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THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT FROM 1954 TO 1968



DIANE MCWHORTER
PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF CARRY ME HOME • FOREWORD BY REVEREND FRED SHUTTLESWORTH

1965

SELMA

"Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice."

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, March 15, 1965

Sheyann Webb was all of eight years old and wasn't sure what "voting" meant. But that hadn't stopped her from joining the movement to register black voters in her hometown of Selma, Alabama. On her way to school one day, she had noticed the crowd of civil rights workers in front of Brown Chapel, which, to her amazement, included white people. Even though her parents told her to stay out of that Movement "mess," Sheyann soon became Martin Luther



State and local law enforcement officers block civil rights marchers in Selma.

King Jr.'s "smallest freedom fighter." Whenever he came to Selma, he would hold her on his lap at the pulpit and let her lead her favorite freedom song, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around."

Like Sheyann, many of Selma's black adults did not understand what

voting had to do with their lives. They didn't see that political power would enable them to have a say in who ran the town, the school board, and the police department. Voting was "white folks'

business,” and the white folks had taken pains to keep it that way in the Black Belt, the band of cotton-growing country that cut across the South and was named for the darkness of its rich soil as opposed to the skin color of its vast black majority. Because the white minority didn't want to be outnumbered at the polls, they had thought up ploys to keep blacks from voting. Besides the long-standing poll tax, which meant you had to pay to vote, there were limited registration days

(two Mondays a month in Selma), difficult forms, and “good character” requirements—which one candid Alabama politician admitted would exclude Jesus Christ if he were voting the wrong way. If all else failed, a “citizenship” test made registrants answer questions such as “Who was President Zachary Taylor’s vice president?” and “How many bubbles are there on a bar of soap?” In Selma, the capital of Alabama’s Black Belt, only 325 of the 15,000 voting-age African Americans had been registered, compared with 9,300 of the 14,000 eligible whites. Somehow, barely literate whites always passed the tests, while black Ph.D.s failed.

[114]



SCLC held demonstrations in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964 from March through June. Here, protesters “wade in” at a segregated beach on June 25, 1964. They were attacked by segregationists. A week earlier, during a “swim-in” at a motel pool, the owner poured skin-burning chemicals into the water. SCLC’s St. Augustine campaign ended when President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in July.

On the same day King went to jail, Sheyann and 500 other schoolchildren were arrested for marching.

The kids were carrying the day again, closing in on the nonviolent Gandhian goal of filling the jails. They also provided the snapshots of suffering innocence that engaged the rest of the country. A group of U. S. Congressmen came to Selma to see the indignities for themselves. Initially, President Lyndon B. Johnson had worried about trying to push through voting rights legislation so

soon after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed. He was concerned that it would draw support away from his War on Poverty, a collection of programs designed to benefit African Americans on account of their economic condition rather than their skin color. Now, Johnson reconsidered and announced his willingness to move in behalf of "the efforts of our fellow Americans to register to vote in Alabama."

JIMMIE LEE JACKSON

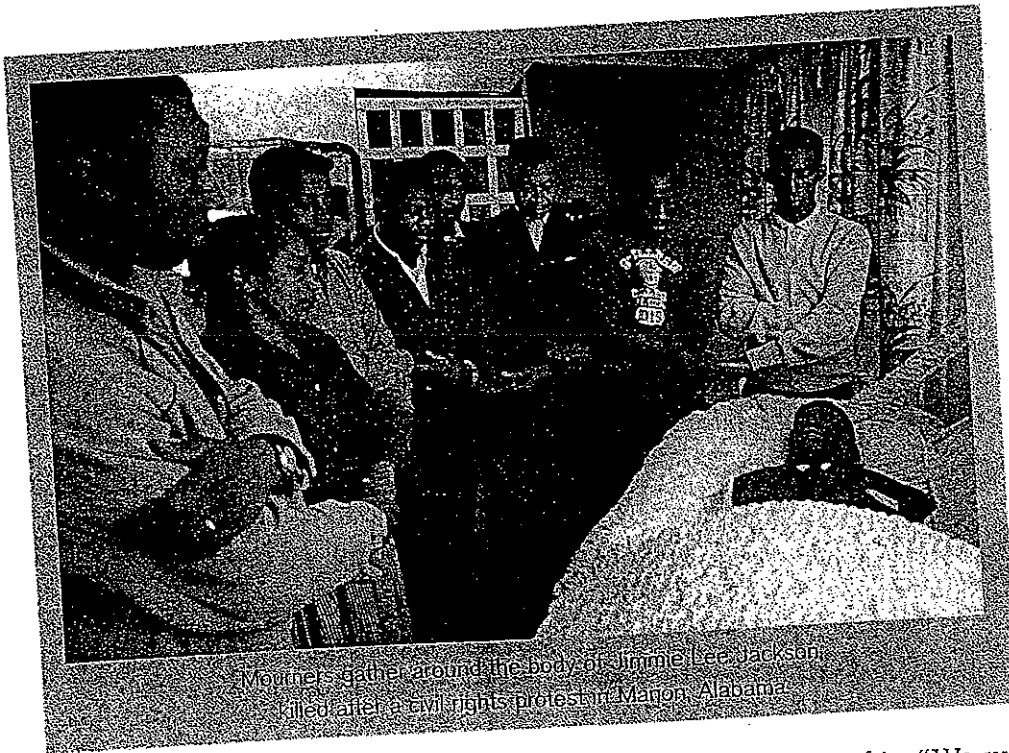
SCLC grew more provocative. In front of the courthouse, one of King's lieutenants, the Reverend C. T. Vivian, taunted Sheriff Clark: "You're racists the same way Hitler was a racist." Clark smacked Vivian in the mouth so hard that he broke his finger. Two days later, on February 18, Vivian went a few miles north to the town of Marion, Alabama, and held a nighttime march, a dangerous tactic given the chaos factor of darkness.

