

Remembering Selma

The following is a letter written by Miss Bonnie Strabley after her trip to Alabama to take part in the recent Civil Rights Voting march. Bonnie is from Rock Island, a 1964 graduate of Alleman Catholic high school, and is currently a freshman at Mundelein College in Chicago.

March 27, 1965

Dear Mom, Dad and Little Ones:

I just couldn't let these few minutes pass by without starting a letter to you about my last few days. First of all, in answer to your question, the Alabama trip had been brewing since about Friday. Nothing definite was worked out until Monday. That's why I called home so late. I thought sure I'd have to put up quite an argument, that's why I was especially happy when you said I could go. Monday night we spent buying food and making plans. We had to be prepared to carry everything we brought wherever we might go, so we traveled very light. Tuesday morning and evening we attended briefing sessions where we were brought up to date on the situation, warned of the possible dangers and etc. Dressed in slacks and Mundelein sweatshirts, we boarded our Continental Trailways Bus at about 6:15 P.M.

There were 38 of us including six nuns, two lay faculty members, a priest and a doctor from the Chicago University. (We were prepared for almost anything!) We changed drivers in Nashville, Tennessee and had a layover of about an hour. We left Nashville at about 5:30 A.M. and got into Montgomery about 1:30 P.M. Once we crossed the Alabama state line, we were warned not to leave the bus. Judging by the sneers of some of the people, it was a bit of wise advice. Since we hoped to meet the marchers outside of Montgomery, and actually march into the city with them, we went immediately to the city of St. Jude to drop off our belongings. This area includes a school, church, hospital, convent, and a huge field where we were to stay. We attended an orientation program right away. Here they told us what to do in case of personal assault, horse attack, or tear gas. This was one of the few times that I was really scared. No sooner did we go outside, than it started to pour! The rain dampened everything but our spirits and enthusiasm. We rescued our equipment from under the huge tent, which had collapsed during the storm, and started for the march. (At first we tried to save our shoes from the worst of the mud, but eventually we just gave up!) Unfortunately the original 300 marchers had made better time than they had anticipated, as we met them about ½ mile outside of St. Jude's. They were such a bedraggled, but happy group. We were all so proud to walk into camp with them, even though it was such a short way.

Once inside camp we had a chance to meet and talk to many of the original 300. There had been little trouble, but quite a bit of work and struggle and yet I didn't meet one of the marchers who wouldn't gladly have done it all over. The atmosphere inside our fenced-in area was completely friendly. No one was allowed outside of the fence, except in case of emergency, and then only groups of at least six, with a predominance of men. I've never seen so many federal troops, state police and just regular police. There must have been between 150 – 250 just around St. Jude's. There were always helicopters and airplanes over the field. It was a bit disconcerting to see so many troops with small Confederate

insignias over their names, but nevertheless the presence of the troops gave us a greater feeling of security. We were free to mix until the rally started at 8:00. I met people from all over the U.S. including Michigan, Arkansas, New Jersey, Missouri etc. It seemed as if the percentage of Negroes to Whites was fairly equal, with maybe a few more Whites on our bus, but a few more Negroes in the camp as a whole. Since the Negroes knew that we were on their side, they were especially eager to meet and talk to us. So many thanked us for coming down and backing their cause. Some of the women insisted on bringing us to their homes for dinner. Some offered the use of their bathtubs. (We took them up on their chicken, but decided we'd be considerably more grubby by the end of the march, so passed up the baths.) They all seemed so anxious to do anything in return for our moral support and presence. We felt more than once that they were giving much more than they were receiving.

