

Marching

Now, what was happening was, as our schools were getting better along about this time in the 1950s, we were learning that we weren't supposed to be living like this regardless of what our parents said. We learned that we had certain rights: freedom of speech, freedom of religion. We learned about the Constitution of the United States. We learned that all men are created equal. We knew it was time for change.

I remember that when I was in about the

eleventh grade, people started coming around to the schools, and wanted high-school students to participate in marches. These people wanted to march in Raleigh, and they would come around and talk to you about it. It wasn't like there was someone insisting, but they would explain to you about how you would go about it and what they were going to do, and it was up to you if you wanted to. They didn't have to talk too much—we were ready for a movement. Of course, we figured it would be a little violent, but we didn't know it was going to be rough as it was. Our parents would say to us, "We don't understand. Don't you know you're going to get killed for listening to these people? You're going to get beat up. What's wrong with you?" Then we would say to them, "We're getting beat up now. We're getting killed now. So I'd rather get beat up for doing something or trying to change things. I mean, why get beat up

for nothing?" That's what we used to reply back to them.

Martin Luther King, Jr., went to Raleigh. He went to the capitals because that's where the governors and mayors and everybody was at. I remember he would send these representatives out to see us at the high school, and they would also go to the college in Raleigh, a black college, Shaw University. These people would come to us because there was no need to talk to our parents and people like that because they couldn't participate in the movement: first of all, because they lived on these farms, and if the white man found out that they were participating in this type of movement, they would automatically be kicked off the farm and not be able to get a job anywhere else; and second of all, the Klansmen would catch them. So the only people they would talk to were high-school students and college people.

Later, when I was a little older, we used to meet up in Raleigh in the mornings to march. We would meet up by the mayor's house. When we got there to start the march, the Klansmen would be there waiting. They marched before we marched, and they had their signs about white power and all this stuff, and the police would escort them. We couldn't understand why the police escorted them, because nobody was going to bother them.

Now, before we marched, we used to get rubber inner tubes and we would cut them up. We would take our clothes off and tie the inner tube around our bodies and around our arms. Then we'd put our regular pants back on and a big pair of coveralls or anything real loose over that. We also used to make stocking caps from cotton stockings that ladies wore, and we would take either newspaper or cotton and fold it up and put it on our heads

and take these stocking caps and put them over that. The inner tubes were in case we were jumped by a dog. The paper or cotton was in case we were beaten.

When it was our time to start marching, the Klansmen and the white citizens stood on one side. We would lock arms. We would start marching, and people would start throwing things at us. They used to have human waste in paper bags. They would run up and try to throw rotten eggs in our faces. They used to urinate in milk bottles, and they would try to throw that on us. But we kept marching. We were determined and we felt we had nothing to lose. It was a good thing Martin Luther King was nonviolent, because if both sides would have been fighting and carrying weapons and stuff like that, it would have been chaos. I still believe that was the only solution, to be non-violent.

It was a heck of a feeling—to not know

whether we were going to live for the next hour or not. Because it was rumored that some of the Klansmen had guns. It was rumored that they would throw dynamite in the crowd. It was an awful feeling, too. We had police standing shoulder to shoulder. They weren't going to let us pass. And we tried to break the length of the police. They had dogs. We would start running because of those dogs. The main thing was not to fall down if you could help it. If you fell down, you could really get hurt or mauled by one of the dogs. You had to stay up on your feet.

Now, some of the police would beat on you, but they wouldn't be hitting you that hard. They was just going through the motions, and they would say, "Run, run!" Those were the good policemen.

After you got past the police, then you had the firemen with water hoses from their trucks. And believe me, that water could ac-

tually peel the skin right off of you. They would put a lot of water on the street. You would take your hands and fold them between your legs so your limbs wouldn't be flopping all about you, and you would go down with the water and let it push you wherever it would. You didn't try to fight it or nothing like that.

We would start running down the street because the police and the dogs and the Klansmen—everybody was chasing us, and we would just start running. And I remember that there were Greeks and Jewish people with businesses there. They would stand in their doorways and motion for us to run in the store. We used to run down in their basements and hide.

Sometimes there were people sitting down at the end of Fayetteville Street with cars. There were black and white people sitting in cars, and you would run and jump in

a car that would take off and take you out of the city.

There was a black section in Raleigh. You would think they would have helped us if we made it to their section and we would be safe. But they would be standing with shovels, ice picks, anything to keep us out. They said we were troublemakers and they hated us. Those people worked in Raleigh, and because of the demonstrations they couldn't get to work. So they were out of a job. That's the main reason they hated us.

But we continued marching and carrying on as though it was the only thing to do, because we couldn't turn back once we started. We used to try and make it to a van they called the Black Marie. A Black Marie was black, and the story goes it was named after a big powerful lady who would get drunk on Saturday, and it would take about four or five police to put her in one of those vans, so they

nicknamed them Black Marie. Anyway, it was the wagon that you got to go to jail in. We would try to go to jail because they would keep you overnight, and that way you were protected. They had these speakers in the jail, and they would tell us Martin Luther King was a Communist and he worked for the Germans and he was coming to break peace between the whites and the colored. And when the Klansmen spoke of him, we used to start singing old Negro hymns and stuff like that. And I remember them coming with fire hoses and they would turn the hoses on to get us to stop singing, and we would take the mattresses and put them between us and the hoses to keep the water from hitting us.

But we kept on and on. One day we went up there to the big house where the mayor lived, to march, and this was when we had been marching for a while now, and I remember when we got there the mayor was

standing out on the steps and they had National Guards. We figured, well, this is it. Somebody was going to get killed with those soldiers there.

But the mayor said that from that day on, the marches would be protected. If anyone was caught abusing anyone or throwing rocks or anything, they would be arrested. We couldn't believe what we were hearing. When he finished his speech, we clapped our hands and started shouting and carrying on in the streets. The white folks and the Klansmen could not believe this was happening. They ran out as usual to do their thing. The National Guards caught them and put handcuffs on them and took them to jail, and we were startled. We thought we were dreaming. We never thought this would happen—that the white man would go to jail for abusing us. We just couldn't believe this was happening. But we actually saw this with our own eyes. That was the most rejoicing day of my life.

Our friends and relatives would say to us, “What are you doing? Why are you doing these things? You will never be able to walk in the front door of the drugstore. You will never be able to live in a beautiful house beside the white man. It isn’t supposed to happen in life.”

But our friends and relatives and also the white man didn’t understand the way we felt and the way we thought about the situation, which was we didn’t care who we sat beside. We didn’t care who we lived beside. We didn’t care so much about walking in the front door. What we cared about was who are you to tell us what we can and can’t do in America, the land of freedom, the land of democracy. That is what we got beat up for. It was as simple as that.