Sure enough, the streetlights went dark after Vivian's rally, and pandemonium set in. State troopers began hitting a black woman. Her 26-year-old



Martin Luther King Jr. accepts the Nobel Peace Prize from King Olav V of Norway in Oslo on December 9, 1964. King later said of the ceremony, "That isn't the usual pattern of my life, to have people saying nice things about me. Oh, this is a marvelous mountaintop. . . . But the valley calls me."





Mourners gather around the body of Jimmie Lee Jackson, killed after a civil rights protest in Marion, Alabama.

son, a local Movement volunteer named Jimmie Lee Jackson, rushed over to protect her. A trooper shot him in the stomach. On February 26, Jackson died. He was the first martyr to voting rights, but not the last.

The Reverend James Bevel, SCLC's rabble-rousing architect of the "children's miracle" in Birmingham, proposed a march to the state capital of Montgomery. He wanted to lay the blame for Jimmie Lee Jackson's death on Governor

George Wallace. SCLC's sensational approach was getting a decidedly mixed reaction from the SNCC workers who had started the Selma voter campaign. SNCC's chairman, John Lewis, whose head had been bashed in four years earlier during the Freedom Rides, was worried about exposing the community to more fatal violence. King himself was under such constant death threats that he dealt with the pressure by making

light of it. "We were lucky in Birmingham, all of us got out of alive," he half-joked to his colleagues. But Selma might be different.

Many in SNCC decided to boycott SCLC's Selma to Montgomery March, which was scheduled for Sunday, March 7, 1965. John Lewis faced a "very dark and lonely hour." He finally decided that he had to break with his SNCC colleagues and march; he couldn't abandon the people of Selma who had given him their trust.

[11]

GOODY SUNDAY

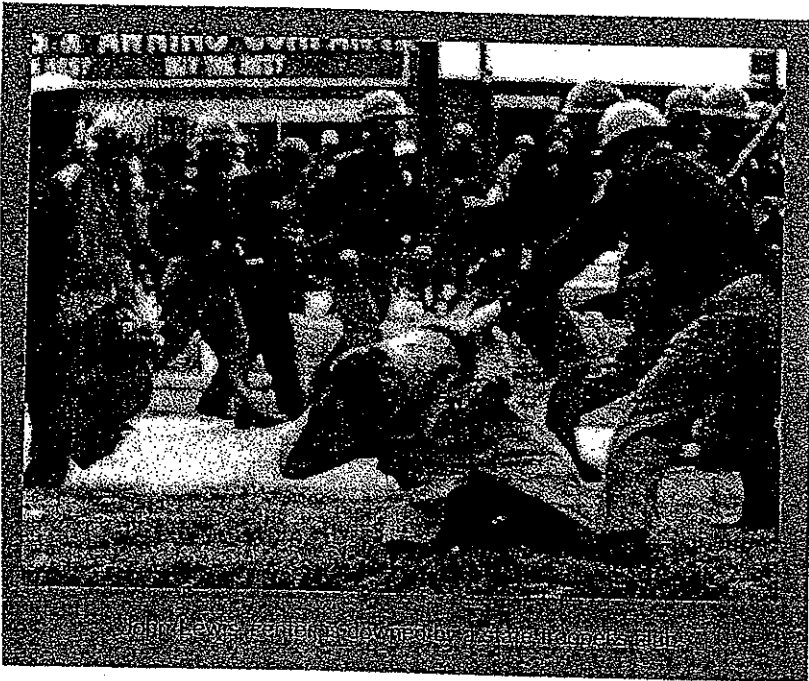
It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, and Lewis found himself at the head of a line of 600 marchers, sharing the leadership duties with SCLC's Reverend Hosea Williams. (King was in Atlanta.) Right up there in front with them was Sheyann Webb. A lot of people had told the girl she was too small, but she was so "spirited up" that she wasn't afraid. Singing freedom songs, the marchers walked east out of Selma, crossing the Alabama River on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. At

the highest point of the bridge, they looked down to the other side upon what Lewis described as "a sea of blue" uniformed state troopers, with tear gas masks dangling from their belts. Sheriff Clark's posse was among them, horses and all.

