

Voting Rights Erupts From Selma Bridge

By MARILYN MILLER

In Selma, Ala. lived the more than 15,000 blacks who made up more than half of its population.

Early in the afternoon of March 7, 1965, groups of these blacks were streaming out of Brown's Chapel Methodist Church. Brown's was located in the heart of the black community. During the past two months, the church had been the nerve center of a drive to gain voting rights for Selma's blacks.

The fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1870, stated that the right to vote could not be denied on the basis of race. Yet in Selma in 1965, only 156 blacks of voting age were registered. This situation was typical of a number of states in the deep South. Using a variety of tactics—some legal, some not—whites had kept blacks from voting.

Since January, blacks had been marching in groups to the Dalles County courthouse in an attempt to register to vote. So far, not a single black had succeeded. Sunday, March 7, was another day to try.

This time, the destination was the state capitol, in Montgomery, located about 50 miles east of Selma. Some 525 men, women and children were going there to protest the lack of voting rights to Gov. George C. Wallace. Governor Wallace had banned the march, and the marchers were afraid that state troopers would try to stop them, as had already happened in other parts of Alabama.

In small groups, the marchers left the chapel. On their backs they carried bedrolls and packs. Four ambulances trailed behind them. The first objective was the Edmund Pettus Bridge, more than three quarters of a mile away. The bridge formed part of Highway 80, which led to Montgomery. Three hundred yards away from the bridge, the marchers passed three dozen state troopers standing in the shadow of the Selma Times-Journal building. The troopers made no move to interrupt the march.

The marchers could see the dingy brown bridge as they approached, but they could not yet see over the rise to the other side. On the other



Dr. King speaking from the pulpit of Brown's Chapel. To his immediate left Coretta Scott King, his wife.



Crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge

side waited more than 50 state troopers massed about two hundred yards beyond the bridge. They were armed with clubs and they had gas-mask pouches slung across their shoulders. Behind them, three dozen possemen loomed menacingly. Fifteen of them were on horseback. The possemen were volunteers engaged by Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark who believed in using force against black demonstrators. The sheriff was well known as a militant racist.

On the sidelines stood some 50 white spectators. Beside a yellow bus, some distance from the troopers, about 50 blacks also watched. The marchers kept moving across the bridge.

What happened next was to affect Americans all over the country. It was also to affect the president and the Congress, leading to the Voting

Rights Act of 1965. What happened next led observers to refer to March 7, 1965, as "Bloody Sunday."

On Monday, March 8, all that could be seen on the six o'clock news was the images of "Bloody Sunday" the bleeding, broken and unconscious passed across the screen, some of them limping alone, others supported on either side, still others carried in arms or on stretchers.

People from all over America came to Selma after the news stories. Throughout Monday, President Johnson was on the phone about Selma. He was concerned about possible violence during Tuesday's march, and he urged movement leaders to postpone the action. Dr. King's aides were also worried. They feared King might be killed if violence erupted.

No one really knew if the march would take place. Blacks had asked

Service, to Alabama. Collin's task was to try to persuade both sides to compromise. King refused to stop the march. Collins then went to Sheriff Clark and Colonel Lingo. They agreed not to use force against the marchers on one condition - that the marchers turned back when they reached the troopers.

Collins informed King of their promise. King merely smiled in reply.

On Tuesday morning, Judge Johnson banned any march before Thursday. What would King do? At 2:25 p.m. March 9, the answer came. Arriving at Brown's Chapel, he stated that he was ready to march. At 3 p.m., marchers once again reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

There, a U.S. marshal read aloud Judge Johnson's order. King said that he would continue to march and

Sunday would not be repeated.

Some things about the march seemed familiar. The 3,200 marchers moved down Water Street. Before them stood the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which twice before they had failed to cross. But this time protected by the National Guard, they crossed it. The road to Montgomery lay open once again.

Three days later, they reached St. Jude, a Roman Catholic conference center outside Montgomery where they were to spend the night. A reporter noted that their entry had an almost biblical grandeur.

The next afternoon, March 25, 1965, Dr. King addressed a crowd of more than 25,000 gathered before the Alabama Statehouse. He said, "This is a shining moment. We are on the move now. We are moving toward the land of freedom."



"Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to the ultimate reality."

Martin Luther King Jr.

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King addresses demonstrators at Brown's Chapel on Tuesday, March 9, after their return from the bridge.

federal judge Frank M. Johnson to lift the ban on a march to Montgomery and tension continued to mount while everyone waited to hear. Then Judge Johnson contacted the black leaders and recommended that they postpone the march until he could hold hearings, which were to begin on Thursday, to decide if the march should be permitted.

The matter was now left to Dr. King and his associates. Should they postpone? If they did, they might lose the public's attention. If they went ahead, they would risk King's life and break the law. They decided to postpone.

Sometime Monday, King changed his mind. He announced to the people at Brown's Chapel that he would lead a march on Montgomery the next day. After hours of discussion, at 4 a.m. Tuesday, other black leaders agreed to follow his decision. In a little more than 10 hours the second attempt to march on Montgomery would begin.

In the meantime, President Johnson sent LeRoy Collins, director of the Federal Community Relations

protesters began to move across the bridge. State troopers waited several hundred feet in front of them for the second time that week.

The next thing that happened caught most marchers, news people, and onlookers by surprise. King turned back. A moment later, the troopers moved to the side of the highway, the road to Montgomery was open.

It was open, but the marchers were returning, without explanation, to Selma. The columns obediently followed King back. Among many of them, fury mingled with surprise. Had their leader betrayed them. Some realized that the troopers' gesture was one of contempt. Did King have a reason for what he had just done? For the moment, King said nothing.

On March 17, 1965 Judge Johnson handed down his decision that the demonstrators could march to Montgomery legally on March 21, 1965. At Gov. Wallace's request, the president ordered 18 hundred National Guardsmen to protect them. Bloody

In the same speech, King warned of a season of suffering still to come. His words were prophetic. That night, Viola Liuzzo, from Michigan, a mother of five, drove some of the marchers back to Selma. On the return trip to Montgomery, she was shot to death by members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Still, despite this tragic event, relative quiet reigned the next day in Selma. The events that had begun three months before and climaxed on Bloody Sunday had made voter registration in the South a nationwide concern.

Nearly five months later, on August 6, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The act aided not only black voters but also the economically impoverished, the poorly educated, and non-English-speaking minorities. Opposition to the black vote did not end once and for all after Selma and the Voting Rights Act. But now, finally, some one and a half million blacks who had been kept from the ballot box would have the strength of federal law on their side.