

an unwavering quest



JIMMIE LEE JACKSON
1938-1965
Civil rights marcher
killed by state trooper,
Marion, Ala.

“Jimmie Lee Jackson’s death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly to make the American dream a reality. His death must prove that unmerited suffering does not go unredeemed.”

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

In 1962, when civil rights organizer Albert Turner persuaded some black residents of Marion to try and register to vote, an elderly farmer named Cager Lee was one of the first in line at the courthouse.

Standing with Lee was his daughter, Viola Lee Jackson, and her son Jimmie Lee Jackson. They were not permitted to register. When Jimmie Lee Jackson saw his frail 80-year-old grandfather rudely turned away from the registrar’s office, he became angry. He knew that he must be a part of the movement for civil rights.

Years earlier, when he was a proud high school graduate of 18, Jimmie Lee Jackson had made plans to leave rural Alabama for a better life in the North. He abandoned those dreams when his father died, leaving him to run the family farm. Determined to make the most of his life, Jackson took logging work in addition to farming, and he became active in a local fraternal lodge. At age 25, he was the youngest deacon ever elected at his church.

After the incident at the courthouse, Jackson saw the chance for real change in his hometown of Marion. He wrote a letter to a federal judge protesting the treatment of black voter applicants. He attended civil rights meetings, participated in boycotts of white businesses and joined others in marching for the right to vote.

In nearby Selma, activists had been marching for voting rights since early 1963. In January of 1965, they were joined by Martin Luther King Jr., who brought national attention to the voting rights campaign.

King led nightly mass meetings and frequent marches to the courthouse, where demonstrators were turned away by a stubborn Sheriff Jim Clark.

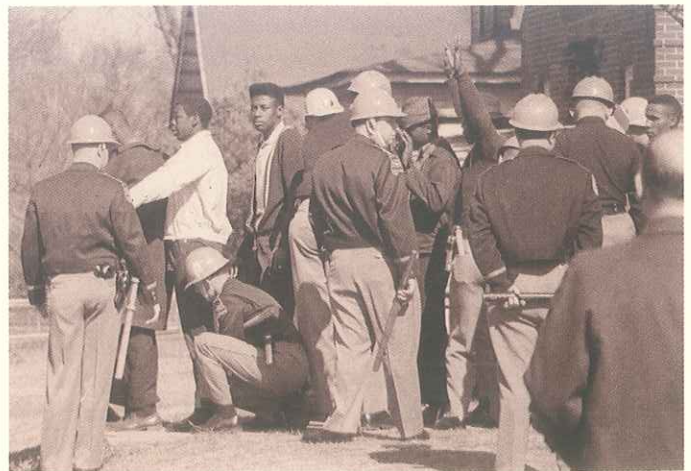
During one week in February, more than 3,000 marchers were arrested in Selma. On Wednesday, February 10, the sheriff’s posse used cattle prods to drive marching students all the way out of town, leaving them stranded and injured about a mile from the city limits. And on February 16, Sheriff Clark clubbed civil rights leader C.T. Vivian and then arrested him after Vivian continued to argue for the right to vote.

As the Selma campaign heated up, so did activity in Marion.

night marches.

The day after he was released from jail in Selma, C.T. Vivian went to Marion to lead a mass meeting and night march. About 9:30 the night of February 18, more than 200 marchers began walking in pairs out the front door of Mount Zion church. Before they had even walked a block, they were confronted by a line of state troopers and the police chief, who ordered them to disperse.

The marchers halted at the chief’s order, and suddenly all the streetlights on the square went out. A black minister at the head of the march knelt to pray, and was struck on the head by a trooper. Other troop-



On February 3, Marion police arrested 700 black children for marching around the courthouse and jailed a civil rights leader for contributing to the delinquency of minors.

ATTACK AT NIGHT

The combined resistance of Alabama officials angered the Marion demonstrators, and they decided to step up their campaign with a tactic they knew would be dangerous:

ers began swinging their clubs, and the marchers panicked, running for cover wherever they could find it.

Viola and Jimmie Lee Jackson hurried into Mack’s Café and were huddled for safety when they saw Cager Lee come in, beaten and bleeding. Shocked at the sight of his grandfather wounded, Jimmie Lee tried to lead him out the door to take him to a hospital. But they were quickly shoved



back into the room by a crowd of club-swinging troopers and terrified marchers.

The troopers began knocking out the café lights with their clubs and beating people at random. Jimmie Lee saw a trooper strike his mother, and he lunged for the man to protect her without thinking. A trooper clubbed him across the face and slammed him into a cigarette machine. As Jimmie Lee was forced against the machine, another trooper pulled his pistol and shot him in the stomach.

Wounded, Jimmie Lee managed to escape the café, but the troopers continued to beat him as he ran up the street. Eventually he collapsed. It was two hours before Jimmie Lee arrived at Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma. He died eight days later.

Jackson's killer was never publicly identified, and no charges were ever brought. Three days before Jackson died, the Alabama state legislature passed a resolution supporting the state troopers' actions in Marion.

TEST OF NONVIOLENCE

For decades Jackson's killer was never publicly identified, but in a 2005 interview with the *Anniston Star*, former state trooper James Bonard Fowler acknowledged he shot him, claiming self-defense. In May 2007, Fowler, 73, was charged with murder.

There was no disguising the bitterness civil rights activists felt at the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson. Albert Turner, who had started the voting rights

drive in Marion, said, "We were infuriated to the point where we wanted to carry Jimmie's body to (Alabama Governor)

King's, thought a long march from Selma to Montgomery would help absorb the tension in the movement and bring na-



George Wallace and dump it on the steps of the Capitol."


It was a testament to the genius of the nonviolent gospel and its ministers that such bitterness did not explode in a rage of violence. At one of two services for Jackson, Martin Luther King told a crowd of 2,000:

"Jimmie Lee Jackson's death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly to make the American dream a reality. His death must prove that unmerited suffering does not go unredeemed. We must not be bitter and we must not harbor ideas of retaliating with violence. We must not lose faith in our white brothers."

Yet more than encouraging words would be needed to calm the surge of grief and rage. James Bevel, an associate of

tional publicity to the problem of voting rights.

Thousands of blacks and whites from all over the country gathered in Selma on March 21, 1965, to march behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the state Capitol in Montgomery. Jimmie Lee Jackson's grandfather, Cager Lee, was one of the first in line.

By the time the Selma to Montgomery march was completed, two other civil rights workers were dead. The murders of James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo and Jimmie Lee Jackson made voting rights a matter of national urgency. Three months after the Selma march, Congress passed a broad voting rights bill, and federal officials began the massive job of registering blacks throughout the South. 

OPPOSITE PAGE
Hundreds of voting rights activists are arrested in February 1965.

BELOW
The hearse carrying the body of Jimmie Lee Jackson drives slowly through the rain as an estimated 700 people follow.