We had intermittent showers during the day, but after the field got just so muddy, a few drops more didn't matter. Wednesday night was the only other time that I really got scared. We could hear the planes and helicopters overhead, and the sirens outside our "walls." We had seen a few signs and heard a few jeers only, but people coming in said that the tension outside was mounting as the people of Montgomery hung out their Confederate flags, and prepared for the march. The rally was about two hours late, but once it got started it was terrific. You wouldn't believe the people who participated that night. Harry Belafonte, Sammy Davis Jr., Odetta, Peter, Paul & Mary, Shelly Winters, Leonard Bernstein, Alan King, Tony Bennett, Dick Gregory, Chad Mitchell Trio, George Kirby, Floyd Patterson, Leon Bibb, Ralph Bunche, Rev. Robt. Abernathy and lots others! Since we had been on the go since early morning, we were really getting beat as the night wore on. Though we had hoped to spend the night in the open field, our leaders decided otherwise. Because of the collapsed tent (which left 2000 homeless) and the wet ground, our wet blankets and equipment, we were to spend the night in a church. Some Negroes heard of our plans and insisted on housing all 38 of us. Again we were indebted to the people we had come to help! Even though the rally continued until nearly 2:00, we decided to head for those beds at 1:30, as the next day promised to be a full one. We were to stay with a Mrs. Short, who had graciously volunteered to take in ten of our group. (Ann Murphy and Cathy Finneran were included in this ten.) How Mrs. Short could give us such a warm welcome in view of our bedraggled and terribly muddy appearance was really a marvel! It was so good to have a chance to wash up, and clean linens never looked so good. Mrs. Short rose early the next morning and prepared a hearty breakfast of eggs, juice, grits and ham. We learned that she was widowed and lived alone with her son Cecil in this Negro neighborhood. While her home was not luxurious, it was a modest middle-class home and the area was neat and well kept. Both Mrs. Short and her son hardly seemed to be able to do enough to express their gratitude and thankfulness for our support of their efforts. We left for St. Jude's at about 7:00 on this important day of the Montgomery demonstration.

Our group re-assembled near the convent at St. Jude's between 8:00-9:00. There was definitely an air of tense excitement, but this seemed overshadowed by our desire to start marching. I was amazed at the number of people present. Our crowd of about 1500-2500 (I never was very good at estimating figures) had grown considerably. Despite our numbers the group seemed highly organized. Due to late arrivals, including Martin Luther Jr., the march, which was scheduled to leave between 9-9:30, left at about 11:30 A.M. During the intermittent few hours we were again given briefing instructions. We were told to link arms, to form lines of six abreast, and to have a man on each end of each line. We were told of "eye-ball contact." This meant being aware of the people on the outside, but not acknowledging them. We were warned to expect jeers, dirty language and spitting – all of which we were told to ignore. Since

some of us had worn our Mundelein sweatshirts we were asked to be a "banner" and to lead the Mundelein group . We had a Negro boy at each end, and Faye Turner (Negro), Cathy Finneran, Helen Moorehead (Negro) and I completed the line. We had been provided with an improvised sign stating that we were representing the CIC (Chicago Interracial Society). We took turns holding the sign.

During these hours of waiting, we were also able to talk to other new people and to learn of their experiences. Military protection was doubled during this time.

The word to march was finally given! Because of the large number of marchers (we were told 50,000, the papers said 30,000) we thought at first that there would actually be some people who wouldn't make it out of St. Jude's field! Luckily this assumption wasn't right.

We alternately marched and ran the four miles to the Capitol building. We sang freedom songs constantly, and always seemed to return to everyone's favorite, "We Shall Overcome."

It gave you such a warm feeling to march through the Negro sections of town. There we were greeted and encouraged with cheering, smiles, tears and the victory sign. If only those people who questioned whether or not we were wanted by the Montgomery Negroes could have seen these Negroes, their suspicions would have been dispelled.

The situation looked entirely different when we entered the white section. We weren't subjected to much actual violence, but we did encounter what John Howard Griffen so aptly described as a "hate stare." We saw both Alabama state flags and Confederate flags. Downtown Montgomery was relatively deserted as we marched down Dexter Avenue to the Capitol. Our route had been very well guarded, again both by troops and aerial observation. In all, a total of 102 streets were guarded. The number of troops was astonishing, and a little foreboding. The Alabama Capitol is situated on a hill at the end of Dexter Avenue. As we reached the Capitol a jubilant shout went through the crowd. As we marched up the hill, I could see only marchers in front and in back of our group.

