

103-year-old activist: I was almost killed fighting for freedom

By Jane Ridley

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Mrs. Amelia Boynton Robinson, at home in Tuskegee, Ala., became a catalyst for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, passed just months after a photo of her beaten unconscious at a civil rights march in Selma (right) made headlines.

Photo: Left: Dana Mixer; Right: Bettmann/CORBIS

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It was the sickening image that woke up the world to the brutality that gave birth to the civil rights struggle: a God-fearing, middle-aged woman lying helpless and unconscious on the side of the road. She had been savagely beaten with clubs. Then, a helmeted law enforcement officer pumped tear gas into her throat before leaving her for dead. Or, as the racist sheriff callously put it, "for the buzzards to eat."

Newswires flashed the shocking March 7, 1965, pictures of Mrs. Amelia Boynton across the globe. Every major newspaper and TV network carried them. And the message was loud and clear: This is what America does to blacks who dare make a stand.

Half a century on — with nationwide protests over the fatal shooting of an unarmed black teen by a white policeman in Ferguson, Mo., showing that the struggle continues — the fateful Bloody Sunday march has been re-created in the much-anticipated movie "Selma," out



Lorraine Toussaint (far right) plays Boynton Robinson in the film "Selma," which chronicles a series of protests led by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965.

Photo: Atsushi Nishijima/Paramount Pictures

Produced by Oprah Winfrey and Brad Pitt, the film focuses on a brief but intense chapter in the life of Martin Luther King Jr. (played by David Oyelowo), chronicling the three historic marches from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., that took place during the fight for desegregation and equal voting rights in the Deep South.

And while most of the characters appearing in the film have long since died, Mrs. Boynton — today known as Amelia Boynton Robinson and portrayed onscreen by Brooklyn-raised "Orange Is the New Black" actress Lorraine Toussaint — remains one of the nation's best-known living civil rights leaders. Remarkably, though physically frail and confined to her home in Tuskegee, Ala., the "matriarch of the 1965 Voting Rights Act" is mentally alert at the venerable age of 103.

"I wasn't looking for notoriety [when we marched]," recalls Boynton Robinson, during an interview with The Post at her home. "But if that's what it took [to get attention], I didn't care how many licks I got. It just made me even more determined to fight for our cause."



Amelia Boynton Robinson was a teen in the 1920s. She later married Samuel W. Boynton, with whom she raised two children.

Photo: Courtesy of Mrs. Amelia Boynton Robinson

She might not have been well enough to attend the Atlanta preview of the film, but she's confident it will accurately portray the tense period when the civil rights battle concentrated on her former town of Selma. At the time, even though they made up half of the population, only 1 percent of blacks were entitled to vote, because of literacy tests, the preposterous bureaucracy it took wading through to register, plus the payment of a poll tax well beyond their means. They also lived in fear of the murderous Ku Klux Klan, which ruled the surrounding area, victimizing anyone it believed was disrupting the status quo of white rule.

"It's important that young people know about the struggles we faced to get to the point we are today," says Boynton Robinson, who received a visit from Toussaint this summer when the 54-year-old actress was researching her movie role. "Only then will they appreciate the hard-won freedom of blacks in this country."

If it wasn't for Boynton Robinson and her late husband, Samuel William Boynton, King might never have chosen Selma as his battleground in 1965. Among the most outspoken leaders of the civil rights movement in their town, the devout Christian couple invited the clergyman to mobilize supporters who were "sick and tired of being sick and tired" of prejudice and injustice.

"The blacks would gather downtown from the outlying farms every Saturday, like it was a big picnic," recalls Boynton Robinson, a native of Savannah, Ga., who settled in Selma after marrying in the 1930s. "But there were so many restrictions — you weren't allowed to drink from the 'white' water fountain, and police officers would pace the streets, pushing the colored people with cattle prods.

"They were so frightened and conditioned to be subservient, they'd just move out of their way."

In the spirit of King's nonviolent approach to protest, Boynton Robinson helped organize the first of three marches from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery. The aim was to call for Gov. George Corley Wallace to loosen obstructions that prevented African-Americans from voting.

At first, it looked as if the March 7 march would be peaceful, but, after the 600-strong crowd crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, across the Alabama River, mounting tensions resulted in "Bloody Sunday."

"There was this line of state troopers, like tin soldiers, with billy clubs, wearing gas masks," remembers Boynton Robinson, who was 53 and newly widowed at the time of the protest. "And the order came: 'Go back to your churches or your homes.'"

"Then they charged. They came from the right. They came from the left. One [of the troopers] shouted: 'Run!' I thought, 'Why should I be running?' Then an officer on horseback hit me across the back of the shoulders and, for a second time, on the back of the neck. I lost consciousness." She later found out that another cop stood over her body, pumping tear gas into her eyes and mouth from a canister. She was eventually left for dead. Mercifully, a young man in the crowd saw signs of life and dragged her to the safety of an ambulance.



Boynton Robinson was beaten unconscious by police officers during a civil rights march in Selma on March 7, 1965.

Photo: Bettmann/CORBIS



Martin Luther King Jr. leads a March 25, 1965, march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., in the days following Bloody Sunday.

