

The Last Time I Saw Selma

by Milton Mayer

THE FIRST time I saw Selma there was a sign at the north edge of town that read, "THIRTY THOUSAND WHITE FARMERS IN DALLAS COUNTY BY 1930," and another at the east edge of town, on the Montgomery highway, that read, "SELMA—DALLAS COUNTY'S FASTEST GROWING WHITE COMMUNITY." Both signs were signed, "Chamber of Commerce—H. Hohenberg, President."

It was crowding 1930 then, and it didn't look as if Dallas County would make it; and if Selma was Dallas County's Fastest Growing White Community, all the others were shrinking, because Selma wasn't growing fast or slow. There were stores and houses for rent a-plenty, and this was just before the Crash. The bottom was out of Alabama cotton (which couldn't compete with Texas), and the train in and out of Selma had one dirty old day coach which was running nearly empty.

Selma was dying, a dying town on a dead river. The mighty Alabama—and it was and is mighty to see—had been killed long ago by the railroads. Selma was poor, and Selma was seedy, living on its antebellum gentility.

And its gentility was fading fast away. The sons and daughters of the big old families in the big old houses were going away to school and they weren't coming back. Some of the big old houses had one elderly widow or spinster in them and old Negro servants who came by the day. Roof-gutters and outbuildings and porches were sagging, siding and fluted columns peeled, and broken windows in the rat-ridden attics unmended. Five thousand dollars bought you a block of Selma

with a porticoed mansion on it and a stand of live oak and magnolia, and there were no takers.

As I read the papers nowadays and see the names of Selmians like Clark, Smitherman, Wilson, and even Connors, I can't find a name that I recognize. Yes, one: Sheriff Clark's lawyer, W. McLean Pitts. Must be a son or grandson of Old Judge Pitts; there are a few lawyers, I suppose, and a banker or a doctor or two, who maintain the old family practices. But I don't see any Boyds or Pettuses or Owenses or Kings—or Hohenbergs or Hagedorns—mentioned anywhere. The Selma of 1965 is not the Selma of 1929.

Nor is the Selma of 1965 the Selma we read about in the papers; nothing is, I guess. Selma is just another town except for its above-average record on race. The papers don't bother to tell us that the Hotel Albert is long since desegregated, and the restaurants and the movies, and all without demonstrations or violence. Selma is better than a thousand other towns in the South. But nobody tells us about that.

Nobody tells us about that any more than anybody tells us that a generation ago Franklin D. Roosevelt listened to Walter White's assertion that the only Negroes in the Navy were messmen and turned to his Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, and said,

MILTON MAYER, author and lecturer, spent the last semester as visiting professor of English at the University of Massachusetts. His articles have appeared in many publications and have won him the George Polk Memorial Award and the Benjamin Franklin Citation for Journalism. His most recent book is "What Can a Man Do?"

"Frank, maybe we could have some Negro bandmen in the Navy." We don't want to hear about what we were twenty-five years ago any more than we want to hear about what Selma is today.

What we want to hear about is the black-hearted wickedness of white Selma, so that we may be whiter-hearted free of charge. We had a big Selma demonstration on the Monterey Peninsula in California a few weeks ago. None of the speakers said that we Californians, by passing Proposition 14 for segregated housing, had put the club in the hands of the Selmians who attacked James Reeb. Nobody said that two of the Peninsula's five towns, Carmel and Pebble Beach, are Jim Crow towns. One of the local beats carried a sign reading, "Why Are There No Negro Policemen or Firemen in Monterey?" And one of the highest officials of the Peninsula said that the sign was unfortunate. "This demonstration," he said, "is about Selma."

So we thank God that we are not as other men are—in Selma. We thank God that nobody tells us to see the Selma racists as they see themselves or the California racists as the Selma racists see them. And we thank God that nobody tells us what we don't want to know. So the Selma racists hate us the more for our hypocrisy, as we hate them the more (just as we hated Hitler) for pulling the skeleton out of our closet. And so the wheel of hate turns.



