

Spider Martin captured history by documenting civil rights battle

Photojournalist's work, shown at Briscoe Center, recorded brutality against peaceful protesters

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By Michael Barnes - American-Statesman Staff

The power of the central image lies in the void. And what intrudes into that void.

To the left are uniformed white officers, guns in holsters, nightsticks in tensed hands, helmets on heads and, for a few, gas masks already strapped into place. They are in motion, moving forward at what appears to be a deliberate pace.



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Spider Martin captured many side moments during the 1965 Alabama marches, which included representatives of varied religious communities.

To the right are a half dozen or more African-Americans, jackets hunched over shoulders, hands in pockets or clasped at the waist. They are stationary, staring at the officers. One man holds his right hand to his lips. It is not a threatening gesture.

Meanwhile, the lead trooper stretches out his left arm and points to the black men. Whether he's telling them to turn around or simply to halt — they already have — is not immediately clear. Yet there is no question that this gesture is threatening.

Given the asymmetrical possession of weapons, it is clear this will not end well. And it did not. Very soon after that, troopers, some of them mounted, tore into peaceful demonstrators brutally.

In that central scene, titled "Two Minute Warning," another photographer stands opposite the one who took the picture, also



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Spider Martin's "Two Minute Warning" captures the showdown between demonstrators and Alabama troopers during the "Bloody Sunday" march in Selma.

documenting this clash of wills during the first of three Alabama marches — all attempts to march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital in Montgomery — that left an indelible mark on history.

This March 7, 1965, image, along with others taken by photojournalist James "Spider" Martin at Selma — on view at

the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History through Dec. 19 — helped influence national opinion in the months between the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

"The whole world saw your pictures," Martin Luther King Jr. once told Martin, according to SpiderMartin.com. "That's why the Voting Rights Act passed."



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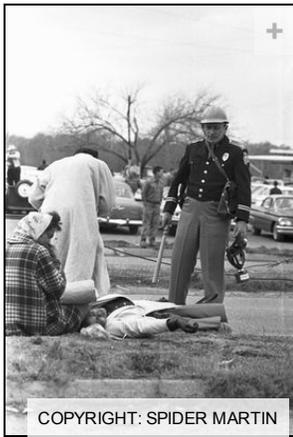
A coalition of races participated in the 1965 voting rights marches, as photographed by Spider Martin. His images of counter-protesters waving ... [Read More](#)

What made a difference

"The modern civil rights movement began after World War I and was often met with violent resistance, much of it under-reported," says Briscoe Center spokesman Ben Wright. "Why was the movement more successful in the 1960s? A major factor was that a national audience saw what happened. The call for equal rights and the violent prejudice it exposed was documented by photojournalists."

The images of the three marches — the first, known as "Bloody Sunday," was stopped at the Selma bridge over the Alabama River — are unforgettable.

In the early shots, the Soweto-like sense of fear and courage from those who faced down official violence is palpable. Later images of marchers making it successfully to Montgomery indicate that the tide was changing.



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Spider Martin's "Amelia Boynton" shows an Alabama trooper and three demonstrators on "Bloody Sunday."

People smile. There is a tentative sense of triumph. One sees the emerging coalition, a mix of races and religions, of those who marched for basic political rights.

Not everybody was happy. Images in the hallway exhibit at the Briscoe show knots of whites jeering, carrying crudely racist signs and making angry gestures, none of which could be reproduced in a daily newspaper today, despite their historical value.

In April of this year, civil rights pioneer Rep. John Lewis paused to look at that central image, shown on a banner hanging on the Briscoe Center exterior, as he attended the Civil Rights Summit at the nearby LBJ Presidential Library.

"The photographs of Spider Martin helped change not just the American South," said Lewis, who appears in the picture's foreground, wearing a raincoat. "But changed our nation and our world."

Photos as history

When Briscoe Center director Don Carleton heard that the late photojournalist's daughter, Tracy Martin, was seeking a home for her father's prints and negatives, he immediately perked up.

"That's our bread and butter," Carleton says. "We practically raced over to Birmingham to see them."

Tracy Martin still owns two other large collections of her father's photos, including those documenting the case of Viola Liuzzo, a white activist from Detroit who was gunned down on a lonely Alabama road by Klansmen. Another set records Alabama Gov. George Wallace's presidential campaign tours through Texas.

For Carleton, Martin's work fits not only the University of Texas center's mission of collecting, preserving and making available American history but also its specialty in journalism, often called

the first draft of history.

One piece of luck that makes Martin's images available for acquisition was his sometime status as a freelancer, which meant he retained copyright privileges.

"We are interested in that, too," Carleton says. "We want to be the home of the Spider Martin archive, the definitive place for his work. And Tracy wants it to be here, but we are working out a price. And we are trying to raise money to purchase it."

The center already holds more than 6 million images made by photojournalists, including a number of White House photographers. Many, those by living photographers, are not owned directly by the Briscoe.

"We can serve as their archives," Carleton says. "We store them. That allows them to use them. They can retain the copyright. We'll only buy collections of photographs if they are part of an estate and that's the only way to keep them as a collection."

Carleton emphasizes that Martin's work fits the center's core historical criteria, and so the photographs were not acquired just because they are beautiful or powerful.

"We are a history center, not an art museum," he says. "We are interested in photographs that are sometimes not really well done, but are rich in evidence. I mean, you look at these images and there's a lot going on."

Why are Martin's prints shown in a back hallway of the research building, which is connected to the LBJ Library, LBJ School of Public Affairs and Benson Latin American Collection?

There's no other place to show them. The center is halfway through a campaign to raise \$6 million to transform its entire ground floor into exhibition spaces, a new research room and supporting spaces.

"We feel like we have a compelling case to make to people who treasure history," Carlton says. "And we've got to raise every nickel."

Meanwhile, the Briscoe is a major supplier of exhibition materials for the LBJ Library and the Bullock Texas State History Museum.

Anyone interested in Martin's contributions to the civil rights battles of 50 years ago can make their way to the hidden hallway. (Parking in the adjoining lot is usually free, and there is no admission charge at the center.)

"People come in and look at this and they don't realize that this was hugely symbolic to getting voting rights for African-Americans," Carleton says. "It was a catalyst."

"The Power of His Camera: Spider Martin and the Civil Rights Movement" can be viewed at the Briscoe Center for American History, 2300 Red River St. on the University of Texas campus. The center is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday and, when classes are in session, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday.

Information: 512-495-4518, www.cah.utexas.edu