his hand. He got them engaged in a conversation about what needed to be done to change things instead of fighting with each other and making things worse.

I have reflected on the event for many years and have come to the conclusion that the term speaking truth to power doesn't mean telling your oppressor what you think but speaking the truth to the power in each of us. This has led me to believe that we shouldn't ever organize around secret or unspoken agendas. We need to always frame our discussions about how what we are organizing around today is part of an agenda that fits into a larger picture.

I have found that when you tell people if we win this battle today than our problems will be solved is not a good idea. Because when we do win people stay where they are and it is hard to get them to take the next step. If people are included in a long term discussion about the problems we face and the long term goals when a battle is won, they understand that the Movement is everyday and pace themselves for the long haul.

Fourteen months into a long strike I was alone with a striker in the union hall very late one night. The striker who had looked after the people on the picket line every night on third shift for the entire 14 months asked me, "Peter, I know we are going to lose this strike. My only question is have we advanced the cause of Labor?"

How deep is Racism?

I was living in Salem, NH and attending a two room school house which had students from the first through eighth grades. I was in the third or fourth grade, I was about eight years old at the time. We were studying history and our book had a picture of Black mother and child picking cotton. The woman faced the reader as did the child who was a few feet in back of the cotton sack the women dragged, both had wide toothy smiles. The caption under the picture said "Colored woman with pickaninny." Our teacher told us that colored people were happy people who were great entertainers. They all had rhythm.

At age 20 I had spent a fair amount of time living in all Black communities in the Deep South. One night I was at a party at the SNCC Freedom House in Selma. We were singing and dancing and I noticed a Black man that couldn't carry a tune and danced like he had iron in his joints, no rhythm.

The synapses in my brain crashed, I went outside and sat by myself on the porch. I was mentally exhausted because I had realized at that moment that even though I had been living with Black people for over a year the images and descriptions I had been exposed to in grade school were still with me.

Imagine if the teacher had given me a different view of African Americans. Talked about their writers, poets, inventors and educators instead of what she did talk about. You know, what is left out of a story is often as important as what is included.

Do Right

At some point back in the 1960s I cut a photograph taken during the Selma to Montgomery March out of a magazine. I still have it. The picture was of a Freedom Fighter from Greenville, Mississippi, on the March. He was wearing a black trench coat, walking on a dirt road with an American flag hung on a sapling pole which he leaned on his shoulder. The man's name was Will Henry Rogers and his nick name was "Do Right." He started helping SNCC out in Greenville, Mississippi, and when the SNCC people he worked with in Greenville came to Alabama Do Right came with them. They gave him the nickname Do Right hoping he would do right. I got to know him in Selma.

This picture was the only physical thing I had that I kept over the years which reminded me of my days as a Freedom Fighter in the Deep South. Over the years the picture deteriorated and I started looking through old magazines in the library to try and find an original that I could copy. No luck.

Several years went by and my wife Rebekah, a school teacher, brought home a book put out by the Southern Poverty Law Center which had on its cover the outline of Do Right and the flag. I told Rebekah that the outline on the cover was of the picture I had been looking for. I contacted the authors of the book who put me in contact with the agent for the photographer Dan Budnik who left a message with Budnik to call me.

He called and we talked on several occasions for hours. He had some great stories about his life and Alabama. I told him I was interested in a copy and he said the next time he was going to have some printed he would contact me. Meanwhile, Oprah Winfrey wanted to do a show on what happened to some of the people in Dan's Civil Rights Era photographs. Dan asked me if I knew where to find Do Right. I gave him some names and he contacted Bob Mants who still lived in Alabama and had been friendly with Do Right. It turned out, according to Mants, that Do Right ended up driving semi-trucks and was murdered outside of Greenville, Mississippi some 15 years before, circa 1985. Oprah never did the show but a year later Budnik was passing through Maine and spent a few days with us and gave me a print of his photograph of Do Right on the March.

Post Script

My closest friend in Selma was Dennis Coleman who I worked with on the library and we hung out a lot. At some point a friend of his from Wisconsin moved down to be with him. Her name is Barbara and they were married and still are. Dennis had a shoe repair store and Barbara worked as a nurse. They are both retired now. I have included a description Barbara wrote of her work in Selma and a letter by Dennis to the family of the woman Dennis stayed with in Selma at the end of the article. Over the years I have stayed in touch with them on an irregular basis.

In Sumter County I worked with Stu House. In late 1966 I was in Selma and Stu was living with SNCC worker Gloria Larry. They married and had a child. I saw them again in Detroit a few months later. I recently had an email exchange with Stu. He remarried and Gloria became a college professor in Michigan. She has remained an African American activist.