We Americans are hysterical these days, and I reckon we should be. We cannot bear the spectacle of our naked condition at home or abroad, in Vietnam or in Alabama. And by "we" I mean you and me and Walter Lippmann, who says (and the italics and the exclamation mark are both his), "*Selma is not only an American tragedy. It is an American disgrace. Selma is happening in a country which is engaged in defending freedom throughout the world!*" But we are not defending freedom throughout the world, least of all in Vietnam, where Walter Lippmann doubts that thirty per cent of the South Vietnamese support the government. Nor is Selma either a tragedy or a disgrace. Selma is a look-

ing-glass—and a triumph. And it symbolizes the only triumph “we” have achieved in a long time. But the “we” who have achieved that triumph are not you and I and Walter Lippmann, but the poorest and worst oppressed and most inarticulate and most religious minority in our gung-ho secular society. Its religion has even moved the white church.

Everybody knows that the integration battle is won. It will take another half century or so to mop up, and another two or three centuries to eliminate the bigotry that has its last-ditch stand in the opposition, North no less than South, to interracial marriage. But the battle is won. Meanwhile the hatred and the fear and the frustration that create racism go on mounting as “we” go it alone in attacking North Vietnam with our conventional weapons of napalm and phosphorus and gas.

What we have won in Selma is the battle. What we are losing in Vietnam, and everywhere else in the world, is the war. For we are the minority rich, we Americans, and we cannot think of a better way of stopping Communism than to kill the uppity poor. And so it was in my day in Selma long ago. We were the white minority, and we could not think of a better way of stopping integration than to keep the uppity Negroes walled up.

I wasn't a Selmian, or a Southerner, but I spent many a long, languid week and month in Selma over a period of fifteen years. A big old home, across from the Hotel Albert on Broad Street, where Miz Julie ruled a large family (or let it rule itself) from a sickbed; and with her four sons and her other son-in-law I carried her to her grave. But I mean to write about Selma here, and not about me.

Nobody had ever heard of Selma then, or ever would. The last battle of the War had been fought there—but it was a week before Appomattox and it wasn't anything like the big battle we're now told it was. And nobody outside of Selma had ever heard of that battle. And that was the last thing that had ever happened in Selma, or ever would.

Out on a washboard turn off from the Marion Junction road was Old Cahaba, the first capital of the state, a tangle of Spanish moss and Cherokee roses, tumbled with fallen and

worn-away tombstones and, among the still-standing chimneys that mark the burned shanties all over the South, a few great chimneys of the great houses of Old Cahaba. Old Cahaba was drowned out—the Alabama at flood backs up into the Cahaba there—and the capital was moved to Montgomery. I used to go out to Cahaba to commune with death and decay, in company with Rabbi Joe Gumbiner of Selma and Sampson Lightning, Cahaba's only centenarian and only citizen. “It be a mighty place den,” said Sampson, “but it done gone down.”

Selma, too, was done going down, without even having been a mighty place. But a few years after the last time I saw Selma we got into the Second World War to Make the World Safe for Democracy, and Craig Field, a flight training center, was set up outside Selma, and Selma done went up a little. And in the news pictures of Selma these days I see the names of low-wage and non-union manufacturing plants that weren't there at all in my day or in the day of M. Hohenberg, President of the Chamber of Commerce. Selma done went up a little more; enough to bring in all kinds of new people.

Maybe mostly one kind, country people and boomtown people and people possessed of neither antebellum nor postbellum gentility. I hope that somebody some day takes the trouble to find out who they are.

