

A conversation about the Civil Rights struggle as told by George Sallie

The Adventures of Melanie An account of the experiences and observations of Melanie Eversley, a 27-year journalist with an interest in people and a focus on race, culture, history and politics. Young woman walks past civil rights mural in Selma, Ala., March 2010 Thursday, October 28, 2010 Selma and Mr. Sallie, George Sallie has a lot in common with the way he spent Election Day in 2008. Those 24 hours changed history, though they seemed tame on the surface. In Selma, Ala., where Sallie lives, Election Day was sunny with temperatures in the 70s. This was typical November weather for this small city of 19,000. Except for the fact that Sallie cast a ballot for Barack Obama, the 79-year-old retired lumber worker spent the day like most others. He got into a pristine clean sedan that dwarfed his rail-thin body, ran errands; drove to a nursing home to visit his wife, Minnie, then went home to read the Bible - a daily habit in spite of his ninth-grade education. When night came, Sallie clicked on his TV to the CBS affiliate out of Montgomery. The blue-white glare lit up his forehead and a scar made by a state trooper's billy club in 1965. The light highlighted his auburn-colored face with its web of lines. The TV announcer declared Obama had won the general election. From the living room of his modest home in a cluster of modest homes and some dirt roads, Sallie watched the jubilant crowds in the streets of Harlem, Hyde Park in Chicago, and U Street in Washington jump up and down or watches Jumbo-trons with tears in their eyes. Many of the African Americans watching an African-American man give a speech about assuming the throne of the White House wore J. Crew, worked in law firms, drove Acuras, dined out twice a week or possessed some of the other trappings of middle-class life. Many thrived in northern cities because some relative a couple of generations older had left the poverty and racism of the old South for better opportunities. Meanwhile, people like Sallie stayed put after they worked to change things. When America's attention turned from the South and the Civil Rights Movement, the George Sallies simply went back to their lives. Although Sallie had marched for the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed discriminatory voting practices, and although between 97 percent and 98 percent of African-American voters cast ballots for Barack Obama, helping to make him the first African-American president, Sallie did not feel as if anything was owed him on election night. He just felt good. "Something had happened I never thought would happen," Sallie said in his perpetually hoarse voice. "Something just come over me -- a feeling of joy just come over me." Sallie is part of the fabric of Selma, a down on its heels city that is part of the "Black Belt," a region in the South so named for the color of its fertile soil and the race of most of its people. The name actually is odd, though, because a lot of the dirt in this part of the country is red. The air smells perfumery, from the colorful flowers all around. Just like a scene from a movie, birds really chirp here. Selma has wide, quiet streets that seem to bask in the sun. Some storefronts are empty. Others are open for business, though barely so. With a cyber café and a funky new takeout place, downtown seems to be trying to summon the young and the hip from the region. There is a feeling of age and dustiness around, but it is oddly comforting, like a grandmother's house. Selma also is a city with a lot of love. On a quiet Sunday afternoon outside of a public housing complex, I saw a little boy of about 8 walk up to a car that pulled up. He opened his arms wide and said, "Hey, Louie, how you doin'?" as a second boy stepped out of the passenger's side. They hugged openly like two adults, and then the first boy helped Louie unload his mother's car trunk. In church, I saw a little girl of about 5 draw up close to her mother who had just gotten the spirit. The little girl just gazed at her mother's face while her mother wiped tears from her eyes. During one of my visits,

Sallie, a man of modest means, refused to let me buy him a meal, and insisted on paying for my breakfast one morning to the point of drawing the waitress into a ruse. There is so much natural warmth here that it is hard to believe that Selma was the site of "Bloody Sunday," an explosion of violence that took place on March 7, 1965, when 600 marchers set out to walk to the state capitol in Montgomery, Ala., to protest the murder of a local man and the denial of their right to vote. The marchers only made it a few blocks, to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. There, a wall of state troopers and mounted deputies attacked them, sending many to the hospital. Sallie was among them. Each year since then, Selma has held an annual recreation of "Bloody Sunday." It is called Jubilee. I first met George Sallie during one of these annual commemorations. There was a flurry of movement in front of Brown Chapel AME Church, the place where the marchers met on "Bloody Sunday." People strolled around and gave sidelong glances to one another. The morning air was a little cool and the sun was just beginning to warm things up. The crowd included groups of people there to advertise their personal causes. It seemed as if the locals from Selma and the residents of nearby public housing buildings were the least acknowledged. A black car pulled up to the front of the mass of people. A famous activist got out. Another car pulled up. A well-dressed congresswoman placed one high heel on the ground, then another, and positioned herself at the front too. As the large group began moving slowly and awkwardly forward, TV camera people skipped and jogged at the sides of the mass, trying to keep up, balancing heavy equipment on their shoulders as they squinted into eye pieces. The news people narrowly missed bumping into one another as they recorded the famous activist, the congresswoman and other well-known folks walk down the street with arms locked and eyes focused straight ahead. Something about the scene seemed disrespectful to me. The actual people of Selma hovered in the background while people who live comfortable lives and who hadn't been part of the initial march blew into town and sucked up the attention of my media colleagues. I turned away from where the cameras were focused and searched the rest of the crowd. That's when I saw him walking off to the side. He was slim and angular with a lined face that looked as if it had seen a lot. He lumbered quietly along in a summer-weight gray suit and cracked leather shoes, a stick figure of a man looking straight ahead, almost devoid of self-consciousness. He was just there, his presence simple and existent, a true non-violent protestor. I learned his name was George Sallie. Over the years, I would interview him several times, drawn to his quiet way and his rock-the-house life. George Sallie's story starts a few miles from the ghosts of Selma in Lowndes County, Ala., a place even poorer and with more of an entrenched history of racism than Dallas County, where Selma is located. Alabamians used to call the area "Bloody Lowndes" because the white supremacists were so openly active there. It is where the Klan shot and killed white Detroit housewife Viola Liuzzo for volunteering with the Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March. They caught her driving on a highway with an African-American man. Sallie grew up on a Lowndes plantation with his parents, two brothers and two sisters, all dead now. His parents were sharecroppers who tended corn, cotton and cows. Sallie left school in the ninth grade to earn money for the family. "That was just what you did," he said. "When you're living down there on the plantation, you go (to school) so long and then you go out into the fields." Back then, the prospect of voting and standing up for something never occurred to Sallie. Education wasn't an option. But at age 24, he was drafted into the Army and served in Korea for 21 months. When he came back, he moved down the road to Selma because there were classes there for veterans to learn basic skills. One of his teachers awakened him to the injustices in America. That teacher taught him to pull himself up by his bootstraps, he said, pronouncing the word

