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Ronald Hooks

History 304

Dr. King's March on Memphis

On Thursday March 28, 1968 a mass march was held in Memphis, Tenn. In support of the striking sanitation workers. Dr. Martin Luther King had been in town earlier and had called for a general work stoppage on the day of the march. He urged all Negroes and whites in support of the strike should stay off from work in support of the striking workers. The march had been originally scheduled for the previous Friday but had been cancelled because of a snowstorm.

On the day of the march this writer boarded a bus headed downtown to the march. Hamilton high school happens to be on the bus route and what this writer observed at the school happens to be on the bus route and what this writer observed at the school turned out to be only an indication of what would happen later on in the day.

There was a sizable group of students outside the school but at this particular time this writer observed no significant incidents of disorder among the students. When the bus came to a halt at the bus stop two girls attempted to board the bus. As they were loading a voice from outside the bus shouted "Hey don't ride we're all marching down." The girls then turned around and got off the bus. As the bus started off again there were between ten to fifteen patrol cars on the scene and they were blocking off and detouring traffic heading back toward the school. The bus proceeded to the location of the march without further incident.

Within two blocks of the location of the march traffic began to (illegible) and this writer left the bus and walked the rest of the route to the starting point of the march.

It was about 9:15 A.M. when I reached the starting point of

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the march. I went to pick up a camera from my uncle's studio which is not quite two blocks away from the point where the march was scheduled to start.

From about 9:30 to 10:30 I busied myself by taking candid shots of the crowd. Everyone seemed to be in a gay mood. During this time the organizers [sic] of the march were constantly telling those people standing on the sidewalks and milling around in the front of the marchers to fall in line behind the organized marchers. The leaders of the march never accomplished this goal for even after the beginning of the march there were those on the sidelines and in front of even the leaders. This fact gave the impression that the entire march was out of order which was not the case. This writer is not an experienced crowd estimator but it is my opinion and the opinion of those witnesses I have interviewed

that the size of the crowd far exceeded the five or six thousand given in the papers. One reporter I asked gave an estimate ten to fifteen thousand people however I have yet to see this estimate in the papers.

Dr. King arrived at approximately 10:45. It was at this point that there was a good indication that events would not proceed as well as planned. The people who had been milling around swarmed around Dr. King's car and it was a good ten minutes before Dr. King was able to get out of the car. When he finally did get out of the car he never was able to get ahead of those two or three hundred marchers who refused to fall into the ranks of the crowd.

As the march turned on Beal I ran to get in front of Dr. King in order to take some pictures of the leaders of the march. About a block and a half up Beale street I heard the first window break. It is impossible at this time for anyone to give an overall picture of what happened because so much was happening at once that one could

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Only observe a small portion of what was happening. People were trying to walk such too fast for a crowd of that size. Dr. King was being pushed and people were walking on each other's heels. This fact only added to the confusion that was rapidly building up. As they proceeded up Beal St. windows continued to break in rapid succession. I was later told that this was when most of the looting was done. I was later told that this was when most of the looting was done. As I try to remember back on the march a factor of which I did not pay much attention to was the absence of police from the starting point of the march and even on Beale Street.

As the procession turned onto Main Street I sought to stay ahead of the march. The sound of windows breaking could still be heard. It is a rather short block from the corner of Beale and Main to where Main is intersected by McCall Street. By the time the march reached McCall a group of the parade marshalls formed a line across Main St. to stop the march. At this time I only thought it was a temporary halt in an effort to restore order. It was only after I heard Dr. Ralph Jackson telling the people that the march was over and that they should return to the church that I realized that the "March on Memphis" had officially come to a halt.

However if the march was over much of the confusion was just beginning. I looked down Main and saw a line of policemen stretched across Main Street. Some of the policemen were wearing gas masks. As the policemen came forward mass confusion broke loose people started running, women and children were crying and those on the sidelines were continuing to break windows and loot the stores. It was at this point that, what is in my opinion, the most significant event of the whole afternoon occurred. When the windows were first broken and those few involved began looting most people in the march were saddened and disgusted at the outbreaks of violence. In only a short time span however this disgust was replaced by hate,

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Hate that in my opinion was precipitated by the acts of “Memphis Finest,” the Memphis Police Department.

For as the policemen sought to push the march backwards. They turned not on the looters in particular but on the marchers and Negroes in general. They did this with such enthusiasm and with such utter disregard of justice that many people began to encourage the few who started the window breaking and began to encourage the few who started the window breaking and began to take part in the looting themselves.

As the march was pushed back to Main and Beale some marchers went down Main and others went down Beale. I was one of the ones that went down Main Street. However as I walked on I noticed a cloud of white smoke that was preceded by what resembled a shotgun blast. Immediately those people in front of me turned and started back toward me. I suddenly realized that they were running from tear gas. I did not immediately panic however as I thought that I was too far away to become affected by the gas. Three seconds later I knew I was wrong. My eyes suddenly seemed as if they were on fire. I was blinded by my own tears and I also started to run back down Beale Street. I couldn't really see where I was going. All of a sudden I felt someone grab me. I immediately turned and tensed up because I thought it was the police. As I opened my eyes wider I realized that it was the police. As I opened my eyes wider I realized that it was my father who had been taking pictures also. He wanted to know what I was running for but before I could answer he knew for the effect of the tear gas on my eyes suddenly made his eyes start to run.

As we walked on to my uncle's studio we noticed the incidents taking place the looting and the actions for the police toward those who are not even involved.

One incident involved a Negro man who like most people were moving along as the policemen advanced. To one particular officer

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however it seems that the man was not moving fast enough. The officer took a portable can of mace and proceeded to spray it in the man's face for about a half a block. The man refused to run however and this seemed to only further anger the officer.

My father and I looked across the street and observed three of four policemen advancing on a bearded white man who had been in the protest. The man was walking backwards away from the officers. As the officers advanced however one of them reached out and clubbed the man with his riot stick. The other officers immediately joined in and also beat the man. My camera was out of film at this and I knew that I dare not stop to reload as one officer had previously tried to snatch my camera from around my neck.

When we finally reached the studio which is located on Linden near Hernando policemen were scattering people and running them in all directions. Some of them sought to refuge on the porch of the studio. My uncle was standing on the porch taking pictures. Suddenly two or three officers ran on the porch and began to push everyone off. People fled into our door. When told that this was out place of business one officer replied "Well get the hell inside then." As we went inside one officer made a remark that they should take our cameras however we closed the door and they went away. Throughout the day we could see across the street and see people throwing bricks and bottles and police officers giving chase. I went to the darkroom to develop the film in the cameras. At that time the darkroom was probably the quietest and the safest place in town. Indeed it had been a long day.