I suspect that they are the rootless rednecks, rooted out of the canebrake

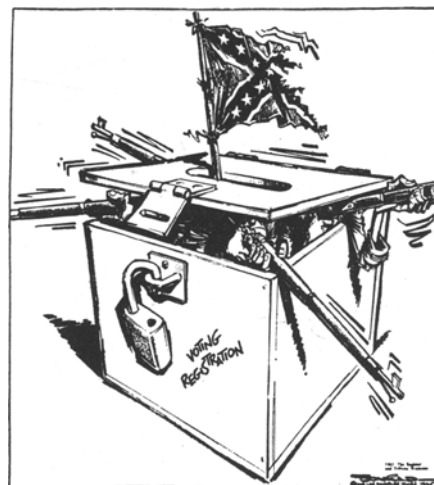
by the war and the collapse of cotton and the promise of industrial jobs—in which last the Negro might have his only opportunity to move up and compete with them for work. The Selma Negro in my day was, as I'm sure he is for the most part still, a house servant or a janitor; the county Negro a fantastically miserable cropper whose crop was “advanced” before he ever made it. The house servants in the home on Broad Street got up to \$2 a week and “takin's” from the kitchen; my little girl Amanda is named after one of them, Amanda Lark.



Amanda Lark held that home and that family together, at \$2 a week. Mistuh Ben, the patriarch, paid no attention to the house, and Miz Julie, the bed-ridden matriarch, never saw her own purse. Amanda Lark, joyous, virtuous, and wise, managed the money, the house, the kitchen, and the six children at \$2 a week. And when Amanda Lark said, “Y'all pick up dat stuff dis minnit,” or “Outa mah way, chile,” or “Go on, now, Ah ain't got no time fo' studyin' y'all,” the six children moved to it. She was the head man, at \$2 a week. If she said to Mistuh Ben, “Ah needs money, Mistuh Ben,” and Mistuh Ben said, “Go get it out of my wallet,” it meant that she needed money to run Mistuh Ben's house.

Was Amanda Lark happy? Were any of them happy? Of course they sang and they laughed, and they prayed and they shouted, and they never committed suicide (or murder or rape). Of course some of them (but not most of them) pilfered a little (like poor white folks), and some of them (but not most of them) got likkered up a little (like rich and poor white folks) on Saturday night; and you heard, on occasion, when a servant or a janitor didn't show up, of a cuttin' on Washington Street. But nothing ever appeared about the cuttin' in the Selma *Times-Journal*, or about anything else that any Negro did or was done by. Were they happy?

A believer would say yes, and a non-believing psychiatrist would say yes. But a political philosopher would say that that was not the question. If



Los Angeles Times

The Last Stronghold

man is a political animal, he is not a man unless he participates in his governance; and that no Negro in Dallas County (or any other county down that way) ever did. And having no part in his governance, he had no human part in his community. No truant officer came to see if his children were in the Negro school taught by near-illiterates. (The white schools looked better, but they weren't much better taught.) For the Negroes, there were no health measures or police protection, no sanitation or sewage system, no water, no paving or pavements; nothing. Between five p.m. and eight a.m. the Negroes of Selma did not exist. But they were a majority of the people of Selma and the county.

Their complete squalor was completely isolated. But out of that squalor, on Sunday morning, came the whole resplendent Negro world into the Resplendent Presence. They existed, all right; not in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal or Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, but in the New Jerusalem and the Great-Gettin'-Up-Day, in the one Society that admitted them and admitted them first that were last. The Kingdom. Clean and dressed in their finest—though the children in their finest might be shoeless—they went to Church. Rabbi Joe Gumbiner and I, two Northerners, marveled. How did they do it, without water, soap, or money? The white Selmians didn't know or care.

What could the white Selmians have done if they had cared? Here was a borderline economy, the city's, the county's, and the state's. To relieve the squalor of the Negroes—not to say hiring them at white men's wages—would have wrecked that borderline economy in ninety days. Selma, and Dallas County, and Alabama were (as they say down that way) just too po' to tote it.

What could the whites of Selma have done? What can the whites (and blacks) of America do in all the world's Vietnams, besides stop killing the Vietnamese? If we Americans were to substitute justice for the scandalous pretense of aid, in a world two-thirds of whose people are hungry, we'd sink the American Standard of Living in ninety days. We have no intention of letting justice or Godliness touch the Amer-

ican Standard of Living. Neither had the white Selmians in the Thirties; and theirs was much lower than ours.



So you see how it was in Selma, and how it is outside Selma.

