

Excerpts from
'Troublemaker' Memories of the Freedom Movement
Selma and Montgomery: 1965-1966

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Selma, Lord, Selma ~ 1965

Shortly after the FSM victory I left San Francisco to visit my parents in New Haven, though I knew I'd someday return. 'Frisco felt like home to me in a way that L.A. never did. I rode the dog to Connecticut and my dad picked me up at the Greyhound depot. Through their contacts at Yale, I was able to pick up unskilled work assisting graduate students who hired me with funds from their research grants. Since I was living with my folks my expenses were minimal and I was able to save money for going South, which I was still determined to do.

From my Freedom Movement work in L.A., I had contacts and people who would vouch for me to both CORE and SNCC. And in late 1964 the Freedom Movement was still remarkably open to anyone willing to — as the saying went — “put their body on the line.” Obviously, as a white man, I did not enjoy the same presumption of solidarity that was automatically offered to Black activists. But for the most part, whites willing to share the risks, treat Afro-Americans as equals, and respect Black leadership found a warm welcome in the Movement. Though I wasn't aware of it, the growing influence of Black nationalism and the increasingly poisonous effects of the FBI's COINTELPRO spying, sabotage, and disruption program were beginning to change that in SNCC and CORE — though due to King's influence not so much in SCLC.

I was therefore reasonably confident that if I showed up at the Atlanta SNCC or New Orleans CORE office and explained who I was I could find a place in the southern wing of the Freedom Movement — first as a volunteer and then, hopefully, as paid staff. That was my plan. By February of 1965, I'd saved around \$300 (equal to about \$2,400 in 2018), which I figured was enough to support me for half a year in the lavish lifestyle that southern civil rights workers were known to enjoy. If at the end of that time I hadn't been hired on to a freedom project, I'd return to California and figure out what to do with the rest of my life.

So why was I still in Connecticut?

When I was a kid and my parents took me to a swimming pool I was afraid to jump into the deep end. I'd stand there faltering, desperately wanting to jump — but I couldn't. I just couldn't. I loved and respected my mom. In many ways she was a great woman, but in regard to me and my brother she was burdened with obsessive anxieties that she had no clue how to handle. So she worried and fretted and verbalized, "Be careful, be careful," which helped me not at all. My dad, however, was calm and supportive. He gently encouraged me but he didn't push me. He let me solve it on my own. Eventually I jumped into the deep end.

I was scared to go South. On this matter my mom was vociferously clear — she did not want me to go. No way. No how. And she used all of her considerable verbal and — let's be honest here — manipulative talents to prevent me. But by then I'd lived with her for 21 years (I turned 21 in January of '65) and had become much better at minimizing the degree to which her anxieties constrained and influenced my life.

With my father the situation was more complex. Unlike my mom, Ken was not only a southerner by birth, he'd been a Communist union organizer in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. He once mentioned to me that one time a gang of Klansmen threatened to kill him if he wasn't on the morning bus out of Tupelo, Mississippi. He really wanted to defy them, he hated the idea of cowardly running away, but he already had a ticket for that same bus because his attendance was required at a union meeting in New Orleans. (He didn't use his motorcycle while organizing in the South — too easily run off the road and too exposed to bushwhackers with rifles.)

Obviously he did the intelligent thing, but I completely understood his dilemma and how appearing to submit to their threats still rankled him 30 years later. I would have felt exactly the same — and hopefully I would have made the same smart decision. I do regret though that I was too full of myself and my own concerns to ask him for the full detailed story of that event (and many others).

So Ken's fears for my safety were solidly grounded in realities my mom, thankfully, had only theoretical conception of. Decades later when I posted on the Civil Rights Movement Veterans website some stories about my work in the South she told me that if she had known the truth of what I was involved in she

would have come down herself and dragged me home whether I wanted to go or not. And she would have. Or rather, she would have tried. Which is why the stories I'll be getting around to in this memoir somehow never made it into any of my letters home. To his credit — and Mom's forcefully expressed displeasure — while my father did not actively encourage me, neither did he try to dissuade me from going South.

Meanwhile, news reports of the brutal voting rights battle in Selma and Dallas County Alabama had begun to percolate up into the North. SNCC had been working and organizing in Selma since January of 1963, engaging in voter registration efforts and courageously enduring ferocious repression. While little known to the general public, those stories were familiar to me as a CORE activist.

Among civil rights workers Selma had a reputation as one of the roughest hell-holes in the South, a violent stronghold of a white supremacy enforced by the four guardians of Jim Crow — Council, Klan, courts, and cops. Ruling over Dallas County was Judge James Hare, a self-proclaimed "expert" on racial eugenics, who firmly believed in Black genetic inferiority. Though 57% of the population were Afro-American, he ran Dallas County as if it were his personal political plantation.

Sheriff Jim Clark was Hare's porcine-looking, whip-cracking overseer and enforcer. In addition to his hired deputies, Clark was backed by an armed posse of more than 200 volunteers — all white, of course — many of them KKK members. The posse was originally formed in the 1940s after World War II to suppress labor organizers like my father, but by the 1960s their mission was to crush Black challenges to white supremacy. And not just in Dallas County. Clark sent his posse on missions far and wide — to beat Freedom Riders in Montgomery in 1961, to riot against the admission of James Meredith to Ole Miss in '62, and to crack the heads of Birmingham children in '63.

Supporting Hare and Clark was Selma's powerful White Citizens' Council, composed of bankers, landlords, politicians, clergy, and other pillars of the established community. They stood ever-vigilant against any attempt to undermine the "southern way of life," which they fiercely defended with economic terrorism — firings, evictions, foreclosures, blacklists, and boycotts. And if economic retaliation failed there were murderous Klan cells active throughout the state. Together, Hare, Clark, Council, and Klan maintained an interlocking reign of judicial, economic, and violent terror that held most Dallas County Afro-Americans in an iron grip.

Yet against all odds there was a gutsy local Freedom Movement in Selma. The Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) had been formed after the NAACP was outlawed in Alabama in the mid-1950s. It was small but courageous. Unfortunately, courage alone was insufficient, and against adamant white opposition they made little headway. Eight years after *Brown v. Board of*

Education and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Selma remained totally segregated with but a bare handful of Afro-Americans registered to vote. In 1961 less than 1% of the 15,000 adult Afro-Americans living in Dallas County could vote.

In January of 1963 two SNCC organizers, Bernard and Colia Lafayette, began helping the DCVL break that grip of fear. Soon other young SNCC freedom workers joined them. They organized house by house, block by block, holding meetings, staging protests, demanding that Blacks be allowed to vote in Selma, Alabama. During a "Freedom Day" in October of 1963, SNCC and DCVL encouraged 350 Afro-Americans to defy a century of Jim Crow by lining up at the courthouse on registration day. Almost none were registered — but some were arrested, and many were fired from their jobs or evicted from their homes for daring to assert that they were American citizens entitled to vote.

SNCC was so bold in thought and mighty in courage that most northern supporters didn't realize how few they actually were and how meager were their finances. In 1964 they had to concentrate almost their entire force in Mississippi for Freedom Summer and its follow-up campaigns — leaving behind just a skeleton staff in Selma.

In June of '64 the Civil Rights Act was enacted over the ferocious opposition of southern whites. SNCC members and Black students tried to implement the Act in Selma by patronizing a white-only drive-in and attempting to sit in the white section of the movie theater. They were beaten by white thugs and arrested for "trespass." Judge Hare then issued a sweeping, unconstitutional injunction that effectively outlawed all civil rights activity in Dallas County. Protests of any sort were forbidden, and so too were private meetings where people simply discussed voter registration.

Of course, the DCVL filed legal appeals against the injunction, but those motions were stalled in the Alabama state courts and neither DCVL nor SNCC had the human, financial, or legal resources to openly defy the injunction with large-scale civil disobedience. Unable to engage in public activities, the Selma Movement was driven underground and forced to meet clandestinely behind closed doors.

After five months of stagnation under the injunction, the DCVL asked Martin Luther King and SCLC for assistance. King and SCLC were seeking a battleground for a Birmingham-style mass protest movement powerful enough to force a voting rights act through Congress — as Birmingham and St. Augustine had done for the Civil Rights Act. DCVL leaders told them that Selma was the place.

SNCC, of course, saw Selma as their territory, and as a matter of principle they opposed mass protest movements, which they considered detrimental to the kind of deep community organizing that was now their primary strategy. But the local DCVL leaders prevailed and King accepted their invitation.

On January 2nd, 1965, hundreds of Selma Blacks successfully defied the injunction by attending a mass meeting in Brown Chapel addressed by Dr. King. With the full glare of national media attention focused on Selma and powerful legal resources standing ready to take effective court action, Judge Hare and Sheriff Clark backed down — mass public defiance had nullified the no-civil-rights-activity-of-any-kind injunction.

Large-scale attempts to register to vote quickly followed, as did marches to the courthouse. Hare issued a new injunction forbidding protests near his courthouse, which became the legal pretext for beatings and mass arrests of protesting students, while adults who attempted to register continued to face economic reprisals. By February, Selma, Alabama had become a war zone occupied by hundreds of blue-helmeted state troopers, club-wielding sheriff's deputies, and armed possemen — all in confrontation with nonviolent Afro-American protesters, young and old, who were determined to become full citizens free of segregation, Jim Crow, and racial subservience.

The protests and registration attempts began to expand outward into adjacent counties like Wilcox and Perry, where Afro-Americans outnumbered whites three or four to one and no Blacks at all were registered. On February 18th, a small band of freedom marchers in Marion, the Perry County seat, were brutally attacked by troopers and some of Clark's possemen. These so-called lawmen first shot out the streetlights and broke news media cameras so no record could be made; then they attacked with flailing clubs and searing cattle prods. Jimmy Lee Jackson, a Black military veteran and church deacon, was shot point-blank by a trooper.

Perry County had no hospital, and the publicly-funded hospital in Selma refused to treat civil rights activists, so Jackson was taken to the small, Catholic-run, Good Samaritan infirmary. A few days later he died of his wounds. Thousands of mourners, mostly Black, a few white, attended his funeral and memorial.

On March 7 — "Bloody Sunday" — some 600 protesters attempted to march from Selma to the State Capitol in Montgomery seeking redress of their grievances from Governor Wallace. As they crossed over the Edmund Pettus Bridge a horde of deputies, troopers, and possemen savagely attacked them. They were clubbed, beaten, teargassed, and whipped by possemen on charging horses.

That Sunday night my parents and I were watching the movie *Judgment at Nuremburg* on ABC when it was suddenly interrupted by a breaking news flash showing film of atrocities in Selma, Alabama. My fears and hesitations were instantly burned away. I knew — and my parents knew — that next morning I'd be on my way to Selma.

Selma Under Siege ~ 1965

I quickly cut myself loose from the odd jobs I was doing for the Yale grad students and converted my cash into American Express traveler's checks, which is what everyone used back in those dinosaur days before credit cards and ATM machines. I linked up with a guy who was driving down to Selma, and by evening I was rolling South. Scared — but determined.

We drove straight through, taking turns at the wheel and trying (with scant success) to sleep in the shotgun seat — New York — Philly — DC — Charlotte — Atlanta. While we were on the road Tuesday, Dr. King and several thousand marchers made a second attempt at reaching Montgomery. When troopers blocked them he peacefully led everyone back over the bridge to Brown Chapel rather than force a bloody confrontation. This sparked an intense controversy between SCLC and SNCC over what became known as "Turnaround Tuesday." That evening, four Klansmen in Selma brutally assaulted three Unitarian ministers with baseball bats, severely injuring Rev. James Reeb of Boston, who had answered King's call for people of conscience to come stand with the embattled Black community of Selma.

It was deep in the night when we finally reached Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma. Along with the nearby First Baptist Church, it served as Movement headquarters and rally point. Despite the hour it was open and welcoming. People from out of town were sleeping on the pews. Exhausted from the long drive, I joined them.

I awoke bleary-eyed to early morning hustle and bustle. Attached to the rear of the sanctuary was a kitchen and utility room that had been set up as a dining hall for outside supporters where we were fed strong coffee, hot bacon and sweet corn bread in the morning, and fried chicken and collard greens for the rest of the day. From dawn to midnight Black women — volunteers all — cooked with pride for the mostly white visitors who had come from across the nation to support them in their fight for freedom. They welcomed me with smiles and issued me a little meal card good at any of several similar church kitchens in Selma's Afro-American community.

Today Brown Chapel is a National Historic Landmark, but back then it was just a worn and shabby 60-year-old building of red brick, white stone, and aging wood with peeling paint. Though the sun had barely risen above the horizon, the church was already filled with activity as local Blacks and northern whites hurried in and out on errands and tasks. Pete Seeger with his banjo and Jimmy Collier with his guitar were sitting on the outside steps leading an impromptu songfest for a throng of kids who had no intention at all of going to school and missing all this excitement. Everywhere I looked, groups of people were talking, sharing rumors, and speculating on what was to come.

Brown Chapel with its two bell towers sat in the center of the totally segregated Carver public housing project — 30 or more two-story brick buildings, each with multiple apartments. Surrounding the project area like a feudal army besieging a rebellious village were swarms of hostile troopers, deputies, game wardens, possemen, and Klansmen. Racial hatred radiated off them like a foul stench. Hatred for defiant Afro-Americans, hatred for SNCC and SCLC, and hatred for white “race traitors” like me.

The local kids quickly clued me in: state troopers wore blue battle helmets and spiffy gray and blue uniforms, sheriff’s deputies wore brown with white helmets, and the Selma city cops were in standard police uniforms. The state game wardens, who had been brought to reinforce the troopers, had green helmets. Clark’s possemen wore khaki work clothes, cheap tin badges, and plastic construction helmets in various colors. They were armed with pistols on sagging belts and swaggered around carrying ax handles for “whipping burr-heads,” as their racist vernacular expressed it. Klansmen had been mobilized from all over the state and as far away as Mississippi and Louisiana — the only way to distinguish them from the local posse was that the KKK didn’t have badges or bother with “sissy” helmets.

Now please allow me a momentary pause for a brief language digression. A baton is a little stick that orchestra conductors wave to keep the musicians on the beat; a club is what cops use to beat people into submission. In the 1960s the mass media suddenly started referring to police clubs as “batons” to soften and disguise the brutal use of state violence against nonviolent demonstrators protesting racism, segregation, and systemic injustice. Media euphemisms notwithstanding, troopers with their clubs and possemen with their ax handles knew precisely what they were carrying and for what purpose — and so did we.

The Carver project siege was not airtight. While groups of protesters attempting to leave the project area would be immediately blocked and attacked, individuals could come and go by car or on foot. But outside the project area, anyone the Klan or posse identified as a civil rights activist risked a brutal beating if they were caught out of view of the press cameras. The Black community to the north and east of the project was more or less safe, but even there the Klan prowled in cars looking for “troublemakers,” “shit-disturbers,” and “nigger-lovers” to attack.

By now it was known that the Selma public hospital had refused to treat Rev. Reeb and the Catholic-run Good Samaritan infirmary was neither equipped nor staffed for massive head trauma. During the night he’d been transferred by hearse to a hospital in Birmingham. (Few white-owned ambulances would serve Afro-Americans, so hearses owned by Black funeral parlors were often used to transport the ill or injured.)

