IN MARCH OF 1965, THE WORLD CONVERGED ON ALABAMA.

Civil rights workers had been there for more than a decade, of course, organizing bus boycotts and marches and sit-ins in support of racial integration and equal rights.

By 1965, efforts had reached their zenith: John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was there; Rev. C.T. Vivian of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was there; and of course Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was there.

**WHO WHAT WHEN of the Civil Rights Movement**

**JULY, 1948**
President Truman signs Executive Order 9981 ending legalized segregation.

**MAY, 1954**
Brown v. Board of Education: U.S. Supreme Court unanimously rules segregation in public schools unconstitutional.
So, too, were Liz (Cantera) Douglass ’67, Kathy Gibson ’65, Donna (Roefaro) Henke ’67, Catherine McClenshan ’63, Barbara (King) O’Connor ’66, Barbara (Getsey) Palso ’67, and Linda (Elston) Wolfson ’65.

Together with more than 20 other Mount Mercy College students and chaperones—including young professor Samuel Carcione and college administrators Sister M. DeLellis Laboon, RSM; Sister Marie Josepha (Patricia) McCann, RSM; and Father Xavier Carroll—the young women heeded the call to join the now infamous Selma to Montgomery march in support of voting rights for black southerners.

Mount Mercy students scrambled to catch one of three charter buses in Oakland on Sunday, March 14, 1965, and departed into the dead of night, bound for Montgomery, Ala.

**Planting the Seeds of Protest**

Students at Mount Mercy did not suddenly take up civil rights in the spring of ’65; on the contrary, many had been involved in planning and direct action protests for years.

“For a small school, we had a tremendous commitment to the civil rights movement,” remembers Linda Wolfson. “It wasn’t just going to Montgomery, we were going to the Hill District every week to meet with the United Negro Protest Committee (UNPC).”

“Over Thanksgiving the year before, there was a nationwide ‘Thanksgiving Fast for Freedom,’” says Sam Carcione. “The idea was that students would skip a cafeteria meal at Thanksgiving and the school would donate the money to support hungry families in Mississippi. Mount Mercy students started a big campaign that took off—only a few people ate dinner that year!”

In December of ’64 the UNPC organized direct action protests against Pittsburgh’s downtown department stores. “The only black people working there were the people working at night, cleaning and doing repairs,” recalls Wolfson. “So when we approached these stores and asked them to end the practice of job discrimination, Gimbels resisted. Well, we had picket lines wrapped around the block every night, and lots of Mount Mercy girls went down there. We picketed every night, and we broke that store.”

**The Call to Action**

Though change was happening in Pittsburgh, circumstances in the South grew more dire by the day.

In July of 1964, Selma Judge James Hare issued a sweeping injunction forbidding the gathering of three or more people under the sponsorship of civil rights organizations such as SNCC or SCLC. By January of 1965, civil rights leaders were determined to break the injunction. And so began the 1965 marches in Selma, Ala.

Demonstrators—including the likes of Dr. King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, and Rev. Vivian—were routinely arrested. Tensions escalated throughout January and February as demonstrators clashed with police. The assassination of Malcolm X in New York in late February only added to the worries and anxieties.
“WE ARRIVED AND SAW THE CONFEDERATE FLAG FLYING ABOVE THE AMERICAN FLAG, AND I KNEW WHAT WE WERE UP AGAINST.”

The “Bloody Sunday” march on March 7, 1965, was shown on televisions around the country; for some it was the first they’d seen of police brutality against nonviolent protesters.

One week later, Mount Mercy students were called to action. “On Sunday we got a call from a Mount Mercy priest who was already there,” remembers Wolfson. “He was involved in the demonstrations in Selma and he said, ‘This is happening. Students are getting involved. Tell people about it.’ And so we did, and the plan to join him came together in a matter of hours.”

“We had to get permission from our parents before we could go,” recalls Donna Henke. “It was chaos, everyone was trying to reach their families. I called my house and said, ‘I’m going to Alabama.’ I didn’t really ask, I just said I was going, and they sort of said ‘Whaat?’ but they let me go.”

Henke’s parents weren’t the only ones taken by surprise. Barbara Palso’s, who lived in New Jersey at the time, were less than thrilled to hear from her. “That call was not well-received,” she says with a laugh. “This was not an age when you just picked up the phone to call somebody. Calling home was a big deal—and calling collect was even bigger!”

