

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



Everybody's stories matter. It's not just a matter of nostalgia, it powers us into the present and the future. -- Barack Obama

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"Not a problem, we got this": From Birmingham to Selma

Everyone knows it began at Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, that epic 54-mile march for voting rights in March 1965. The Selma to Montgomery march, recognized around the world as a turning point in America's struggle for civil rights, is now a designated national historic trail with interpretive centers operated by the National Park Service.

The march actually began in Birmingham, however. Marchers, perhaps 20 strong, walked to Alabaster for an overnight stay, picked up more folks there, passed through Montevallo and then Centerville and at last arrived in Selma, their numbers growing as they went. The grit and courage of the marchers, along with the love and resourcefulness of supporters along the way, are a story that needs to be told.

We can begin to piece together that story from a conversation recorded late last October with Elvie Schooley, best known to Montevallans as visionary founder of local nonprofit DRUM the Program. Elvie inherited her activism and boundless energy from her parents, Eloise and Rev. Jimmy R. Underwood, founding members (along with Robert Tolbert and Elizabeth Taylor) of the Alabaster Suburban League, a civil rights organization with a mission to expand local voting rights. When the League got wind of a major voting rights march being organized in Selma, its leaders, including Elvie's parents, got to work planning an overnight stop for marchers from Birmingham.

Elvie was too young to be directly involved, but her parents and one of her older sisters took part in the march. Their remembrances became the family stories which she has recently shared.

"The plan was, that when the marchers arrived, the Alabaster School, which was the Black school, right there on 31" -- site of the Shelby County Resource Center today -- "would be where they would host them. They had organized all the community members that would cook, prepare the food for them, and the bedding, and all that kind of stuff, all that stuff was set in motion." But things did not go as planned. "Daddy said that when it was time for the marchers to arrive, the city of Alabaster cut off the electricity and the water at the school." So there the marchers were, weary and footsore, obliged to shelter in a building with no heat, light, or water.

The response of the organizers? "Not a problem, we got this." Elvie explains: "You had this organization of people, especially women, who were already activated, already organized, and all it took was 'we got this.' So they brought in everything that they needed, candles, flashlights, water, food, bedding, and they fed and housed the marchers. They

didn't have any problems you know from Klans members at this point of time, at the school." The next morning they were off to Montevallo and then on to Centerville.

Did the marchers face problems at other sheltering sites? None that Elvie heard about, although there have been unconfirmed reports of stomach sickness, perhaps food poisoning, connected with stops in Montevallo and Centerville. Others with memories of the march from Montevallo onwards may be able to help us fill out the story.



Asked why so few have heard about the march from Birmingham, Elvie was unhesitating and to the point. The "heavy hitters" were in Selma: "then it became a thing." But people need to know that civil rights activism was taking place outside Birmingham, outside Selma and Montgomery: "People were doing it at their own local level." Knowing this "adds so much value to our small towns."

It was "people along the way" who created "the momentum and the energy" that fed events in Selma. For young people especially voting rights and the civil rights struggle were basic to who they were, to the changes they knew had to come. The struggle was "what you did back then. . . , it was huge, it was part of the movement, it was in the music, it was in the social scene, you know" and you had to use "whatever tools you had to add to the conversation around it."

The story of the voting rights march of 1965 offers more than the expected scenes of brutality and evil at Pettus Bridge; of suffering and sacrifice in the Black community. The marchers who made their way through Alabaster and Montevallo attracted no reporters, no television cameras, none of the cruelty publicized by the national media. Family stories like Elvie's create a different legacy. They bring into view the acts of kindness of everyday folks who joined forces for the freedom to vote. They illuminate the get-it-doneness of ordinary people in small towns who offered candles, bedding, and flashlights when the electricity was turned off. "We got this."

Image from the digital collection of Alabama Department of Archives and History. We are grateful to Elvie Schooley for sharing this story. Submitted by Kathy King & Anitka Stewart Sims. Contact us at Movaltrail@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome correction of any errors of fact or interpretation.