Around noon we gathered in Brown Chapel and were told that Reeb’s condition was grave. Rev. Anderson of Tabernacle Baptist Church was one of the

main local Movement leaders. He led us out for a march to the Dallas County Courthouse where we intended to pray for Rev. Reeb's recovery. Sylvan Street was the main road through the center of the project and like all roads in the Black community it was unpaved. Though in the summer it was dry and dusty at that time of year it was muddy, with water-filled potholes. Today Sylvan is well paved and named Martin Luther King Street.

As our march approached the project boundary we were blocked by a line of Selma police. Chief Baker announced that under an emergency decree just issued by the mayor all marches outside of the Carver project were banned — for our safety, he told us.

The cops strung a rope across Sylvan Street marking the limit of where we could march. Students — high school and college — were the heart and soul of mass protests in Selma as they were everywhere in the South. They instantly dubbed that rope the "Berlin Wall" and quickly made up a freedom song about it:

*We've got a rope we call a Berlin Wall,
Berlin Wall, Berlin Wall,*

*We've got a rope we call a Berlin Wall,
In Selma, Alabama.*

*We're gonna stay here till it falls,
till it falls, till it falls,*

*We're gonna stay here till it falls,
In Selma, Alabama.*

Rather than retreat back to the church we halted against the rope and began an around-the-clock vigil, face to face with the line of cops and deputies. All day, all night, we stood in the street waiting for the rope wall to fall, singing songs and making impromptu speeches about segregation and voting rights to the cops, the press, and each other. People would vigil until they got tired, then grab a bite to eat and some rest while others took their place.

Mass Meeting ~ 1965

As evening fell a group of the younger children — junior high and elementary students — began marching around the project buildings singing freedom songs. That signaled that the nightly mass meeting in Brown Chapel was about to begin.

I left the confrontation at the Berlin Wall and climbed the worn wooden stairs up to the balcony as a line of high school students and two little elementary school girls led the crowd in freedom songs. The church was packed with some five or six hundred people. In all my life I have never, ever, heard singing like that

— never before, never since, not even in other Freedom Movement battlegrounds.

The emotional power of that singing was indescribable. It wasn't a performance. It wasn't poetry set to music. It was the rage of generations erupting forth in a passionate torrent of melody. It was the defiance of people determined to be free — sustained by the power of their mass singing. It was their declaration of pride, standing strong in the face of police beatings, gassings, arrests, evictions, firings, and murder.

In her remembrance, *Selma, Lord, Selma*, Sheyann Webb, who was nine at the time and one of the song leaders, would later describe the immediate aftermath of Bloody Sunday:

When I had first gotten to the church ... my eyes were still swollen and burning from the tear gas. ... I sat with Rachel up toward the front. ... we were just sitting there crying, listening to the others cry; some were even moaning and wailing. It was an awful thing. It was like we were at our own funeral. But then later in the night, maybe nine-thirty or ten, I don't know for sure, all of a sudden somebody there started humming. I think they were moaning and it just went into the humming of a freedom song. It was real low, but some of us children began humming along, slow and soft.

At first I didn't even know what it was, what song, I mean. It was like a funeral sound, a dirge. Then I recognized it — *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round*. I'd never heard it or hummed it that way before. But it just started to catch on, and the people began to pick it up. It started to swell, the humming. Then we began singing the words. We sang, "Ain't gonna let George Wallace turn me 'round." And, "Ain't gonna let Jim Clark turn me 'round. "Ain't gonna let no state trooper turn me 'round."

Ain't gonna let no horses ... ain't gonna let no tear gas — ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round. Nobody!

We was singing and telling the world that we hadn't been whipped ... I think we all realized it at the same time, that we had won something that day, because people were standing up and singing like I'd never heard them before. ... But when that singing started, we grew stronger. Each one of us said to ourselves that we could go back out there and face the tear gas, face the horses, face whatever Jim Clark could throw at us.⁷

The speeches that night — freedom sermons really — were many, passionate, and deeply based in faith and Bible. At least 50 or so of those in the audience that night were northern whites like me. We were warmly welcomed, the famous called forth and honored by name, the rest of us thanked for our presence. I was not the only Jew in the audience, a visiting rabbi was asked to address the crowd. I did not feel at all out of place. Nor did I feel uncomfortable singing Christian hymns, because it was a Freedom Movement service, not a denominational event.

Rev. Hosea Williams called the collection. I was so moved by his oratory and by the entire experience of my first Freedom Movement mass meeting that I actually signed one of my \$20 traveler's checks (equal to about \$160 in 2018) and

dropped it in the bucket that they were passing from hand to hand. That's not like me at all — then or now. I'm quite generous with my time — with money not so much.

During that time between Bloody Sunday and the March to Montgomery there was at least one mass meeting every day and sometimes more than one, and Brown Chapel was always packed to the rafters with local Selma folk, Afro-Americans from the surrounding counties, and Black and white Freedom Movement supporters from far and wide. Day after day, night after night, from that balcony bench I had the privilege of listening to some of the finest public speakers of the mid-20th century.

I loved hearing Martin Luther King speak. Schooled in the rhythm and cadence of the Black church, he is justly considered one of America's greatest orators. Deeply rooted in both biblical calls for justice and the unfulfilled promise of the American creed, his speeches were visions of compassion and brotherhood that still inspire me to this day. Most people have heard portions of his famous *I Have a Dream* speech, but to hear the full text of one of his freedom sermons was to be carried to a higher plane of existence. He not only sounded the call for justice and equality, he made it seem possible in a way no one else in my lifetime has ever been able to replicate.

Rev. Ralph Abernathy was King's closest friend, confidant, and collaborator. More than anyone else, Abernathy was the man King relied on. When King went to jail, so did Abernathy. He was also a skilled speaker and preacher, but his style was totally different from King's. Where King was lofty, eloquent, and cerebral, Abernathy was exuberant and earthy in the peoples' vernacular. One time, I was told, he was pounding the pulpit at a mass meeting and a hidden police microphone attached to a wire was knocked loose. He didn't miss a beat. Grabbing it and holding it up for all to see, he addressed it as *doohickey* and in no uncertain terms told off the police assumed to be listening at the other end — all to gales of tension-easing laughter from the crowd.

Rev. James Bevel — everyone called him "Bevel" or "Bevels" — was the fiery tactical genius behind the Birmingham and Selma campaigns. His use of language was so brilliant and his delivery so compelling as to be messianic. Not, "almost messianic" — *actually* messianic. He wove such a magic spell around us that had he told us to walk through fire we would have done so without hesitation so long as he led the way, which he might well have done, because there was at times an obvious touch of madness about him that only Dr. King seemed able to keep in check — most of the time. Usually.

I remember one afternoon sitting in the kitchen attached to Brown Chapel listening to Bevel rail against bombing attacks by U.S. warplanes against the river dikes in North Vietnam. He said we might have to go sit on those dikes as nonviolent defenders, and if he'd actually done it I might well have joined him.

Maybe. He did have his dark side though, particularly his treatment of women, which was abusive and exploitative, though I only learned of that much later.

SCLC's command structure was hierarchical. Directly under King followed by Abernathy was the Executive Staff. Of all the Executive Staff members, Hosea Williams and Bevel were the fiercest rivals. Hosea was both an ordained minister and a chemist by profession and when it came to fiery freedom sermons few could match him. From Savannah, Georgia, he had something of the urgent energy of the urban street about him that resonated with me. When I later joined the SCLC field staff I was assigned to the department he headed, and while I respected and admired his legendary personal courage and willingness to defy white authority, I had trouble adapting to his mercurial temper and flamboyant egotism.

Rev. C.T. Vivian was the SCLC leader closest in age to young SNCC and CORE activists like me. He was also closest in outlook. Whenever I was in his presence he seemed to burn with a fierce anger — a rage that I shared. He had come out of the SCLC affiliate in Nashville and he too was a powerful speaker and fearless in defiance. He was well known in the Freedom Movement for boldly confronting Sheriff Clark face to face on the courthouse steps, shouting, "You're a racist the same way Hitler was a racist!" Every time Clark knocked him down, he rose again and got back in the sheriff's face.

I greatly admired and respected all of those fiery and passionate SCLC leaders, but it was Dr. King who I truly loved. I loved him for his compassion, the breadth of his vision, the power of his oratory, and what I can only describe as his *mahatma* — his great soul. We used to joke about being part of his "freedom army," and in the context of that metaphor he was the general and I was — at best — no more than a corporal, maybe eventually a sergeant. Generals and sergeants don't normally socialize, and I never spent any personal time with King. When he saw me in Selma, or later Grenada, Mississippi, he'd recognize me as someone who worked for SCLC and he occasionally asked me to run some errand, but I doubt he ever recalled my name. Yet though I knew him only at a distance, what impressed me most was that his public and private personas were identical. He was as caring, thoughtful, and compassionate toward others in day-to-day interactions as he appeared to be from stage and pulpit.

Later on in life, when I encountered other famous folks, I learned how rare that was.

On the Line at the "Berlin Wall" ~ 1965

My first mass meeting ended around 11pm and I returned to the Berlin Wall for a while before crashing on one of the wooden pews in Brown Chapel

until the next morning. Thursday the 11th was more of the same, though a hard, cold rain began to fall, and those of us who didn't have real raincoats cut slits in green plastic garbage bags to use as makeshift ponchos. While vigiling we tried to shelter under plastic tarps held up on poles. That provided some protection — until they shifted and dumped a waterfall down the back of our necks.

The Carver housing project remained under siege, with deputies and troopers confining our ability to march and the posse and Klansmen prowling the perimeter looking for prey. The only place where white Movement supporters or Blacks wearing freedom pins could safely buy sodas, snacks, smokes, and other incidentals was the tiny candy shack near Brown Chapel. It was just a small wooden hut, no name, no sign, with a window for customers. A dozen or more people were always lined up in the muddy street from dawn to dark. Back in those days I was a hardcore Coke fiend (the drink not the drug) and on warm afternoons I'd be in that line a couple of times a day — sometimes just ahead of a visiting rabbi, other times behind a famous Afro-American entertainer, a local high school kid, or a Maryknoll nun.

Meanwhile at the vigil line we were still face to face with the cops and posse, though eventually Chief Baker removed the rope. He told a reporter he was tired of hearing us sing about it. We continued to sing about it anyway.

Though some in SNCC were turning away from nonviolence, that was not the case with SCLC. I met some of the SCLC staff, and when they found out I was CORE-trained they asked me to do what I could to encourage people to remain nonviolent on the vigil, where emotions were running high.

While most of the northern supporters who had come to Selma were white, quite a number were Afro-Americans, some of whom were super-militant Black nationalists who vehemently rejected nonviolence as either a strategy or tactic. Afro-Americans from Selma and the surrounding counties understood the necessity of Tactical nonviolence in relation to the cops. And for them, overtly expressing defiance in speech and song to white authorities armed with badge, pistol, and club was sufficiently defiant. Not so for some of the northern Blacks. So when we weren't singing or preaching freedom at stone-faced troopers and possemen we debated nonviolence.

It didn't take long, however, for me to realize that the is-ness of reality was far more compelling than any intellectual argument I could muster — CORE training notwithstanding. Local teenagers, Freedom Movement veterans all, would stand face to face with the troopers and possemen singing:

*"We love everybody!
We love George Wallace!
We love state troopers!"*

And it was completely clear to everyone present on both sides that none of them loved Wallace or the troopers. But singing that song was driving the cops crazy. It was a way of defying them that they had no way of countering and it was frustrating the hell out of them. They yearned and ached for an opportunity to whip heads with their clubs — you could see it plain as day, it was just obvious. When it was dark or no cameras were around they'd taunt us and poke us with their sticks and ax handles, trying to provoke us into some small act of violence that they could seize on as a pretext for beating the shit out of everyone and arresting all of us as violent "troublemakers."

Even northern super-militants could (eventually) see that violence on our part was precisely what our foes wanted. And if you wanted to effectively fight "The Man" in Selma, you didn't do what he wanted you to do, you did what he *didn't* want you to do — which was nonviolently defy white supremacy. So after a couple hours on the line I'd see those same northern militants I'd been arguing with to no avail singing at the top of their lungs, "*We love George Wallace! We love state troopers!*" So I stopped arguing theory in favor of allowing practical reality to take its inevitable course.

That night we learned that Rev. Reeb had died in a Birmingham hospital. In Selma's Black community there was great sorrow. Though the cold, heavy rain was coming down hard we kept the vigil going. Now we were determined to march to the courthouse for a memorial rather than a prayer for his recovery.

Somehow that night I ended up at the home of the West family in one of the two-story project buildings close to Brown Chapel. Alice and Alonzo West and their 12 children were well known in the Movement, the older ones marching and going to jail, eight year-old Rachel leading freedom songs with the high school kids, the family apartment a haven for out-of-town SNCC and SCLC activists. All their beds, their one couch, and every inch of floor space were already occupied by others, but I found a cozy sleeping spot on top of their side-by-side washing machine and dryer just off the kitchen (with a dozen kids you can't be running back and forth to the laundromat all day).

Among their semi-permanent Movement guests was Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal seminary student from New Hampshire whom I got to know and came to like quite a bit. He was always cheerful and upbeat, calm and steadfast. A quiet rock in the Freedom Movement maelstrom.

For the next couple of weeks the West home became my home, their family my family. It was from the Wests, around their crowded formica table in the kitchen, that I learned the ins and outs of Selma and the local Movement. Who was who, where it was safe to go, where it wasn't, what they thought about all that was happening, and why it meant so much to them.

And they were curious about me as a Jew — "You mean you don't believe in Jesus?" It was hard for them to grasp. For them "religious differences" meant

Catholic versus Baptist. There was a small Jewish community in Selma dating back generations, and some of the stores catering to the "colored trade" were run by Jews. Those that treated Afro-Americans decently were looked upon favorably by the Black community, those that didn't — weren't. But there was no social interaction at all. I was the first Jew the Wests could talk to, argue with, and relate to on a basis of assumed equality — which was far more important to them than religious doctrine. And, of course, I was no great proponent of religious doctrine myself.

Third-grader Rachel West and her next-door neighbor Sheyann "Shy" Webb were familiar figures in the Selma Movement. Dr. King called them his "littlest freedom fighters." Along with the teenagers, they led freedom songs in Brown Chapel. Shy had been on the bridge during Bloody Sunday. And Rachel had almost been trampled by possemen on horses when they charged into the housing project. They later wrote a wonderful memoir titled, *Selma, Lord, Selma* that Disney turned into a film of the same name.

I've heard folks scoff and claim that Rachel and Shy were too young to know what they were involved in and that King cynically and selfishly manipulated and used them. Bullshit, total bullshit. Too often grown-ups dismiss children as inconsequential or discount them because their breadth of understanding is less than that of adults. But how old do you have to be to see unfairness and resent injustice? I adored them both. They were frightened, yes, they knew the dangers better than I, but they marched precisely because they did know what they were doing — and *why* they were doing it.

It might seem odd to you that families would open up their homes and lives to complete strangers the way the Wests did for us. And it wasn't just the Wests, many families in the projects and the larger Afro-American community took in and cared for out-of-town supporters. As I was walking down the street, Blacks I have never met would often ask me to share a cool lemonade on the porch, or even invite me to join them for dinner.

