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Behind the photos of the historic march in Selma

PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURES JOY AND ANXIETY OF A TURNING POINT IN CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY

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The woman wears a fur cap and cape over her best Sunday dress. To her right, another woman looks cautiously over her shoulder, at something outside the frame. To the left, a couple of kids are goofing around.

But at the center of this eye-catching photo, the woman in the center clutches a camera to her breast. She carried it from home to capture the history of this day. She is singing, "We shall Overcome."

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The woman was right. History was about to be made that Sunday in Selma, Alabama, 50 years ago, when Dr. Martin Luther King would lead some 8,000 marchers through town on their way to Montgomery and the freedom to vote.



Photographer James Barker looks over images he shot 50 years ago in the historic Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery.
(Photo: Dale Neal/dneal@citizen-times.com)

Photographer James Barker was only a few feet away, capturing that moment with a Leica camera and a single-wide angle lens.

Barker was a 28-year-old photographer down from Washington State University. It was his first visit to the Deep South. He knew he was in different territory on the drive from the Montgomery airport the 50 miles to Selma. A state trooper's car fell in behind their vehicle, and Barker aimed his Leica out the back window.

"I'd rather you didn't do that," the black organizer driving the car glanced in the mirror. "We don't want to give him any reason to stop us."

The driver's girlfriend chimed in. "We don't trust those who are supposed to protect us."

A half century later, those black and white images from the historic march hang in the lobby of Karpen Hall on the UNC Asheville campus. The stark images invite students and others to revisit that moment in time, the moral call to correct the injustice denying black Americans their right to vote.

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Just three weeks before, a peaceful demonstration of marchers had been beaten, trying to cross the Pettus Bridge, a day that came to be known as "Bloody Sunday."

Two days later, Dr. Martin Luther King then led marchers halfway over the bridge and then turned back.

Finally on March 21, civil rights champions planned to stage a march from Selma all the way to Montgomery over three days, bringing their concerns to the state capital.

Barker arrived that Saturday in Selma and people were pouring into town, signing in at the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's headquarters. He didn't waste any time, snapping candid shots, capturing the volunteers chatting over coffee. Blacks and whites talking quietly together, knowing the hatred they would face in public.

Plenty of media was swarming the event, along with the National Guard and U.S. federal marshals sent by President Johnson to guard the marchers.

He was never personally afraid, even when he heard gunshots that first night he spent in the church basement in Selma. But the threat of violence was palpable in the air. He snapped a photo of a handwritten note from Viola Luizzo, probably the last thing the young volunteer had scrawled out before she was murdered the week before the march.

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Marchers leaving Selma and approaching the Edmund Pettus Bridge where previous marchers were beaten.

(Photo: James Barker/SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN-TIMES)

He snapped photos of the racist slurs sprayed onto cars, warning the marchers, black and white, that they were unwelcome in the segregated South.

Barker wasn't trying to be a press photographer, going for the iconic image. With his single lens, he worked inside the march and crowd, trying to record the people, and not just the history.

"There was this joy in all these people coming together. This was an extraordinary event occurring and the people knew it," Barker recalled.

He walked backward to capture a picture of a man framed by two American flags.

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Barker turned and walked backward to capture the iconic image of a marcher framed by American flags

(Photo: James Barker/Special to the Citizen-Times)

He turned and captured a shot of black and whites, marching together up Selma's main street, headed once more for the bridge where so many had been brutally beaten. His photos show the smiles on their faces, and the snarls on the faces of many white onlookers.

For Barker, it was only a few days in Selma. Later on, he would move to Alaska and document the Eskimo villagers in his photography.

His wife, Robin, whom he met and married in Alaska, didn't even know about earlier photos. "I didn't even know he'd been to Selma. We opened up this box and there were all these pictures."

The show at UNCA will also reconnect him with people. David Warren was the Washington State University student president who traveled with Barker to Alabama.

"I haven't seen David since the March. We'll meet him at the airport," Barker said.

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On Saturday, the two men will walk through the photos and a time that bound them together 50 years ago.

Barker didn't consciously know what faces, gestures would appear in the photos as he snapped his photos. But like the woman who was singing in front of Brown's Chapel, clutching the camera to her breast, Barker knew it was an important day.

"It was the turning point of the Civil Rights movement," Barker said.

And his camera had captured the future in the guise of a black boy leaning against the Brown Chapel marque that read "Forward Ever, Backward Never."

Five months later, President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

"Forward Ever, Backward Never," a series of photographs by James Barker depicting the 1965 March from Selma to Montgomery will be on display through Feb. 27 in the lobby of Karpen Hall on the UNC Asheville campus. The exhibit is free to the public 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday through Friday.