White Selma survived on the backs of the unlimited supply of dirt-cheap Negro labor, town and country. And just survived. The stores sold the Negroes bright-striped shoddy. The landlords and the banks double-compounded interest on the advance the Negro lived on, and the money-men took a fat mortgage on his skinny cow. The Negro didn't understand the white man's cal'atin' and would have had no alternative if he had. The insurance companies issued him policies consisting of nothing but loopholes. When Rabbi Joe Gumbiner squawked on behalf of the synagogue's janitor, the insurance agent, one of the new men moving in, said, "What do you want to mix up with the Niggers for?"

Mixing up with the Niggers was really beyond comprehension in Selma (as where wasn't it?). The Niggers were happy, weren't they? They weren't complaining, were they? No-suh, boss. They weren't pushed around, or made to get off the sidewalk, or clubbed or lynched; not in Selma. I never heard of the Klan's being in town in those fifteen years—and I'd have heard if it had been. No redneck rabble posse was needed; there was no more "white leadership" than there was Negro leadership, and the black and white pulpits (except for Rabbi Joe Gumbiner) were as mute on race as they are today on Vietnam.

The mythos was all that was necessary, the mythos of what the whites called "social distance." But social distance didn't mean that the whites did not feel a responsibility for "our own Nigras" when they were starving or dying; at the behest of their white patients the white physicians took care of Negroes as a matter of course. Within the absolutely formal isolation there were nevertheless the vestiges of a community, half ex-slave and half free; and within the community was an always amused concern, but a real concern, of the whites for our own Nigras, who got all the cast-off clothing and food and shoes, and who, inside the homes

where they worked, got the love that bridges social distance. Most every home had its Amanda Lark, and if the wet-nursing of white babies by mammies was gone, a good deal of the rest of the antebellum lived on. Births and birthdays and weddings and funerals of our own Nigras commanded the observance, and even the attendance, of their masters and mistresses.

There was a lot more love in Selma then than now, and, I trow, a lot more in slave times than in my day. Without love men fight for justice. And when men fight—whatever they fight for—there is always less love. And without love there is no durable justice in peace. A melancholy circle. But the love of a man for a Nigra—at his mercy, like his dog—is not the love of a man for a man. So the love had to go, in Selma, and the Negro had to settle for justice finally; and maybe lose himself something in the process, and maybe lose us something too. If he is equal to us when he is equal, he won't be equal to much.

If Selma was better than most towns like it—and it was—it may have been because it was newer. It didn't go back much before the 1850's, and almost as far back as it went there were Jews there, and a Jewish synagogue. These were prosperous Jews of the "right," i.e., German, kind, whose cultural level was higher than that of most of the antebellum gentiles. Mistuh Ben's partner in Tepper Brothers, "Where a Child Can Buy," was Max Hagedorn, Miz Julie's brother, and Max Hagedorn was just about the weightiest man in town. He read *The New York Times*, the only man in Selma I ever knew who did. He thought that things would change in the South, not, of course, in his time or mine, but some time, and in some unimaginable way; and so did his cousin, Mayor Leon Schwartz of Mobile.

Like the Hohenbergs and a dozen other Jewish families, the Hagedorns belonged to the Selma Country Club; this, mind you, in the Thirties. They belonged to everything, and they hadn't to stoop to get in. Being in, and being Jews, they had reason to keep away from "trouble," if trouble should ever appear, and to worry about Rabbi Joe Gumbiner's radicalism. But being Jews, and having once been in Egypt, they

supported Negro charities (including Tuskegee) far heavier than the gentiles did. Happy, oh, happy, those Amanda Larks who, in Egypt, had jobs in the homes of those who would never quite forget their own Egypt. But the Hohensbergs and the Hagedorns, like the Pettus' and the Kings and the Owens and the Boyds, sent their children away to college; and when Rabbi Joe Gumbiner of Berkeley went back to Selma (and to jail) a few weeks ago, the old Jews of Selma, like the old gentiles, were far to find.