Some of them called us "freedom fighters" others referred to us as "freedom riders." The first few times I was called a "freedom rider" I tried to explain that while I was a civil rights worker I had not been on the Freedom Rides of 1961. But I soon realized that those rides had so impressed Afro-Americans living under the yoke of segregation in the Deep South that "freedom rider" had for them become a generic term for anyone who came from outside the community to help them fight for freedom. So I accepted the title of freedom rider in the sense they intended.

By Friday the rain had temporarily halted. The vigil continued. The siege continued. The mass meetings and freedom songs continued. As on previous days, from time to time Selma students — by now highly experienced protesters — organized nonviolent guerrilla marches. Two or three hundred of them would

secretly assemble in First Baptist Church or some other location and then make a dash, trying to evade the encircling cops and reach downtown. Caravans of state trooper cars with sirens screaming careened through the streets to head them off, the blue-helmeted lawmen leaping out with curses and flailing clubs to drive them back.

Only a few SNCC workers were left in Selma during this period, most of them had shifted to Montgomery where mass street protests were also underway involving Black students from Tuskegee and Alabama State College. We heard rumors that the SNCC-led marches in Montgomery were being ruthlessly attacked and savagely beaten by possemen on horses, but the local news was completely untrustworthy and utterly biased against us. The national TV networks only broadcast one 15-minute evening news show per night and copies of northern newspapers were few and far between. So we often knew less than people in New York about what was happening 50 miles away. Mostly we existed and operated on rumor and hearsay.

We did hear, though, that prominent Americans, Senators and Congressmen, religious leaders, and other notables were sending telegrams of condolence to Rev. Reeb's home in Boston. Pundits were commenting, analyzing, and moralizing at length on his murder. President Johnson had Mrs. Reeb flown to Birmingham on an Air Force jet to retrieve her husband's body and return with it to Massachusetts for his funeral.

We in Selma, however, were acutely conscious that there had been no such reaction at all when Jimmy Lee Jackson was shot to death by a state trooper. No note from the White House, no phone calls from anyone in Congress. Other than few lines in the national press, little attention or notice. For Afro-Americans the contrast between white public reaction to the two killings was stark and bitter — utter indifference to the police murder of a Black man, enormous compassion and concern over the death of a white man. Most galling of all was that most whites, even liberal ones, didn't even notice the discrepancy. But the anger in Selma was not directed against Rev. Reeb. Selma Blacks knew he risked his life to stand with them, and they honored, respected, and mourned him.

During those days when we were holding the line at the Berlin Wall, I met three nonviolent warriors who are indelibly painted on the walls of my memory: Annell Ponder, Septima Clark, and Dorothy Cotton. Three Afro-American women who though almost completely unknown to the general public and the mass media were key members of SCLC's bedrock leadership. The organization's visible leaders were all ministers, all male, and except for Dr. King, all competitive and self-promoting. Not so Septima, Dorothy, and Annell, who labored quietly behind the scenes doing much of the grassroots organizing work that sustained SCLC's local affiliates and built a cadre of local activists and leaders across the South. While some in SNCC condemned SCLC for its seeming

lack of interest in local community organizing, no one in SNCC who actually knew those three ever included *them* in that criticism.

Mrs. Clark, 66 years old at the time, had been born in 1898, the daughter of a former slave. She, Dorothy and Annell were the main leaders of the Citizenship Schools, which I had never heard of but was soon enormously impressed by. Originally a project of the Highlander Center in Tennessee, SCLC had rescued the program in 1961 when Highlander had come under ruthless legal attack by the state.

Under the innocuous cover of adult literacy classes, at a time when government repression and KKK terrorism were smothering other forms of Black resistance, the Citizenship Schools taught democracy and civil rights, community leadership and organizing, practical politics, and the strategies and tactics of nonviolent resistance and struggle. Eventually almost 10,000 citizenship teachers, most of them unpaid volunteers, were conducting classes across the South in churches, kitchens, and beauty parlors, on front porches and beneath shady trees in the summertime and around wood-burning stoves in the wintertime. Those classes and SCLC's teacher training program developed many of the local Freedom Movement leaders who became the backbone of the struggle — people like Fannie Lou Hamer, Hollis Watkins, Victoria Gray, and Marie Foster — folks who may not have been well known to the public at large, but who were giants within their own communities.

Howard Zinn once described Annell as "tall, black-skinned and beautiful," and certainly I found her so. For me she epitomized the steadfast essence of a true Freedom Movement organizer. The truth is, I had a crush on her but was too shy to say anything.

Day after day the vigil continued. In cold rain and blazing sun we held the line at Selma's Berlin Wall across the middle of Sylvan Street. Rachel West later wrote:

During that time it seemed each day and each night was like the one before it; nothing changed. The rope stayed there, we stayed there, the troopers stayed there; we'd sing hour after hour until our throats became hoarse. The rain fell, fell almost constantly. The sun would come out briefly, then it would start raining again. We'd be soaked to the skin. It would turn warm; it would turn cold.⁷

And while the vigil continued without pause, the Carver projects seethed with life and energy. More supporters from the North were showing up — mostly white, some Afro- American — as were Freedom Movement activists from across the South — mostly Black, a few white. SNCC folk showed up from Mississippi, Georgia, and Arkansas, so did CORE members from Louisiana and Florida, as well as NAACP and SCEF folk from all over.

Out on the line it was the young Selma students who were the soul of the community's resistance. They were the ones who bore the brunt of direct action

protests and marches. Throughout the South, youth who were too young to vote themselves played a vital role in the struggle for voting rights. Not that I was all that far from them in age, they were 15, 16, 17, and 18 and I was an "old man" just turned 21 and not yet registered to vote myself because I had no fixed state of residence.

Two of Selma's student leaders remain vivid in my memory more than 50 years later. Charles Bonner, "Chuck" to everyone who knew him, was tall, very dark, and thin as a rail. He had graduated from Selma's segregated R.B. Hudson high school the year before and had recently been expelled from the private, Baptist-run Selma University for leading student marches to the courthouse. By virtue of his courage, skill, and experience, when he was on the line he was the students' picket captain and recognized as such by any SCLC and SNCC field secretaries or local movement leaders who might also be present.

Former Hudson High student Bettie Mae Fikes was the daughter of gospel singers. Her voice rang with the clarity of crystal, soaring over all others as she led the teenage song leaders in Brown Chapel mass meetings, belting out the verses, leading the call, guiding the response. She later became a professional blues singer.

Gray-haired Nannie Washburn was at the other end of the age spectrum. White, Georgia-born, child of sharecroppers, a textile worker from age seven, a union organizer in the 1930s like my parents, and a life-long Red, she was a stalwart opponent of racism and exploitation. After Bloody Sunday she answered Dr. King's call along with her blind son and her daughter Nellie. When you're 65 no one thinks of you as a "child," but if they did she would have been the poster child for the concept of "feisty." Some years later, in reference to the Brown Chapel kitchen she told reporter Howell Raines:

Well, ... my daughter, son, and I we refused to eat the Jim Crow food, because there wasn't anybody in the kitchen a cookin' except black women that was older than ... as old as I was, and I was sixty-five. ... I went to Rev. Hollis and asked him. I said, "We not gonna eat ya Jim Crow food." And he says, "Why?" I said, ... "My daughter has droved us, my son and I, down here, and I didn't think I'd come to a Jim Crow kitchen." And he said, "You a guest." I said, "No, I'm not. I just one of 'em." And he said then, "I don't know nothin' we could do about it." I says, "Well, don't you think the black women's been in the kitchen too long cookin' for the white people?" And he commenced studyin', and he said, "The only thing I can do is to let yo'r daughter go in the kitchen. I wouldn't let you." You know, I was sixty-five.⁸

She later marched the entire distance from Selma to Montgomery and then volunteered as a Freedom Movement nurse in Marengo County to the west of Selma, where she was arrested on vague charges. The authorities concluded that as a southern white woman she was obviously insane for associating with and supporting Blacks, so without trial they incarcerated her in the state mental

institution for 21 days before Movement lawyers could finally locate and free her.

Finally, on Monday March 15, after six days of confrontation and tension came victory. The Wall was struck down! A federal judge had issued an injunction permitting a march to the courthouse and a memorial service for Rev. Reeb. We surged out of Brown Chapel into Sylvan Street and immediately began forming a march column three abreast behind those still holding the vigil line. Deputies, possemen and troopers gripped their billy clubs with white knuckles. Angrily, grudgingly, they stepped aside, their faces a mask of hate, frustration, and defeat.

Singing *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us 'Round*, a thousand or so Afro-Americans and two or three dozen white supporters marched forward. As we passed the spot where they had blocked us for so long I was filled enormous satisfaction and pride. Under the terms of the injunction we were not allowed to gather in a group at the courthouse steps or otherwise block street traffic, so only those at the front of the column were actually able to hear Dr. King's brief memorial tribute and prayer. But we all marched by the steps singing *We Shall Overcome*, and tasted the sweetness of triumph.

Then that evening, a hush fell over the projects. Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, was inside, gathered around a TV or radio to listen as President Johnson addressed Congress on the issue of voting rights. The Wests' living room was packed with their entire family and at least a dozen Movement people — SNCC and SCLC organizers, Jonathan Daniels, other northern supporters, and myself. The kids were on the floor watching, chin in hand, adults were perched on every stick of furniture and the stairs leading up to the second floor. No one spoke. The intensity of our attention was palpable.

To this day, my feelings about LBJ remain deeply conflicted between respect for his civil rights accomplishments and rage at his obscene war on Vietnam. But that night he spoke as a true American statesman. He called for strong, effective, and immediate voting rights legislation. Then he echoed our signature slogan, "We shall overcome." There were tears, and cheers, and smiles a mile wide. Rachel West later wrote:

I remember lying on the living room floor in front of the set, watching, listening. It seemed he was speaking directly to me.

"The effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessing of American life must be our cause, too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really, it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

"And we shall overcome."

When he said that all the people in the room, my sisters, my parents, the ministers, all cried out and applauded. I just lay there watching, listening. Somebody had heard us. ...

Except for that one time, we just listened quietly. Once in a while I'd hear my mother or father agree with an, "Um-hmm," but that was all. I remember after his speech going over to Sheyann's, and she was just sitting there in the living room, thinking about it.

And I said, "You hear that speech?"

And she says, "I heard it." Then after a long time she said, "But he's there in Washington, and we be down here by ourselves."⁶

Voter Registration March ~ 1965

After the memorial march to the courthouse, the siege that had kept us confined in the Carver project dissolved. Troopers and deputies remained, but the number of roving Klansmen began to dwindle. It still wasn't safe for identifiable Movement supporters to wander around white neighborhoods or the white section of downtown, but if we were careful, and willing to endure being cursed, heckled, and harassed by possemen, we could venture into the Black business district just east of Broad Street.

I don't remember if the mayor's emergency decree banning marches was overturned, or withdrawn, or simply evaporated into irrelevance, but at some point during the next few days several hundred of us marched to the courthouse to resume demanding that they register Black voters. Unlike the student-led protests, this was mainly a march of Afro-American adults defying white supremacy. By attempting to add their names to the voting rolls, they were risking their jobs, their homes, and their lives. Some of them had applied and been denied multiple times.

Under an order from a federal court, previous applicants were allowed to be listed in an "appearance book" and queue up for admission to the registrar's office according to numbers they had been issued. Sheriff Clark and his deputies herded us all into an alley behind the courthouse. Then he ordered the Black applicants with numbers to line up on the steps at the back-door service entrance (using the public front entrance was a privilege reserved for whites).

Those of us who were supporters waited in the alley while the line of voter applicants slowly crept forward as they were allowed to enter the courthouse one person at a time to fill out the registration forms, which were four pages long.

While we waited in the alley we were surrounded by deputies and troopers gripping their clubs in both hands — obviously itching to start swinging at our heads. We waited. We waited. Inside, the registrar clerks processed the applications and administered the tests as slowly as humanly possible. Over the course of hours, only a handful completed the process and most of the applicants never made it inside the door. It would be weeks before those who completed the complex procedures learned if this time they had been added to the voting rolls — or had once again been denied.

Like a Runaway Slave ~ 1965

Federal Judge Frank Johnson was famous in liberal circles as a “racial moderate,” one of the few such judges in the South. So after Bloody Sunday everyone assumed he would quickly rule that American citizens had a constitutional right to march from Selma to Montgomery to petition for redress of grievances. But that didn’t happen.

To the amazement of legal experts, it took SCLC lawyers *nine* days of hearings and testimony to win that ruling in what everyone had assumed would be an obvious, open-and-shut, slam-dunk case of First Amendment rights. There was a lot of speculation as to why it took him so long to issue his ruling. Some of the more cynical activists (like me, for example) suspected that he was deliberately delaying and stalling until his political ally LBJ announced his proposed voting rights bill. That way, his political patrons in Washington could then spin the march as a pro-Johnson demonstration in *support* of the administration rather than a protest *against* federal inaction in regard to Afro-American voting rights. In any case, on Wednesday, March 17 he finally ruled in our favor.

SCLC and the volunteers like me who were working with them immediately shifted our efforts from courthouse marches to organizing and preparing for a five-day road trek to the Alabama Capitol in Montgomery.

One morning I was sent on some errand to the First Baptist Church, a block down Sylvan Street from Brown Chapel. First Baptist was one of the three main Movement churches in Selma and after Bloody Sunday the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR) set up an emergency aid station in its basement staffed with volunteer doctors and nurses.

When they weren’t treating injured protesters they provided free care to anyone who needed it — though they had to be careful, since the state medical establishment refused to honor their out-of-state licenses, so they were limited in the services they could legally provide. Nevertheless, Black folk quickly started coming to them for medical problems that Alabama’s system of segregated healthcare ignored, refused to address, or priced out of their reach.

While I was down in the basement I noticed young Black woman creeping down the stairs, cautiously, almost furtively. She was carrying an infant maybe a week or so old. Even I could see it was bad sick. Clearly frightened, she kept her eyes cast down as she spoke softly to these white strangers. She was a sharecropper living on a rural plantation out in the county somewhere. Her newborn was dying, but the landowner refused to let her bring it to a doctor.

That was no surprise. In Alabama’s Black Belt, plantations were still run like it was 1865 not 1965. Dallas County field hands were supposedly paid \$1.25 for a 12-hour summer day — sometimes not even in cash but rather in credit at a

crooked company commissary. That's about 11¢ an hour for hot, backbreaking labor (equal to 88¢ an hour in 2018). Plantation owners didn't want to pay medical expenses for their "pickaninnies," and they were not about to risk their "help" being contaminated with the kind of radical ideas they might encounter in a town where "Martin Luther Coon" was preaching sedition against the southern way of life.

But like slavemasters of old, that plantation owner couldn't entirely suppress the grapevine, that secret rumor line that ran like an invisible network beneath the notice of the white power structure. Somehow she heard about doctors at First Baptist who would treat Afro-Americans for free. In the dead of night, like a runaway slave, she had snuck away carrying her child all the way to Selma on foot through miles of fields and bogs.