“Many of my classmates wanted to go to Alabama, but were not given permission,” remembers Liz Douglass. “It was a dangerous time. Reverend [James] Reeb had just been murdered in Selma and one week later Mrs. Viola Liuzzo was murdered. When I called home, my mother said no, but my father asked me, ‘Do you feel you have to go?’ and when I said yes, he had the strength and faith to say to me, ‘Then go with my blessing.’”

For nearly 30 Mount Mercy students, permission was granted. “The plan was to go to Montgomery so that the SNCC marchers could meet up with the people coming from Selma,” remembers Sister Patricia McCann, RSM. “Then we would all go on to the capitol.”

**Confronting Reality**

“It just felt like we were on another planet,” says Cate McClenahan, recalling her first moments in Alabama. McClenahan and her fellow students had been traveling virtually nonstop for nearly 24 hours, driving through Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee; when they got to Alabama they were eager to stretch
their legs. “I remember crossing a road to use the restroom at a Mercy hospital,” she says. “People driving by recognized us as out-of-towners coming in to support the civil rights movement, and you could see on their faces, they were not happy to see us. One truck stopped and waved us through the crosswalk to let us pass. Then suddenly the driver stepped on the gas—hard—and tried to run us over. For the first time in my life I thought someone was trying to kill me.”

Wolfson remembers a similarly chilling experience. “We were at a rest stop in Birmingham. We’d just arrived, and someone came to the front of the bus and said, ‘You can’t get off this bus. There are people here who will hurt you.’ And that was my reality check. Before that moment I felt good, I was with people I knew, I was doing this thing that I knew was morally right, but I didn’t really have an appreciation of the magnitude of the situation until then.”

Barbara Palso, too, found herself startled. “Somehow the images of the dogs and the horses and the fire hoses and the hate-filled faces of the segregationists, I didn’t make the connection between that experience and the one I was headed into,” she recalls.

For McCann, the tone was set when they drove by the capitol building. “We arrived and saw the confederate flag flying above the American flag, and I knew what we were up against,” she says.

### The March

After arriving in Montgomery, the students bedded down late Monday night at a large Baptist church in an all-black neighborhood; chaperones were offered beds or couches by the neighboring parishioners. “We didn’t really sleep much,” remembers McClenahan. “People were everywhere in that church—in the pews, aisles, on the floor. Cars with sirens went by all night long, and we were panicked that the police were raiding the church.”

“I remember hearing barking dogs all night long,” says Wolfson. “And now I realize: people had those dogs to protect themselves.”

### Staggering Statistics

In 1964, clerks in Dallas County, Ala., recorded 15,115 black citizens over the age of 21; only 335 were registered to vote. Numbers like these were not unusual throughout Alabama in the early 1960s, and in neighboring counties, the statistics were even worse: Lowndes County recorded 73 percent of the total population as black, zero were registered to vote in 1961. Wilcox County was the same that year: 70 percent black, 0 percent registered to vote.

The statistics are not surprising when one considers the endless series of hoops a black citizen was required to jump through to register to vote: registration was only open every other Monday, and only for a few hours; in some places registrants would have to be “vouched” for in-person by another registered voter; so-called “literacy tests” included obscure questions pertaining to state and federal governments; some would-be registrants were required to write out passages of the Constitution as they were dictated—or more likely, mumbled—to them.
But by daybreak on Tuesday, students and chaperones awoke feeling refreshed. Some were invited into the homes of local black families for breakfast; others made their way to a nearby “colored only” café with fellow students from Pitt and Duquesne.

A 10 a.m. meeting was called, and students were reminded of their objective and purpose. “We were a nonviolent group, and if anything happened we were supposed to just put our hands over our heads and not cause any problems,” says Palso.

“I’ll never forget the words of the SNCC leaders before we set out on the march,” says Douglass. “They said to us, ‘You may lose your life on the streets of Alabama today. Are you ready?’”

“The first thing we did was march from the church to Alabama State University,” says Carcione. “We made our way through campus picking up more and more people,” he remembers.

“It was great to see how happy these students were to see us, they were just streaming out of classrooms and buildings joining us along the way,” says Henke.

“There was a lot of confusion over whether or not we had a permit to march,” remembers McClenahan. “I never really found out what the truth was.”

“We had a permit to march through the school, but no permit to march to the capitol,” wrote Kathy Gibson in a letter to her family dated Thursday, March 18, 1965.

Still others recalled otherwise. “To the best of my knowledge we did in fact have a permit to march,” says McCann.

The group of demonstrators was rapidly growing and advancing on the capitol.

