

THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON: A TEACHER'S REMEMBRANCE

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Rarely does a history teacher have the opportunity of relating a historic moment first-hand to his or her students. In the summer of 1963 I was a 22-year-old newly minted college graduate, headed for work on a master's degree that fall. As my home was in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., I had been able for several years to pick up summer jobs in the various federal agencies. That summer I was at the then-Department of Health, Education and Welfare, doing just what, I have long forgotten. In that hot summer of the civil rights movement word had spread that there was to be a massive march on the nation's capital.

Wednesday August 28 dawned clear and muggy, a typical Washington summer day. The neighbors with whom I carpooled were convinced there would be rioting and burning, and so they stayed home. In my youthful idealism I felt confident no such thing would happen (it turned out I was right), so I made my way to work via buses, which were almost empty. The city was indeed strangely silent. Federal agencies and many private businesses had offered workers a day off; Washington was turned over to the marchers, whatever might happen. At work, only my supervisor and one other employee, another college student, were there in my division. After a couple of desultory hours the boss said we both might as well take off too, which was what we wanted to hear. So off we hurried to the Lincoln Memorial, arriving around 11 a.m.

Never have I been in such a large crowd in my life. With no expertise in such things, I estimated it at 100,000; later I learned it was closer to two and a half times that. Was I aware of the historic import of the event? Probably not. As Bruce Catton has reminded us, history doesn't usually make sense until long afterward. But what I recall most vividly was the civility, the orderliness, and above all the indomitable passion and fervor of those masses of people. Many of them obviously were terribly poor and had scraped money together at great sacrifice to ride buses all day and night from the Mississippi Delta, from the ghettos of Chicago and Georgia, from other places that I, as a white boy from a middle-class suburb, had never been or known, to share in an experience that clearly had a profound meaning for them. There was an atmosphere of intensity, of hope, of release, of sheer joy, especially among the older people, who had known a lifetime of privation.

I wish I could say I stayed for Dr. King's speech. In fact, I heard it on someone's radio on the bus going home late that afternoon. But what I remember from August 28, 1963, was less the speaker, important though he was, or his message, historic though it would become, than the people who came to hear it.