She was clearly frightened of what the owner would do when he discovered her escape. She knew she could never return to what had been her home. The MCHR nurse kept reassuring her that she wouldn't be sent back, but she was terrified. They say on TV that "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." I don't know if that's true, but I do know that what happened on those feudal Alabama plantations in the 1950s and '60s was buried there, never to be spoken of or revealed to outsiders. And I know that Sheriff Clark and his deputies would have dragged her back to that plantation in a heartbeat — no one the wiser and no questions asked. After all, she couldn't vote, she was no one.

I was just there on some errand when she came in. My assignment was elsewhere and I had to leave without knowing what happened to her or her child. I have no doubt that MCHR did what was needed regardless of license technicalities. And they wouldn't have forced her back to the plantation or turned her over to the sheriff so I don't know what happened to her and her child — though over the years and decades since I've often wondered. Recently, though, I came across the following paragraph in a letter I wrote a couple of weeks later quoting Dr. Herbert Krohn of the MCHR:

"Most people are malnourished. Especially with vitamin deficiency. I have seen some babies with starvation diarrhea. One baby was brought to me at the point of death. I saw a child with a classical case of malnutrition such as you read about in concentration camps. It is very common to see malnutrition masquerading as obesity because of the high starch and low protein diet."

Marching to Montgomery ~ 1965

The march from Selma to Montgomery would take four days. On the fifth day we would march from the city outskirts to the Alabama Capitol Building where we were determined to speak our truth to the power of Governor Wallace. The logistic challenges were enormous. Food — where and by whom

would it be obtained and cooked? How would it be kept more or less hot and delivered to the marchers out on the road? Clean drinking water. Portable toilets. Jackets and rain gear. Tents and sleeping bags. Garbage and trash pickup. Trucks and transport. Radio communications. Portable generators at campsites to provide security lights at night. And so on, and on, and on.

With an adequate budget, a professional staff of paid event organizers could have easily pulled it together in no more than a month or two. We had three days and hardly any money at all. And other than a few military veterans of WWII and Korea, no experience whatsoever in multi-day road marches. So everyone pitched in as best they could. Precision and coordination ranged from haphazard to nonexistent, but enthusiasm and energy were high.

The route from Selma to Montgomery followed U.S. Highway 80, a stretch of road that in Alabama was (and still is) known as the "Jefferson Davis Highway" — the largest Confederate monument in the nation. It was four lanes wide leaving Selma, narrowed to two lanes across Lowndes County, and then widened to four lanes again in Montgomery County. Under the rules issued by Judge Johnson, an unlimited number of people could march on the four-lane segments but for traffic safety reasons no more than 300 could march across Lowndes County on the two-lane blacktop.

Of course, everyone wanted to be among the 300 who would "go all the way." Well, everyone but me. I was a true Angeleno, I loved to drive — hiking was not my thing. Those chosen to be among the 300 included 250 Black Freedom Movement veterans from Selma and the surrounding counties plus 50 out-of-town notables and special honorees, most of them Afro-American, a few white. Those not chosen to "go all the way" were asked to volunteer for one of the logistic committees — food, transportation, etc.

Protection from hostile whites, particularly the Ku Klux Klan, was our biggest concern. Under the judge's order, the county sheriff's departments and state troopers were required to facilitate and protect the march, and the federal government was ordered to send in Army and National Guard troops for the same purpose. We knew that many deputies, troopers, and Alabama guardsmen were dedicated racists and some were actual KKK members themselves. The Guard's shoulder patch was the Confederate battle flag — the same "stars and bars" that adorned Klan pickup trucks and that hostile whites screaming "the South shall rise again!" and "niggers go home!" waved at us.

So we knew we had to form our own security teams. I volunteered for the campsite night watch which was led by Morris Samuel, an Episcopal minister whom I had known through L.A. CORE. He had been one of the moderates that N-VAC rebelled against, but neither he nor I carried that contention into Alabama where we worked well together.

As soon as the march date was set, Freedom Movement supporters from all over America began flowing into Montgomery and Selma by plane, bus, and car. Some came from as far away as Hawaii — they made themselves known by handing out beautiful flower leis. Contingents also arrived from voting rights battlegrounds across the South, bringing with them memories of their own struggles and suffering.

On Saturday afternoon, March 20th, olive drab jeeps and trucks of the United States Army began appearing on Selma streets, rolling through town to the county armory. Rifle-armed GIs with fixed bayonets — Black and white both — were soon standing sentry on street corners, replacing the hated troopers and possemen. When President Kennedy had sent troops to Oxford Mississippi in 1962 to quell rioting whites enraged about the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi, Afro-American soldiers had been disarmed and shunted aside so as not to offend the white racists. To his credit, President Johnson did nothing of the kind, and seeing Afro-American fighting men in uniform standing guard over them was a huge point of pride for Selma Blacks who welcomed them as brothers.

The Army troops were followed by sullen members of the now-federalized Alabama National Guard — all white, of course — who resentfully reported to their military commanders. Some of them didn't have to travel far, they lived in Selma, Montgomery, and adjacent counties. Among them, I was told, were some of the possemen who had beaten freedom marchers on the bridge during Bloody Sunday.

The March to Montgomery was scheduled to start from Brown Chapel at 10am on Sunday morning. By 11am, Dr. King and most of the dignitaries had finally arrived to commence the pre-march mass meeting. The church was so jammed I didn't even try to squeeze in. It was well after noon before the 3,000 or more marchers begin lining up on Sylvan Street, filling its entire width. Afro-Americans, mostly from Selma and the surrounding counties, made up the bulk of the marchers, but there were hundreds of Movement activists of all races from both South and North. We stepped off just before 1pm, a mere three hours behind schedule.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River humps up out of Broad Street like an ugly hill of steel and asphalt. It was named after a Confederate general who later went on to become a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. It felt good striding up the middle of the road to the bridge crest with thousands of like-minded people all around me, it was like I was walking over his defeated and discredited memory. I believe in nonviolence as an effective strategy and tactic, but while I deeply admired Dr. King, I was not one to love my enemies.

Sheyann Webb later expressed some of what I felt so much better than I ever could:

What I remember so much about that day was the happiness of the people. I had never seen them like that before. When we finished singing *We Shall Overcome* we started off and went to the bridge and there were soldiers with rifles and bayonets everywhere, protecting us. Well, when we crossed that bridge and started on down the road for Montgomery, the people just seemed like something had been lifted from their shoulders. They were so proud, but it was a pride that was dignified. We had always maintained that dignity.⁶

A furious crowd of hostile whites had gathered on the flatland across the bridge where the troopers had attacked the original march on Bloody Sunday. They had cars with "I hate niggers" and "Yankee trash go home" painted on their sides, and they jeered, and cursed, and waved Confederate battle flags as we strode past singing. We held them in utter contempt and no one deigned to respond to their obscene and racist taunts. I could tell, though, that their vitriolic hate and almost hysterical verbal violence shocked and frightened some of the white northern supporters who had never personally encountered that form of traditional southern gentility. Nor were they prepared for the local newspaper stories claiming that the nuns and white women who had come to support the march were only there for sexual orgies with Black men.

Army soldiers in jeeps escorted us past the shouting whites while two military helicopters circled above us. As we marched down the Jefferson Davis Highway toward Montgomery I noticed that soldiers were checking under every bridge and culvert for explosives. Earlier that morning, five dynamite bombs had been discovered before they exploded at Afro-American churches, schools, and homes in Birmingham.

That day the march covered only seven miles to a campsite on land owned by David Hall, an Afro-American farmer. Seven miles doesn't sound like much, but it was a hard trek for people like me, used to driving everywhere and just walking from the parking lot to the checkout counter. A lot of the marchers, and not just northerners, were weary and footsore by the end of the day.

Advance teams had set up four large tents. Two were sleeping tents for the 300 who would go all the way — one for men, the other for women. The third was for supplies and equipment, and the fourth tent was the MCHR emergency first aid station. Almost 100 volunteer doctors and nurses from around the country had responded to the call, arriving in Selma with their canvas first aid satchels ready to treat injured and wounded if there was another attack like Bloody Sunday. A fully equipped mobile field hospital had been provided by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and local Black funeral parlors loaned hearses to act as ambulances if necessary. As it turned out, none of those preparations were needed. The medical teams mostly dealt with blisters, sunburn, insect bites, indigestion, and exhaustion.

Since only the chosen 300 would be camping overnight, the other 3,000 marchers had to be taken back to Selma. Carpools had been arranged, but by now

night had fallen and the crowd of hostile whites by the bridge had turned into an ugly mob — bigger, angrier, and more violent than before. Cars driven by Blacks and autos with northern license plates were being hit by rocks and threatened with assault despite the presence of soldiers and cops. It was clearly too dangerous to ferry people back to town by automobile. Some were taken by hastily assembled buses using a roundabout route to avoid attack. The remainder were ferried to a nearby railroad stop where a special nine-car train chartered by the Justice Department returned them to Selma.

Food for the 300 marchers and those of us overnighing at the campsite in support roles finally arrived in a rented truck. Cooked by Black women laboring in the kitchen at Green Street Baptist Church, the lukewarm spaghetti, pork & beans, and coffee were ladled out from brand-new steel garbage cans. Squares of corn bread were cut from large rectangular baking pans. Gourmet it wasn't, but we devoured it quickly and regretted that there wasn't more.

The day had been pleasantly warm, but the night turned so cold we could see our breath. The 300 marchers bedded down in their sleeping bags while I and others of the night watch patrolled the perimeter. The Alabama National Guard — the "Dixie Division" — was supposed to be guarding our camp from Klan raiders. But most of them were facing inward with their loaded rifles obviously ready to protect the "southern way of life" from us. We trusted them not at all, so our team of unarmed Freedom Movement veterans patrolled the perimeter on the alert for Klan attackers and warily watching the guardsmen to make sure that none of them were "cleaning their rifle" in our direction. If we saw any danger our orders were to raise a shout and a warning. Unstated, but well understood, was our duty to nonviolently stand between the threat and the sleeping marchers. Fortunately, that did not become necessary.

By sunrise the temperature was down to 28 degrees. Sparkling white frost crusted the leaves, and the water buckets had a skin of ice. The marchers woke stiff, cold, and grouchy from sleeping on hard ground. A *New York Times* reporter wrote:

At dawn the encampment resembled a cross between a *Grapes of Wrath* migrant labor camp and the Continental Army bivouac at Valley Forge. The marchers, bundled to the ears with blankets and quilts, huddled around the fires...¹⁰

Though we didn't know it at the time, this would be the most comfortable — or, rather, the least uncomfortable — campsite of the entire march. After a more or less warm breakfast of oatmeal, toast, and coffee delivered in the metal trash cans, the 300 marchers formed up and headed down the highway into Lowndes County.

Known as "Bloody Lowndes," KKK terror ruled the county with an iron fist. Just driving through it on US 80 was so scary that we often sang freedom songs in the car to keep our spirits up. The brutal history of Bloody Lowndes

was a tale of exploitation, land seizures, evictions, arson, beatings, murders, and frameups on false charges. Over 80% of the county's population were Afro-American and not a single one had been allowed to vote since the turn of the century. Zero. Zip. Nada. None. As Carl Golson, the Registrar of Voters, explained to a reporter, "I don't know of any Negro registrations here, but there is a better relationship between the whites and the niggers here than any place I know of."

A carload of us from the night watch accompanied the marchers into Lowndes. We'd drive ahead and pull off the road, wait for them to pass, then leapfrog forward. The first sign of the approaching march was the loud *thwop-thwop-thwop* of helicopters circling above. A state trooper car then appeared on the two-lane blacktop moving slowly at footstep pace with its blue warning lights flashing. It was followed by Army jeeps containing rifle-armed soldiers. Then came the lead marchers with American and United Nations flags waving in the wind and behind them the marching 300 — men and women, some old, some young, most in the prime of life. They were singing and talking and walking proud. Behind them came the vans and cars of the news media with their cameras clicking and whirring. Then the MCHR medical van and finally the support truck with port-a-potties and other equipment followed by more soldiers and state trooper cars.

That portion of Lowndes was mostly pasture, cotton and corn fields, alternating with stretches of swamp where gloomy trees trailed long veils of Spanish moss and the dark water was slimy with algae. Charles "Chuck" Fager, an SCLC staff member later wrote, "The dead trees seemed like the stumps of burned crosses, and it was easy to imagine mutilated black bodies, the victims of the county's quiet methods of social control, bloated and rising suddenly out of the mud ..."

At first the few isolated Afro-Americans living in dilapidated, "shotgun shacks" along the highway watched the march go by in silent astonishment. No one in Lowndes had ever seen such a public display of Black pride, Black assertiveness, and Black opposition to white racism and white power. Equally astounding was the sight of Black and white, men and women, marching together as friends and allies. Then as word began spreading through the grapevine, Blacks began to gather along the road to wave and cheer. If you look at photos of those who dared come out to show support for the march you can see such enormous joy in their faces.

One of the places where we waited in our car for the march to catch up was across the road from a White Citizens' Council billboard claiming to show "Martin Luther King at a Communist Training School" (the photo was actually from a speech about the Montgomery Bus Boycott that he gave at the Highlander Folk School). The marchers passed it by with laughter and derisive comments. We also passed other billboards like "Help get the U.S. out of the U.N.," and a round

sign with crossed American and Confederate flags saying, "Citizens Council, States Rights, and Racial Integrity."

By mid-morning the sun had turned hot and bright and on the open stretches sunburn was becoming a problem. MCHR nurses distributed white sunscreen ointment and some of the young marchers used it to write "Vote" on their foreheads.

By now, we of the night watch were exhausted and bleary-eyed, so our car finally headed back to Selma, where we hoped to catch a few winks of sleep before resuming guard over the second campsite, which was in the center of Lowndes County on land owned by Mrs. Rosie Steele, a Black woman 78 years old who told a reporter:

At first I didn't think it amounted to much, I guess I've lived too long and just didn't think things would change — until I heard the president's speech the other night. ... When they come and asked me if they could use my land I felt I couldn't afford to turn them down. If the president can take a stand, I guess I can too. ... I don't know, I almost feel like I might live long enough to vote myself.¹¹

It took great courage for her to defy the Lowndes County Klan and Citizens Council power structure by offering her land for our use and we were grateful to her. Unfortunately, however, her field was infested with swarms of red ants that bedeviled and stung us wherever we sat to eat or lay down to sleep. Selma was by now 20 miles distant, and when the trash cans of spaghetti finally arrived the food was cold and congealing.

That night as we stood guard it began to rain, a light drizzle at first that by mid-morning the next day had turned into a downpour. The marchers hit the road early after lukewarm coffee and a breakfast gone cold in the cans. At first they tried to stay dry with make-do ponchos made from plastic garbage bags and improvised hats from flattened cornflakes boxes, but between the hard blowing wind and spray kicked up by passing cars, the marchers were soon drenched to the bone. Though they didn't know it, their bedrolls loaded on a stake-bed truck were also getting soaked through beneath a leaky tarp.

