

BETTYE PARKER MILES STORY

(Retired Banker and Loan Officer;
Manager Kellogg's Union in Memphis, Tennessee)

*Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm alone
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home*
Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey



“I had always known that we were treated differently from the Whites, but I recall that I was about 10 or 11 years old when I became really aware. When we went downtown, if we were walking on the sidewalk and were meeting white people, they expected us to step off the sidewalk so they could pass. That wasn't right. I remember walking down to Woolworth or Kress, and when my sister and I walked downtown, I always wanted to go into the Kress store and buy some candy if I had a dime or a quarter. I might be the first customer at the candy counter, but if some whites walked up, I was the last one to be waited on. That wasn't right. My money was the same color as theirs. Even though I was there first, I had to go to the back of the line because the whites

just walked up. And that happened all the time. I remember getting really upset that we couldn't shop just like they did. Also, my grandfather was a janitor in the Kaiser store but if we just wanted to talk to our granddaddy for a minute, we had to go through the alley. He had to come to the back door to talk to us. That wasn't right.

When the movement started, I began going to the mass meetings at Brown Chapel. I remember when Dr. King came to town and we went to the mass meetings; sitting in the section where we were listening to him always brought a feeling of calm and being uplifted to me. There were sheets (that's what we called the Ku Klux Klan) watching us outside, and people were worried that they were going to bomb the church, and what talked about what they were going to do to us but that didn't faze me. I don't know if it's because of the calming effect Dr. King had on me or because I was just 18 years old. You have a different perspective of things when you're young, and you have less fear.

My mother's name was Mildred Parker. She worked for an old lady whose name was Miss Keebler. She ran an antique shop out of her house. My mother worked for her three days a week. But my mother was really outspoken and told this lady, "I have children in school. I have to be home by the time they get home."

My mother always spoke her mind, and she also went to jail several times. When she was going to register to vote, she told us when she left, "If I'm not here when you get out of school, I'm in jail." My mother got involved after the students started protesting, and she was one of the first ones to try to register and go to jail. Annie Cooper, the lady who got the first registration card, was my mother's best friend. I have a picture of my mama standing on the steps to vote, with Miss Annie Cooper, and a lady named Isabel Fort.

I also didn't go to jail, but I marched in the Bloody Sunday march. We walked up on the bridge, and when we went down on the other side, the troops had it blocked at the bottom and they were on their bullhorns, telling us that our march was illegal and we had to go back. I don't know who was speaking in the front line and said that we were going to go forward, but what I remember next was seeing a lot of tear gas, people running, troops on horses.

I turned around in a panic and started to run back across the bridge. There were troops trying to trample us with the horses, to the point that they were trying to make us jump off the bridge into the water. I remember seeing people just being trampled, a lot of screaming and running and being whipped. I saw one man get hit in the head with a billy club so hard that the blood just spurted up out of his skull like a water fountain. I was terrified. People were trying to get out of the way, but the troops beat them and cattle prodded and herded us as if we were cattle. We were herded back across the bridge by troops on horses with cattle prods whips, dogs and tear gas. At age 18 it was terribly traumatizing.

I recently saw Colia's report with my name as one of the first organizers on it, and it's hard to believe that was more than 50 years ago."