

March 3, 1994

D. Cavanaugh

## A Long Journey

On Sunday, February 6, 1994, the headline said, "A long journey -- white supremacist found guilty in Evers' slaying. Racist Byron De La Beckwith had been convicted of the June 12, 1963 murder of Medgar Evers. The story continued, "In the weeks before his death, at a time when racial violence was as much a part of Mississippi life as the summer heat, both Myrlie and Medgar Evers lived each day with the thought it could be his last. 'We both knew the end was near,' Myrlie Evers said. 'You don't challenge a system like that without knowing the price to be paid. We lived with threats on a daily basis, and both of us knew in the last three weeks that it wasn't going to be very long.'" Evers, Mississippi field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was getting out of his car shortly after midnight after attending a meeting to watch a televised speech on civil rights by President Kennedy. A sniper hiding in a clump of sweet gum trees shot him through the back with a .30-06 bullet.

"The guilty verdict set up a cheer among the mostly black crowd attending the trial and brought a close to one of the longest and most painful sagas of the 1960's civil-rights movement."

Today the conviction of Medgar Evers' killer dominates the headlines, but thirty years ago the headlines spoke of marches, boycotts, struggles, sit-ins, bombings, shootings, police dogs, resistance, segregation, integration, fire hoses, and lynchings. When Langston Hughes, a twentieth century black poet, wrote the poem "I, Too" in the 1950's, he was commenting on the state of black Americans in the United States.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.

Other than the Emancipation Proclamation, the earliest significant civil rights legislation was Plessy v. Ferguson. In 1896 Homer Plessy sued the railroad because he had not been allowed to ride in the white section of the train. Eventually the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy. The court decided that since there was a section available for Plessy, he had no right to sit in the white section. Only "separate but equal" was required by law. In other words, this decision gave legal validity to segregation.

In 1952, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case of Linda Brown v. the School Board of Topeka, Kansas. Linda was a black child who was forced to attend an all black school many miles from her home when she lived quite close to an all white school. On May 12, 1954, brand new Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the court's decision: "We conclude, unanimously, that in the field of public education the doctrine of separate but equal has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The decision was quite clear, but the court did not provide instructions for desegregating the schools. So most of the nation waited and did nothing.

The next major hurdle to be encountered by blacks was busing. As you recall,

the prevailing system required blacks to sit in the back of buses. Whites could not only sit in the front of the bus, but were also allowed to commandeer seats from blacks if there were no seats available in the front. In 1955, Rosa Parks of Montgomery, Alabama, stepped into the fray. Mrs. Parks refused to give up her seat at the bus driver's request. She was arrested, tried and found guilty of violating the law banning integration. A protest group headed by twenty-six year old Martin Luther King, Jr., was formed and a one day bus boycott was organized. After tremendous support from the black community on the first day, the group decided to continue the boycott until their demands were met. Actually the demands were quite modest. They asked that seating be granted on a first-come, first seated basis (even though blacks would continue to sit in the back of the bus), that they be treated courteously, and that blacks be hired as drivers on all black routes. The city agreed to none of the demands and the boycott continued. Opponents of the boycott fought back. The homes of many of the leaders of the boycott (including Dr. King's) were bombed. Blacks were fined and jailed and insurance coverage on churches was revoked.

On November 13, 1956, nearly a year after the initiation of the boycott, the Supreme Court affirmed a lower court decision outlawing segregation on buses. The boycott had been successful. Black America had won equitable seating on buses. But they had won much more. Montgomery had taught them that they did have power and that this power could be used to fight injustice.

In 1957, education again moved into the headlines. The Brown decision had mandated integration in our schools, but most systems still had done nothing about complying. The school board in Little Rock, Arkansas, issued a statement that they would comply. They developed a plan known as the Little Rock Phase Program, under which Central High of Little Rock would admit a limited number of black students. The Supreme Court ruled that this was not compliance and that a speedier program must be initiated. With the support of Governor Orvil Faubus, the group opposed to

desegregation tried to block admission of any black students to Central High.