It was raw spirit, grit, and determination that kept them going. Chanting "*Freedom! Free-Dom! Free-Dom!*" they crossed over Big Swamp in a driving rain on a long causeway raised above the dark foreboding water. For some marchers, cheap fake-leather shoes were all they owned, and now they were beginning to fall apart. One young woman taped cellophane around her feet to keep on marching. Legs and feet were sore, soaking wet garments chafed and rubbed, blisters ached and burned with every step. "*Free-Dom! Free-Dom! Free-Dom!*"

The third campsite, just before the Montgomery County line, was on the Robert Gardner farm owned by A.G. Gaston of Birmingham. Though by afternoon the rain had dwindled to an intermittent drizzle, the site was soggy and dotted with standing puddles. The dark soil had turned to thick sticky mud

that oozed over shoes and glued down feet. Unless you stepped carefully your shoe remained stuck and your sock-clad foot plopped down into the wet goo.

The advance crew had spread hay on the ground, but that just thickened the quagmire. We had to slog through mud, stand in mud, sit in mud, eat in mud, and sleep in mud. Dinner of BBQ chicken, peas, and carrots was provided by Tuskegee students. It had to be eaten either standing on exhausted feet or sitting in cold wet mud. Cheap air mattresses had been obtained from somewhere and people tried to sleep on them but many deflated in the night and marchers awoke in clammy ooze.

Breakfast the next morning came from Selma, now more than 40 miles distant. It was cold coffee, cold toast, and cold oatmeal choked down in cold mud. Few of the marchers had managed a good night's sleep in their wet, clammy sleeping bags and by now those of us on the night watch were running on adrenaline fumes. Everyone was caked with mud, exhausted, sullen, and gritty-eyed.

But the day dawned warm and bright. As the 300 marchers slogged down the road they began shedding their jackets and ponchos and piling them into the supply truck. Then everyone was abruptly soaked by a sudden spring shower.

When we reached the Montgomery County line where the road widened to four lanes and the 300-marcher limitation ended, we of the night watch jumped out of the pickup truck we were riding in and merged into the marching column. Another rain shower was pouring down. Suddenly this incredible frision of energy ran through the entire line and we all started singing like crazy. It felt like Louis Armstrong blowing "When the Saints Go Marching In" at his most passionate.

Trucks, and cars, and a couple of chartered buses started pulling up with people jumping out to join the march, the vehicles rushing back to Montgomery and Selma to pick up more marchers. The column grew longer and longer — 400, 500, 600 — everyone singing, singing as loud as we could against the rain.

By the time we reached the Montgomery city limits the shower had tapered off and we were now a thousand strong. We came up on motel row, just the Ramada and Holiday Inns back then. The room maids — all Black of course — were out in front with their mops and pails and linen carts and they were just staring, just looking, smiles as wide as the sky. Standing right behind them were their white managers and they were staring too but with completely different expressions. A couple of the maids looked back at their boss, looked again at us, threw down whatever it was they had in their hands, and ran out to join the march — still in their uniforms. I couldn't believe it. But I saw it happen.

The line continued to swell as we passed through the outskirts and into the city proper — 1500 — 2000 — 3000. By the time we reached the final campground

at St. Jude, we were 5000 strong. Thousands more were on hand to cheer us in through the brick gateposts and tears were flowing down my face. And I tell you true, tears flow again today as I write this remembrance.

The City of St. Jude's was a Roman Catholic institution providing education, health, and social services to Afro-Americans. Dr. King's two eldest children had been born there. Here too the ground was soaked from days of rain, though the mud wasn't as deep as at the Gardner farm.

By evening there must have been 10,000 people milling around. The logistic operation that had been performing miracles on a shoestring for four days was swamped, the volunteers exhausted. One of the old generators began to fail, plunging portions of the campground into periods of partial darkness. The food truck couldn't get through the crush or find the 300 road-marchers to deliver dinner. A tentpole broke and the canvas partly collapsed. Trucks and cars became mired in the mud.

Nobody cared — we had made it! We had marched from Selma to Montgomery in the face of Wallace, in defiance of the cops and troopers, in the teeth of the Klan.

For me, the march from Selma had been a study in contrasts. The contrast between the magnificent beauty of the march as a political and social concept and the daily discomfort and petty misery of actually being part of it. The stark contrast between the smiling happy faces of the cheering Black supporters along the way and the sullen, hate-filled faces of white lawmen, guardsmen, and grim-faced onlookers. The marchers were odiferous and ill-clad, dirty, disheveled, with blankets and knapsacks on their backs and sometimes barefoot. The soldiers, many with Confederate patches sewn on their uniforms, were well-equipped, neat and clean. Most intense of all was the contrast between the marchers' determined "We'll never turn back" spirit and the frustrated, angry, and yet somehow impressed-in-spite-of-themselves attitude of white Alabamians.

Long-time Movement supporter and dedicated social justice activist Harry Belafonte organized a free "Stars for Freedom" show for a huge crowd at St. Jude. From an improvised outdoor stage laid atop coffins loaned by Black funeral homes, Mahalia Jackson, Dick Gregory, Joan Baez, Leonard Bernstein, Nina Simone, Nipsey Russell, Pete Seeger, Sammy Davis, Odetta, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Peter Paul and Mary, Ella Fitzgerald, and scores of others entertained the throng.

I was told the next day that it had been a fabulous show, but I neither saw nor heard any of it. I had been up all night for three nights straight on security duty with no more than a few hours sleep and then had marched all day into Montgomery. I was utterly exhausted and just fell out. I lay down in an empty tent to rest for "just a moment" before going to see the show. I could hear Peter,

Paul and Mary singing something in the distance. The next thing I knew, some kid was kicking me awake next morning because they had to start taking down the tent. I missed the whole thing. But everyone sympathetically assured me it had been absolutely amazing.

That Thursday morning, the 25th day of March 1965, there was bustle and confusion everywhere. The ground was still soggy, there was light morning drizzle, and cars were spinning their tires in the mud. Like a tide coming in, inevitable and relentless, a river of Movement supporters from South and North were pouring onto the grounds for the final leg of the march through the heart of Montgomery to the State Capitol.

Singing their hearts out, some 200 Tuskegee, Alabama State, and Montgomery high school students who had been arrested on SNCC-led protests in the city proudly marched into the swelling throng, having just been released after enduring incarceration in Kilby prison. A mass of Tuskegee and Tougaloo students and adult contingents from Birmingham and Bessemer, Gadsden, Anniston, and Tuscaloosa joined the multitude. From Jackson and Meridian, Mississippi; Atlanta, Albany, and Savannah, Georgia; Northern Florida and the Carolinas; and from other embattled communities across the South came carloads of civil rights activists to participate in what we all knew by then was going to be the climactic march of the decades-long campaign for voting rights — a battle that some were now referring to as the “Second Reconstruction.”

Rumors were rife that KKK assassins were stalking Dr. King and security was tight — so tight that Army sentries refused to let his car enter the St. Jude gate. Andrew Young, then Ralph Bunche of the United Nations, and finally King himself tried to talk their way past the young sergeant dutifully manning his post. To no avail. Finally a Montgomery motorcycle cop recognized King and yelled at the GI, “You danged fool. This is the man! Let him through!”

Those of us who had been part of the night watch were issued armbands and designated march marshals, as were other volunteers. Big James Orange, an SCLC field organizer, explained the plan, which was for King, selected Freedom Movement leaders, and special guests to join the 300 and together lead the march to the Capitol. Fluorescent highway-worker safety-vests were being handed out to identify those who were to have the vanguard honor.

That was the plan. But all sorts of other people were trying to snatch the vests so they’d have the pride of “leading” the march with King. Some heads of major organizations, out-of-town preachers, and those simply filled with their own self-importance insisted that they were entitled to march side by side with King. They resented having to follow behind “kids” — meaning the 300.

But the young protesters who had marched all the way were having none of that. Selma student Profit Barlow, age 17, shouted back at them, “All you dignitaries got to get behind me. I didn’t see any of you fellows in Selma, and I

didn't see you on the way to Montgomery. Ain't nobody going to get in front of me but Dr. King!"

As King tried to reach the head of the column to start the march he was intercepted by Montgomery County sheriff's deputies who served him and other Movement leaders with multiple lawsuits and summonses for a variety of nonsensical offenses and phony court claims. Just one more petty, mean-spirited act on the part of Alabama officialdom.

We marshals tried to help Dr. King reach his place, but we were overwhelmed by a surge of the vainglorious eager to be seen and photographed next to him. Rosa Parks was supposed to accompany King as a special honoree. I remember she was wearing rimless granny glasses, and her long hair, now beginning to turn gray, was wrapped in a neat bun. She was rudely shoved aside by dignitaries in fine suits. Mahalia Jackson tried to hold a place for her (nobody was able to push Mahalia Jackson around), but I later saw that Mrs. Parks had found a spot farther back among the rank and file. She didn't seem to mind, but she knew who she was and she was proud of it. "You know," she told me, "some folks call me the mother of all this." I assured her I was one of those who considered her to be so.

There was no way short of violence that those self-important bigshots were going to allow themselves to be separated from King or prevented from getting as close to him as they could shove themselves. So the SCLC field staff quickly adapted, placing the 300 in their orange vests ahead of King as a kind of honor vanguard, leaving behind them an open space for reporters to photograph the march "leaders" — both actual and self-appointed.

With all this *mishegas* going on, the march was almost two hours late getting started — not that unusual for Freedom Movement events, as I was coming to learn. Singing strong, with American flags waving in the breeze, more than 12,000 of us strode out of St. Jude's. An equal number were impatiently waiting to join the column at various staging areas along the four-mile route to the Capitol.

As we marched through Afro-American neighborhoods the column grew bigger and bigger as the assembly point groups merged in. Other folks simply stepped off their porches to join. All along the way Black folk waved and cheered us on with huge smiles and grins. This was a Thursday, supposedly a school day, and we passed a Colored elementary school where kids were jumping out the windows to join the march — the Negro principal futilely standing in the door trying to stop them.

When we entered the downtown business district the streets suddenly became eerily quiet. Governor Wallace had proclaimed a "danger holiday" for female employees (whites only, of course) and urged all whites to stay away. Most had complied, but a few knots of hostile white men jeered and taunted us

with racist slogans and chants. Lines of troopers guarded every foot of state property from our odious presence. Plywood panels had been placed over the bronze plaque on the plaza at the Capitol to prevent any Black feet from "desecrating" the spot where Jefferson Davis had been sworn in as president of the Confederate States of America in 1861.

Ever since I was a kid I've had a passion for history — not the doings of kings and generals but the history that was forged up from below by people struggling for justice and freedom. We passed Holt Street Baptist Church, where in 1955 a very young Dr. King had addressed the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He had been just 26 that day, five years older than I was on that March day in 1965.

Our route took us not far from the Greyhound Bus station where the Freedom Riders were so brutally beaten by a white mob in 1961. And as we turned up Dexter Avenue we went by the bus stop where on a dank, dreary December night less than ten years earlier, Mrs. Rosa Parks had refused to move to the back of the bus and endured the humiliation and terror of a lonely arrest. By now I'd lost track of her in the huge throng, but I knew that today she was no longer alone. Today she was proudly walking with 25,000 fellow freedom warriors — Black and white.

Tears were again flowing down my face and I was not alone in that as we surged up the gentle rise of Dexter Avenue toward the looming Capitol edifice. The march column was by now so long it took over an hour for all of the marchers to finally fill the full eight-lane width of Dexter, from the foot of the Capitol steps back for blocks. Law enforcement authorities — no friends of the Freedom Movement — estimated a total number of 25,000. The media and historians to this day accept and repeat that figure without question. Movement organizers and participants thought the number to be higher, but there was no general consensus as to the actual total, so 25,000 is what everyone says.

In the final analysis though, what defined this march was not numbers, but rather *who* the marchers were. Almost all of them were hard-working southern Blacks — farmers, maids, sharecroppers, laborers, and a smattering of teachers and business owners — all determined to end both white supremacy and the "southern way of life." Though the overwhelming majority of the marchers were Afro-American and poor, the media, as usual, focused its coverage on the white and the notable.

The speakers' platform was just a flatbed truck equipped with microphones and loudspeakers. The rally began with songs by Odetta, Oscar Brand, Joan Baez, Len Chandler, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Leon Bibb. I could see big tripod-mounted TV cameras recording the event, and I later learned that it had been broadcast live until Mary Travers — young, blond, and beautiful — joyfully kissed Harry Belafonte on the cheek. At which point so many outraged whites

around the nation swamped studio phone lines that CBS switched to their regular soap operas until a counter-flood of equally angry viewers on the other side of the issue forced them to restore coverage.

Dr. King gave the main address. Today it's known as the *Our God is Marching On* speech. It was powerful and moving. By now I'd heard him speak several times in mass meetings and, of course, I was present for his *I Have a Dream* speech at the March on Washington. But if *Dream* was a call to conscience and hope, on this day, standing on a makeshift platform at the foot of the Alabama State Capitol with the hated Confederate flag flying from atop the dome and surrounded by state troopers in blue battle helmets gripping their clubs and scowling in anger, he delivered a declaration of truth to power, articulating what Afro-Americans across the South wanted to say — directly and unambiguously — to a white-supremacist power structure whose oppression they were no longer willing to endure or tolerate.

From his truck-bed podium, Dr. King could easily see Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where just ten years earlier he had begun his ministry as a small-town pastor and then risen to fame as leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. While I listened to him I wondered if that personal journey was in his thoughts as he ended his speech with a declaration of faith that still rings across the decades:

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"
I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the
hour, it will not be long, because, "truth crushed to earth will rise again."
How long? Not long, because "No lie can live forever."
How long? Not long, because "You shall reap what you sow."
How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward
justice.
How long? Not long, because:
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
Our God is marching on.
Glory, hallelujah!
Glory, hallelujah!
Glory, hallelujah!

Glory, hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.¹²

The Murder of Viola Liuzzo ~ 1965

As was so often the case with Dr. King's great speeches, a surge of hope, pride, and commitment uplifted us all and the throng responded with fervent

cheers and applause. For mass movements to be sustained over time, anger alone is not enough, there must also be hope, optimism and a long-term vision, which King provided in a manner and degree never replicated since.

By the time the rally ended it was late afternoon and now confusion reigned as the marchers in their thousands began dispersing. Hundreds of supporters who had come directly to the city from distant locales needed help finding the homes and churches where their luggage was waiting and then transportation to airports and bus depots. The Black-owned taxis were overwhelmed, and white taxis wanted nothing to do with "agitators" and "race-mixers" of any color.

Thousands of Afro-Americans had to return to Selma, Wilcox, Perry, and other Alabama communities and counties. With what little funds they had left, SCLC had chartered some buses — but not nearly enough. Most of the Alabama marchers had to be ferried back along US 80 in hastily organized carpools. I managed to catch a ride back to Selma with some SCLC folk I had become friendly with. All of us were exhausted and hyper with the emotion of the day and the success of the march.

From the moment we left Brown Chapel in Selma five days earlier to the end of the program in Montgomery the U.S. Army and federal law enforcement agencies had kept us all safe. Now that elaborate protection system began to rapidly wind down just as thousands of people were headed home through Klan country. It was a premature withdrawal that cost Mrs. Viola Liuzzo her life when a KKK "action team" gunned her down on the US 80.

