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Selma photographer captured history on 'Bloody Sunday'

By MATT PEARCE

As the column of black demonstrators in Selma, Ala., marched two by two over the Edmund Pettus Bridge, James "Spider" Martin and his camera were there to record the scene.

It was March 7, 1965. Martin didn't know it yet, but he was documenting one of the most consequential moments in the history of Alabama. Every photo would become a blow against white supremacy in the South.

Martin, then a 25-year-old staff photographer for the Birmingham News, scooted ahead of the action.

An Alabama state trooper swings his club at future U.S. Rep. John Lewis, pictured on the ground, during "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Ala., in 1965. (James "Spider" Martin Photographic Archive)

Martin later wrote that while trying to wipe the tear gas from his eyes, he used one of his cameras to block a blow from a trooper's club. "Excuse me," the trooper then said, Martin recalled. "I thought you's a [n-word.]"

Martin, who was white, was exasperated by what was happening. "Alabama, God damn, why did you let it happen here?" he remembered thinking.

Several of Martin's photos raced across the Associated Press wire and into history, where, half a century later, they have become a crucial record of the civil rights movement.

Earlier this year, the photos were part of a collection purchased from Martin's estate for $250,000 by the University of Texas' Briscoe Center for American History. Martin died in 2003.

The photos were also "referenced extensively" for the recent film "Selma," which dramatized the events of the march, said director Ava DuVernay, who called Martin's work "incredible stuff."

"It was the, at the time, most important thing in his life that he'd ever done," daughter Tracy Martin said of the weeks that her father spent covering the events leading up to and following "Bloody Sunday" in Selma. "He was really blown away and he didn't know the degree of cruelty and inhumanity and racism that was out there."

Marchers help Amelia Boynton Robinson, who was beaten unconscious by Alabama state troopers on "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Ala., in 1965. (James "Spider" Martin Photographic Archive)

A huge gathering in Selma this weekend marked the 50-year anniversary of Bloody Sunday, the news coverage of which sparked a massive march to Montgomery, Ala., and passage of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Selma marked the culmination of civil rights organizers' strategy to use media coverage to draw attention to dramatic abuses in the South. At one point, Martin Luther King Jr. reportedly reprimanded a photographer in Selma for physically intervening instead of taking photographs when a posse of white men started shoving children to the ground.

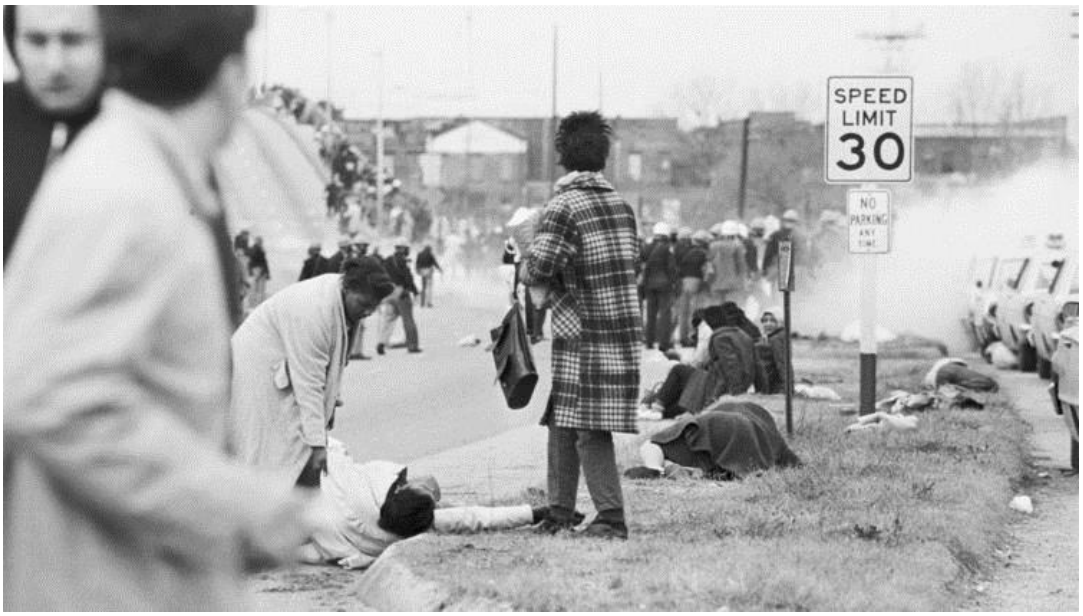
"The world doesn't know this happened because you didn't photograph it," King told Life magazine's Flip Schulke, according to "The Race Beat," a history of media coverage of the civil rights movement. "I'm not being cold-blooded about it, but it is so much more important for you to take a picture of us getting beaten up than for you to be another person joining in the fray."

Covering the movement required physical courage, and remaining impartial under the blows of angry white crowds was a struggle for many journalists from the North who

covered the civil rights movement. That was true even for Martin, an Alabama native with liberal views on race.

To cover the 1965 killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson by an Alabama state trooper, Martin recalled traveling to Marion, Ala., in the middle of the night with three cameras and a couple of .22-caliber pistols beneath the front seat of his Plymouth Valiant. He was also armed with two accents – the one he normally spoke with, and a deep-fried version he used to disarm the “rednecks” outside Birmingham who saw him as an unwelcome interloper.

“You never knew if you were talking to a Klansman back then,” said Hubert Grissom, 73, a former attorney for the firm that represented the Birmingham News, which sometimes downplayed the racial unrest developing in its own backyard.



A woman looks on as Alabama state troopers, using tear gas, push peaceful demonstrators back toward the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., on "Bloody Sunday" in 1965. (James "Spider" Martin Photographic Archive)

“Being back then, the newspapers published very little about the civil rights movement at the time it was going on,” said Grissom, who later helped Martin assemble a draft of a memoir of his time covering the civil rights movement. He called Martin and himself “liberal Democrats in a funny place.”

In that unpublished memoir, Martin, who was just 5-feet-2 inches tall and 125 pounds, wrote that his size allowed him to hide in closets or climb trees as safety or photojournalism demanded -- sometimes tossing down rolls of film to other photographers in exchange for cash.

“As the marchers came over the bridge, I ran to the other side ... and got myself situated, like I'd done so many times when shooting a football game, staying 10 or 20 yards ahead of the action, never even knowing what the score was,” Martin wrote of Bloody Sunday.

He got close enough to one trooper to capture the grooves on his baton, and watched marchers’ faces as the troopers closed in. “I'd never seen them have a look of fear like this,” Martin recalled.

After the clubbings began, in one Pietà-like shot, Martin captured two demonstrators lifting an unconscious Amelia Boynton Robinson off the ground. In another, taken later, he found Selma Public Safety Director Wilson Baker holding a couple of pages of a telegram from Framingham, Mass., that said simply, “SHOCKING SHOCKING SHOCKING SHOCKING ...”

Not long after the drama ended, Martin left the Birmingham News and photojournalism to become a commercial and fashion photographer. The negatives from the march languished first at the News, then in a safety deposit box, before Martin began showing them in exhibitions several years later.

Martin likened his most perilous encounters from the period to “trying to be an action hero in a bad movie.”

Alabama, Martin added, “was the most notorious of the bad movies.”