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# A Photographer's Selma Trove

Spider Martin, Who  
Captured the 1965 March,  
Is Getting a Broader View

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

When Spider Martin, a young photographer for The Birmingham News, stepped onto the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., on March 7, 1965, he knew exactly what to do.

He ran to the top of the bridge "and got myself situated, like I'd done so many times, like shooting a football game, staying 10 or 20 yards ahead of the action, never knowing what the score was," he later recalled.

Today, everyone knows the score from that day in Selma, known as Bloody Sunday, thanks in part to Mr. Martin's powerful images of the police beating back peaceful civil rights marchers, which were blasted around the world via The Associated Press.

And now, Mr. Martin — one of the few photojournalists present in Selma over the whole of the weeklong course of events there — may be about to get better known, too.

The Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas in Austin has acquired Mr. Martin's archive, including more than 1,000 images shot in and around Selma, many existing only on



Spider Martin of The Birmingham News sought a high vantage point during the march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala.

negatives that have been kept in a bank box for decades, virtually unseen.

But the collection, purchased from Mr. Martin's estate for \$250,000, also contains thousands of other images as well as correspondence, memos, clippings, and other material, providing an unusually complete record of a journeyman photographer who captured everything from beauty queens to Klan rallies to hurricanes.

"The Selma material is what attracted us," Don Carleton, the executive director of the Briscoe Center, said in an interview. "But the archive also documents how a hard-working local general news photographer operated in that particular time and place."

The acquisition comes at a bit of a moment for Mr. Martin, who died in 2003 after spending virtually his entire career in Alabama. Some of his classic Selma images are on view currently in Selma and, starting Feb. 21, at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, adjacent to the Briscoe Center. Next month a set of his vintage prints will be shown in New York for the first time as part of "Selma March 1965," a three-photographer show at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea.

Mr. Martin's visual fingerprint, some scholars say, is also plainly evident in the current film "Selma."

"I was struck by how many scenes in the film seem to have been structured based on Spider

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The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King, leading a civil rights march through downtown Montgomery, Ala., on March 25, 1965.

## A Photographer's Archive of the Selma March

From First Arts Page

Martin's photographs," said Martin A. Berger, a professor of art history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the author of "Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography."

Most photos from Bloody Sunday show "a confusing jumble of bodies," Mr. Berger said. But Mr. Martin's famous images, he continued, offer "a clear narrative that seems to crystallize the stakes of the larger conflict."

Those photos distilled the chaos into a series of "legible dramas," Mr. Berger said: a state trooper pointing toward a row of marchers just before the moment of confrontation; John Lewis falling to police clubs at the Pettus bridge; the wounded Amelia Boynton being lifted to her feet by fellow marchers.

But Mr. Martin's Selma archive, Dr. Carleton said, also stands out for capturing the full course of events, from the pre-march grass-roots organizing to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s triumphant speech on the steps of the State Capitol in Montgomery.

"A lot of photographers captured parts of it, but Martin was

there the whole time," Dr. Carleton said.

James Martin, nicknamed Spider for his wiry 5-foot-2 frame, grew up in Hueytown, Ala., a Southern white boy who got shivers when "Dixie" played at football games, he later wrote. He began working for The Birmingham News in 1964. In February 1965, he was sent to Marion, Ala., to cover the shooting of the civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson by state troopers, a dangerous assignment no senior colleague wanted, he later recalled. The plan for a march to Montgomery began to take shape, and he found himself in Selma on March 7.

Mr. Martin's images of Bloody Sunday helped stir public outrage (and landed him a bonus, according to documents in the archive, despite what Mr. Martin later described as the reluctance of The News to put them on the front page).

After Bloody Sunday, the national press corps descended on Selma en masse. In an unpublished memoir included in the archive, Mr. Martin describes climbing trees or rickety church towers to get distinctive shots during the successful five-day march from Selma to Montgo-

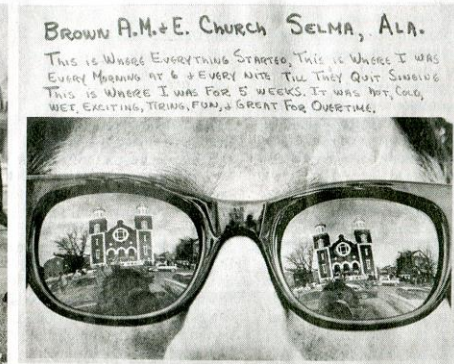


LEFT, JAMES "SPIDER" MARTIN ARCHIVE/BRISCOE CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN, RIGHT, JAMES "SPIDER" MARTIN, VIA TRACY MARTIN

Amelia Boynton, beaten by Alabama state troopers on Bloody Sunday in 1965, is helped by fellow marchers. Spider Martin is in the foreground of his Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church photo.

mary, developing film in makeshift roadside darkrooms and transmitting images through a hot-wired telephone pole.

Sometimes he would toss rolls of exposed film down to other photographers in exchange for cash. But not all interactions were so collegial. At one point, he recalled, Dr. King broke up a



brewing fistfight between him and a BBC reporter, reminding them that "this was a nonviolent march."

In May 1965 Mr. Martin covered the trial of a Klansman accused of murdering the activist Viola Liuzzo as she was driving protesters back to Selma from Montgomery hours after the

march, snapping illicit courtroom shots with a camera hidden inside his shirt.

In 1968, two years after leaving The News and branching out into commercial work, he served as a photographer for the presidential campaign of George C. Wallace, the segregationist Alabama governor who had tried to shut down

the Selma marches.

"My father told him, 'I won't vote for you, but I'll take your money,'" his daughter Tracy Martin said in an interview. "Eventually, they developed a friendship." (Among the hundreds of photos relating to Wallace in the archive is one showing John Lewis, then a member of Congress, visiting Wallace on his sickbed in the 1990s.)

In the late 1990s Mr. Martin began organizing small exhibitions of his Selma photographs that traveled around Alabama and beyond. He also tried to sell his archive, sending out queries on a letterhead featuring a web-slinging Spider-Man and the tagline "World's Greatest Photographer."

Selma changed Mr. Martin. "He was appalled by what he saw," Tracy Martin said.

But he never lost his sense of cheek. Sometime after 1965, he wrote a caption on a print showing the Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma reflected in a colleague's sunglasses, with the photographer himself captured, selfie-style, in the foreground.

"This is where it started," he wrote. "It was hot, cold, wet, exciting, tiring, fun and great for overtime."