I don't recall seeing her shot-up car by the side of the road so I assume I must have reached Selma before the killers chased her down. It's probable that we had passed her going the other way as she drove back to Montgomery to pick up more marchers. I don't remember how I learned of her murder, probably at Brown Chapel or the SCLC office later that night.

Leroy Moton, a local student active with the Movement whom I had met several times, had been in the car with her. Covered in her blood, he had feigned death when the Klan killers came back to check on their work. When he managed to catch a ride back to Selma with others returning from the March, he reported the assassination to the police, who immediately arrested *him* — apparently on the assumption that if a Black man was riding with a murdered white woman he *had* to be the culprit. We knew he was a witness the KKK would try to silence. Fortunately, Movement lawyers were able to get him out before he was murdered in jail. He was spirited away to safety in the North.

I hadn't known Mrs. Liuzzo but I felt her murder deeply with a seething mixture of rage, sorrow, despair, and fear. Which, of course, was exactly what her killers wanted. A couple of days later I joined a small memorial service by the side of the road in Lowndes County where she had been shot, and later at a nearby Afro-American church. We prayed, listened to eulogies, and stood in a

circle holding hands while we sang "We Shall Overcome." It all felt totally inadequate.

I also remember the campaign of character-assassination and racist, sexual, and political slander that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover later waged against her memory — no doubt to divert media attention from the fact that a long-time, well-paid FBI informant was in the Klan car with the killers and did nothing to halt the murder or dissuade the killers. And whom some believe was himself one of the shooters.

Green Clouds and Klan Trucks ~ 1965

On a warm spring day in early April a week or two after the march, I was driving some folk from Montgomery to Selma in an old Volkswagen minibus we used for Movement work. Shortly after we crossed into Lowndes County on the two-lane blacktop of U.S. 80, a pickup truck with a Confederate flag license plate on the front bumper came up fast behind us. It was driven by a pair of white men. We were trained to prevent anyone from pulling up alongside us on the open road — that's how they shot Mrs. Luizzo — and so far as I was concerned, any car with a Confederate plate was presumed Klan. But a VW minivan with a load of passengers couldn't outrun an old jalopy, much less a modern pickup. I told my passengers to lie down on the floor.

Up ahead of us was a Trailways bus which we didn't have the speed to pass. By flooring it, I managed to pull up close behind in the hope that if the men on our tail had evil intent the possibility of witnesses might deter them. Maybe. I hoped.

Then local Selma kid who was riding in the shotgun seat muttered, "Uh-oh."

"What?"

"Look up ahead."

As the road swerved left and right, I could from time to time see around the bus. A thick band of dark black clouds stretched across the horizon in front of us. It was a springtime squall line — a bad one — moving fast in our direction, and the highway to Selma was taking us right into it. We began passing cars that had pulled off the road to hunker down in open areas away from any trees. The pickup was now only a few feet behind us, practically riding our bumper, and with Klan on our tail, we didn't dare halt.

As the squall line came closer I could see that the lower portion of the clouds were not black but green from leaves and branches stripped from trees by the gale-force winds. Winds that were already beginning to rise around us as the first fat drops of rain began splattering against the windshield. This was the

kind of weather front that spawned tornados and it had everything except an actual twister-funnel. The Klan truck behind us was no longer my main concern.

Suddenly the minibus was buffeted by a gust so powerful it tilted us over on our left side wheels with the right side off the pavement. I swung the wheel hard left to bring us down. The wind lashed at us. The van shimmied and shook as I fought the wheel to keep us upright. Lighting flashed like rock-concert strobe lights. The continuous roll of thunder was deafening. Rain flooded against the windshield like it was being pumped from a fire hose. Blowing leaves and branches were smacking into our windows. Suddenly a flying something smashed into a side window, cracking it into a maze of shatter lines. We were terrified.

So I did what we always did when we were scared.

*“Wade in the water,
Wade in the Water children,
Wade in the Water,
God’s gonna trouble the Water!”*

As I’ve mentioned before, I can’t sing for shit, but everyone else joined in as I fought the wheel to keep us upright and moving.

*“Who’s that yonder dressed in red,
Wade in the Water,
Must be the Children that Moses led,
God’s gonna trouble the Water!”*

The Trailways bus had slowed to 10mph and I tucked in as close behind as I could, almost touching its bumper, for whatever shelter it might provide. The rain was now so heavy I couldn’t see if the pickup was still behind us. All I could see were my slapping windshield wipers and the blurry red tail lights of that big bus a couple of feet in front of us.

*“Who’s that yonder dressed in black,
Wade in the Water,
Must be the hypocrites turning back,
God’s gonna trouble the Water!”*

Somehow, somehow, we made it though. After a while the wind began to drop and the rain tapered off. The Trailways bus picked up speed and I let the gap between us widen. There was no sign of the pickup truck with Confederate plates. Though the highway was littered with tree branches and leaves and there were wide pools of standing water on the pavement and shoulders, it was still open to slow traffic. As we approached Selma I saw that the “Martin Luther King at a Communist Training Camp” billboard set up by the White Citizens’ Council had been blown over.

God’s gonna trouble the waters indeed.

Boots on the Ground ~ 1965

In Hollywoodland, good triumphs over evil in the epic battle, the lovers are always reunited, the credits roll, and everyone happily goes home. In real life — not so much.

After the March to Montgomery, SCLC staff member Charles Fager later wrote:

To most [Alabama Blacks] the march had been nothing less than a kind of miracle, with wonders piled on wonders: the president's address, the coming of troops to protect them from Wallace, Lingo and Clark, the influx of whites ready to stand, suffer, and even die with them in their struggle, and soon enough a voting law which would open up the voting booths to them. They had made more history in three weeks than most of them had ever studied in their lives. Throughout the rest of the spring they were still trying to comprehend it all, savoring the memories it left, and basking in its lingering euphoria. They were also a little exhausted, especially the people in the counties around Selma who had been most actively involved. Thus they were by no means ready to put on their marching shoes again on cue and go right back out to repeat or even surpass the march's accomplishments. ¹¹

Selma after the march, however, still remained largely segregated. Sheriff Clark's reign of police terror had been somewhat weakened and was now to a degree constrained by public pressure and the threat of federal action. But he, his posse, the courts, and the powerful White Citizens' Council were still committed to maintaining the traditional Jim Crow "southern way of life." As a visible symbol of that determination, Clark wore a prominent "Never" button on his chest.

Within Selma's Afro-American community, however, the old habits of subservience and fear were dying a well-deserved death. With a united community behind it, the Black boycott of Selma's white merchants had taken hold in support of demands to end job discrimination and the daily humiliations of Jim Crow segregation. Political organization was flourishing, with a strong cadre of local leaders, an empowered Dallas County Voters League (DCVL), and local ward groups with elected leaders developing neighborhood programs.

By April, most of the outside supporters had returned to their homes, but in addition to a small cadre of SCLC and SNCC field staff a fluid group of around a dozen or more unaffiliated civil rights activists — like me — remained to lend support to community organizing, voter registration efforts, and the mass meetings which were now being held two or three times a week rather than daily.

I was still living off the money I had saved working for the Yale grad students. That was not difficult because many of my meals were provided by local Movement supporters and for a while I was still sleeping on top of the Wests' washing machine, though by the end of April I had graduated to a spare bed in the home of a local activist on Green Street.

In the rural South at that time, male freedom fighters of all races were quite attractive to many of the local Afro-American girls. We had a kind of macho glamour and our connection to, and familiarity with, the great world outside of small-town Selma was alluring. Teenage girls and young women flirted with us a lot — yes, even with me. Nella, Alice, and Charlene were the oldest of the West girls, all in high school and so beautiful they put me in mind of that line from the Song of Songs, "Dark am I, yet lovely, daughters of Jerusalem." Living in their home as I did for almost two months, the West girls came to trust me enough to flirt, even when their mom, Alice, was present.

As a randy young man recently turned 21, I must confess that I was flattered and quite tempted. Yet if there was one thing I had learned from overhearing my parents when they thought I wasn't listening, it's that nothing divides and destroys social movements quicker than messing around with wives and daughters. So I was determined to treat the West girls as if they were younger sisters. Somehow I managed to hold to that resolve — but, oh, it was difficult. So very, very difficult.

The March to Montgomery and the dramatic events leading up to it had been a once-in-a-lifetime event — not in any way typical of day-to-day civil rights work in the Deep South. Once the march ended and the hoopla subsided, I had to learn how to be an effective, full-time southern freedom activist with all that entailed. SCLC and SNCC were continuing their work in Selma and the surrounding Black Belt counties and there was intense rivalry between them — I knew I would have to choose one or the other. Before going South I had assumed I would join the staff of either SNCC in Alabama or Mississippi or CORE in Louisiana, but that's not the way it turned out.

I never saw myself as any kind of community leader, and though SNCC exalted the role of "organizer," I didn't see myself as that either. I was a young, inexperienced, northern white guy — what did I know about organizing a Black community? Nothing. Planning and coordinating protests, yes, that I knew. The scut work of operating and maintaining a political action organization, that too I could handle. So my role, as I understood it, was to be an ally, to assist local Movement leaders however I could. To perform whatever staff work they needed, and to make available to them what limited skills I might possess.

I also understood that an important aspect of my role was to simply endure and, in defiance of Klan, Citizens Council, cops, and courts, survive as an advocate for racial justice — and by so doing show that it could be done by others. I also came to see that I was living witness and political proof to both Blacks and whites alike that the Freedom Movement was a struggle between right and wrong, not a race war of Black against white. The local Afro-American leaders and SCLC staff I worked with clearly understood that if the conflict was framed as Black versus white they would inevitably be outnumbered and overpowered politically. The presence of white allies at their side helped define

issues in right-against-wrong ways that gave them at least a fighting chance of winning.

Many of the Black SNCC workers, however, were moving away from that view towards a more nationalist stance that saw no role for white civil rights activists in Afro-American communities. So I found myself more and more in the company of SCLC folk. While some of the SNCC staff I encountered in Selma were warm and friendly, others were antagonistic and even deliberately hateful towards white activists like me.

SNCC was also increasingly hostile towards nonviolent direct action protests which they felt disrupted and set back their strategy of deep community organizing. As I saw it, though, organizing and protests were complementary, each one strengthening the other, and that to achieve substantive reforms both were necessary — an opinion that became firmer the longer I worked in Alabama and Mississippi and an opinion I continue to hold to this day.

So despite the fact that SCLC did not maintain as large a field staff as did SNCC or CORE — and therefore my chances of being added to their staff were poor — somewhat to my surprise I found myself gravitating towards the SCLC folk who were engaged in the traditional kind of “Black and white together” organizing and nonviolent protesting that had been my political world since that first Torrance picket line two years earlier in 1963.

Not long after the March to Montgomery I accompanied James Orange and Andrew Marrisett, two longtime members of SCLC’s field staff, to a local freedom march in Marion, where a month earlier Jimmie Lee Jackson had been shot to death by state troopers. Marion was a tiny hamlet, the classic southern seat of rural Perry county. An imposing courthouse painted entirely in pure white with six stately columns occupied the central square. Lining the four streets surrounding and facing the square were the post office, jail, bank, a couple of churches and funeral homes, and brick stores some with second stories where the doctor, dentist, and other professionals conducted their less than bustling businesses.

About 50 people rallied in the little Zion Methodist church on the edge of the miniscule “downtown” district, mostly Afro-American locals with some SCLC organizers and a couple of white activists like me. Then we marched by the square to encourage a Black boycott of the white-owned stores. Since we were violating anti-boycott and anti-picketing laws we expected to be arrested, but the police and troopers just fingered their cattle prods and glared or smacked billy clubs against their gloved hands — what a difference the Freedom Movement had wrought from a month earlier, when those same cops had reacted with savage violence to a similar freedom march.

A few days later I rode down to Camden, the seat of Wilcox County, with Charles Bonner and a carload of other young Selma activists. After an afternoon mass meeting in a rural roadside church, maybe 75 of us started marching two by two along the side of the highway towards the courthouse where we intended to hold a voter registration rally. Suddenly, out of nowhere, white men on galloping horses charged into our line, cursing, yelling, and flailing at us with long clubs, walking canes, and bullwhips.

"It's Clark's posse!" shouted one of the Selma kids.

A blow across my back knocked me down and I rolled into a roadside drainage ditch with grass growing in an inch or two of stagnant water. I heard the clatter of horse hooves on the pavement as the posse pulled back and then, *Pop! Pop!* A cloud of acrid, eye-burning teargas enveloped me. I felt like I couldn't breathe. Gasping, choking, and coughing, somehow I managed to get out of the ditch and retreat back towards the church along with everyone else.

By the time we got inside, the cloud of gas had dissipated but our clothes and skin were covered in the residue, and our sweat reactivated the fumes. My clothes were so drenched with the toxic chemicals that when I put them in the washing machine the next day, eye-stinging vapor drove everyone out of the West family's kitchen.

A number of people in the church were battered and bruised and some were being tended to by MCHR volunteers. SCLC leader Dorothy Cotton, who had been one of the march leaders, rose to the church podium. Proud and defiant, she spoke not at all but rather sang the most emotional and memorable rendition of "Why Was the Darkie Born" that I've ever heard. To this day, the memory still haunts me and sends shivers down my spine.

*"Mommy, why was the Darkie born?
Mommy, why was the Darkie born?"*

*Somebody had to pick the cotton,
Somebody had to pull the corn,
Somebody had to build a great nation,
That's why the Darkie was born.
That's why the Darkie was born.*

*Somebody had to cry at midnight,
Somebody had to weep and moan,
Somebody had to love everybody,
That's why the Darkie was born.*

*Somebody had to go to jail,
Somebody had to walk a picket line,
Somebody had to fight for freedom,
That's why the Darkie was born."*

Shotguns, Cockroaches & Old Jim Crow ~ 1965

The social insanity and petty humiliations of segregation never failed to both shock and infuriate me.

To make it difficult for Klan assassins to target Dr. King, his addresses to Selma mass meetings were always held on short notice with little advance publicity. Some of the more affluent Afro-Americans had telephones, and while kids passed out "King will speak tonight" flyers in the poorer neighborhoods, we made calls to alert people and encourage them to attend. The Selma phone directory made it easy for us to distinguish whites from Blacks. If the name was preceded by "Mr." or "Mrs." we knew the number belonged to a white person. If there was just a name — "Marie Foster" or "Alonzo West," for instance — we knew the number was that of an Afro-American. While it proved very helpful to us, I was astonished at the bigoted, small-minded lengths segregationists — even those working for major companies like "Ma Bell" — would go to reinforce their sense of white superiority.

That April we did a lot of door-to-door canvassing in Black neighborhoods to encourage people to honor the boycott, continue trying to register if they hadn't already done so, and attend the next mass meeting. Unlike Los Angeles or other residentially segregated northern cities, Selma was divided into a patchwork quilt of Black and white areas, some large, others quite small. And while whites in general were much better off economically than Afro-Americans, there were plenty of poor whites living in shacks no different from those of Blacks. Yet in Selma it was easy to tell which race lived where. If the street was paved it had white residents, if it was dusty dirt or gooey mud Afro-Americans lived there. Some streets alternated back and forth, paved and dirt, white and Black. Like the absence of courtesy titles in the phone book, the dirt streets showed us which homes we could safely approach.