The major in command of the state troopers ordered the marchers to halt and go home. He gave them two minutes. Sheyann started to cry, and then obeyed the ministers' orders to kneel down and pray. The major issued the call: "Troopers, advance."

First came a line of uniformed cops, striding into the front row of marchers. John Lewis was eyeball-to-eyeball with one of the troopers, who then started clubbing him in the head. As Lewis buckled from a skull fracture, SCLC's Hosea Williams turned and ran. Canisters of tear gas were being hurled at the marchers, spewing a yellow fog. Then came the horses.

Sheyann ran as fast she could. The horses knocked some people off the bridge and down the riverbank. Hosea Williams picked Sheyann up. She told him to put her down because he was not running fast enough. The horses galloped



after the fleeing marchers, their riders clubbing stragglers. Officers on foot shocked the demonstrators with cattle prods. Simply unable to believe the behavior of the white folks, Amelia Boynton, the godmother of the Selma campaign, turned to another woman and asked, "What do these people mean?" Then she was knocked unconscious by a trooper's billy club.

"Bloody Sunday" did not come to an end until Sheriff Clark's horses had chased the demonstrators all the way back to the steps of Brown Chapel. Cameras from the major television networks filmed the action. That night, ABC broke into its regular programming to air the blood-chilling news footage out of Selma. The ABC movie being interrupted was *Judgment at Nuremberg*, about Nazi Germany's crimes against humanity.

"WE SHALL OVERCOME"

At the urging of King, clergy and other interested citizens flocked to Selma from around the country. On Tuesday, March 9, King led 2,000 people over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. But because federal judge Frank Johnson had ordered that no march take place until he ruled on a related matter, King obeyed the troopers' order to stop. The marchers turned around and headed back to the

church. SNCC workers, their resentment of SCLC breaking the surface, mockingly sang, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." The anti-climactic sequel to Bloody Sunday became known as Turnaround Tuesday.

Still, that Tuesday ended in bloodshed. In the evening, a young white Unitarian minister from Boston named James Reeb left a black café with two other visiting white clergymen. A white local whacked him upside the head. After two days in a coma, Reeb died. As the country convulsed in protest over Reeb's death, some SNCC leaders compared that sorrowful reaction to the relative silence that had greeted the murder of the young black man, Jimmie Lee Jackson. They wondered if the Movement was accommodating the racism of a country that paid no attention to their struggle until it took the life of a white person.

On Monday, March 15, President Johnson went on national television and topped John F. Kennedy's modern Emancipation Proclamation of 1963. "It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote in this country," Johnson said. With his hangdog glare, the president announced that he was sending voting rights legislation to Congress. He compared Selma to other landmarks of American

democracy such as Lexington, Concord, and Appomattox, where "history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom." In one of the most electric moments of his presidency, Johnson declared, drawing in his chin for emphasis, "And we shall overcome."

The SCLC ministers watching the address on TV that night began to cheer. C. T. Vivian stole a look at King and noticed a tear running down his cheek.

ON TO MONTGOMERY

Judge Johnson lifted his ban on the Selma to Montgomery March. Governor Wallace claimed that he couldn't protect the "Communist-trained" troublemakers streaming into Alabama by the thousands. President Johnson federalized the Alabama National Guard and sent 2,000 additional soldiers to protect citizens exercising a constitutional right from their fellow Americans.

On Sunday, March 21, 4,000 people set out from Selma and headed east down the Jefferson Davis Highway on the 54-mile, five-day walk to Montgomery. The front of the march was a picture of melting-pot harmony: King, his fellow black Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche, a rabbi, a priest, some nuns, a young white woman, and a white amputee on crutches, whom white Alabamians along the route ridiculed by chanting, "Left, left, left." Selma had become a magnet for celebrities, including actors Marlon Brando and Paul Newman. A number of the "marchers" just put in appearances on the route, driving off at night to a hotel bed.

