



### About the Author

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### About Vintage Voice

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# VINTAGE VOICE



## SELMA

**By the Rev. Fred Fenton**

One of the joys of retirement is getting to go to the movies during the day. So on a chilly winter day, soon after it opened in local theatres, my wife and I went to see the film "Selma." This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the march. Was it really that long ago? We joined the march at the invitation of our bishop. I was vicar of a small, Southern California mission church, and we had a five-year-old son. Now with three grown sons and three granddaughters, one of whom just entered college, we still have vivid memories of the event.

The day the letter from the bishop arrived, inviting us to join a group from the diocese, I told my secretary I wanted to participate but could not afford the plane tickets. She was a can-do black woman and determined I should go. Before long she had raised enough money for both Billie and me to make the trip.

The rural dean, an Englishman who had spent five years in Alabama, thought our decision unwise. He wrote, "I hope you have made your will and arranged your affairs..." I sent his letter to the local newspaper. The next day, a front-page article proclaimed "Beach Pastor 'Bama Bound" and quoted from the dean's letter. Not an auspicious beginning for a young priest in his first cure!

Arriving for the charter flight to Montgomery, we found a celebrative mood among participants. The bishop was handing out Episcopal Volunteer medals. Then the FBI arrived. They ordered luggage from the plane removed, and began searching for explosives. Billie and I retreated behind a pillar for a private conversation. Our child was staying with grandparents. We did not want him to become an orphan. Finally, we decided to put our trust in God. The march had become, for us, a journey in faith.

The scene at the airport was chaotic. Marchers kept arriving from all over the country. The public restrooms were out of all supplies. A priest friend, who had been with the marchers from Selma, camping at night in fields adjacent to the highway, saw the look of distress on my face and said, "What's wrong?" When I told him, he reached into his backpack and produced a roll of toilet paper. Talk about manna from heaven!

I saw a rabbi with a long, white beard, sitting with his back against a wall in the terminal. He was sound asleep. Leaning against him, also sleeping, was a black child. I thought of the words “black and white together,” from a version of the great anthem of the Civil Rights movement, “We Shall Overcome.”

Those of us pouring into the terminal were joining the last leg of the march from Selma to the steps of the state capitol. Our route took us through a section of the city with the poorest housing we had ever seen. Black men, women, and children, were waving handkerchiefs and cheering us on. It was a hot and muggy day, punctuated by light showers. I was in a dark suit and clerical collar, and wearing a topcoat. Billie was wearing a coat, too. The march seemed interminable. Soon, I was carrying both coats. A young UCLA student spotted me trudging along. Like an angel from heaven, he asked if he could carry the coats for me. Could he!

The downtown part of the march was a sharp contrast to the impoverished, black neighborhood we had just been through. Here, sullen white faces appeared and taunts could be heard. National guard soldiers, in uniform and carrying rifles, lined both sides of the highway. They had been sent by President Johnson to protect the marchers. These were mostly young men, 18 or 19 years of age. Like us, they looked hot, tired, and scared, but I was very glad they were there.

SNCC, or “Snick” workers, brave young black people who risked their lives in voter registration drives, ran along the sides of our column flashing cards that read, “SMILE.” Without a doubt the most joyful marchers were from a big Jewish temple in Los Angeles. They had arrived on the same flight with us. Repeatedly chanting songs in Hebrew, they wore hard hats for protection.

Arriving at the capitol, we were surprised to see the Confederate flag flying from a tall pole near the capitol building. Twenty-five thousand marchers waited a full two hours before Dr. King spoke. He did not disappoint. His powerful words echoed over the area and gave us all hope for the future of the civil rights movement and of the nation.

On our way back to the airport, tired and thirsty, we stopped at a black church where members were providing jugs of water for the marchers to drink. A photographer asked to take a picture of the sign I was carrying. It pictured black and white leaves together on a vine growing out of a cross.

Racism, as we know, is not confined to one section of the country. When we got home to California hate messages began arriving. We were mailed pictures of massacred children and told this would happen to our child. Ugly telephone calls came at all hours of the day and night. One male voice, which sounded quite serious, said a bomb would be placed under our house. The sheriff’s deputy who came to investigate laughed and said, “I’d like to see them try. The house is sitting on a cement slab.” The next Sunday my sermon title was, “How firm a foundation.”

And what of the film “Selma?” Some of the things it depicts are accurate, others are not. It is an artistic interpretation, not a documentary. Those of us in the march had different experiences, but as I look back from my vantage point as a retired priest and a veteran of peace and justice work, all of us, I think, would say we were glad to have responded to Dr. King’s call and to have participated in a history-making event.



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