Canvassing was hot and tiring. It was also frustrating and depressing. Two things struck me again and again — the constant, all-pervasive fear we encountered and the wretched poverty. Like many other northerners, my most intense memories of being a southern freedom worker were not of Klan violence, mass protests, inspiring oratory, or filthy jail cells, but rather images of devastating, systemic poverty — remembrances of tumbledown sharecropper shacks, children thin to the point of emaciation, and babies so comatose from malnutrition that they had not the energy to brush away the flies drinking the moisture from their suppurating eyes.

After the passage of four decades, I thought I had buried those mental images until TV reports of hurricane Katrina's aftermath in 2005 forcefully reawakened them, reminding me once again that beneath America's celebrated affluence are rural and urban wastelands of human suffering and soul-destroying poverty. And that poverty and economic inequality know no color, there are poor whites just as there are poor nonwhites.

By late April I saw myself as — and was seen by others as — an SCLC volunteer. Not yet a member of the SCLC staff or invited to attend staff meetings, but someone who worked with and took direction from SCLC leaders and organizers like Albert Turner, Dorothy Cotton, Big James Orange, Annell Ponder, and Septima Clark. Turner was Alabama field director for SCLC but unlike most SCLC leaders he was a farmer rather than a preacher. He had built and led the local Freedom Movement in Perry County and was one of the finest leaders I have ever worked with — the kind of guy that people refer to as “salt of the earth,” and that Jews like me call a “mensch.”

The common practice in Selma at that time was for SCLC and SNCC workers to pair off in two-person teams for canvassing so that each organization was represented and able to share the organizing data we collected. But with so few staff members from either organization left in Selma a lot of that work was being done by volunteers like me. Since I was seen as an SCLC volunteer I was often paired with one of the SNCC workers. One day a Black SNCC guy and I were crossing the railroad tracks at Jefferson Davis Avenue (today it's J.L. Chestnut Boulevard, named after the local civil rights leader and attorney). A car with young white men suddenly pulled up and blocked us. One of them aimed a double-barreled shotgun out the window and shouted, “We're going to kill you niggers!” Without a moment's hesitation the SNCC guy snarled back, “If you're going to do it go ahead and shoot, motherfucker!”

The whites laughed and drove off. Not exactly the kind of nonviolent response I'd been trained to use by CORE and N-VAC — but it worked. We were both a little shaky, though, as we reported back to our respective organizational offices to add the incident to the long list of similar encounters by others.

With spring came warm humid weather — and cockroaches. Apartments all over the Carver Project were infested. They'd crawl on the table while we were eating and over our skin while we were resting. Some were so big you could actually hear the clicking of their legs as they wandered the floor at night. If you turned on the light, you'd see hordes of them scurrying for their hiding places.

Though it was a federal housing project, Carver was totally (and illegally) segregated. All the residents were Black. All the bureaucrats who ran it were white, and they ran it for the benefit of themselves and their white business cronies rather than the residents. The roach infestation was a typical example. They contracted with a pest control company — white-owned, of course, and probably politically connected. But instead of spraying all the apartments in one building to exterminate all the bugs at the same time, they would only treat one apartment and then move on to an apartment in another of the 30 buildings. That way they just drove the roaches back and forth from one set of rooms to the next.

After each spraying there'd be hundreds of dead bugs on the floor in the treated apartment. We'd sweep them up in a mound three or four inches high and

dump them in the trash, but within a day or two they'd be back as plentiful as before. The exterminator company had crews working the project full time, five days a week — paid for by tenant rents — but with no noticeable long-term effect.

And no matter how many times the Black residents complained and argued for killing all the roaches in a building at once, the white managers refused to alter their one-apartment-per-building-at-a-time schedule because it was so profitable for the exterminator company. They knew that if all roaches in an entire building were exterminated at the same time they wouldn't repopulate so fast and the need for exterminator services would noticeably drop. Profits would go down.

When Afro-American residents complained they were ignored. When Movement organizers asked a white reporter inquire, I was told that the managers responded with, "You know how dirty those coloreds are, they don't mind roaches — they like 'em."

In May, word came down from SCLC headquarters in Atlanta that their next big effort would be a multi-state, summer-long, voter registration project called Summer Community Organization & Political Education (SCOPE). In some ways it would be similar to the Mississippi Freedom Summer of the previous year that had been organized by SNCC and CORE. But since the Johnson administration had promised that the Voting Rights Act would be passed by June, it was expected that SCLC's project would actually be able to register large numbers of Afro-American voters in six southern states — enough, perhaps, to influence the 1966 mid-term elections.

SCLC leaders working on that project asked me to join the SCOPE staff and travel to northern campuses to recruit student volunteers. I thanked them but declined. In conversations with other civil rights workers over the years, I've noticed that most of us, particularly those from the North, sort of fell in love with the first southern community we worked in for any length of time. Certainly that was true for me and Selma — I didn't want to leave and return to the North. I was committed to staying in the South, on staff if possible, as a volunteer if not.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place ~ 1965

After the March to Montgomery, SCLC leaders returned to Atlanta, only occasionally showing up to speak at mass meetings, SNCC's focus and attention shifted to Lowndes County, and most of the field staff of the two organizations were now working the surrounding Black Belt counties rather than Selma. Which meant that the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) was left to fend for

itself just at a time when it needed experienced, national-level support to address a new and unanticipated crisis.

Large amounts of food and clothing had been sent to Selma by Movement supporters in the North — a generous impulse that could have strengthened the Movement and solidified the local organization. But no structure or a plan was in place for how to handle and distribute the unexpected windfall. Neither SCLC nor SNCC were paying much attention to Selma, nor were they providing insight or offering advice learned from similar situations in Greenwood, Birmingham, St. Augustine, and elsewhere.

After the March to Montgomery ended, the Medical Committee for Human Rights dismantled their aid station in the basement of First Baptist Church, which was then used to store the goods arriving from the North. The cartons and boxes filling the basement looked like a huge trove, but compared to the needs and hopes of tens of thousands of impoverished Afro-Americans it didn't amount to even a drop in a bucket. What appeared to be a horn of plenty was actually a form of scarcity, because almost everyone, regardless of income level, wanted a share of the bounty. Yet there was nowhere near enough to go around — not even close.

Those who had been most active in the struggle, the men and women who had been beaten and gassed, those who had gone to jail and risked their homes and livelihoods, argued that they deserved the rewards their courage and sacrifice had sowed. On the other hand, those who were most impoverished felt that the bulk of the largesse should go to them because their need was greatest. But precisely because their economic situation was most precarious — and for the most part they were the least educated — they had been less active than others in the protests and few had dared white retaliation by trying to register to vote.

And some Afro-American ministers — including some who had not participated at all in the struggle — asserted that they were the acknowledged community leaders with a long tradition of providing aid and assistance to those in need, so distribution of the windfall goods should be placed in their hands. Their assertion was not met with universal agreement. Many people were convinced that the preachers would skim the cream for themselves and use the remainder to reward favored parishioners who supported them in their church's internal politics, leaving both Movement activists *and* the poorest of the poor out in the cold.

By early May the March to Montgomery unity that had bound together Selma's Afro-American community was being torn apart by bitter acrimony over who was getting what from the donated food and clothing and who controlled its distribution. Angry accusations that the best items were disappearing into the hands of persons unknown began to be hurled — everyone had their suspicions and many had little hesitation about pointing fingers.

Thankfully I was not personally involved in any of that, but I heard disheartening tales of furious arguments, fist fights, and even people being threatened with guns over the supposed treasure in the church basement. Even worse, rumors were spreading that donated funds were unaccounted for or misappropriated. Eventually legal charges were brought against some community leaders and activists for embezzlement and malfeasance. A sad and tragic denouement to what had been one of the widest, deepest, and most courageous local movements of the entire freedom struggle.

Around this time I received a letter from Los Angeles informing me that Michael Robinson had been killed. Mike, a Black man about my age, had been an N-VAC stalwart one of the group's key members. He had always been at the forefront of our sit-ins, shop-ins, and picket lines, and had then gone South to work with CORE in northern Louisiana at around the time I came to Selma.

His death was never fully explained nor adequately investigated. All that CORE could learn was that he had been driving at night on a rural highway, something happened, there was supposedly an "accident," and he was dead. No other cars were reported involved, and I was told that the passenger riding with him was completely unharmed but wouldn't talk about it. She refused to say anything to anybody. We all figured the most likely explanation was that Mike had been run off the road by the Klan and beaten to death, and that the killers had terrorized his passenger into remaining silent by threatening her or her family.

Mike's death shook me. As with Mrs. Liuzzo's murder, I was filled with rage, sadness, and loss. Frustration — from the certain knowledge that here was yet another murder that the racists were going to get away with — etched deep into my soul. And, of course, it intensified my own fear, because I knew that the same thing could happen to me — any time, any where, so long as I was a civil rights worker in the Deep South.

On the Streets of Selma ~ 1965

During that time, Freedom Movement offices were in an old shabby three-story brick building on the corner of Alabama and Franklin streets. On the ground floor was an Afro-American funeral home, on the second floor the SCLC office, and on the third the SNCC office. Directly across the street was a newer three-story structure of yellow brick and white stone. On its street level were City Hall and the police station, above were the Selma and Dallas County jails. You could look from the windows of the Movement offices into those of law enforcement and vice versa. We were literally across the street from each other — though hardly friendly neighbors.

With Selma's Black community dividing against itself over the donated food and clothing, the boycott of white-owned stores was beginning to weaken. Support for the boycott was urged in mass meetings, Sunday sermons, and door-to-door canvassing, but that was no longer enough to sustain it. Boycotting sounds easy — just don't shop somewhere — but Afro-Americans had been shut out of the merchant economy for so long that there were few Black-owned alternatives. A handful of small mom-and-pop stores in the Afro-American community tried to carry the load, but they were systematically overcharged for their goods by the white wholesalers who supplied them, which meant they had to set their prices higher than the larger and better-stocked white-owned stores. As a practical matter, supporting the boycott meant either paying higher prices or traveling 55 miles to Montgomery for supplies and necessities. Few Dallas County Blacks owned cars, and gas was expensive for people living below the poverty line, so honoring the boycott was hard.

Early in May we began passing out leaflets and small-scale picketing to reinforce the boycott. Regardless of what the U.S. Constitution might say about freedom of speech, in Alabama asking people to boycott a store was illegal. In Selma, handing out flyers or picketing were grounds for immediate arrest on spurious charges of "disturbing the peace," or some other trumped-up excuse. Yet though it meant certain arrest, direct action was the best way to publicize and strengthen the boycott. Not only did it get people's attention, the presence of cops and the inevitable disruption and turmoil in the street deterred both Afro-Americans *and* whites from coming downtown to shop.

On Friday May 7th, I and a local kid were handed a small stack of boycott leaflets and told to give them to customers entering the liquor store next door to the SCLC/SNCC offices. This was a state-owned "ABC" outlet run by the Alabama Beverage Control department. I was surprised to learn that socially conservative Alabama was (and still is) in the retail booze business, but as the old saying goes, "Money talks, bullshit walks."

Of course, we knew we would be arrested as soon as we were spotted, and since the store was across the street from the police station, that wouldn't take long. It was also, I assumed, a kind of test by SCLC to see if I was willing to face arrest and how I would handle it.

Sure enough, a minute or two after we started handing out our flyers, Lieutenant "Cotton" Nichols, second in command of the Selma police force, strode across the street and placed me under arrest on charges of disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace, and conspiracy to encourage a boycott. Off to jail I went. The local kid managed to escape around the corner while Nichols focused his attention on me.

Like all white freedom riders, I greatly feared being placed in a cell with hostile white prisoners eager to curry favor with the guards by beating the crap

out of me. So I was relieved to be thrown into the large holding tank for "Colored" men which already contained others arrested on various protesting and boycotting charges. It was a big, dimly lit cell. I don't recall any windows at all and only a few feeble lights. The bars were painted red and the walls some kind of cream color but they were so dark and grimy it was hard to tell. The steel beds had been stripped of their mattresses, the toilet was overflowing, and the stench was overwhelming. Our spirits, however, were high. We sang freedom songs, talked, and welcomed in other fresh-caught "fish" as they were captured and incarcerated.

SCLC was still flush with cash from all the donations that had poured in after Bloody Sunday, and rather than go through a trial and appeal process before white judges and all-white juries, they simply paid my \$17 fine (equal to about \$130 in 2018). I was released the next day.

Meanwhile dissension and conflict over the donated food and clothing was getting worse. Community solidarity was fracturing and the boycott faltering. DCVL leader Rev. Reese was often out of town speaking and raising funds, the main SCLC leaders were usually elsewhere, and SNCC's attention was focused on Lowndes County. It was clear that something dramatic had to be done to prevent the boycott from completely falling apart, so the local leaders called for a large-scale picketing effort. Saturday was the big shopping day. That's when rural Afro-Americans came into town, some in cars or pickups, a few in horse-drawn wagons or on foot. (All Selma stores, of course, were closed on Sunday for the Sabbath.)

Albert Turner was SCLC's field director for Alabama and he knew about my CORE background. I later learned he had written to L.A. CORE to check me out. With most of the SCLC field staff either working in the outlying counties or recruiting for SCOPE up North, he asked me to organize and coordinate the picketing. Okay, that I knew how to do.

I wasn't responsible for mobilizing and recruiting the protesters. The local student leaders handled that, yet it wasn't easy even for them. Most of the high school and college-age students who had been the backbone of the mass protests in January and February were awaiting trial on multiple arrests, and some had been told by their parents not to get busted again until they saw what the outcome was on the previous charges. There were, however, junior high kids who had been kept out of the February marches by their parents because of the danger. Now that it was a little safer their parents were less opposed, and the younger kids were eager to finally protest and show their defiance of segregation and Sheriff Clark.

My job was getting the boycott flyers printed in Montgomery (there were no Black printers in Selma), conducting nonviolent training sessions for the those who were not already experienced protesters, planning strategy and tactics, and coordinating the action.

Using the same approach and format as with the N-VAC training sessions I had run for Bruin CORE, I held my first nonviolent training session in the Movement offices at Alabama and Franklin. There was a large room up on the third floor with an old, warped wooden floor. About a dozen Afro-American kids attended, mostly between 13 and 16 years old, two-thirds of them girls. All went well until we got to the part where I demonstrated how to handle being hit. While the other kids watched, I asked Margaret Griffen to slug me. She was maybe 14 or 15, stood about five foot three, and weighed less than 100 pounds. It had always been quite hard to get the UCLA students to actually strike me (or each other) with any real strength, so as I was in the habit of doing I urged Margaret to "hit me hard."

She looked puzzled. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes, don't hold back. And keep on hitting me."

A huge grin lit up her face. She hauled off and slugged me so hard in the chest I was knocked on my butt and slid across the rough wooden boards, scraping my back and leaving a small scar that I bear to this day. I quickly curled up in the nonviolent protection position while she kicked and pummeled me with great enthusiasm. By now, everyone was laughing — including me. Except for that scrape and a bruise or two, I wasn't hurt. Then they all practiced on each other. In subsequent training sessions afterwards, however, I never made such a big deal about urging the students to "hit me hard."

