

MARCH FREEDOM DAYS: MOMENTS IN CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY

By JANUS ADAMS

MARCH 5

"Ghana is Free!" Just before midnight on March 5, 1957, on a path lit by a triumphal arch of colored lights that beamed from endless rows of flowers, the parade of dignitaries began; Ghanaian chiefs from every region looked exquisite in their royal robes as they were joined by representatives from fifty-six countries, including African American Ralph Bunche (Undersecretary of the United Nations and Nobel Peace Prize laureate), Coretta and Martin Luther King, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, publisher John H. Johnson, and labor leader A. Philip Randolph. At midnight, the Union Jack was lowered on

Parks the summer before her historic arrest.

When Clark was fired for her Civil Rights work in 1956, Highlander's legendary founder, Myles Horton, recruited her to direct the workshops that became known as the "movement half-way house." Her voting rights literacy project kept her in contact with male leaders. She perceived a weakness in the movement and told them so: They were minimizing the role of women. "The work the women did during the time of civil rights is what really carried the movement along. The women carried forth the ideas... It would never have taken off if some women hadn't started to speak up." Women were speaking up in every field.

represents a victory over patterns of bias that have impeded black professionals in every field. It also raises issues about the quality of our news and our histories. If the press was so biased in its gallery, how unbiased was its reportage? If researchers rely on sources so "discolored" by racism, what does this say about our history and our truths?

MARCH 21

March 21, 1960, Sharpeville: a day of tragedy. March 21, 1965, Selma: a day of resurrection. Two days, two peoples at a crossroads marked freedom.

March 21, 1960, in South Africa was the day set by the people of Sharpeville to fight the "pass law"—the odious rule that "nonwhites" produce, on demand,

"Holiday on Broadway" opened in the Mansfield Theater—a sellout for three straight weeks. It would be a hard climb, but Billie Holiday was headed back to the top. Her audiences loved her—forgave her. She had given them years of pleasure and they wanted more. "God bless the child that's got his own," she thought, having learned that

lesson a long time before. For weeks she had been stewing over a mother-daughter squabble when her mother wouldn't lend her some money. Then, in one flush moment of inspiration, an entire song fell from her head to the page—it became one of the most enduring lyrics of all time: "God bless the child that's got his own."

This is an excerpt from the book, "Freedom Days". Permission for reprint was given by John Wiley and Sons, Inc.



On March 21, 1965, thousands of people gathered in Selma, Alabama, for the five-day Selma-to-Montgomery march.

British colonial rule; the red, yellow, and green national flag of a new day, Ghana took its rightful place. The ancestral home of the Ashanti was free." At long last the battle has ended! "the new nation's liberator and president, Kwame Nkrumah, declared in front of a crowd of one hundred thousand. "Ghana, your beloved country, is free forever," he said to "the chiefs... the youth, the farmers, is free forever," he said to "the chiefs... the youth, the farmers, the women, who have so nobly fought and won this battle."

In response, a protest march from Selma to Montgomery was set for March

MARCH 14

The March 1948 issue of Negro Digest responded with an article by Ollie Stewart, staff reporter for the Baltimore Afro-American, that ranked cities according to these criteria: incidences of antiblack violence (lynchings, kidnappings, mob attacks), access to public services (schools, hospitals, libraries, parks), community life (churches and youth centers), job opportunities (police, fire, teaching, civil service careers), and nonsegregated transportation. In an article provocatively titled "America's Ten Worst Cities for Negroes," the cities were:

an insidious passbook. To be without it was to be subject to fine, imprisonment, banishment, or forced labor. As prearranged with officials, ten thousand peaceful protesters gathered at the police station without passbooks to await a promised change of law. Instead, at 1:40 p.m., police raged toward them, firing directly into the crowd of stunned men, women, and children. When the carnage was done, 69 blacks had been killed and 180 had been wounded in the historic Sharpeville massacre.