Because of threats and scare tactics, only nine black children enrolled at Central, and they were unable to attend because Governor Faubus ordered the National Guard to block their admission. President Dwight Eisenhower asked the governor to aid with the desegregation efforts, and when that failed, the President sent riot-trained units of the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock. Each day the black students were escorted to and from school by federal troops. Eisenhower had made it abundantly clear that he would not permit unlawful acts by the segregationist South.

In February of 1960, the first sit-in was staged in the F.W. Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina. The sit-in movement challenged segregation at lunch counters. Soon the movement spread throughout the South. During similar efforts in Atlanta, Dr. King was arrested and given jail time. The presidential election was just one month away, and candidate John Kennedy called King's wife to lend his support. Later Robert Kennedy spoke to Atlanta authorities, and King was freed. The next month Kennedy's election was ensured by overwhelming black support. A new alliance had been formed.

The Freedom Riders took center stage in 1961. This group was actually made up of members and supporters of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, which was established in 1947. The goal of the group at this time was to end segregation on the interstate buses and trains. The integrated group traveled through the Deep South on Greyhound and Trailway buses with whites in the back of the bus and blacks refusing to move from the front of the bus. When they stopped, blacks would attempt to use white restrooms and eat at white lunch counters. The goal was to create enough trouble that the federal government would step in. At that time in that section of the country, trouble was easily created. One bus was bombed in Anniston, Alabama. In Birmingham, police commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor led a violent campaign against the Freedom Riders. Beatings, bombings and death threats were all part of life

for the riders.

Two years later "Bull" Conner was at it again. He met a demonstration in Birmingham with force. Police dogs, electric cattle prods, high-pressure hoses, and clubs were used against demonstrators. Nearly a thousand black students were arrested.

While "Bull" Conner was turning the dogs loose in Birmingham, blacks were achieving success in other areas. Wilt Chamberlain was starting for the Philadelphia Warriors. Ray Charles was performing hits like "I Can't Stop Loving You," and Sidney Poitier was becoming the first black actor to win an Oscar as Best Actor for Lilies of the Fields. So while white Americans were telling some blacks to move to the back of the bus, they were paying millions of dollars to be entertained by black athletes, singers, and actors. And it is probably a safe bet that no one was telling Wilt Chamberlain to move to the back of the bus.

As bad as Birmingham was, it was perhaps more symbol than exception. George Wallace was making his famous "Segregation now" speech; the Ku Klux Klan was bombing black churches; the admission of black students to schools was still being blocked by white leaders, and Dr. King's home was bombed again. President Kennedy knew that tougher legislation must be passed. On June 19, 1963, he delivered a new civil rights bill to Congress. Within the bill was a provision that would guarantee the right to vote. This was a right that was withheld from blacks in many rural southern areas.

In an effort to demonstrate support for the bill, members of various civil rights organizations joined together for a march on Washington. Over two hundred fifty thousand people came to Washington to show their support. Demonstration of support for this bill by blacks was critical, but even more important were the other themes of the march -- unity and racial harmony. Blacks reached out to whites and were greeted with handshakes, not clenched fists. Whites had always taken part in the Black

Movement. Some had helped with money, or ridden buses, or given rides to boycotters. But this time great numbers of whites joined in. A picture taken of the event on Constitution Avenue shows thousands of marchers, both black and white, and signs such as "We march for integrated schools now!" and "We demand decent housing now!" as well as "UAW says jobs and freedom for every American" and "UAW says: God of Justice, God of Power -- Can America deny freedom in this hour?"

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Bill on July 2, 1964, seven months after the assassination of John Kennedy.

The most disappointing aspect of the new bill to civil rights leaders was that despite attempts by Kennedy, Johnson and many in Congress, voting rights were still not being granted to many blacks. Intimidation by white officials was a major factor as was the lengthy questionnaire that blacks were forced to fill out.