Sometime in 1965 I was in Boston and met Martha Kocel who worked for SNCC there. She was from Detroit where she started working for SNCC.

Martha went to the SNCC staff meeting where Stokely Carmichael was elected Chairman of SNCC and the whites were removed from the staff. After that meeting I was staying in Boston with Martha. Jim Foreman, SNCC's Executive Director, came to visit Martha and asked her to stay on with SNCC as a fundraiser even though she would no longer have a vote in the organization. Martha replied, "Foreman, One Man One Vote" and we moved to Detroit where we lived for a few months and got married. In early 1967 we went into exile in Canada where I stayed for seven years and Martha still lives there. We were divorced in 1980.

Finally

My experiences as part of the Freedom Movement sent me on the path my life has taken. Although I have not always "Done Right" I have kept to the path and I hope it will be said of me that I "kept on keeping on."

I would like to thank Matt Beck of IBEW Local 1837 for editing this essay.

I am a proud member of UAW Local 1981, Boston Chapter, National Writers Union.

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Letter from Dennis Coleman that he wrote to the family of Miss Emma, the person who he stayed with in Selma, when he heard of her passing. According to Dennis, Emma worked seven days a week as a cook at the YMCA and golf cub consequently there was always plenty of good food at her house as I recall.

Evelyn, Mary, Tom, Terry and Edward

I was pleased to receive Evelyn's call but saddened to hear the news. I had lost track of Emma about two years ago. I was grateful to get the call and know that Emma was in good hands toward the end of her life.

The thing I remember about your mother is her laugh. We had called each other from time to time especially in the fall when she would send Pecans. She was always kind enough to laugh at my stupid jokes and misfortunes. A while back I was traveling through Selma and stopped by to see Emma and see if she could get some shinney for me. She called a friend and because she was thinking that the phones were still tapped she said "Where do you get your chocolate milk from?" Then she broke out laughing. I was wondering what was going on and she said her friend paused and said "At Walmart you old fool." There was a time when I was down in Selma and offered to help this farmer. When I got out to his farm he was plowing with a mule. The farmer said I could try it, but instead of a straight furrow the mule plowed a circle. I must have gotten my Gees and Haws mixed up with my Haws and Gees. The farmer was laughing so hard he was rolling on the ground. When I got back to town and told Emma she about fell out laughing over that one. One time at your place in the projects I noticed a fog rolling along outside. I peeked out to see how many deputies we had to deal with and why they were trying to gas us when I found out it was someone spraying for insects. Emma thought there was no hope for me that day

and she laughed. There was an older guy called Mister Oliver who had some arrangement with a white guy about some sugar cane. Well, I went out to help him feed the cane into a stone mill while a mule pulled a crushing stone around in circles. There are strange alliances in the south and here came another one. These two old guys, Mister Oliver and this white guy get to arguing and pretty soon the white guy pulls a pistol. We all survived, even the mule and I ended up with the hell scared out of me and I got some syrup. Your Mom laughed some more.

I often thought about her and loved what she had done for me.

You all know that I came from Wisconsin and back then it was just white folk. When I joined the Marine Corps I found Negroes, Asians, Latinos, American Indians and Whites in my Unit. We all got along and worked together. When I came back to Wisconsin I learned that some of the guys returning to the south couldn't vote. That didn't seem right to me. Then when I saw that some people were beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge for trying to march on Montgomery I thought "Not in my country". So I found my way to Alabama and arrived in Montgomery about the same day everyone else did. After the demonstration I found myself in an alien culture.

Whites sure didn't want anything to do with me and I had no idea what the black community held for me either. I heard that if I got on a bus I could get a ride back to Selma, so I did. I heard that there were places to stay, I found your mother and my life has been better ever since.

I think she is in a good place now and she can laugh some more.

I was lucky enough to marry Barbara, we have two sons and two grandchildren. We live in Neenah, Wisconsin

From Barbara Coleman in 2015:

At age 71, my memories of Selma have developed a few gaps, but looking back I realize how utterly unprepared I was to contribute anything of significance. My parents had always modeled inclusiveness, fairness and concern for others so my heart was in the right place although my skills were sorely lacking.

Somehow I was asked to conduct a nursing assistant class at Burwell Infirmary for high school girls. There must have been about a dozen of them and me. I soon realized that they were really more interested in sex education than nursing, but we managed to provide a bit of care for the half a dozen or so patients. Beds were some type of metal cot with bare mattresses and none too clean. There was a closet full of pharmacy samples that had been donated from around the country, but I don't recall anyone ever administering any of them to the residents.