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The March 14, 1948 issue of Negro Digest listed Birmingham, Alabama as one of "America's Ten Worst Cities for Negroes". Alabama police ordered their dogs to attack crowds of civil rights demonstrators. In addition, fire fighters employed high pressure water hoses to repel the protesters.

7, 1965. Beyond the need to publicize the incident, the long march also allowed time for the story to appeal to the national conscience. For SCLC's Rev. James Bevel the march was deeply rooted in Gandhi's teachings: "When you have a great violation of the people an honorable means and context in which to express and eliminate that grief... Otherwise the movement will break down in chaos."

Dr. King was not expected in Selma that day. A coin toss among SCLC deputies put Hosea Williams in the lead with SNCC's chairman, John Lewis, as his second. After a prayer assembly at Brown's Chapel, marchers in the carnage were teargassed and trampled; the day would become known in infamy as "Bloody Sunday." As news footage swept the air, thousands of outraged people headed to Selma for the defining march of the era.

MARCH 18

If, as it is said in the history of the movement, Rosa Parks was "The Mother of Civil Rights", then the grandmother would surely be "Mother Conscience," Septima Clark. To Clark, literacy held the key to freedom. A gifted teacher and organizer, she honed her skills as a South Carolina public school teacher and empowered generations with her innovative citizenship education workshops for adults at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. There, in 1955, she trained NAACP activist

1. Columbia, South Carolina
2. Annapolis, Maryland
3. Greenville, South Carolina
4. Birmingham, Alabama
5. Alexandria, Louisiana
6. Miami, Florida
7. Atlanta, Georgia
8. Houston, Texas
9. Jackson, Mississippi
10. Washington, D.C.

MARCH 16

On March 16, 1827, the African American press was born with the first issue of Freedom's Journal. "We wish to plead our own cause," the opening editorial declared, clearly stating its goal: "to vindicate our...brethren, when oppressed." A century and a half later, Benjamin F. Clark, a Howard University graduate student, reviewed coverage of contemporary twentieth-century oppression. How true was the black press to its founding principles? Clark's 1969 doctoral dissertation, "The Editorial Reaction of Selected Black Newspapers to the Civil Rights Movement," reported both good and bad news.

MARCH 19

And, on March 19, 1947, Louis Luttier of the Afro-American and Washington bureau chief of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association became the first black reporter credentialed to cover Congress from within its chamber.

Clearly, the desegregation of the press


march. Three weeks earlier, unarmed protesters had been betrayed and stormed by police on what would be known as Bloody Sunday. Now, determined and defiant, they retraced their route as the world looked on. Singing "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round," they crossed the Pettus Bridge. The movement had come to a crossroads. So gratuitous was the earlier violence that an army of foot soldiers twenty-five thousand strong dropped what they were doing, headed for Selma, and joined the freedom fight.


MARCH 27

On March 27, 1948, ten days out of jail on a drug possession charge, Billie Holiday walked onto the stage of Carnegie Hall. She was a sellout. And she sang her heart out—thirty-three songs in all. During intermission, a box of gardenias arrived; someone had remembered her trademark. She went back on stage to triumph. Despite the predictions, it looked like she was going to be able to reclaim her career. She tried coming back to life, looking in on friends, many of whom were fearful for their own reputations and rejected the "jailbird." One, Lena Horne, hearing that work, especially in New York, but as an "ex-con" she was prohibited from working where alcohol was served—that included nightclubs, the places where singers made their living. What to do next? Her agents came up with a novel idea. One month later, on April 27,