To be seen on a Selma street carrying a protest sign — even if under your arm or with the lettering concealed — was grounds for instant arrest. We wanted all the arrests and turmoil to take place in the downtown shopping district rather than on the way from Brown Chapel, so well after dark on Friday night we stashed our supply of picket signs in the back of Walkers Cafe on Washington Street and in the empty coffins of the funeral home on the ground floor of the Movement offices at Alabama and Franklin.

On Saturday morning about 50 or 60 protesters gathered in the church. I formed them into teams of half a dozen or so, each led by an experienced captain. The first team was led by a 16-year old girl. They left at mid-morning, casually sauntering into the downtown area in twos and threes, then picking up their signs at the funeral home. When they were all assembled they stepped out on Franklin together with their signs held high. They got almost the full block to Water Avenue before being busted. Every half hour or 45 minutes thereafter, a new team would leave the funeral home or Walkers Cafe and picket as far as they could get before being arrested. The cops scurried around trying to figure out where the pickets were coming from so they could seize the signs. They finally found the stash at Walkers, but though they checked the funeral home it didn't occur to them to look in the empty coffins.

By early afternoon we were down to the last few protesters and almost out of signs. I joined the last team from the funeral home. Only a couple of us had signs, so the rest of us just clapped and sang freedom songs. I guess the cops were tired because we got almost to Broad Street before we were arrested. The cops marched us down the middle of Alabama Street back past the funeral home to the jail.

Close to 75 of us had been arrested over the course of the day. Almost half were under 16 and two-thirds were girls. Their courage was inspiring. When the booking sergeant asked a girl what her name was she insisted on using "Miss" before her name in utter defiance of Jim Crow custom. The cops hit her with their fists and kicked her when she fell to the floor, but she refused to give in, insisting on using her courtesy title. She couldn't have been older than 15. All the kids booked after her also referred to themselves as "Miss," and "Mister" to the obvious frustrated fury of the cops.

Again I was put in the Colored holding tank, which was way too small for the 30 or so male protesters plus the regular prisoners, most of whom had been arrested on Friday night for possession of moonshine or being drunk in public. We were singing our freedom songs, preaching to each other, and defiantly celebrating our protest and arrest with humor and wisecracks. We could hear the girls singing in a nearby cell but we couldn't see them.

One of our favorite jokes was that sooner or later someone newly arrested for the first time would be shoved into the crowded cell and would inevitably ask, "How long do you think we'll be in here?"

A veteran of the cage would reply, "Well, what did you say your name was, again?"

When the new fish answered, the old hand nodded wisely and said, "Oh, yeah, you're on the B-list."

"The B-list? What's the B-list?"

And then everyone would shout, "You're going to beeeee here for a loooooong time!" We all thought that was hilariously funny.

Three middle-aged Black women were in an adjacent cell and we could speak with them through the bars. They were from Bogue Chitto, a little district way out in the deep rural of Dallas County. I don't recall if they had been arrested on the voter registration line at the courthouse on Friday or in a boycott action that morning, but I remember them telling me that to participate in the Freedom Movement they'd walked almost 20 miles to Selma. They weren't boastful, but they showed a kind of quiet and serene pride in having done their part for freedom.

By the next day we had all been released on bond. I never heard how that arrest was resolved, whether SCLC paid a fine or if the case was removed to

federal court under the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and eventually dropped, as happened with many other southern civil rights cases.

[While the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was largely a toothless sham, it did contain an important provision allowing the Justice Department to block state and local prosecution of people who were arrested for activities connected to voting rights. Under that provision, arrests of civil rights activists on minor charges by local police could be transferred to federal court and eventually dismissed if the federal judge determined that the arrest was part of a pattern of police conduct intended to suppress voting rights and interfere with voter registration. Because the boycott was an aspect of the Selma voting right campaign, arrests for leafletting and picketing might have been set aside by federal court without our having to stand trial.]

I coordinated three more Saturday picket actions, though Turner ordered me not to get arrested myself. Despite our efforts though, by early June the boycott had essentially collapsed, largely because of dissension and conflict over the donated food. So far as I know, it was never formally called off, but as fewer and fewer people honored it, it ceased having any economic effect on the white merchants.

Jim Clark and the Commie Kike ~ 1965

On Monday, May 17, the juveniles arrested the previous Saturday were appearing in court. Since I had sent them out to picket, I thought I should be there to support them. As soon as I entered the courtroom the judge furiously ordered me out and the bailiff shoved me into the hall.

I didn't know what to do. Go back inside as a defiant protest or wait outside in the hallway while the kids who had been arrested on the action I coordinated were berated and, for all I knew, sentenced to juvenile jail? Being young, brash, and not too bright, I went back in. Before I could even sit down, the judge ordered me arrested on charges of contributing to the delinquency of minors — a serious felony.

The courthouse was three blocks from the county jail and Sheriff Clark was pleased to haul me off. As he shoved me into the back seat of his car he called me a "communist."

Still operating in brash and stupid mode, I answered, "Communist? What do you mean? What's a communist?"

Clark wasn't stumped at all, he knew the answer right off. "A communist is any God Damned New York kike that wants our nigras to vote!"

Well, except for the fact that I was from Los Angeles he had me dead to rights. If he wanted to define "communist" as someone who thought that American citizens had a right to vote, who was I to argue? I thought he was

giving communists more credit than they deserved, since by that time I was pretty down on the Communist Party. I considered them nothing more than a bunch of liberal do-nothings. And I still resented the way they had treated my parents. But even in brash and stupid mode I knew that wasn't a discussion I wanted to have with Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma, Alabama.

I was booked and incarcerated in the Dallas County Jail, which was bigger, brighter, and cleaner than the Selma city jail. On the downside, though, Clark threw me into a 9x9-foot cell with a white prisoner, saying, "Here's one of them race-mixing nigger-lovers. Why don't you two get acquainted?"

Well, that made the agenda clear. The other prisoner was a big husky guy, taller than me and in good physical shape. As soon as Clark walked away and before I had time to feel much fear he clobbered me. I curled up in my nonviolent defensive ball, making sure to get my back up against the bars so he couldn't kick me in the kidneys. He proceeded to kick me in the shins and my arms, which were protecting my head, to stomp on my ribs, and to punch me wherever he could reach.

After a while, though, he got tired and stopped. I had never quite realized it before, but beating up on someone is hard work. That's probably one reason why professional boxers only fight for three minutes before they get a rest break. I was hurting and bruised, my ribs were sore, and I had some bloody scrapes on my bare arms, but I wasn't really injured in any serious way.

I remained sitting on the floor with my back against the bars in case he decided to go a second round, but instead he sat down next to me. I offered him a smoke. He was out of cigs, so he thanked me and lit up.

As it happened, I didn't smoke tobacco. I never cared for it. And, of course, I never touched pot while I was in the South because it was way too dangerous — if I'd been caught it would have meant a long prison sentence for sure. But like most southern civil rights workers I was in the habit of always being ready for an unexpected arrest, which meant hiding some notepaper and the flexible cartridge of a ballpoint pen in the lining of my jacket and always carrying a pack of Camels or Lucky Strikes to offer other inmates in case I ended up in the slammer — as had just happened.

Another reason even us non-smokers carried cigs was that while driving around the rural areas we would often come across chain gangs of Black prisoners doing roadwork. It was considered a mark of activist professionalism to drop a few smokes out the car window — out of sight of the white guards — as we slowed down to pass them by.

Anyway, there we were, two guys in the same jail cell. He didn't like me or what I stood for — and vice versa — but he'd clearly been in jail for some time and I guess he was lonely. Since we had nothing else to do, we started to talk. He asked me was I really a "nigger-lover" and all the usual crap. Though I was

circumspect in my answers and careful not to allow any anger-feedback dynamic to get started, I didn't deny who I was, why I was in Selma, or who I worked for.

He asked me if I had marched in Camden. I told him I had, and out of the blue he asked, "Did you see me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was in the posse, I was there on my horse." He left unsaid the *beating the shit out of you* part, but we both understood his subtext. He went on to explain that he was a member of Clark's posse.

"But Clark's posse is for Dallas County, what were you doing in Wilcox County?" "Oh, when Sheriff Clark tells you to go, you gotta go."

Yes, I thought to myself — but didn't say — like a feudal baron's armed retainer you're sent to suppress rebellious peons wherever they might be.

"Well, if you're a posseman, why are you in jail?"

So he had this long involved story, the details of which I don't remember. He thought he had been arrested for some crime — burglary or robbery or some such — but he didn't actually know what the charges against him were. He assured me, though, that he hadn't done whatever it was, and that he was being framed.

"You don't know the charges against you?"

He didn't. He'd been in jail for more than a week without, he claimed, anyone officially telling him what crimes he was being held for.

"Well, what does your lawyer say?"

He told me he hadn't been allowed to talk a lawyer or, for that matter, to his family, though they knew he was in jail because they had sent him some smokes a few days earlier.

He had a theory though. He had done something that pissed off Clark — he wouldn't tell me what — and that was why he was being held.

What amazed me was that he didn't seem to feel there was anything unusual about his treatment. He took it as the normal course of events — he'd pissed off Clark and Clark had thrown him in jail out of pique. He didn't like being incarcerated, but he didn't seem to resent being held incommunicado without charges and no bail. His attitude was that eventually Clark would get over being mad at him for whatever it was and he'd be let out. Just another aspect of the southern way of life. A classic case of a feudal thinking, I concluded (but didn't mention to him).

So we sat there talking until sometime in the late afternoon this kid came walking down the aisle between the rows of cells. He was maybe 10 or 11 and obese like Porky Pig. I mean corpulent, his eyes were like raisins set deep in a

doughy face. He saw us in the cell and started taunting us. "Nyaaa, nyaaa you're in jail. Jailbirds, jailbirds." And then he began throwing stuff at us, cigarette butts and wadded up toilet paper and whatever he could find. After a minute or two, a pudgy little girl joined him. She was maybe 7 or 8, and they both taunted us.

"Who are they?" I asked posse guy.

"Oh, they're Sheriff Clark's kids. He knows the niggers are out to get him — and his kids too — so they live in a cell down the hall."

I kid you not. Clark was literally raising his kids in the county jail. They had a cell of their own and though their door obviously wasn't locked they were, in a sense, prisoners too. After dinner we could hear them watching TV, squabbling, and playing. Clark was so paranoid he wouldn't let them go outside unless they were accompanied by an armed deputy to guard them at all times. Their playground was the aisle between the cell rows. I don't know where their mother was, I never saw her or heard a woman's voice.

Normally I like kids, but those two were something else. Years later, I read the *Harry Potter* novels, and the obnoxious cousin he had to live with during the summer brought those two brats back to mind.

Speaking of dinner, the food was utterly vile. Half-cooked lima beans crusted with what seemed to be some kind of chemical, bitter coffee, and slices of white Wonder Bread. I couldn't eat it that first night, nor breakfast the next morning, though eventually hunger compelled me to choke down lunch.

Later, I learned that the common practice was for the state and county to provide the sheriff a small amount of money for each inmate's food. He could spend it as he saw fit to feed his prisoners, and whatever was left over went into his pocket — the less he spent on feeding us, the more he made for himself.

And in many counties the sheriff was actually paid like a for-profit business rather than a public official. In addition to any salary he might receive, he was paid a fee for every arrest, for each court document served, prisoner transferred, and so on. Even better, he was entitled to a share of all criminal and traffic fines. The more people he or his deputies arrested or issued tickets to, the more money he made. Of course, if he was too aggressive he might be voted out of office. But since Afro-Americans weren't allowed to vote, they were easy prey and his personal cash cow. Which helped to explain why Clark and other southern sheriffs were so ferociously opposed to Afro-Americans getting the vote.

Using the pen cartridge and notepaper hidden in my denim jacket I wrote a note to the SCLC office across the street, letting them know where I was being held. One of the Black prisoners was a trustee allowed to go outside on errands for the guards and deputies. I snuck the note to him when posse guy wasn't

looking and he passed it on and relayed a response back for me. For some reason it took SCLC a couple of days to arrange my release. I guess the judge, or maybe Sheriff Clark, were delaying matters. After I was released, I never heard anything more about that arrest either, so I suppose charges were eventually dismissed through federal intervention.

A University Without Books ~ 1965

There were two tiny private Black colleges in Selma: Concordia College of Alabama, run by the Lutheran Church, and the Baptist-run Selma University. Neither had more than a few hundred Afro-American students. In 1965, Selma University (SU) was a "university" in name only, it was not accredited, offered no degrees recognized by the general academic establishment, and its educational program was focused on "Christian training" for a pre-*Brown* social milieu of accommodation to Jim Crow. SU students sarcastically described its academic level as roughly equivalent to that of a white junior high school. Its social structure was autocratic, manipulative, and rigidly controlling — with an intense focus on ensuring that female students remained virgin until suitably married to a "proper" husband.

Beholden to white patrons for its funding, SU's Afro-American administrators and faculty publicly opposed the Selma Freedom Movement and the voting rights campaign as "un-Christian." Students who participated in protests or who worked with civil rights organizations were first disciplined and then if they persisted were expelled on phony pretexts. Despite the risk, some students and ex-students were active in protests, and after the March to Montgomery they began clandestinely circulating petitions and newsletters criticizing the SU administration and advocating reforms. Those who were caught were suspended or dismissed.

In addition to the food and clothing donated by Movement supporters in the North after "Bloody Sunday," thousands of books ranging from college texts to modern best-sellers were also sent. But Selma had no Afro-American community center to make use of them and despite the Civil Rights Act the public library was still, for all practical purposes, white-only. Chuck Bonner, a Selma student leader, SNCC worker, and former SU student who had been expelled for participating in the protests, proposed that the books be given to SU, which had recently constructed a new library building for which they had practically no books — 90% of the shelves were empty. In a sense, the new library could be seen as a metaphor for SU itself, an impressive building without content.

Fearing that accepting the books might be interpreted by whites as support for the Civil Rights Movement, the Black president of SU rejected Chuck's offer. SU students appealed his decision to the Board of Trustees. In late April, Chuck, I, and several others snuck in to eavesdrop on the trustee discussion — the door to

the room where they were meeting had been left open and we quietly lurked just out of sight in the hallway. Almost all of the trustees were opposed to adding the donated materials to their empty library, partly for fear of antagonizing whites, but even more so because they felt it their duty to protect their students from whatever dangerous notions and radical un-Christian ideas might lurk in northern textbooks and reading materials.

Since the trustees didn't know we were listening, they had no idea they were teaching me an important lesson that I needed to understand if I was to be an effective civil rights worker in the South. White activists like me existed in a kind of political bubble because Afro-Americans who opposed the Freedom Movement — either out of fear or sincere belief — carefully avoided contact with us. So we rarely encountered Black opponents of the Freedom Movement and most of the time we interacted only with Afro-American supporters. Today, everyone automatically assumes that back in the '60s *all* Afro-Americans enthusiastically supported Dr. King and the freedom struggle as a matter of course — but in reality that was not the case, which the SU trustees unwittingly made plain to me.

The donated books rejected by SU were later used to establish the Selma Freedom Library, which eventually grew to around 18,000 volumes. For a while, it was one of the largest libraries in western Alabama.