Again the civil rights activists went back to work. Selma, Alabama, was picked as an area of major emphasis. In Selma, only one percent of blacks were registered to vote. As usual there was plenty of opposition. Three young men who took part in the voter registration drive were murdered. Dr. King, and later 500 students, were arrested at the Selma Courthouse. At one time there were more blacks in jail than on the voting rolls in Selma.

Dr. King's arrest in Selma took place only a couple of months after he was presented the Nobel Peace Prize. What most of the world saw and apparently prized, the rest of us considered a threat.

A fifty mile march from Selma to Montgomery was planned. The hope was that this act would again draw the attention of the federal government to Selma and similar communities. To no one's surprise, the marchers were viciously attacked by the Alabama State Police. King decided to discontinue the march until going to Montgomery for a court hearing. A district judge in Montgomery ruled that the marchers had the right to proceed to Montgomery. President Johnson sent the

Alabama National Guard, regular army troops, FBI agents and federal marshals to protect the marchers.

On March 15, 1965, President Johnson said, "What happened in Selma was an American tragedy." He then announced that he was sending a voting bill to Congress that would guarantee the right of every American to vote. On August 6th, the Voting Rights Act was passed.

Everything I have just told you is true. Each of us lived through those years and followed the major events and the big names in the headlines. I am not sure, however, that we can develop a real appreciation for the struggle by looking just at the big picture. In order to do that, we need to isolate on one area. Nashville certainly saw its share of action during the sixties.

I have interviewed two people who were directly involved in sit-ins and boycotts in Nashville in the early months of 1960. Most of my information concerning those events comes from Leo Lillard, who is currently a member of the Metro Council in Nashville. In 1960, Mr. Lillard was a junior at Tennessee A & I, majoring in engineering. He was a native of Nashville and was more than familiar with the strict segregationist policies. He naturally had never approved, never understood, and had gotten kicked off of a couple of buses for refusing to move to the back as quickly as the driver wished. However, his thoughts at that point of his life were not on civil rights. His studies took most of his time, and his goals were to get his degree, make some money, and grab his share of the power offered to a moderately wealthy black man.

As early as January, Lillard had heard rumblings about action at Fisk University. It was said that a group of Fisk students planned to demand service at some of the "white" lunch counters in town. If they were not served, and they wouldn't be, they would occupy the seat so no one else could be served. Leo wished them the best, but really had not time to pay attention to what was bound to be such a feeble attempt. In his mind the students at Fisk, although mostly black, were an elitist group. Most came

from families with more money than Leo's and a lot were from the North. At any rate he couldn't imagine a group of students making any change in the status quo.

The next month passed uneventfully until the snowy morning of February 14th when word came that the Fisk students were indeed going to "walk." Their plan was to order lunch at Woolworth, Kress, and McClellan lunch counters and to occupy the seats until served. The imminence of the attempt did spark Leo's interest, and he decided to cut an afternoon class and watch the activities. He made his way to Fifth Avenue by noon and what he saw thirty minutes later changes his life forever. As he stood on the sidewalk outside Woolworth, he saw a group of well-dressed, black, college-age students enter the store. He followed as they made their way back to the lunch counter and as each found a seat and ordered lunch. He watched as plates were dropped by waitresses and lunch orders were met with blank, confused expressions. None of the employees really knew what to do. Managers were called to the counters and phone calls were placed. Through it all, the students maintained a quiet discipline. They were actually in charge of the situation. Leo didn't know what was planned next or where this movement was going, but he wanted to be part of it. The rest of the afternoon was spent talking to participants at the sit-in. That night he went to a meeting at the First Baptist Church on Capitol Hill. While there, he met Diane Nash and Jim Lawson, the two people who had been primarily responsible for putting the day's activities together. Miss Nash was a junior at Fisk and was the confirmed student leader. She was from Chicago and had no intention of accepting the existing conditions in Nashville. Mr. Lawson was a divinity student at Vanderbilt. He had spent three years in India, learning about Gandhi's use of nonviolent resistance.