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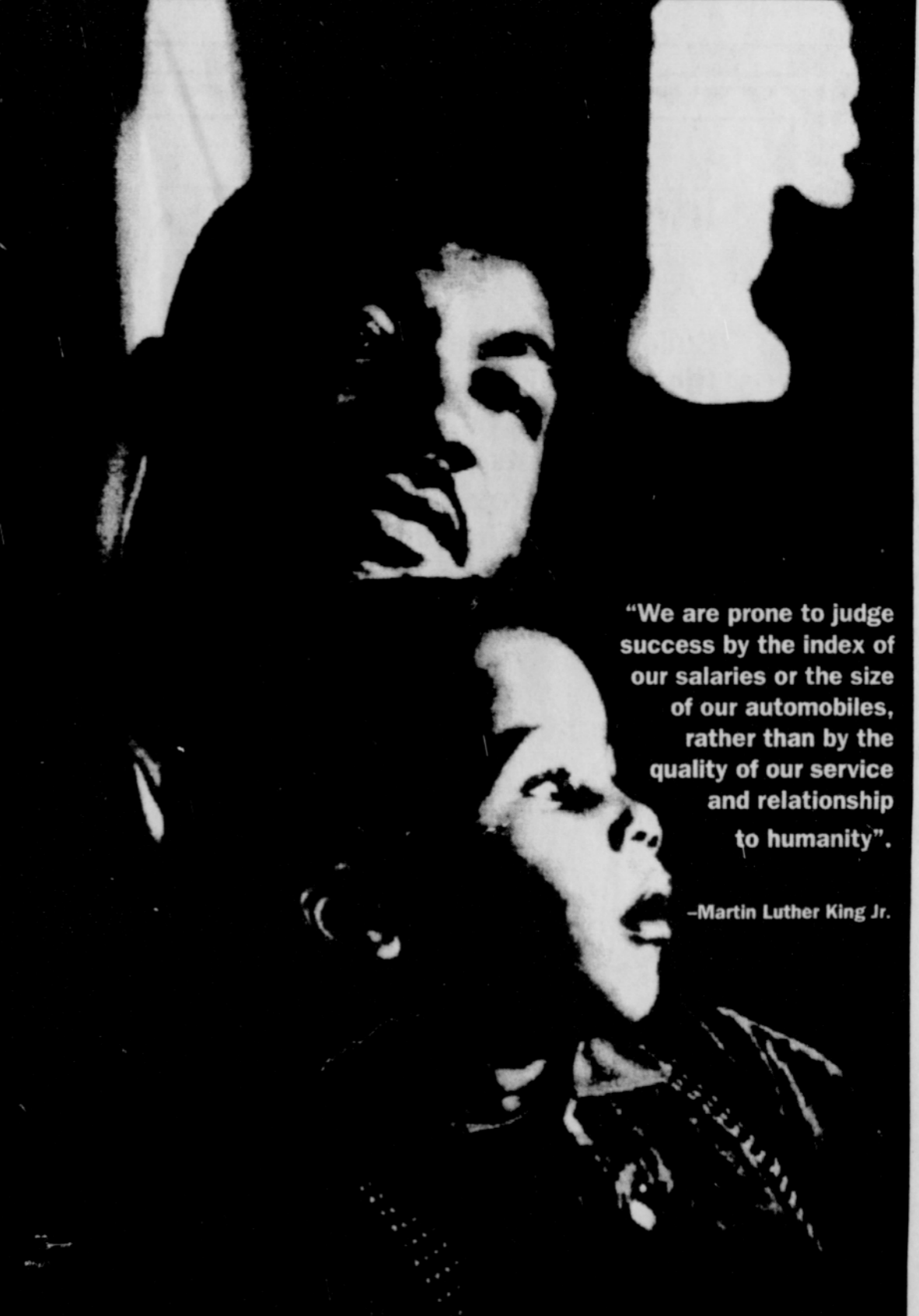




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1130 NE Alberta St. • Portland, OR 97211 • (503) 284-7930
email: sbrooks@sbrooks.com • web: www.sbrooks.com



"We are prone to judge success by the index of our salaries or the size of our automobiles, rather than by the quality of our service and relationship to humanity".

—Martin Luther King Jr.



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