

MEMORIES OF THE MARCH

STONEY COOKS

I was a student at Anderson College in Anderson, Indiana. . . . A group of us, three or four of us, just decided that we were going to take off and go to Selma. . . . The thought was really just for a weekend, that four of us would just go down, two white students and one professor and myself. . . . All four of us were deeply moved by it. In late '64 you had had the letdown of the Kennedy assassination, the March on Washington. All of those kinds of things had passed, and you found yourself like feeling as though you had missed those things, that you had not in any kind of way identified or supported or worked with it. So here was clearly the build-up of another kind of key movement.

One of the unique things about the Southern Movement, particularly in terms of Dr. King's Movement, was that people like myself show up from no place, express a desire to participate and to work *with*, and readily there was something for you to do or someone to bring you in and to give you a feeling of meaningful participation. And that was what was so important about it . . . it was very open. I could have been an agent like many other people were. I hadn't been there for a day, and I had a job doing something, monitoring something, or people would show up from a seminary in California and in three hours they would be a part of a tent-pitching team. . . .

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My Soul Is Rested

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Postscript: His visit "grew from a day to a month to six months to a year to nine years." He joined the SCLC staff, and when Andrew Young was elected to Congress, he became his administrative assistant. In 1977 he joined Young's staff at the United Nations.

RITA SAMUELS

Even though she was a secretary in SCLC headquarters in Atlanta, she had never been in a march or demonstration. She arrived in Selma with the other SCLC office workers on March 20, the night before the big march was to move out for Montgomery.

And when we got there, it was dark, and I just remember I said, "Oh, my God, . . . I wonder what's gon' happen." I think they had already called in the National Guard, and you could see them on every corner. And it was really frightenin', although for some reason, I just couldn't wait to get to where everybody was, like Dr. King and Hosea and everybody, because you really kind of had a feelin' of bein' safe once you got around them. So we checked into the hotel, and Mary, Paul, and what is it . . . the folk singers . . . they were there that night to entertain us, because people had been in Selma for almost a month. We were late goin' . . .

I had never seen any celebrities like that before in person, and I remember Tony Bennett was walkin' through the hotel, and I just could not believe it. Rev. Bennette* was standin' there, and he said, "We want you to meet some of Dr. King's staff." And I've got an autograph in one of my schoolbooks now, because I remember I had some schoolbooks with me so I could study, and he autographed one of my books, my history book. I still have that. That was the first time I had ever seen anybody like that in person. I saw Nina Simone that night and . . . kind of got over bein' scared about anything, because I was so fascinated by all these celebrities and seein' Dr. King talk to them and everything.

When that was over, we went back to the hotel and then the next morning, everybody got ready, puttin' on blue jeans and sneakers and everything to go to the march. And we rode—everybody got in cars and went to certain points and then you'd get out. And you know, all durin' the march, I think I personally felt like I was really a part of a big change that was takin' place, and I just didn't feel any better than anybody else. I was so glad to be a part of it, and I remember it was so many people. Like if you looked in the back of you as far as you could see, you couldn't see

*Fred Bennette, an SCLC official.

nothin' but people. So it was like you were almost trapped. It was no way to get out, and as far as you could look ahead, it was nothin' but people.

HARRY ALSTON

He came down from Chicago to represent his union, the Amalgamated Meat Packers. He was among the three thousand marchers who set out for Montgomery on March 21 under the protection of a federal court order and federalized troops.

I was here . . . when the military was here, and I had a lot of mixed emotions. There is still a radical streak somewhere inside, and I think perhaps at times it was foremost in my mind. To think . . . it necessitated a whole fleet of helicopters flying over above, foot personnel from the Army, Army carriers and whatnot to assure that this thing could be done. You were glad to see all of this and said, "Thank God, at least they are seeing to it that we have the right." But on the other hand, you wonder what kind of government forces a group of people into the position where it takes the military, because Selma at that time was just like an invaded [city] or a city under siege. The only thing that was absent was the firing of the howitzers and blockbusters and other things. For all practical purposes, it was a city under siege. . . .

A WHITE WOMAN FROM SELMA

Now all did not see [what went on]. Some people sat back in their houses and watched the TV, and it was not the true picture. . . . The true picture was when you saw the demonstrations, you saw what was goin' on, you saw the filth that came into Selma. The people that sat back in their homes and said about Jim Clark that he was not makin' a good sheriff, all they would have had to have done was to ride downtown some night and see businessmen goin' into their businesses with shotguns because they didn't want somethin' to happen. . . . what later has happened in Watts. The same thing could have happened right here in Selma, and it would have happened had it not been that Jim Clark confined them to that area of Selma. I saw that because I rode by. I took food to men [in the posse] who were workin' there, and if you had seen the element that was involved in that [march]. If you had seen the men and women [yin'

out on the ground all together. It's something that anyone would have been upset about.

