

## **In Memory of Luke “Bob” Block**

**(November 1946-April 2026)**

In 1965 Bob (later known as Luke) Block was 18, fresh out of San Mateo, CA High School, traveling cross-country with his buddy Jerry Roche. They heard King’s April call to come to Selma for the March to Montgomery. Rather than return home Bob stayed in Selma for the march because “it sounded like fun.” While in Selma, Bob became friends with Chuck (later known as Charles) Bonner, a leader in the Selma student movement.

While waiting for the permit to march to Montgomery, Charles, Bob and others drove to nearby Wilcox County where students held near daily demonstrations for school equality and voting rights all winter and spring. In early April, *The New York Times* and *Chicago Defender* headlines declared that Camden temporarily “stole the civil rights banner” from Selma. Bob was in some demonstrations including the one where Strider “Arkansas” Benston was badly beaten.

Charles tells the story that the first time they went out canvassing together, they were picked up by the sheriff, driven deep into the woods to the home of a judge who issued an order. They were jailed and placed in separate cells and released in the morning. Bob said he blocked out that experience but took Chuck’s word for it.

SCLC Field Director Dan Harrell asked Bob to stay in Wilcox to work on the Summer Community Organizing and Political Education project SCOPE that I had signed up for. Bob attended the Highlander Institute where he was oriented to nonviolent philosophy to complement the voter registration strategies he was learning in the field. By June he was on SCLC field staff, ready to train others to canvass the rural county with its vitriolic sheriff and active Klan.

Our meeting, love story and many other adventures are detailed in in my memoir *This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight* ([www.thisbrightlightofours.com](http://www.thisbrightlightofours.com)). That summer, our field directors kept sending Bob and I to separate parts of Wilcox County, although we took every chance we had to get together at Camden Academy where I stayed until the white authorities evicted us. Sometimes we’d head to the relative safety of Selma with Charles and his girlfriend.

The SCOPE project envisioned by SCLC brought in mostly white college students to guide Black residents through the arduous Alabama voting rights hurdles before and after the Voting Rights Act passed. In Wilcox, SCOPE workers joined SCLC and local leaders who were already active in voter education and accompanying people to the courthouse. People in Wilcox do not recall SCOPE, only the summer “when the kids came.” Dr. King, Camden Academy student leaders and the adult Wilcox County Improvement Association were who they credit with their movement that summer.

Bob was one of the hardest workers out there and steered away from the internal politics arising between the local leaders and some white seminarians. The “Revs” wanted to take charge of my cadre of SCOPE volunteers. Bob was patient and determined although he did get frustrated. I remember him slamming his fist into the wall a couple of times because he was so frustrated at how long it was taking President Johnson to get the Voting Rights Act passed. The adult squabbles seemed pointless. We didn’t understand why the Revs didn’t just listen to Dan Harrell and the other Black leaders the way we did.

Our job was to canvass the rural areas since close to town was too dangerous. We’d knock on doors and speak to people about their right to register and try to get them to sign up to go into the Camden courthouse. Bob was legendary for his ability to speak comfortably with people. Bob partnered with a local youth like Jesse Smith out in Lower Peachtree or with Charles or Eric Jones of SNCC in Pine Apple. He could chat people up naturally but also knew when to give up and move on to a more promising household.

Most often Bob stayed with Bob and Georgia Crawford in Pineapple or in Lower Peachtree with the Smiths. Carolyn Smith Taylor remembers they were always excited and happy to have him stay with them. Bob also felt completely at home with the Crawfords. They welcomed him and the next generations of Crawfords claim Bob as family. He said staying with the courageous land-owning farming activist Crawfords influenced his life direction more than the movement itself.

Our days were long, but seldom boring. That summer, I admired Bob for his courage but feared for his safety especially after he relayed some of his experiences.

