

The following essay was written by Josh Del Colle. In it, he reflects upon the experience of his 8th grade class trip, taken to America's deep South to explore the Freedom Trail. The trip was the culmination of the class's study of American history. The article was printed in RIVERWEST CURRENTS in July of 2003.

CLASS TRIP

The educational part of my class trip began Sunday, May 19. My class and I attended morning church services at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The church was made famous when it was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan in 1963, killing four young African American girls. At the church itself, we did not learn about the civil rights struggle, but I thought it was a good experience to be at a southern Baptist church and see the way they worship. Seeing how powerful the minister was gave me an idea of how meaningful and inspirational the church must have been during the civil rights movement. It also gave me an idea of how powerfully the leaders must have spoken.

After the service we walked through Kelly Ingram Park. The park had many statues and monuments dedicated to the movement. Although the park seemed a bit run down and looked like a haven for homeless men, the sculptures were still very inspirational. My personal favorite was of police dogs jumping out of a solid wall at children.

Soon after, we went to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. In the museum we viewed a video on the early history of Birmingham. I learned that Birmingham was a mining town with free blacks and immigrants working in the mines. The mines were dangerous and the miners extremely underpaid, but the workers' families were provided with food, housing, and education. Blacks and whites lived together in the houses but blacks always lived in back. But the mines started to get into some financial trouble and some closed. Regardless, Birmingham still grew. Segregation was at first started by tradition, but soon became law.

After the video, we took a self-guided tour of the museum. To me, the most interesting part of the museum was a room full of panels with life-sized pictures of people on them. On each panel, next to the person, it would tell about different types of discrimination each one had suffered, whether it was racial, ethnic, religious, gender, etc.

On Monday we headed to Montgomery. The first stop was at Martha's Place, a restaurant owned by a woman that participated in many marches and demonstrations. Martha came down to talk to us during the end of our meal.

She told us about her experiences during the Movement and about the impact youth had on the movement. Kids skipped school almost daily to participate in marches and demonstrations. The protesters thought it was a good idea to have people constantly protesting every day, and many adults could not because of their jobs. She told us stories about the police brutality toward the children and how her brother was put in jail. She is a very nice lady and it was great to meet her.

Next stop on the list was the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). We looked at the monument dedicated to those who were killed fighting for civil rights. Then we headed into the center. We had to go through metal detectors to get through because the center was attacked in the 1980's by members of the KKK. Once inside we went into a conference room where we watched a video on the center and all the things it does. The Center works very hard to keep track of hate groups and does as much as possible to stop them. A few years ago the Center sued the Aryan Nation on behalf of a person who was attacked by some of its members. This lawsuit put the Aryan Nation into bankruptcy and it lost its headquarters to help pay for it. They also work with government organizations like the FBI and the Justice Department to give them information on what hate groups are doing. After the video we talked to a lady who told us about programs the SPLC does with children for its TOLERANCE program. I think the SPLC is a very important organization to have in this country.

Before going to our next stop we walked to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the church Martin Luther King Jr. preached at when he first became a minister. Then we went to the Rosa Parks Museum and Library. In the museum we walked around a room and looked at profiles of important civil rights leaders from the 1800's to today. Then the tour guide came in and put on a video about the bus system in Montgomery. The video had interviews with people who remembered the buses before the boycott. One man told about the humiliation he felt when he was forced to get up for a white child and how he had to stand at the back of the bus when there were open seats in the front. Some told about going to the front of the bus to pay, then having to get off the bus and entering the bus again at the back to sit. Some drivers would drive off after the passengers had paid!

After the video we were led into a room where there was a cut-out of a bus, and in the bus windows there were video screens. On the video screens it showed what was going on inside the bus. The video told about the story of what happened the night Rosa Parks refused to move. The video gave me an idea as to how much courage she really had and how much pressure was on her. The rest of the museum showed more about the bus boycott and what was happening in Montgomery at the time. One thing I thought was kind of funny was a newspaper clipping from 1965 with the title "King Attends Communist Training Center." It was an article about a center where whites and blacks worked together to find a solution to the south's problems.

Tuesday we got up and went straight to Selma to go on a tour of the city and the National Voting Rights Museum. We met up with our guide and drove to the Brown Street Church, which was the headquarters during the movement in Selma. This is a church where King made many speeches. And a lot of the marches in Selma either began or ended at this church. On the rest of the tour we looked at houses and buildings that were important to the movement.

Back at the Voting Rights Institute we learned about the history of voting rights in America. After slavery and during Reconstruction, black men were allowed to vote and many black congressmen and a few senators were elected. But after Reconstruction ended, the southern states made Jim Crow laws for black voting. Blacks were forced to take bogus tests with trick questions like how many feathers are on a chicken or how many hairs on my head. It wasn't until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that all Americans

over the age of 18 were allowed to vote. But the act will expire in 2007 and the Institute is doing all it can to make sure it is renewed.

The museum also focused in on Bloody Sunday. In early May of 1963, a young black man was shot and killed by an Alabama state trooper while trying to protect his elderly grandfather from the officer beating him. In response, the African American community decided to march in protest from Selma to Montgomery. The protest was scheduled for Sunday, May 16, and Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders were going to attend. But the marchers were never given permission by the state to march. At the last minute, MLK dropped out because his father was sick and he wanted to stay in Atlanta where he was at the time. So they decided to postpone the march. But then the organizers realized they did not have enough time to get the word out that they would have to march anyway, and Martin could meet up with them on Monday.

On Sunday morning the marchers began, but when they arrived at the Edmund Pettis Bridge they were met by about 50 Alabama state troopers in full riot gear with gas masks. The marchers were ordered to disperse and when they did not the police charged at them with tear gas and billy clubs. Some officers were on horseback and they trampled over marchers. Many of the marchers were injured, some seriously. Luckily, there were no fatalities. The whole event was captured live on TV and aired all over the country for people to see.

The nation was shocked and appalled by what they saw, and President Johnson ordered the National Guard to protect the marchers. Two weeks later, thousands of people converged on Selma and marched together all the way to Montgomery. People said every day more and more marchers arrived and that when they finally reached Montgomery five days later there were 25,000 people.

That night our class drove to Atlanta, Georgia, and we stayed overnight at Clark College. Wednesday morning, we went to the Martin Luther King National Monument. We took a tour of his childhood home and then went to the Ebenezer Baptist Church. At the church we listened to the entire "I Have A Dream" speech. It was very inspirational to hear the speech in the church where he preached so many times. Afterwards we headed to the museum where we saw his tomb and the Eternal Flame.

Martin Luther King Jr. has inspired many people including myself. I think visiting these historical sites about him was a great way to end our class trip. I have read his autobiography and many other biographies about him. His work can never be forgotten but is not yet finished. There are still many problems with racism in America today, and I think a lot of it is going on unchallenged. People need to band together and end it once and for all.