Selma March

Selma's 'bloody Sunday'

By ORBIE L. MEDDERS

SELMA, Ala. (UPI)—A vanguard of about 525 blacks converged on the Edmund Pettus Bridge 10 years ago to begin a march to Montgomery to protest the denial of voting rights to Negroes in Selma.

Awaiting them on the span which crosses the Alabama River were around 200 state troopers and sheriff's deputies under orders from Gov. George C. Wallace to block their march to the state capitol 66 miles away. A few minutes later, the troopers and deputies, some of them on horseback, attacked the approaching procession with teargas, whips and nightsticks.

It happened on March 7, 1965. Today, black and white people in Selma still call it "bloody Sunday."

The marchers threw bricks and bottles but they were no match for the law enforcement officers. Seventeen blacks went to hospitals and 67 other marchers received emergency first aid treatment.

Wallace defended the attack as an act in the interest of public safety. Two days after the clash, President Johnson issued a statement denouncing the "brutality" on the bridge.

Many blacks and whites in Selma claim the incident on the Edmund Pettus Bridge hastened the passage of the voting rights act by Congress in August of that year.

"If they had only let that group march to Montgomery there would not have been a voting rights bill signed into law, not when it was," said Frederick D. Reese, a march leader.

The passage of the act cleared many barriers to black voter registration, and the number of blacks on voting rolls in the South more than doubled, increasing in 11 southern states from 1.4 million in 1970 to 3.5 million in 1971.

In Selma and surrounding Dallas County the number jumped from 300 in 1965 to 12,000 in 1975.

The increased voting strength helped elect blacks to public offices that had been held exclusively by whites since reconstruction. Blacks now occupy three southern congressional seats, dozens of positions in southern state legislatures and city halls and several sheriffs' offices.

Ten years ago, blacks could not win election to public offices in Selma. Reese, a leader of dozens of voter registration marches, ran for city council in 1964 and lost by a wide margin.

Today, Reese, 45, is one of five blacks elected in 1972 to an 11-member city council.

"I feel that we have made some progress," Reese said. "It's far from what we'd like to see, but we have to be fair about it—progress has been made."

Change came slowly. In 1968, three years after the voting rights act, blacks were unable to unseat whites in the city government, some black candidates faced harrassment and many blacks became convinced the civil rights movement had failed to improve their lives.

Joseph T. Smitherman, 45, Selma's white mayor since 1964, believes many black persons thought the voting rights act "meant they would have a pretty white house, like the white man, and two cars. It left them in frustration."

Because black voters remain in the minority, there is little chance for a Negro to win the mayor's office or gain control of the council.

"Whites have not gotten to the point where they would vote for a black man" said black city council member Edwin L. Moss.

Reese said election returns indicate some whites have voted for black candidates, and he thinks the number will increase as whites watch the performance of blacks in official positions and as members of both races work together on public projects.

"You cannot legislate love," Reese said, "but you can legislate an act that would put you in a better position to love. This (voting rights act) gave a real opportunity for understanding of both races.

"I don't want to give you the impression that everything is rosy here because it is not," Reese said. "But we have a handle on it."

The political gains won by blacks have not solved all the problems faced by Negroes in Selma.

"Even with some of the political strength we have gained, we've got to get some economic strength," Moss said. "People in the rural areas, even if all of them could vote, there would be many instances where they would go to the voting box and because of their economic dependency they are going to be reluctant to vote gaginst some guy out there who has the power to crush their job or take the food out of their mouth."

Moss, 59, represents much

MOBILE PRESS

MAR 2 1975

recalled after 10 years

of the economic strength of the black community in Selma.

He owns a supermarket, runs the business section of a Catholic Mission and heads a credit union with $890,000 of deposit—all from blacks.

"If you get you some money, you don't have to ask for anything," Moss said. "Really, that is the power. People respect me because I control pretty close to a million dollars."

Few blacks in Selma have the economic strength of Moss, and they must consolidate their political power to be heard. Moss thinks that can be done with "house to house, day by day work" to register the remaining 3,000 eligible black voters in the county.

Moss said the voter registration methods used at the peak of the civil rights movement 10 years ago—mass meetings and marches—fail to draw out the unregistered black voters.

"People are tired of mass meetings," Moss said. "It's just a thing of the past. It died with Martin Luther King."

In the first hours after the clash on the bridge, Reese was not as certain about progress as he is now.

"There was a big question in my mind whether nonviolence would really prevail in Selam," Reese said. "I knew if it wouldn't, we were in big trouble."

When the marchers returned to Browns Chapel AME Church after the clash, Reese said he stood before the group and read from the Bible and prayed.

"I have never seen so much hate on the faces of people I have known all my life, loving people," he said. "I never felt where my scripture and prayer meant nothing except that day."

King, who was in Atlanta, called "for those people who wished to come present their bodies and themselves to help in Selma," Reese said.

"When the call went out, that night, people started coming into Selma," he said. "That was one of the most exhilarating, one of the most encouraging acts that I had ever witnessed.

"When those people came in," he said, "that saved nonviolence."

MOBILE PRESS

MAR 2 1975