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James Barker's Selma March Photographs

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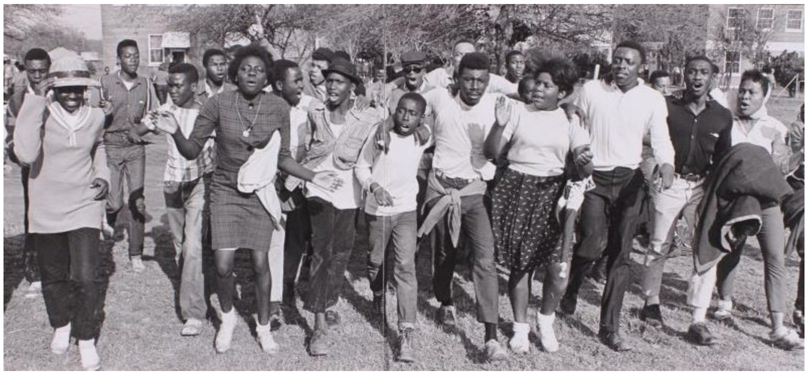

Marchers approach the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, en route to Montgomery, March 21, 1965. Earlier that month protesters had been beaten by law enforcement officials when they tried to cross the bridge. Barker's photos of the march are unique in that they captured the event as seen by participants rather than as seen by the national press.

This year America notes the 50th anniversary of the civil rights march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, the state's capital, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The 1965 protest remains prominent for two reasons. It helped bring about passage of the federal Voting Rights Act and produced photos and television broadcasts that galvanized public opinion.

Some of the most remarkable of those images, the subject of two upcoming exhibits in the Lower 48, are by longtime Alaska photographer James H. Barker.

Barker grew up in Pullman, Washington, the son of an engineering professor at Washington State University, where Barker attended college and found a job as a technical photographer. He was getting ready to close up the shop one Friday evening when the phone rang.

"A minister friend told me an ad hoc committee had put together some funding to send three people to Selma and my name came up," Barker said in a phone call from his home in Fairbanks. The committee, his friend said, was in the process of meeting to decide who to send. Someone thought it might be good to have at least one member of the party who could take pictures to take back to Pullman and show everyone what had happened.

The attention of the country was focused on Selma at that time. After a series of demonstrations that sometimes turned violent, King and other civil rights leaders were preparing for a mass march from that city to Montgomery, 54 miles away. The national press swarmed into the area in anticipation of more violence.

“I was kind of aware of the situation, but it was clear across the country,” Barker said.

He went to the meeting and, somewhat to his surprise, was selected. He had just enough time to grab a pack of film, a Leica 35 mm camera and one lens.

His parents, who had seen the news coverage of chaos at other marches, were terrified, he recalled. So was Barker, who was 28 at the time. “The whole thing was so tense I was fighting being sick to my stomach all the way to (the airport in) Spokane,” he said.

Climate of fear

There were good reasons to be concerned. What is today loosely called “The Selma March” was actually a series of marches. African-American leaders targeted the city for a voting registration campaign in early 1965. Only 2 percent of blacks in the area were registered to vote. Previous attempts to increase their numbers had fallen flat. Local and state law enforcement was considered particularly hostile and even brutal toward civil rights activists and the police had vocal support in the white community.

New legislation banning literacy tests and other forms of polling restrictions were under discussion in Congress. President Lyndon Johnson was said to favor such a law but seemed reluctant to push it. Selma and the nearby town of Marion, organizers hoped, would put a face on an issue that, for many Americans, was not a big deal.

There were protests and mass arrests, but little violence and little notice in the national press. The heat turned up when King was arrested for leading an unauthorized parade on Feb. 1. On the night of Feb. 18, a black church deacon, Jimmie Lee Jackson, was shot by a state trooper. He died eight days later.

Activists began a march from Selma to Montgomery on March 7. As they came to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were met by law enforcement officers who ordered them to disperse. When the marchers did not, the lawmen charged with clubs and tear gas. White onlookers shouted epithets and encouragement to the police. Officers on horseback chased down fleeing marchers.

The beatings went far beyond the bridge -- and far beyond Alabama thanks to national media. Newsmen called it “Bloody Sunday.”

King, out of jail and in Atlanta during the melee, called on religious leaders to join him and try it again two days later. A federal judge issued a restraining order. President Johnson warned King to hold back. But the march went ahead on March 9. With 2,000 others, King walked to the bridge. Again the police were present in force and white counter-protesters were taunting the marchers. Everything was in place for a repeat of Bloody Sunday.

King did not proceed. Instead he and the others knelt and prayed. Then they turned around and left.

In the days that followed, the judge had time to review the marchers' petition and withdraw his prohibition. Sensing a change in national opinion, President Johnson quickly presented congress a voting rights law.

But one day after King’s prayerful restraint, a white mob attacked James Reeb, a white preacher who had been part of the protest. He died two days later.

Johnson mobilized the National Guard and ordered FBI agents to keep the peace for the five-day march. People from across the country flocked to Selma to take part in the showdown, which was set for March 21.

Barker arrived on March 20.

