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A Long March Into History

Stephen Somerstein Photos in 'Freedom Journey 1965'

Almost 50 years ago, the picture editor of a campus newspaper at City College of New York assigned himself a breaking story: coverage of what promised to be a massive, violence-threatened march in Alabama, led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to demand free-and-clear voting rights for African-Americans. On short notice, the editor, Stephen Somerstein, grabbed five cameras, climbed on a bus and headed south.

He wasn't alone. The bus was filled with other students. A flash-lit photo he took of them, shoulder to shoulder on seats and sitting in the aisles, is the earliest in a sequence of the 55 pictures from that trip — most black and white, a few in color — that make up "Freedom Journey 1965: Photographs of the Selma to Montgomery March by Stephen Somerstein," at the New-York Historical Society.

The march, organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, would be a pivot point in the civil rights movement, a high moment of nonviolent direct action followed by a shift into different methods of protest. It has gone down in history as a heroic event and an apotheosis of the reputation of Dr. King — the current Hollywood film “Selma” portrays it that way — and so it was. But it was also a long, dusty, down-to-earth trudge on the part of thousands of citizens whose names are lost but whose images live on in pictures taken by Mr. Somerstein and other photographers on the scene.

For all involved, danger was ever-present. The march, which covered 54 miles and took five days, from March 21 to 25, had been preceded by two traumatic aborted versions. On March 7, 600 people trying to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River leading out of Selma to Montgomery were accused by local law officials of gathering illegally and were savagely assaulted by state troopers. Two days later, a second group, this one led by Dr. King, approached the bridge, knelt to pray and turned back. If the retreat was intended as a symbolic rebuke to violence, it did no good. That night, a Unitarian minister from Boston named James J. Reeb, in town for the event, was beaten on the street by a group of Selma racists and died.

By the time of the third march, certain protective measures were in place. The force of public opinion was one. Pictures of the attack at the bridge had been widely seen in print and on national television: All eyes were on Selma now. An Alabama judge had finally granted legal permission for a march to proceed. Finally, President Lyndon B. Johnson, enraged at Gov. George C. Wallace’s refusal to shield the marchers, ordered federal troops to guard them.

Mr. Somerstein arrived at the tail end of all this. His bus reached Alabama only for the last day of the march. The earliest shots in the show — organized by Marilyn Satin Kushner, head of the society’s department of prints, photographs and architectural collections — are from the morning of March 25. They were taken at the campground on the outskirts of Montgomery, where we see people gathering up bedrolls and unfurling flags in preparation for a final push into the city. A processional order takes shape, with various movement leaders up front — we see the Rev. Ralph Abernathy with his three young children, and John Lewis and Andrew Young joining arms with out-of-town clergy members. Pretty much everyone else — eventually some 25,000 people — falls in behind. And the long column starts off.

Scads of photographers were on the job that day and, inevitably, certain subjects — political leaders, visiting celebrities — were the focus of many cameras, including Mr. Somerstein’s. Yet most of the people in his pictures are not stars; they’re rank-and-file participants. It’s from their perspective that we see the march. In one shot, we’re in the middle of it, surrounded by fellow walkers. In others, we’re looking out at bystanders who line the way: white office workers; hecklers; multiracial shoppers; African-American children on porches; women, dressed in Sunday best, on the steps of black churches.

This viewpoint subtly alters a standard account of the event, one perpetuated in “Selma,” which suggests that a small, elite band of high-level organizers were the heroes of the day. They were indeed heroes, but they were borne on the shoulders of the countless grass-roots organizers who paved the way for the march and the anonymous marchers, many of them women, who risked everything to walk the walk. Mr. Somerstein’s photographs of these people don’t always make for high visual impact, but they do serve as a reality check on a history that in “Selma” becomes a seductively shot and charismatically cast docu-opera.

That said, the exhibition, which starts in a second-floor hallway and concludes in a small gallery, does, in the end, become grand. In one of the last photographs of the hallway group, this one enlarged to mural size, we are with the march as it turns a corner in downtown Montgomery and gets a first glimpse of its goal: the classical, white Alabama State Capitol building, a Confederate flag flying from its dome. A line of police officers stand at the top of its great outdoor staircase, which is a stage for speeches to come, culminating in an address by Dr. King.

From this point on, Mr. Somerstein is out of the crowd and up on that stage, shooting portraits of members of a civil rights movement pantheon: James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, Rosa Parks, Joan Baez and Coretta Scott King. Somehow, the photographer managed to position himself directly behind Dr. King as he delivered the sonorous “How Long? Not Long” speech:

“Somebody’s asking, ‘How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?’ ” it began, ending, “Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

In the resulting picture — very close adaptations of which appear in “Selma” — we see the back of Dr. King’s head in monumental silhouette and beyond it a vista of a vast rapt audience filling the streets.

Interestingly, in the film, the image seems to be about the man and his drama; in Mr. Somerstein’s photograph, it seems to be about the crowd. For an account of this and other civil rights era events that balance symbols and facts, I look back to the documentary series “Eyes on the Prize” that ran on public television between 1987 and 1990. Its use of archival images and contemporary interviews with people involved in the Selma-to-Montgomery march gave equal time to personalities and larger realities. And its news clips of the bloody attack on citizens by the police on the bridge in Selma, despite being choppy and grainy, are to me far more wrenching in a you-are-there way than a Hollywood re-enactment, however spectacular. Mr. Somerstein’s quiet photographs are moving in a similar way.

They are also a reminder of the tremendous impact that documentary photographs, themselves often records of, and exercises in, shrewdly staged theater, had on protest politics and public opinion at that time. And that time is, in many ways, now. Voting rights fought for and gained in 1965 have been rolled back. Police violence against African-Americans is in the news. Across the country, people have taken to the streets to speak truth to power. The primary means for making and distributing firsthand, on-the-ground images may have changed — through smartphones, Twitter, Instagram — but the importance of generating those images remains.

Mr. Somerstein, after graduating from college, took up a career in science and more or less forgot about his Montgomery pictures until he came across the negatives in storage in 2008. In an interview he said he was surprised at how effective they are: “That was a unique time and place. Perhaps we all stepped up to the moment and were able to see things with a clarity that we don’t have as finely honed today as we did then.”

Now retired, he has picked up his camera again. And he still has his work cut out for him.

“Freedom Journey 1965: Photographs of the Selma to Montgomery March by Stephen Somerstein” runs through April 19 at the New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West; 212- 873-3400; nyhistory.org.

