

BERNICE LILLY STORY
(Retired ATT Supervisor New York)

*This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine*
Freedom Song



“Sometimes I picked cotton out in the country with some relatives outside of Selma. I did not like picking cotton, I didn’t like the country at all, but I had to go there sometimes because my mother was married out there, and sometimes I stayed at my grandfather’s out there, his name was Ernest Coleman. I didn’t like picking cotton, and I didn’t like the country, gathering up eggs and working with the hogs, going in the woods. In Selma we didn’t pick cotton, I liked it in town. On Saturdays my step-grandfather used to go and take the cotton to the cotton gin to get the bags

weighed. It was slavery all over again. I was little. I was about four or five, six years old.

It was Jim Clark and the other policemen and sheriffs, and they had guns and Billy clubs. The Billy clubs, at that time, we called them sticks. They came and arrested us. They lined us up, I think only about twelve of us, and they put us in the paddy wagon and took us downtown to the jail house, the big yellow building on Alabama Avenue. That was the first jail we went to.

It was a regular jail, with bars, and we were prisoners. The policemen were all white, there were no black policemen at that time. They put us in a regular cell behind bars. There were four of us in the cell, Amy Johnson, Janice McCarroll, Vivian Martin, and I, four of us in one cell. They fingerprinted us and took pictures. What you call mugshots. We were treated just like criminals.

They couldn't hold us in the Selma jail very long because when the first twelve went in, there were always another twelve behind us. So the first cycle of demonstrators went to jail, and following us there was another set of demonstrators going to jail, so the jail started filling up. I think we stayed in the Selma jail for about three days or so, because actually in total we stayed locked up for thirteen days.

From the Selma jail they transferred us to the prison called Camp Selma, it was in the country. The same people moved us out there because the Selma jail was full. In our cell there was one toilet, at first for only four of us. We had bunk beds, just cots, two of them. And then they kept adding more and more kids to our cell, until we had about fifty of us in the cell, still with one toilet.

They fed us corn bread and black eyed peas every day, but in the beginning we weren't really afraid. That was when we were in the Selma jail. When they moved us to the Camp Selma prison, a couple of black inmates brought us the food, always black-eyed peas and cornbread. In the mornings perhaps some grits and biscuit, but peas and cornbread every day.

One of my biggest fears was when we were transferred from the Selma Jailhouse to prison. I call it prison. I was afraid because we didn't know whether we were going to get out or whether we were just gonna stay there! And we had the same clothes on. They never gave us a change of clothes. They didn't

give us any toothbrush or any kind of hygiene matters either. We made the best of it by singing all the time, something like “We shall overcome, and other songs.”

At that time we lived at 824 Small Street. Mama LB was always behind us, she was really behind Charles because he stayed out there all the time. She really supported him. Bernice, his mother, didn't say very much, but they were all afraid and tried to keep Charles from going out there so much. Charles and Cleophus Hobbs were always out there. Mama used to lock the windows to keep us in, especially Charles, but after a while they sort of gave up because they knew that they couldn't do anything to stop us. They just couldn't stop Charles at all.”