‘Duck down’

“People were meeting the planes (in Montgomery) and shuttling people 50 miles down to Selma,” Barker said. “As we were driving, I was wondering at what point does the photography begin? Then I saw a trooper following us. I started to take a picture and the driver said, ‘I’d just as soon you didn’t do that. We don’t want to give him a reason to pull us over.’ A woman added, ‘Yes. Those people who protect us we fear.’”

In Selma, the white passengers were told to duck down below the window in certain neighborhoods. The presence of a car holding both blacks and whites was considered dangerously provocative, and not without reason. Viola Liuzzo, a white housewife from Michigan, would be killed by Ku Klux Klan members the evening the march ended while driving in her Oldsmobile coupe with Leroy Moton, a black man who had helped transport marchers to the airport.

Thousands of people had gathered at Brown Chapel, the staging area, in preparation for the march that would begin the next day.

“I was very interested in the conversations that people were having down in the basement and started taking pictures. I was there way into the evening,” Barker said. He and others were then taken to another church to spend the night on the floor.

“It was scary. I thought I was hearing gunshots off in the distance,” Barker said. “I’d just finished six years in the National Guard and I arranged everyone to take turns staying awake for an hour, like sentry duty.”

The next day he returned to Brown Chapel and joined an estimated 8,000 others on the first stage of the journey.

They were protected by about 4,000 U.S. Army soldiers, National Guardsmen, federal marshals and FBI agents.

“We seemed to be moving along at a very moderate pace,” Barker recalled. “A truck trailer with numerous bathrooms would appear. Water was passed around. It was a great mix of all types of people. Much good conversation, moments of laughter.”

The day began in sunshine and as the marchers passed over the bridge it grew quite warm. “People were peeling off coats and walking in just shirt sleeves,” he said. The mood matched the weather. “We were also singing while walking and of course the primary song was ‘We Shall Overcome,’ with various verses being made up. I thought I saw someone who I thought might be Pete Seeger off on the side who I imagined might be writing down various made-up verses. So I introduced a verse, ‘We are over-done’ as we were feeling more of the afternoon heat.”

“I could only go to the first encampment,” Barker said. “The agreement with the court was that any number could march on the first day, but from that point the highway went from four lanes to two lanes and only 300 people were allowed to go on.”

He shuttled ahead to Montgomery and was there March 24 when the marchers arrived on the outskirts “in a horrendous downpour.” The following day, with a throng grown to 25,000, King went to the state capitol and delivered his “How long? Not long” speech. It included this summation of the march.

“Once more the method of nonviolent resistance was unsheathed from its scabbard, and ... Selma, Alabama, became a shining moment in the conscience of man. There never was a moment in American history more honorable and more inspiring than the pilgrimage of clergymen and laymen of every race and faith pouring into Selma to face danger at the side of its embattled Negroes.”

Congress passed the Voting Rights Act and Johnson signed it into law on Aug. 6, 1965.

Close-up view

Barker moved to rural Alaska in the 1970s and began a decades-long mission of documenting the lives of people in the Bush, hunting, home life and festivals.

But his Selma photos have had a life of their own -- the upcoming exhibits won't be the first time they’ve been shown.

A 2010 exhibit in the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery was assembled in a rush, Barker said.

“It was basically pinned up on the wall," he said. "It gets seen that way, but after a few showings it will become battered.”

He has produced newer and cleaner prints in recent years. Those will be shown at the University of North Carolina Asheville's Center for Diversity Education, Feb. 2-27. But the New York show at the elite Steven Kasher Gallery, March 5-April 18, will feature original prints he made in 1965.

“From a collector’s point of view, the older prints are worth more than new ones that might actually be better,” Barker said.

The Selma images, some of which will also be featured in the online edition of Smithsonian Magazine [3], can also be seen at Barker’s website, jamesbarker-photography.com[4]. They are arranged in chronological order and show the late night meetings, helmeted soldiers, cheering crowds welcoming the marchers and angry whites in cars covered with racist graffiti.

Barker thinks that, aside from the 50th anniversary of the event, there are a couple of reasons why his photos are being sought right now. One is longevity. “In New York they’re also showing a couple of other photographers who did work in civil rights activity,” he said. “They’re no longer alive. Of course, I am.”

But beyond that, there’s a sense of immediacy, personality, attitude and candor that isn’t always found in the posed official photographs.

“My photos are being looked at in a very different way, because I was not a press person,” he said. “I was not attempting to document it from the outside, looking in. I was a participant, photographing from the inside as part of the march. It’s quite a different perspective.”

Barker’s insider view presents unique information. One of the first photos on his site is of a wall in Brown Chapel where people left messages in those pre-text, pre-answering machine, pre-Twitter days. Among the notes is one from the office urgently trying to contact the owner of a blue 1963 Oldsmobile with Michigan plates.

“At the Rosa Parks Museum, five years ago, two people came up and pointed to that note,” Barker said. “They said, ‘That’s Viola Liuzzo’s car.’

“This is 45 years after, 45 years since she was killed, and people were so conscious of those events that they remembered her car as if it was something that just happened a couple of years before.

“It was startling to hear that.”