

Memphis, Tennessee
March 26, 1965

Dear Warren,

John Wesley, a very old friend, came by the house at 2:30 AM Thursday, March 25, 1965.

It was bitter cold and raining.

He and I put a dozen sandwiches, six hard-boiled eggs, fruit and a thermos of coffee in the car; enough to last the 24 hours we would be on the road (one doesn't stop and try to eat in a restaurant in Mississippi and Alabama when traveling with a black man).

It was a long hard drive of 370 miles to Montgomery. We arrived there at 11:15 AM. On the outskirts, I asked a man at a filling station where the Civil Rights Marches were. He looked at John - then me - then spit on the ground.

Near the Capitol, we asked an Alabama National Guardsman and he shrugged.

We parked the car and started toward Main Street. We left our eyeglasses in the car and felt it best not to walk together. I was to lead and inquire and John follow.

At W.T. Grant I bought three packs of gum for 15¢. I laid the even change on the counter and the female clerk said, "Gimmie a penny tax. Something's got to pay for these niggers on parade."

A Negro Preacher directed me to where the march was forming.

It was an eerie walk. The town was under siege. Six helicopters circling overhead, very low, sounding like machine guns being fired slowly...Thousands of soldiers -- at every corner -- on tops of buildings...emergency trucks...State Police in green plastic helmets carrying their now famous "billies"...ABC, NBC, CBS with mobile and portable cameras everywhere.

After a three-mile walk (it all seemed to be uphill) we arrived at headquarters just in time to hear a white parade organizer giving instructions over a bull horn.

"Remember, six abreast, woman in the center. Don't answer and don't hit back, no matter what -- We shall overcome!"

A group of American Historians were forming,

"I'm Van Woodward, Professor of American History at Yale -- better put on your badge."

"I'm not a historian."

"Well, maybe you'll help make history today. Join us."

So I joined Hufstadter of Columbia, Franklin of Chicago, Winkler of Rutgers, Weisberger of Rochester, Duberman of Princeton and twenty others.

"White scum! Nigger lovers!" Screamed a passing truckload.

The march started. They had expected 10,000 and there were over 30,000 of us. First, hundreds of reporters from all over the world; magazine writers, feature writers; then a truckload of cameras, then the pink luminous shirted 300 who had marched from Selma -- sneakers and legs covered with Alabama mud -- the white faces red with sunburn.

“What do we want – FREEDOM, FREEDOM! When do we want it? NOW, NOW!”

Then, Martin Luther King, Ralph Bunch and every name you’ve ever hear of in the Rights movement. Then the marchers. The line stretched for miles.

“Go back North! Everything was wonderful ‘till you came!”

A one-legged man caused a chorus of “Left, left, left.”

A nun’s chastity was ridiculed.

“We shall overcome -- yes, we shall overcome!”

I’ve never walked so straight or felt so tall.

Above the Capitol dome was the Alabama Flag, below it the Confederate Flag and on a pail set in the ground, our flag. The troops who guarded us had Confederate Flags on their uniforms. There were two solid lines of State Police stretched across the Capitol steps, a grandstand below them, the mobile TV units and the helicopters...Harry Belafonte, Peter, Paul and Mary -- they sang their hearts out while we waited an hour for the end of the parade to join us.

“Mississippi, kneel and pray, Hallelujah” (Repeat)

“Wallace, kneel and pray, Hallelujah” (Repeat)

Then came the speeches.

“We came with eh power of our souls and the presence of our bodies to love the hell out of George Wallace and the State of Alabama!”

“The next time the President calls out eh Guard, let’s see the American flag on their shirts and the American Flag at the top of the dome!”

During the Star Spangled Banner, the double line of troops just stood; no salute, no hats off, not at attention,

This thing just wasn’t happening. Just a bunch of goddam niggers and beatniks.

It was 75°; at times it poured; and we stood till 4:00 PM. And it was over. I asked a trooper how to get onto Route 82-West.

“First turn to your left, nigger-lover.”

It was a long hard drive home; rain and cold again.

Billie let me sleep later. At breakfast I read that Mrs. Viola Gregg Liusso had been killed driving a Negro home to Selma!

“My country, tis of thee
Sweet land of Liberty...”

My love to all...