Because they had their headquarters, and you would see men and women of both races going in and out . . . You can see, now, colored women with a half-breed child. And not only that, businesses were disrupted for six months because of this. You'd say, "Well, they're gonna have a demonstration this afternoon." And I know for myself working near the courthouse in Selma that we were not able to do a lot of work sometimes because of all of this. It was upsetting.

You mentioned that the demonstrators camped near your house.

I live eight miles out of town. They spent their first night in a pasture back of my house, on a hill back of my house. You could hear the noises from that, from their carrying on. And the next morning they came down the hill from my house and stopped for their rest break in front of my house. And we got pictures of them. What they were doing, they had walked for the TV cameras. They had marched as far as that, and then they stopped, and they got on the trucks, they got in the ambulance, and they rode. They changed. They would walk a little ways. The next stop was Southside School, which was just a mile from my house, and they stopped just beyond that. They had rest stops every few miles, and they changed, and they didn't march all the way.

I thought there were some that were supposed to have marched every step?

I know they said so, but I do not believe it because I saw them stopping. Just as they said that that boy with the peg leg did.* But I tell you I have a picture of his getting in an ambulance, and rode off in the ambulance, and then later, he gets out and marches for the TV cameras.

Do you think Selma got a bum rap?

Definitely. If I had set back and watched my TV camera, I would have thought Selma was the worst place in the world. . . . But the ones who were here to see it knows the situation.

*Jim Letherer, an amputee from Michigan, made the march on crutches. As he passed, white hecklers shouted, "Left, left, left."

LEON HALL

I can remember the night the march arrived in Montgomery . . . and a couple of planeloads of entertainers, celebrities, "stars" came. Belfonte. Poitier was there. Sammy Davis. James Baldwin. Eartha Kitt. Slews of them, just slews of them. I think Paul Newman was there. . . . Brando, I'll never forget, probably personified it more than any of the others. These people came, and they blended in. They were so perfectly natural. . . . They tended to come down in almost awe of us. . . . I can remember in Selma Brando coming down and "Sunshine"*—Ben Owens, who lost his leg at Dr. King's funeral; a mule pulling Dr. King's casket stepped on him—Brando running with "Sunshine" and some of the older fellows at twelve, one o'clock in the morning in Selma, going to the bootlegger's house. [Laughs] We goin' and drinkin' corn whiskey and he just a regular fella. . . .

J. T. JOHNSON

After we . . . got to Montgomery, Sammy Davis, Jr., Harry Belfonte, everybody was there with us, and we had a great show that night, after sleeping in the mud and what have you. But nobody even complain about that, though. Sometimes the food would get short, but they would never complain. A lot of people came down to participate, a lot of nuns and things. After that "Bloody Sunday," it had picked up a lot of momentum. . . .

We left and got down to Dexter Avenue Church**—that's right there at the capitol—where Dr. King made his speech. I don't know how many peoples we had there. I would say anywhere from thirty to forty thousand. But you know Mrs. Liuzzo, the lady who was killed, I never will forget that. After the march, there was a lot of people who needed transportation back to Selma. She was determined to drive her car. Hosea and I sat with her a long time. . . . We really didn't want her to go alone, being a white lady from the North. We appreciated all her participation and support. She had been great. She really had. She was a very nice lady. But she just wouldn't listen . . . she just had to make that trip [back to Selma]. . . . I stayed and talked with her a long time.

*Ben "Sunshine" Owens was much older than most of the SCLC staff members and a popular Movement figure. He led the mule wagon which bore King's body through the streets of Atlanta, and his leg was, indeed, amputated as the result of an injury received from a mule that day.

**On the morning after the big show put on by the visiting celebrities.

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Postscript: Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, a housewife and mother from Detroit, had carried one carload of marchers back to Selma that night and was returning to Montgomery to pick up a second group of marchers when a car carrying four Ku Klux Klansmen from Birmingham pulled alongside. She was shot to death on a lonely stretch of Highway 80 near Hayneville, a sleepy Black Belt town where an all-white jury would later acquit of murder the first of the Klansmen to stand trial. One of the four, an FBI informer who said he had only pretended to fire his pistol at Mrs. Liuzzo's car, was not indicted and testified against his companions. Frustrated by the failure of the Alabama courts to return convictions, federal authorities used the informer's testimony to convict the other three Klansmen under an 1870 statute for conspiring to violate Mrs. Liuzzo's civil rights.