“Our spirits were high, and the mood was joyful and purposeful,” remembers Barbara O’Connor. “As we left the black neighborhood, and entered the white neighborhood, the tone shifted … but we kept our focus.”

White students marching side-by-side with black students was very much part of the plan for the day, recalls Carcione. “SNCC was well aware that if you had white people in a demonstration, it was less likely that people would get beat up. We were SNCC’s insurance policy.”

“I think we started feeling courageous,” recalls McClenahan. “We were organized in groups, everybody was singing. It wasn’t until we saw the line of police with clubs and guns and dogs that things got scary.”

“ALL OF A SUDDEN, THERE WAS CHAOS.”

Members of the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Mounted Posse wield their clubs and charge the student demonstrators. “It wasn’t that we did anything wrong, the police just kept coming,” remembers Mount Mercy student Barbara (Getsey) Palso. Photo courtesy of Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Pennsylvania State University Libraries.
Chaos in the Streets

With the capitol just three blocks away, the march slowed, and a tension fell upon the crowd. “We got to a point where we couldn’t advance any further. The police completely surrounded us,” says Carcione.

It wasn’t only the police who surrounded the demonstrators: the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Mounted Posse, a group of deputized cattle ranchers on horseback, were there, too, and they were eager to enforce their particular version of law and order.

A small contingent of a few dozen marchers led by SNCC’s James Forman tried to circumvent the barricade, but instead of addressing the splinter group, the mounted deputies charged the main crowd. 

Bedlam erupted.

“All of a sudden, there was chaos. People were running everywhere, and I remember not knowing who was with me and who was against me,” says Palso. “It wasn’t that we did anything wrong, the police just kept coming.”

“Everyone scattered,” remembers O’Connor. “But as the crowd fled, police pursued, beating anyone in their path with billy clubs and whips. I remember running down an alley, frantic to escape.”

Gibson’s letter recounted much of the same: armed, advancing riders followed by chaos and terror. “The mob panicked and piled on top of each other,” she wrote. “We ran down an alley, but the posse chased us, trying to club the people helping the hurt. We thought we were safe—but the police jumped over walls and chased us further.”

Miraculously, only one Mount Mercy student was hurt that day (Joanne Schoonmaker ’67 sustained a foot injury after being trampled by a horse), though many credit the brave actions of their fellow marchers with saving them from a worse fate.

“I remember this arm coming over my head, it was massive, and the person who belonged to this arm said ‘Don’t be afraid, we’re getting out of here,’” recalls Palso. McClenahan experienced a similar close call. “People were moving fast—running—but everyone had their arms linked together. That’s what saved me. I stepped into a pothole and sprained my ankle badly, but I was pulled along by others who didn’t let go of me.”

Henke, too, recognized a fellow demonstrator for his brave, bold action. “There was one great big guy—he looked like a linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers—who got between me and someone with a club. They hit him instead of me. I’ll never forget the sound of that club on his bones, it was horrible. He definitely saved my life,” she says.

Though the initial charge against the demonstrators was dangerous, it was the sustained, violent pursuit of the marchers that haunted many of the participants.

“These riders were up and out of their saddles, leaning over and bending down, trying to hit people,” recalls Wolfson. “When the horses charged, we were supposed to wrap our arms around the necks of the people beside us and keep our heads down,” says Douglass. “It was hard to keep my head down with all that was happening, so I looked up, and I remember looking to my right seeing Father Carroll holding onto the reins of those horsemen. The police were just beating him, hitting him with their clubs, and he was saying to them, ‘Enough, that’s enough.’ And then I turned my head to the left and I saw reporters taking pictures and filming the action. It was so surreal.”

Carcione remembered demonstrators taking refuge on nearby porches, thinking that the elevated platforms, coupled with the overhanging awnings, would protect them from the posse. “One horse even went up on a porch so that a rider could beat some people. There were a lot of bloody heads that day,” he says.
A Visit from Dr. King

The demonstrators were pushed back away from the capitol, and the Mount Mercy students slowly found one another, but they were by no means out of danger.

“The police had us cordoned off,” recalls McCann. “We had no idea what would happen next. There was one guy who made his way out into the street. He sat down in the street and a policeman on a motorcycle ran right over him. I couldn’t believe it. My dad was a policeman. I just couldn’t believe what I was seeing.”

Carcione recounted the same terrifying moment. “The police blocked off the street, but some people went and sat down—a cop on a motorcycle ran over one kid. Ran right up his back. It was horrible. Behind every window in that neighborhood that night there was someone with a gun—for their own protection,” he says. “We were able to get on a bus and go home. The people in Montgomery couldn’t go anywhere.”