During the next few weeks, Leo spent a lot of time in workshops, learning to participate in a sit-in. Lawson's belief in nonviolence was emphasized. The trainees were taught how to approach a lunch counter, how to relieve a fellow student who had to leave, how to tolerate verbal abuse without reacting, and how to protect one

another. If someone was being beaten, the proper action was to put your body between them and the attackers but never to hit back.

Finally it was time for Leo to actually take part in a sit-in. By this time the opposition whites as well as the police were more prepared than at the earlier activities. Leo had to put up with namecalling, with being pushed and spat on, but he was not arrested. "Actually our workshops had become so rough that the first sit-in was easier than expected." Leo was arrested one time. He was taking part in a stand-in at a local movie theater. The police came and ordered them to leave. When they refused to leave, they were arrested. Like everything else going on during this period, the jail trip was inspiring. The students wouldn't quit singing. They spent several hours singing gospel songs and songs of protest before being bailed out. The money for bail was provided by the NAACP or by the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference.

In March the Student Steering Committee, of which Leo was now a member, began to formulate plans to add a boycott to the other activities. The plan was to get the entire black community, along with white sympathizers, to refuse to shop at any store that refused to serve blacks at their lunch counters. This added one more measure of economic clout to the existing mix. Participation in the boycott was virtually one hundred percent. Easter was approaching, and ordinarily would have signaled a period of heavy spending. Suits, dresses, and hats would ordinarily have been in great demand, but for Easter, 1960, almost everyone decided to wear something that they already had. Almost all the men had khaki pants and a white shirt, and most of the women had a khaki skirt and white blouse so that became the uniform for the day. Row after row in the black churches were filled Easter morning with men, women and children wearing their uniforms.

In mid-April, violence really escalated. The home of Alexander Looby, attorney for the students, was bombed. From the power and placement of the bomb, the police concluded that the act was definitely an attempt to kill Looby. The next day the

students decided that it was time for more action on their part. Many white members of the community and most politicians were horrified by the Looby bombing. That gave the students sympathetic ears that were not previously available. Also the store owners and managers had had enough. Their lunch counters had done little business for two months, and the boycott prior to Easter turned that sales period into a disaster as well. They were ready to capitulate. A student march on City Hall was hastily planned. It began at Tennessee A & I with about 1500 participants. They were joined by students from Fisk, Meharry, American Baptist Seminary, and Pearl High School. Soon the ranks had swollen to over three thousand. They marched three abreast and they marched silently. "It was eerie," said Leo Lillard. "All I could think about was the courage and dedication of these people. All you could hear was footsteps. I looked a couple of rows in front of me and saw Rev. C. T. Vivian, Diane Nash, and Bernard Lafayette leading the way. I knew they were leading in the right direction, and I hoped that the people farther back in the line had the same faith in me."

The marchers reached City Hall at 1:30 and were met by Mayor Ben West. Rev. Vivian read a statement which sharply criticized the leadership of the mayor. After some discussion in which Mayor West defended some of his actions and fielded questions, he was asked about his lunch counter recommendation. West answered emphatically that he had suggested the end of segregation there. Then Miss Nash pressed the mayor, "Do you mean that to include lunch counters? Do you recommend that lunch counters be desegregated?"

"Yes," said West. "That is exactly what I mean."

The day after West's proclamation, Rev. King came to Nashville to celebrate the victory with the students. He also hoped to draw strength from the students and to make plans to use the Nashville leaders in other areas.

On May 11th, six previously segregated lunch counters served food to blacks. Another step had been taken.

When Langston Hughes said that no one would send him to the kitchen any more, he was right. Black America fought for and won the right to eat in the dining room. Hughes also told us that we would be ashamed of the things that we had done. He was right about that, too.