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50 Years Later, SF Photographer Reveals Story Behind his Iconic Selma Photos



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While major newspapers and magazines nationwide sent professional staff to document the historic Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, some of the most iconic images of the march were taken by an aspiring young college photographer.

Today, Stephen Somerstein is a 75-year-old retired physicist living in San Francisco. But in March of 1965, he was part of the civil rights march in Selma as a photographer on assignment for his college paper. Having left New York with only 13 rolls of film, he knew he had to make each shot count.

Several of Somerstein's photographs were used to frame shots in the 2014 movie *Selma*, and the film's official poster draws direct inspiration from a Somerstein image. Upon discovering the use of his work after the movie's release, Somerstein contacted Paramount Studios, who he says were "quite amenable to work[ing] out an arrangement."

While Somerstein's photograph of Dr. King speaking to the gathered crowd during his historic speech at Montgomery is his best-known photograph, his work in Selma largely focused on the everyday people who had come to attend the march. As Somerstein puts it, "I wanted my photographs to represent the best of people."

Somerstein's work can be viewed in *Stephen Somerstein: March for Freedom, Selma to Montgomery, 1965* at Modernism art gallery in San Francisco. The show runs through April 25.

And although Somerstein spent his career as a physicist, he has never stopped taking photographs.