"bootstraps," and Sallie had a political and personal awakening. He realized he'd been ripped off. "You fight for somebody else's freedom and when you come back, you can't vote," he said. "When I came back to Selma, we couldn't walk down the street side-by-side. 'You had to respect the white man,' he went on. 'To me, the Declaration of Independence wasn't worth the paper it was put on because nobody enforced it.'" Sallie explained all this to me from one of the back offices at Freewill Christian Church, a place where you can find this quiet, small man at least four times a week and where he anoints people's foreheads with oil on Sundays. The church is on a side of Selma characterized by crumbling streets and small wood homes that lean, and it is literally on the opposite side of some train tracks from the part of town that has mansions, smooth pavement and churches with primarily white congregations. Sallie said that back in the day, he experienced "all kinds" of discrimination. "You had to go in the back door, had a separate place for you to eat, had a separate place for you to drink water," he said, his voice rising and beginning to shake. "You had to be last in everything." Over time, Sallie evolved from a sharecropper's son who went along with the status quo to someone who questioned everything. "The more I got involved, the more I would think: Why these people don't want me to have this?" Sallie explained. "The more I tried to grasp it, the more important it got to me." While Sallie was changing, anger was simmering in Selma. Activists from across the country were drawn to the community because it had developed a reputation among those active in the Civil Rights Movement for the great lengths its officials would take to prevent African Americans from voting. Sallie became known around Selma for his activism. He put Stokely Carmichael up in his home, had long discussions with John Lewis, now a congressman from Atlanta, and wrote President Johnson many times, asking what was the purpose of having laws that weren't enforced, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed voter registration discrimination and segregation in schools, workplaces and public accommodations. At one point, the lumber company where Sallie worked tried to fire him, but one of President Johnson's aides threatened to shut the plant down if they didn't keep Sallie. After "Bloody Sunday" and the successful Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March, and after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Sallie continued to push. In this phase of his life, the man who had to leave school in the ninth grade began noticing disparities in the public educational system. For instance, he said, the University of Alabama has its well-known "Million Dollar Band," but a public school in Selma with a primarily African-American student body had to raise money to buy a new dishwasher for the kitchen. With the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, 1966 marked the first time a majority of the African Americans in Selma felt assured that they could vote. Sallie and other activists around town tried to draft candidates for school board. They looked for people like Rosa Parks -- established members of the middle class who would have a better chance to win votes. But Selma's African Americans weren't ready to take that step. "We couldn't find high class black people willing to run," Sallie complained. So he and several other African Americans of more modest means decided to run on the independent ticket. "I decided by the way I seen how the children were being treated. I wanted to try to do something to help them," he said. "We were some of the first (African Americans) that ever run since Reconstruction in a general election." He didn't win that election. In 1970, he ran for the Dallas County Commission. He didn't win that election either. He explains all this without self-consciousness or disappointment. The point to Sallie is that someone is pushing to move things forward. Since 1965, life has changed a little in Selma. The city has elected its first African-American mayor. Downtown is home to the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute. And each year, Jubilee draws high profile people and international

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attention to this small sleepy city. Jesse Jackson is a regular. Winnie Mandela came in March 2010. Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, Chris Tucker and Terrence Howard have been here too. Today, if you stand on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, it's easy to feel the spirit of Sallie and all the others who marched. Selma, in fact, feels like a place of ghosts. Downtown has that same pregnant, fleshy atmosphere that fills the air when a television is on in the room. It feels as if all you would have to do would be to stand in place and just wait for some of the specters from 1965 to materialize and make their way stubbornly and silently across the bridge, faces locked in frowns. You could pretend you were one of them, your shoulder accidentally bumping into the shoulder of some other nervous person as you all walked, scared but determined. The quiet of the crowd and the peaceful stillness of the Alabama river on either side of you might seem odd compared to the sight straight ahead – a wall of helmeted sheriff's deputies and state troopers slapping billy clubs into open palms, eyeing you through dark glasses. You might feel your stomach squeeze into a knot, just like the stomachs of the ghosts around you. But when the deputies actually strike, knocking their clubs across backs, kicking people on the ground, raising up the dust, you might feel an odd kind of freedom, glad that you stood up for something. George Sallie is one of those who are glad. He thinks about Barack Obama, destiny, the Bible and his own life all the time. All are tied together, he believes. He watches Obama on the news, admires what he sees as his spirit of conciliation and knows in his heart that it's all because of a higher power and destiny. "God is in that man," Sallie said. "You ever see him get in a rage? Who the only one can settle you down?" The 1960s and the people of Selma paved the road for Obama to reach the White House the way John the Baptist paved the road for Jesus Christ, Sallie said. "There's always something that causes something to happen," Sallie explained. "If the people in Selma hadn't pushed for the Voting Rights Act, we wouldn't be here today."

Posted by Melanie Eversley at Labels: Civil Rights, Obama, Selma.