For some, it was not just the actions of police but also their attitudes that left indelible memories. “I remember seeing this young cop guarding a stretch of sidewalk,” says McClanahan. “He was maybe my age, maybe a little older. And I remember looking at him and thinking there was no way I could talk to this person. He just would never allow it. He could never see me as a human being.”

“The rest of the day is kind of a dream,” says Henke. “We ended up in this church and there was just so much going on. People were singing and giving speeches, and out of nowhere came all this food—it was like the loaves and the fishes, it just appeared!”—and people started whispering that Dr. King was coming.”

Indeed, Dr. King did come.

“It was like God was walking down the street,” says Carcione with a laugh. “I have never seen anything like that in my life. A hush fell on the street when Dr. King arrived.”

“We were all really upset,” remembers Douglass. “We’d been through so much with those horses charging, and everyone was still very on edge, but I’ll never forget standing in the back of that church and listening to Dr. King. I felt so safe in his presence, he was so charismatic and he spoke with such warmth, he calmed us all down. Peace—he gave us a sense of peace.”

“The news cameras came, too, when Dr. King arrived,” recalls McCann. “CBS, NBC, they were all there, and immediately the attitude of the police changed. Dr. King thanked us for coming, thanked us for our efforts, and gave us a piece of advice: ‘When you leave,’ he said, ‘don’t leave with buses that show the name of a northern city. List a southern city as your destination.’ So that’s what we did.”

 APRIL 3-4, 1968
Dr. King delivers his “Mountaintop” speech in Memphis, Tenn. One day later he is shot and killed by James Earl Ray.

 APRIL 4-8, 1968
Race riots erupt in more than 150 U.S. cities in response to the slaying of MLK.
Homecoming and the Aftermath

Mount Mercy students climbed aboard their charter bus. The sign read “Raleigh,” but their final destination was Pittsburgh, and the specter of the day’s events was still fresh in their minds.

“As soon as we crossed over the Mason-Dixon line I felt safe again,” says Douglass. “I don’t remember much about the bus ride, but I absolutely remember a feeling of relief when we crossed back to the North.”

Students arrived in Pittsburgh dirty and exhausted. Some headed for the showers then slipped into bed; others called their families to report on their safe return. Still others were asked to write about their experience while it was fresh in their minds. Gibson’s letter reads: “The whole day seems now to have been a terrible nightmare. I still see the horses and cops and clubs coming at us ... As to what we accomplished, I don’t know.”

Others were less circumspect.

“The sun was shining today,” Douglass told a reporter from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette the next day. “And as I looked out at Fifth Avenue, I thought, ‘There’s a street I can cross any time I want to, I’m free.’ And then I remembered the people who live there and have to stay there.”

“It was back to business as usual in some respects,” says Carcione. “Though some people were more determined than ever to influence change, some kept working on civil rights, and a number of students joined the Peace Corps. They just felt like they had to do something.”

McClenahan was one such student. “It was Mount Mercy that gave me those ideas that we had social responsibility. I signed up for the Peace Corps, and when the riots happened in ’67 and ’68, I was in Kenya, teaching at a girls’ primary school. Just seeing those pictures made me feel like it was the end of the world.”

“The civil rights movement was the most important thing I’ve ever learned from,” says Wolfson. “It truly, truly changed my life. It changed me in a way that couldn’t be reversed,” she recalls.

“Marching ... was a pivotal and transformational experience for me,” says O’Connor. “I am grateful for the idealism and social justice that was encouraged by my education at Mount Mercy College.”

“IT TRULY, TRULY CHANGED MY LIFE. IT CHANGED ME IN A WAY THAT COULDN’T BE REVERSED.”

APRIL 11, 1968
The Civil Rights Act is signed into law, prohibiting discrimination concerning the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, religion, nationality, and gender.

JUNE, 1968
Robert F. Kennedy is assassinated after winning the California presidential primary.
Looking Back, Moving Forward

Luckily, the story of Mount Mercy students and the civil rights movement does not end there. Professor Linda Schifino, PhD, keeps the conversation going with today’s Carlow students as part of a special communications course she offers titled The Roots of The Civil Rights Movement.

The pedagogical approach, she explains, is simple. “Social movements are reliant on public communication. In order to educate society about an injustice, to argue for change in the way we view societal norms, and to stand up for opposition, social advocacy requires effective communication and skilled communicators. From speeches to protests to media coverage, public communication is the vehicle for creating social change.”

