

As King Dreamed, Plaquemine Fought

A guest editorial by Richard Campanella, published in the New Orleans Times-Picayune on Sunday, September 1, 2013

The March on Washington, fifty years ago this past week, is often viewed as the zenith of the American Civil Rights Movement. During that same week in Louisiana, however, violence in a Mississippi River town marked something closer to its nadir, at least regionally.

By 1963, three years after the sit-ins on Canal Street and the initial integration of public schools, activists in lower Louisiana shifted their focus to voting rights. Toward this end the Congress of Racial Equality had been conducting voter registration drives in Baton Rouge, and arrived to the nearby town of Plaquemine on word that officials had gerrymandered black precincts out of city elections. CORE's founder, James L. Farmer, a close ally of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., was particularly reviled by segregationists for his "direct action" tactics, so news of his arrival in Plaquemine fomented local resistance. WWL-TV cameraman Del Hall and reporter Bob Jones arrived from New Orleans to cover the story.

On August 19, Farmer led a slow-cadenced protest march through downtown under the most tenuous of protection, based, according to Police Chief Dennis Songy, on an understanding that "the Negroes had promised not to sing." Defiantly, they sang—"We Shall Overcome," a thousand voices strong—and that's when the police fired multiple barrages of tear gas, sending the marchers fleeing back to their Plymouth Rock Baptist Church and landing the organizers in jail. Hall, who now lives in Chicago, recalled in an interview with me that when people saw his television camera, both sides reacted not with hostility but ingratiation, savvy to the power of the media and convinced that coverage of their side of the story would win over viewers. The sheriff, to whom Hall introduced himself, succumbed to the camera's spell as well: next time they met, Hall noticed the lawman had adorned himself with a diamond-studded sheriff's badge, as if wanting to look his dandiest, Louisiana-style, for his moment in the limelight. The authorities, meanwhile, secured a Federal District Court restraining order against further marches.

The protestors took a hiatus in late August as their attention shifted to the March on Washington, which culminated with King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Farmer, meanwhile, languished in a Donaldsonville jail cell until he was finally released on August 30. He promptly resumed the struggle, organizing demonstrators and inspiring a group of teenagers to march down Court Street to City Hall, technically in violation of the restraining order. The youths were met by mounted police and struck with clubs and cattle prods.

The next day, Sunday September 1, Farmer and local preachers rallied protestors at the Plymouth Rock Church, which congregants had



Footage of Plaquemine unrest shot by Del Hall of WWL-TV on September 1, 1963, and aired on *CBS Evening News* with *Walter Cronkite* the next night.

renamed “Freedom Rock.” Pointedly angered at the beating of their children the day before, they contemplated their next move, as crowds gathered around the church and helmeted policemen and state troopers on horseback formed around the crowds. Day turned into night, and the lawmen grew impatient. Bob Jones, in a recent written communication with me, explains what happened next: “Suddenly, the cops surged into the crowd, the horses knocking down adults and kids[,] using cattle prods and clubs, hurting a lot of people. Then, without warning, the cops, wearing gas masks, filled the church with tear gas, broke down the front doors and stormed inside, using high pressure hoses to all but level the sanctuary and knock out the windows. They drove the people inside out and then beat the hell out of them....” Farmer, the target of the police action, escaped and went into hiding.

White and black men throughout downtown engaged in fistcuffs, and protestors hurled enough rocks, bricks, and bottles to send twenty authorities to the Sanitarium with injuries. Hall himself was knocked down by a trooper on horseback, and both he and Jones were blinded by tear gas.

It was a scene we associate today with places like Montgomery, Selma, Birmingham, or Jackson, but in fact they also occurred in lesser-known places like Plaquemine, in a state that is often perceived as having evaded violent resistance to the quest for civil rights. Hall alone filmed the Plymouth Rock Church melee because he had carefully conserved his camera’s battery for the energy-draining light-and-shoot feature in case an incident broke out at night, which is exactly what happened.

The newsmen now had to get the footage on the air. Racing back to New Orleans, they stopped for gas among the sugar cane fields along Highway 90 and ran into a familiar face: the branch president of the New Orleans NAACP, returning wearily from voter-registration efforts—and, incongruously, at 4 a.m., sipping a Coke. Arriving to the WWL studio at dawn, Hall processed the film, edited it, and fed it via coaxial cable to New York. His unique nocturnal footage of the incident, introduced by Walter Cronkite and reported by Dan Rather, was particularly significant because it aired as part of the first thirty-minute-long *CBS Evening News* broadcast, and one of the first ever, previous shows having run only fifteen minutes. Coming on the heels of the civil rights March on Washington, the footage served as a reminder of the many wrongs that remained.

Plaquemine’s turmoil persisted. Whites directed their anger at Farmer, whom they viewed as an outside agitator and instigator of the violence, and seethed as he described their community as a “town under siege” and September 1 as a “night of wild terror.” Mounted troopers hunted Farmer door to door in what supporters, who harbored him in a funeral home and provided him a loaded .45 to defend himself, viewed quite plainly as “a lynch mob” bent on killing him. Potential bloodshed was avoided when the supporters sneaked Farmer out via a hearse, in an elaborate ploy complete with a dummy car and maps of roadblocks and rural roads, back to the relative safety of New Orleans.

By then Plaquemine settled down, but the seeds of change had been successfully sown. Farmer himself, speaking in 1983, testified that “right after the incident, blacks went on a voter registration and voter education campaign [and] threw the sheriff out of office.... There are now blacks on the police force of Plaquemine [and] holding key public office in both the parish and in the state. It has changed now, as it has changed in much of the South.” Among that new generation of elected officials was the NAACP branch president whom Jones and Hall had run into in the wee hours of September 2, sipping a Coke. It was Ernest “Dutch” Morial, who in 1978 had been elected the first African American mayor of New Orleans.

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