We sat down, completely filling the street, after singing the Star Spangled Banner. It was really ironic that we had to look to the crowd for an American flag, as the Capitol flew only the Alabama state flag, and the Confederate flag. The actual demonstration began at about 1:00 P.M. and ended at about 4:15. During this time we heard speeches from about a dozen prominent Civil Rights leaders, the petition to Governor Wallace was read, and the members of the petition committee were announced. The whole tone of the rally seemed geared to the emotions of the Negroes as seen in something like a religious revival. The closing speech was delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr. He is a terrific speaker and an even better leader. Next we joined hands in a friendship clasp and sang again, "We Shall Overcome." While the benediction was being given we hummed and when it was finished we ended "We Shall Overcome," for the last time as a Civil Rights group. To me this was the most moving sight of the march. To see Negroes and Whites, Christians of all faiths and Jews join hands and sing for this freedom cause produced an indescribable feeling. (We had a Catholic white girl on one side, and an Episcopalian, Negro girl on the other.) The crowd dispersed immediately as we were all warned to leave Alabama, especially Montgomery, at once.

We had some difficulty in finding our bus, but finally located at about 5:30. It was so difficult to move in the city as many streets were blocked. The state troopers were none too friendly and proved to be of little help. We couldn't stand in one place, nor sit (we could have been arrested as a demonstrating sit-in group.) We boarded our bus quite relieved and headed for St. Jude's to pick up our belongings. What

had before been a hustle of activity was again merely a field, with only remnants of its former occupation evident. We loaded our bus, said some final farewells and headed for home at about 6:45 P.M.

We were lucky enough to have as an extra passenger one of the original 300 marchers. The stories he told seemed almost unbelievable. We were all pretty exhausted and each of us seemed to be thinking about what we had just experienced. We again pulled into Nashville, this time for breakfast at about 3:15 A.M. We ate, grabbed some of the local newspapers for more news about the march, and finally departed at about 5:30 A.M. It was in Nashville that we learned of the tragic death of the Civil Rights worker. After the order and safety of the march, it seemed even more terrible that the Movement was marred by this death.

We stopped several more times before reaching Chicago, and pulled into Mundelein at about 2:15 P.M. We weren't prepared for the cameras that greeted us. One of the local TV stations took films which were later on the news, and we were also interviewed. We also weren't prepared for the sporadic booing that we received when we entered Lewis Center. What concerned us most at this time, however, was a hot shower and a nice bed.

I slept from 6:00 – 10:00 and from about 10:30 P.M. – 11:30 A.M. Even though we were back in our Mundelein world, things didn't look quite the same. Things took on a new perspective in view of our recent experience. Even though Alabama seems terribly remote even now, we were a part of that world for a while and we know how very real it really is. I realize that our fresh and vital enthusiasm will wane all too soon, and yet I feel that this trip changed me; affected my views on many things. I only hope we can follow up this action with a practical application here at home. We're trying to organize some kind of CORE group now.

Though many students were against our trip for some reason or other (glory-seeking, curiosity etc.) few can give sound logical reasons for their opposition. I don't expect many comments tomorrow (Mon) as the trip is pretty well talked out.

Misc. We traveled through Indiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama and Illinois. We were told that if one member of our group should happen to be arrested, we were all to go to jail with her. I guess it's a bit dangerous if you're alone. Since our group included Negroes, we were especially warned of this.

There was a group of about fifty noted historians in the group, who were there to get a first hand report.

Whenever I smell green onions I'll think of our trip, as the field at St. Jude's is full of onion grass, wild onions or something.

While we were away, a group here at school held a twenty-four-hour-a-day vigil in the chapel for our safety. The kids also prayed for us each night here in the dorm. It gave us an eerie feeling to hear all of this, and I was glad I didn't find out until I returned.

A group of college students, many of them Negroes, were "abandoned" in Montgomery for eight hours. It seems as if their bus driver disappeared. I doubt if there was any foul play as some of the drivers were entirely against the movement. This one probably decided to up and leave. The idea of spending eight hours in an open parking lot after that Montgomery rally makes my blood run cold!

Some girls here at school had planned a sit-down demonstration in front of our bus before we left, but somehow it never quite came off.

It's so terrific to find someone who really wants to hear about our experience, even though the true significance is too personal to really put into words. I wish I could have told you in person, but this was the next best thing. I hope I didn't talk your ear off, but I just had to try to convey to you what the trip meant to me.

Love,

Bonnie