Students partaking in Schifino’s class don’t merely read the cornerstone texts and supporting writings of the civil rights era; they make the pilgrimage to the South to walk through history and meet the people who experienced the events firsthand.

Over a series of nine days and covering more than 2,000 miles by bus, students visit the people and places who changed American history forever: they learn about the Bloody Sunday attack by walking across the Pettus Bridge with Joanne Bland, who at age 11 participated in the historic march; they visit the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968; they sing freedom songs with Rutha Harris, one of the original Freedom Singers; they talk with Minnijean Brown-Trickey, a member of the Little Rock Nine, about her experience being escorted into school by members of the 101st Airborne Division.

“I can’t overstate how important it is for our students to meet these people,” says Schifino. “The importance of oral history, the importance of keeping these memories alive, it’s so vital, because these folks aren’t going to be around forever, and it’s significant that we hear their stories, we remember their stories, we respect those stories, and we keep telling them.”

Students feel the impact of these experiences immediately. “One of my favorite parts of the tour was talking to Juanita Abernathy,” remembers Gloria Marshman ’12. “She just gave me the urge to do the same kind of work that they did back then—she just made me want to go into the community and organize.” Abernathy’s husband, civil rights leader Rev. Ralph Abernathy, was Dr. King’s closest friend.
“Hearing the speakers was powerful, and so was being in the same places as the leaders of the movement,” says Ceree Wilkerson ’13. “Walking in the same exact steps as they did in the march, being in the same pews that they sat in, that was very inspiring.”

Christina McLachlan, ’12, was similarly moved. “I learned that it was the consecutive, small efforts of many people that made this huge change, and it really shows how much one person can do for the world,” she says. “I’ll never forget walking into that hot church and seeing Rutha Harris. All of a sudden she stood up and her voice exploded into that church. I can’t even put it into words to summarize how much that moment meant to me emotionally and spiritually.”

“A lot of the time on the trip I spent staring out the window and being appreciative of the freedoms that I do have,” says Wilkerson. “I realized that people may die but their ideas and beliefs never do ... it’s easy to forget that people serve purposes, and their purposes leave meaning and lasting impressions on others.”

Kathleen Kelley ’14 remembers a small but poignant exercise conducted by Joanne Bland as the students crossed the Pettus Bridge. “She had us all pick up a rock,” Kelley says. “And she said, ‘Somebody who walked on Bloody Sunday was holding that rock—and now you’re holding that rock.’ And she said that whenever we saw struggle, or felt like we were never going to make it or things were never going to change, we should look at that rock and know that we can change whatever we are facing.”

“Learning about this history is critical for our students,” Schifino explains. “It helps them to better contextualize the distrust and the fear that many people experience when confronted by government or law enforcement officials today. It exposes the pain. Because you can’t understand today’s racial landscape without understanding the history of the civil rights movement.”

For many of the Mount Mercy participants in the 1965 Montgomery march, their experiences in Montgomery set them on a lifelong path toward fighting for justice and compassion. Carcione remained heavily involved in the civil rights movement in Pittsburgh and in Washington, D.C.; Wolfson, too, campaigned for civil and women’s rights, and today she sits on the board of the Community Forum for Economic Justice in South Bend, Ind. Henke uses opportunities that arise from her work as a music teacher in the Penn Hills School District to promote cross-cultural understanding among her students, and Douglass recognizes that Mercy values exhibited in the 1965 march influence her work as a clinical psychologist in Arizona.

And still there are thousands of unnamed Mount Mercy alumni whose work has transformed the lives of people in Pittsburgh and around the world. In fact, many of today’s Carlow students are able to attend college precisely because of the efforts of the women and men who came before them and fought for social, racial, and economic justice. But the fight is not yet over; the stories and struggles of today’s students are no less poignant, no less moving, no less challenging than the events of March 16, 1965— they simply have yet to be written.

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**Extra Credit**

For more information about the civil rights movement, we recommend:

- *Bending Toward Justice: The Voting Rights Act and the Transformation of American Democracy* by Gary May
- *The Selma Voting Rights Struggle and March to Montgomery* by Bruce Hartford
- *Freedom Summer* by Bruce Watson
- *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws That Changed America* by Nick Kotz
- *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s* by Henry Hampton, Steve Fayer, and Sarah Flynn
- *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* by Lynne Olson
- *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody
- *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years* by PBS/American Experience