

Remembering a road trip to Selma 60 years ago

My classmates and I were eager to join the voting rights march to Montgomery. But how would we get to Alabama?

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Participants marching in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965 (US Library of Congress / Photo by Peter Pettus)

The plan we were pondering—as students at Ripon College in central Wisconsin, 60 years ago this month—seemed crazy at first. But it was the 1960s, and we were young and brimming with the idealism of the age. So we set out confidently to make our nascent plan a reality.

Almost a thousand miles away, in Selma, Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr. was preparing to lead a 54-mile voting rights march to Montgomery, the state capital. It was a just cause, and we were eager to join in. But how would we get there, and how would we finance the trip?

As we were mulling it over, Patrick Hunt, the assistant dean of men at the college, received a call from Dan Friedlander, a student activist at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He said that about 100 students from the university would be leaving for Selma soon on three chartered buses, and he asked whether any Ripon students might be interested in coming along.

After Hunt told us this, we approached the school chaplain, Jerry Thompson, to see if he would be willing to lead a school-sponsored student delegation to Selma. He agreed. But he said he was in no position to finance the trip, neither personally nor from his meager school budget.

It seemed to us that the only option was to approach the student senate for the funds.

The next evening, the president of the senate called an emergency meeting of the body to consider our plan. It was there that we began to realize that not everyone was on board with Martin Luther King Jr.'s dictum, [set forth in his "Letter From Birmingham Jail" two years before](#), that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

At the meeting, Chaplain Thompson was the first to speak, arguing that traveling to Selma, where the voting rights march was due to begin on Sunday, March 21, 1965, would underscore the school's commitment to the ongoing struggle for civil rights in America.

Some members of the senate contended that the money could be better spent elsewhere, such as writing a check to the NAACP or inviting a speaker to campus to address the issue of voting rights discrimination.

This caused James Bowditch, a professor in the English department, to blow up, saying that throwing money at the problem—without having the courage to put our bodies on the line for a just cause—would be the worst thing we could do.

In the end, after an hour or so of discussion, the senate agreed by a vote of 13-9 to allocate \$400 for our trip south. Later that evening, about a dozen of us met in Chaplain Thompson's office and agreed that we would leave for Madison the next day to join the others.

The news of what the student senate had done spread like wildfire across the campus that evening. Students who had earlier been deaf to what was happening down south now found a reason to be outraged.

Leading the protest was a student who used his show at the college radio station, WRPN, to urge other students to demonstrate their opposition to this alleged misuse of student money at a mass rally the next morning. About 400 angry students—roughly half of the student body—heeded his call and turned out the next day to try to prevent our departure.

Chaplain Thompson sought to calm the crowd, explaining that the trip to Selma would show the school's support for civil rights. Then, as a backhanded compliment, he praised the protesters for showing interest in something important "instead of beer and sex."

After a brief threat by some students to lie down in front of our two cars, the ten of us—six students and four faculty members—were soon on our way. We arrived in Madison a couple of hours later and were herded onto one of the three buses headed for Selma.

On arriving in Chicago, however, we were informed that the situation in Alabama had become too dangerous for us to proceed, given the beating of White college students in Montgomery the day before and the ongoing violence and tension in and around Selma. We were told that our new destination would be Washington, DC, where we would join protesters outside the White House demanding that President Johnson send federal troops to Alabama to protect the civil rights activists who were already there.

In DC, we were disappointed that we were not in Selma, where the action was. So five of us—Chaplain Thompson, Hunt, and three students, including me—decided to rent a car and drive to Selma, where we would arrive the day before the Selma-to-Montgomery march was due to begin.

Participating in the march, one of the pivotal moments in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, was inspiring. It changed my life.

What was also inspiring was being welcomed on our return to Ripon College a few days later with expressions of support from some students, like Jim Reed, a sophomore from Seattle. Jim wrote in the student newspaper that he was tired of hearing people say that “we Northerners” had no right “to go meddling in other people’s affairs.” He wrote that “we are one nation and one people.” And he ventured that perhaps “the basic reason that the problem has been so bad for so long, is that sensitive people in the North have felt it was none of their business. ... What is going on in the South today is our problem as well.”

After receiving a PhD at Harvard, Reed went on to pursue a distinguished career as an historian and educator, eventually winding up as president of the Massachusetts Fulbright Association. He has since passed away.

If I were able to see him today, I would thank him for his support many years ago in college. And I’m sure we would agree that, indeed, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”