

Songs and the Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama

In Selma a march was called for Sunday, March 7, 1965, to protest police brutality as well as denial of voting rights. Sheyann Webb, an eight-year-old, was the first child to attend the freedom rallies in her church. She led the singing of the movement songs - "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," "O Freedom," "This Little Light of Mine." On what would become known worldwide as "Bloody Sunday," her mother brushed her hair, hugged her, and let her go out to join the proposed march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. The marchers, 600 strong, moved through downtown, turned south, and headed for Pettus Bridge arching over the Alabama River. At the bridge troopers ordered the marchers to disperse. When they pressed on, they were attacked. Years later, while in college, Sheyann recalled what happened next.

"All I knew is I heard all this screaming and the people were turning and I saw this first part of the line running and stumbling back toward us. At that point, I was just off the bridge and on the side of the highway. And they came running and some of them were crying out and somebody yelled, "Oh, God, they're killing us!" I think I just froze then. There were people everywhere, jamming against me, pushing against me. Then, all of a sudden, it stopped and everyone got down on their knees, and I did too, and somebody was saying for us to pray. But there was so much excitement it never got started, because everybody was talking and they were scared and we didn't know what was happening or was going to happen. I remember looking toward the troopers and they were backing up, but some of them were standing over some of our people who had been knocked down or had fallen. It seemed like just a few a few seconds went by and I heard a shout. "Gas! Gas!!" and everybody started screaming again. And I looked and I saw the troopers charging us again and some of them were swinging their arms and throwing canisters of tear gas. And beyond them I saw the horsemen starting their charge toward us. I was terrified. What happened then is something I'll never forget as long as I live. Never. In fact, I still dream about it sometimes.

I saw those horsemen coming toward me and they had those awful masks on; they rode right through the cloud of tear gas.

Some of them had clubs, others had ropes or whips, which they swung about them like they were driving cattle.

I'll tell you, I forgot about praying, and I just turned and ran. And just as I was turning the tear gas got me; it burned my nose first and then got my eyes. I was blinded by the tears. So, I began running and not seeing where I was going. I remember being scared that I might fall over the railing and into the water. I don't know if I was screaming, but everyone else was. People were running and falling and ducking and you could hear the horses' hooves on the pavement and you'd hear people scream and hear the whips swishing and you'd hear them striking people. They'd cry out; some moaned. Women as well as men were getting hit. I never got hit, but one of the horses went right by me and I heard the swish sound as the whip went over my head and cracked some man across the back. It seemed to take forever to get across the bridge. It seemed I was running uphill for an awfully long time. They kept rolling canisters of tear gas on the ground, so it would rise up quickly. It was making me sick. I heard more horses and I turned back and saw two of them and the riders were leaning over to one side. It was like a nightmare seeing it through the tears. I just knew then that I was going to die, that those horses were going to trample me. So I kind of knelt down and held my hands and arms up over my head, and I must have been screaming - I don't really remember.

All of a sudden somebody was grabbing me under the arms and lifting me up and running. The horses went by and I kept waiting to get trampled on or hit, but they went on by and I guess they were hitting at somebody else. And I looked up and saw it was Hosea Williams who had me and he was running but we didn't seem to be moving, and I kept kicking my legs in the air, trying to speed up, and I shouted at him, "Put me down! You can't run fast enough with me!"

But he held on until we were off the bridge and down on Broad Street and he let me go. I didn't stop running until I got home. All along the way there were people running in small groups; I saw people jumping over cars and being chased by the horsemen who kept hitting them. When I got to the apartments there were horsemen in the yards, galloping up and down, and one of them reared his horse up in the air as I went by, and he had his mask off and was shouting something at me.

When I got into the house my momma and daddy were there and they had this shocked look on their faces and I ran in and tried to tell them what had happened. I was maybe a little hysterical because I kept repeating over and over, "I can't stop shaking, Momma, I can't stop shaking," and finally she grabbed me and sat down with me on her

lap. But my daddy was like I'd never seen him before. He had a shotgun and he yelled, "By God, if they want it this way, I'll give it to them!" And he started out the door. Momma jumped up and got in front of him shouting at him. And he said, "I'm ready to die; I mean it! I'm ready to die!" I was crying there on the couch, I was so scared. But finally he put the gun aside and sat down. I remember just laying there on the couch, crying and feeling so disgusted. They had beaten us like we were slaves.

In the evening the people gathered in church. Everyone was quiet, stunned. Nobody was praying, nobody was singing. Was the will to go on lost? Sheyann wondered if there would ever be another march. "It was like we were at our own funeral," she said.

But then later in the night, maybe nine-thirty or ten, I don't know for sure, all of a sudden somebody there started humming. I think they were moaning and it just went into the humming of a freedom song. It was real low, but some of us children began humming along, slow and soft. At first I didn't even know what it was, what song, I mean. It was like a funeral sound, a dirge. Then I recognized it - "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round". I'd never heard it or hummed it that way before. But it just started to catch on, and the people began singing the words. We sang, "Ain't gonna let George Wallace [the Governor of Alabama] turn me 'round." And, "Ain't gonna let Jim Clark turn me 'round." "Ain't gonna let no state trooper turn me 'round."

Ain't gonna let no horses...ain't gonna let no tear gas - ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round. Nobody!

And everybody's singing now, and some of them are clapping their hands, and they're still crying, but it's a different kind of crying. It's the kind of crying that's got spirit, not the weeping they had been doing.

And me and Rachel are crying and singing and it just gets louder and louder. I know the state troopers outside the church heard it. Everybody heard it. Because more people were coming in then, leaving their apartments and coming to the church - because something was happening.

We was singing and telling the world that we hadn't been whipped, that we had won.

Just all of a sudden something happened that night and we knew in that church that - Lord Almighty - we had really won, after all. We had won!"

And they had. For the whole country - the whole world! - saw what had happened that day in Selma. The television cameras had captured the terrible beating the peaceful marchers had taken on the bridge. And the next day people from all over America began arriving to help the cause of civil rights.

Questions

1. Why did the people of Selma want to march from Selma to Montgomery?
2. According to Sheyann, what happened on Pettus Bridge?
3. How was Sheyann able to get off of the bridge safely?
4. What was Sheyann's family's first reaction to what had happened?
5. How did people's feelings change at church that night?
6. How did songs help the people of Selma in their struggle?
7. If you were an adult living in New York in 1965, would you have gone to Selma? Why?
8. If you went to Selma, would you have been willing to follow the principles of nonviolent civil disobedience? Why?