

MARTIN LUTHER KING



By R. Fitzgerald: Consultant in Ethnic Affairs

Thirteen. That number has historically been considered to be an evil omen. The etymology of the word, both in its cardinal and ordinal forms, could fill hundreds of pages. For our purposes, we will simply say that, like any other number, there are good. Consider the following as an example of my hypothesis and see if you don't agree.

Until thirteen years ago, the fourth of April was one of my favorite dates. It was on that date that I was born almost two lifetimes ago. The events of that date in 1968, prompted me to peruse an Encyclopedia of World History to determine what other history making events had occurred on that date since the beginning of recorded history. I was amazed and, simultaneously, dismayed because of all the things which had occurred on that date prior to 1968, none more represented a cause for sadness. It was thirteen years ago, on April fourth, that Martin Luther King was assassinated.

Thirteen years before, in 1955, he had become the pastor of a small church in Montgomery. He had no reason to believe that his life would be as tumultuous as it became. He had expected that he would spend his time caring for the spiritual needs of his congregation. Little did he know that by going to Montgomery, he would place himself dead center of the bulls eye of the civil rights movement.

Rosa Parks had been the spark which ignited the movement but it would be Martin Luther King, Jr. who would guide and nourish it. He was selected, by Black leaders of that community, to organize a boycott of the city's transit system. The action was contemplated because of the arrest of Rosa Parks who had refused to relinquish her seat on one of the city's buses. It was not anticipated that it would be any more than a quiet protest of a day or two. Little did they realize the proportions that that action would achieve.

For more than a year the boycott went on. White citizens of Montgomery had scoffed at their efforts and had even jokingly reported it on the local television news and in the newspapers. They all got a big laugh out of it and sneeringly made snide remarks like "you can't get more than three of them nigras to agree on one thing for more than five minutes". They may have been right--up to that point--but to say such, in public for all to hear, added insult to injury. Black people of Montgomery might have had a history of being abused by their white "christian" neighbors, but among themselves and within their families, dignity did indeed exist. A person's pocketbook might be attacked, a house might be attacked and the person might be attacked. All of those kinds of attacks might go on indefinitely with no aggressive responses or reactions. It is a profoundly different matter when it comes to dignity. Owen Wister probably describes it best in his famous book *The Virginian*, where he writes: "A man's sense of himself is the most important thing he has". Of course, this

also applies to women and children.

In November of 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in seating in public transportation was unconstitutional. Victory. King was humble in victory. He did not gloat and puff his chest out. He encouraged the Black populace of Montgomery not to brag--not to say that "we the Negroes, won a victory over the white people." He understood well, the meaning of being a good winner.

Two years after the end of the Montgomery boycott, he wrote *Stride Toward Freedom*. In that, he analyzed the role he had played during that turning point year. He also wrote about the future and the role of the churches in bringing about the rights of all people. He was the eternal optimist and, in spite of the activities of the KKK and White Citizens' Councils, he was certain that conditions would improve. The churches would have to lead the way by becoming involved in legal social actions against the long held beliefs of racial inferiority. The churches would have to integrate themselves and place as high a priority on its teachings of the universal brotherhood of man as it did on prayer in the schools or swearing on the Bible in a court of law.

Not too many weeks following the end of the Montgomery boycott, he invited a large number of Black southern leaders and church people to a conference in Atlanta. Ten states were represented in the persons of sixty individuals. Out of that few the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC]. King was elected president. The organization was to coordinate all civil rights organizations and activities.

Within two years of the end of the Montgomery boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom* was published. While in a book department of a store in Harlem, he was stabbed with a letter opener by Izola Ware Curry. Fortunately, it was not fatal and he had a rapid recovery. He discovered, however, that even among Black people there were those who could be swayed to believe that he was a troublemaker and was "making things tough" for Black people in America.

He returned to Montgomery and continued his pastorate. It became increasingly difficult for him to wear two hats. As his involvement in the activities of SCLC grew, he had less time to spend in Montgomery. He was needed everywhere. After considerable thought, he finally began, in February of 1960, to devote all of his energies to the civil rights movement and to SCLC.

For the next eight years he became one of the most visible people on the face of the Earth. It was almost as though he had taken and paraphrased the primary order which had been given to naval commanders during World War II--"Seek out, engage and destroy" racism wherever it is to be found. His life's work was laid before him and he was determined to make the United States of America live up to its ideals of democracy and to make christians live up to their principles.

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