A core group of 300 pitched tents in the fields, ate meals prepared back in Selma, and



Martin Luther King Jr. (center) former United Nations peacekeeping official Ralph Bunche to the right of King, and John Lewis to the far left lead the march to Montgomery on March 21, 1965. The girls were the girls of a group of marchers from Hawaii.

slept under the vigil of the U. S. military. The scene of Army helicopters hovering over the non-violent campsite was a mixed message of America's great strengths: democracy with the military might to back it up.

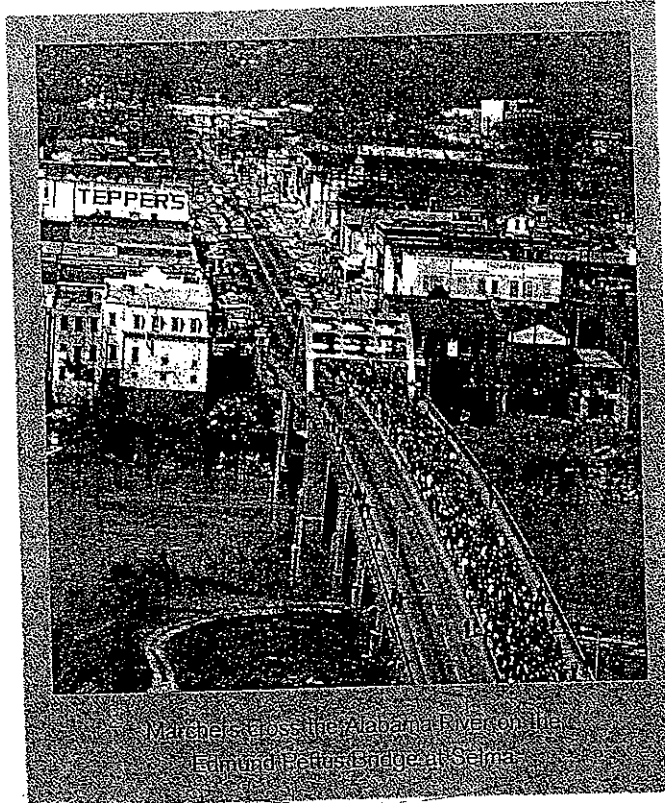
For the first three days, King was there for nearly every step of the way, even on Tuesday, when the marchers walked 11 miles in the rain and bedded down in mud. He ducked out to Cleveland for a fundraising speech on Wednesday. On Thursday, March 25, King was back in the lead, shaking off the reports of yet another plot against his life. More than 25,000 Americans, a thoroughly integrated crowd, rolled into the capital of Alabama that afternoon.

Taking a seat of honor on the speakers' platform near the statehouse was Rosa Parks. One could see King's first church, Dexter Avenue Baptist, close by. From the podium, King recalled

the distance they had traveled since their journey had begun with a bus boycott ten long years before. He quoted Mother Pollard, the ancient boycotter who had said, "My feets is tired but my soul is rested." There would be another "season of suffering," King predicted, but he left his audience with the sense that he himself was rested, on what would be the last major triumph of his career.

How long will it take to get freedom? King asked the crowd. "Not long," he said and summoned his genius at joining hope with reality: "because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

For her ninth birthday, Sheyann Webb asked her parents for a special present: She wanted them to become registered voters. They took Sheyann with them on their first trip to the polls. Her excitement turned to surprise when she saw



Marchers cross the Alabama River on the Edmund Pettus Bridge at Selma.

ow simple the act of voting was. The only thing
it was marking a ballot with a check mark! All

that struggling and suffering for something so basic
to democracy, so fundamental to a human being.

VIOLA LIUZZO: FINAL MARTYR

In her quest to become a useful human being, Viola Liuzzo, 39, a white mother and part-time student from Detroit, had come down to Selma to work as a volunteer. On March 25, as she was driving a black protester back from Montgomery at the end of the Selma march, a carload of Ku Klux Klansmen overtook Liuzzo's green Oldsmobile near the Big Bear Swamp on Highway 80. They shot her fatally through the spinal cord.

One of those Klansmen was the FBI's paid informant, Gary Thomas Rowe. His co-conspirators would later claim that Rowe himself pulled the trigger. At the very least, this violent racist on the payroll of the U.S. government had done absolutely nothing to prevent Liuzzo's cold-blooded execution.

For a time, Rowe became a law-enforcement

hero, testifying in court against his Klan brothers, who were nevertheless acquitted of the murder. But eventually, Rowe's troubling double life as an FBI informant, whose government status allowed him to go unpunished for the crimes he committed as a Klansman, became the subject of a congressional investigation. Rowe's career ended up as another black mark on J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

As the Birmingham church bombing assured the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Liuzzo's death hastened the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was signed by President Johnson on August 6, 1965. Along with the Civil Rights Act, the legislation would be the Movement's crowning achievement, giving African Americans a role in their own political future.