One early evening he told me that

...he and our field director, Dan Harrell, were walking along rural road when a white man appeared out of nowhere with a gun which he raised right to Harrell’s head and pressed against his temple. “You know I would kill you as

soon as look at you, doncha?” “I believe I do,” was all that stoic Harrell replied. As the seconds ticked into years Bob saw himself just as dead as Dan right there on that country lane, knowing this guy would never be caught or punished. “And”, Bob explained, “this was just an ordinary guy, not one of the sheriff’s posse or anything, just an ordinary cracker. They can just do this stuff. Man! Shit!” Then the white guy lowered his gun and disappeared into the trees just as quickly as he had appeared.

Describing another incident out in Pine Apple:

"Chuck and Eric took me out to this little nightclub—though you know this county is dry—so it's kind of an illegal place deep in the woods past Crawfords, way out there. I couldn't find it again if my life depended on it. Anyway, we go into this so-called nightclub, the Dew Drop Inn, that's what they called it, just a hole in the wall, really. So, we go in and Chuck and Eric get some white lightnin' and I get a beer. After a while two white guys come in and I'm thinkin', 'that's nice, maybe they want to integrate the place'; it was all black except for me. Then all of a sudden, Chuck and Eric grab me and say, 'Let's go. Now!' and drag me outta there. Eric yells, 'Those crackers gone for tire irons!' They throw me in the back seat and tear off for Crawfords' place. They tell Mr. Crawford what's goin' on and out come the guns (Mr. Crawford, Chuck, and Eric ) They were each at a window in front of the house. After a while, nothin' happened so I went in the back bedroom and went to sleep."

Although we had planned to stay and return the following summer, we left abruptly in late July. The police and Klan used violence and threats to stop us from using our office at Antioch Baptist church or staying at Camden Academy. There were no regular safe houses in Wilcox so there was no longer an official headquarters. Atlanta SCLC stopped sending financial support, including always needed bail money. The FBI was throwing away our incident reports and petitions documenting voters being denied access to registration. Increasingly violent acts swirled around us, and some came straight at us. SNCC in Selma began to exclude white workers. It was hard to see what else we could do there that would make a difference.

In fact, it seemed like we were bringing too much danger to the locals who after all, had been well organized before we got there. Even though Dan Harrell asked both of us to stay, I wanted to go back to college and return the next summer.

Despite Charles' ongoing friendship, Bob felt the SNCC guys were right. It was time for whites to go home. Charles had been expelled from Selma University for leading a walkout so decided he might head out to California himself.

Bob and I considered ourselves engaged and remained a couple for a year and a half after our return although we didn't live together. We faced many of the same trials as other white kids returning from the South. People were either not interested or didn't understand when we tried to explain our experience in the south. We also had a measure of PTSD from violence we experienced and witnessed. Back in California, Black Power was on the rise, and white kids were flocking to anti-war movement. After a few efforts to raise funds for SCLC, and some volunteering at after school program in San Francisco's Hunter's Point, we just stopped talking about it. Even with each other.

After we separated, Bob volunteered with the American Friends Service Committee in Oakland on an anti-poverty program for while. Then he worked briefly with Anne and Carl Braden on their white people's organizing project in Kentucky. Bob said: "Working with rural white people is like beating your head on a rock."

Eventually, Bob's love of the land and a rural life led him to become a sheep farmer in Arkansas where he lived with his ceramicist wife Willow and their four children. He told me he liked the plain, honest country life and people willing to speak their mind.

In 2005, Charles (formerly Chuck), Luke (formerly Bob) and I, Maria (formerly Joyce ) had our first reunion in Charles' Clear Lake CA home along with Bettie Mae Fikes, Bruce Hartford, Jean Wiley and Jimmy Rogers. That weekend, the three of us re-cemented our friendship, and stayed in touch. Forty years disappeared as we filled in the blanks in each other's memories. Luke and I returned to Wilcox twice, once along with our spouses. On the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bloody Sunday, we three walked over the Edmund Pettis Bridge together in the Selma Jubilee. We never lost touch after that.

Although our lives headed in very different directions, we enjoyed a deep bond that endured until Bob died of a sudden stroke this April. All who knew Bob "Luke" Block will remember him as an honest, hardworking, loyal man who said he tried to live up the values of his Wilcox County hosts.

*May he rest in blessed memory.*

- Maria Gitin (formerly Joyce Brians)