The last time I saw Selma it was immobile, with nothing to move it or mobilize it. Nothing moved. Nothing could, except gently down. Keeping cool, eating and sleeping, and talking. Talking always about the old days, and talking about the Niggers, old times and new, in always amiable mockery. The Niggers were the conversational staple. "Theah she is, sittin' on th' copin' scretchin' huh haid, en Ah say, 'Aunt Mary, yo haid eetch?' En she say, 'Sho' do, Mistuh Harry.' En Ah say, 'Whyn't yo' scretch it hahduh?' En she say, 'Ah *do* scretch is hahduh, but it *eetch*.'" Under the slow, creaking ceiling fans on the verandah in Selma in the evening, that was the way it went, and the young whites who stayed in Selma grew up less literate than their elders; "culture" meant what the whites were, not what they had.

Keeping cool, eating and sleeping and talking and visiting. And hunting and fishing and swimming and bowling and poker. A physical world, slipping further and further back into the physical. Wartime or peacetime, it gave a disproportionate number of its sons to the Army—any army. The religion, art, books, and music of the antebellum rich were losing ground fast. I talked with the librarian, the editor, and two of the teachers occasionally; there was less reading in white Selma, per capita, than there had been fifty years before. Books cost money, and the library was too far to go in the heat.

A generation before Northerners got into their cars to go around the corner, Southerners did. But they would stand half the night in a cold, wet duck-blind, and walk through the fields and the swamps for partridge three days in a row. "En Ah say, 'Oncle, wha' kine uh boid dis heah?' En he say,

'Da's uh kildee, boss,' En Ah say, 'Ent no snipe?' En he say, 'No-suh, boss, da's uh kildee.' En Ah say, 'Dey good fuh eatin'?' En he say, 'No-suh, boss, Ah gives 'em tuh mah chillun tuh eat.'"

And that's the way it was in Selma when Selma was dying and I was young. And I didn't see how I could change it or how I could help change it; and neither did you, and neither did Franklin D. Roosevelt, and neither did Theodore Roosevelt, and *he* had Booker T. Washington to the White House for lunch. And neither did Booker T. Washington. But the Negroes thought that God could change it and would show them how, because he had said to Isaiah, "You shall walk in my path, and I will show you my way." And that, in their unutterable ignorance, they believed.

And in 1965 they came pouring out of the doors of their crumbling churches—churches the white Christians had sold them at a price that built new churches with parking lots in a better

part of the new Selma. They came pouring out of the doors of their churches, clothed finer than their finest this time: clothed in the whole empty-handed armor of the Lord. The Niggers. And they stood on the white man's pavement in Selma and waited (*so the Niggers say*) on the Lord.

Selma is not a tragedy. It is a triumph of faith in a faithless age and among a faithless people, South and North, who tell the Sheriff Clarks to go sic 'em in Vietnam and don't go sic 'em in Selma. Selma, Alabama, the Selma I knew, is an historical accident as the focus of that triumph. It could have been anywhere in America, and maybe, except for the spectacular splendor of it in Selma, it should have been somewhere else altogether: in California; Carmel, California; or in Vietnam, where, if we only allow the Niggers to live and stop killing them and let them make a crop and eat it, they may some day have the strength to stand on their feet and register to vote.

Money and Mississippi

by HAYNES JOHNSON

WHILE its neighbor to the east has been foundering in a morass of political miscalculation and a Wallace-imposed condition approaching anarchy, Mississippi has taken a turn in the opposite direction toward relative moderation and responsibility. The contrast between Mississippi and Alabama today is striking—and ironic.

A year ago few people thought that Mississippi, rather than Alabama,

would try so soon to break the patterns of the past. Even fewer would have believed that Governor Paul B. Johnson would demonstrate more political wisdom than Governor George C. Wallace. But that is what has happened.

In Mississippi, the operative word, from the governor on down to the county registrar, is "change." That change is being spurred by essentially selfish motives is not the vital point. For Mississippi to make any effort at reconciliation is an event of obvious importance to the nation, and particularly to the South.

Governor Johnson, in a number of

HAYNES JOHNSON is national affairs reporter for The Washington Star. He is the author of two books: "The Bay of Pigs" and "Dusk at the Mountain," a study of Negroes in Washington, D.C.