Photo: AP

Boynton Robinson was beaten unconscious by police officers during a civil rights march in Selma on March 7, 1965. "It had been raining, so I was wearing a plastic rain cover over my head, which slipped over my mouth," says Boynton Robinson, who suffered throat burns but is convinced the plastic rain cover shielded her from the worst of the gas. Despite her injuries, she took part in the two subsequent marches, on March 9 (accompanied this time by King) and March 25, when the protesters finally achieved their goal of reaching Montgomery.

But the unprovoked violence of Bloody Sunday was seared into the minds of Americans, many of whom had been apathetic to the injustices in the South. It pressured politicians into supporting lasting change for blacks. Just five months after the publication of the shocking pictures showing her unconscious, Boynton Robinson appeared in another widely circulated photograph. This time, on Aug. 6,

she was shown with President Lyndon B. Johnson at the ceremony in which the Voting Rights Act was signed into law. The landmark piece of federal legislation finally prohibited racial discrimination in voting.

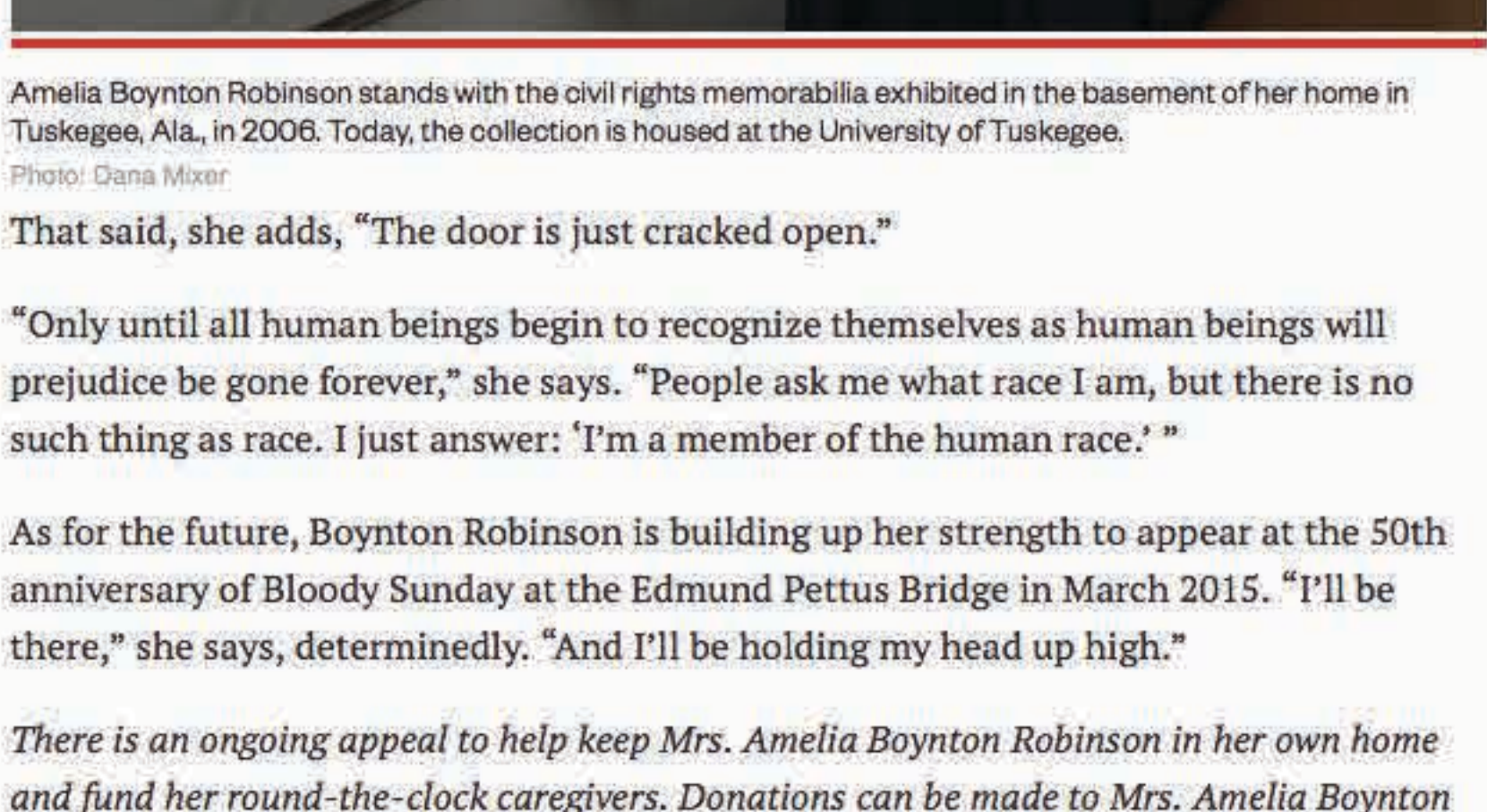


On the left, Boynton Robinson with President Lyndon B. Johnson at the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 2006 (right) with President Bill Clinton.

Photo: Courtesy of Mrs. Amelia Boynton Robinson

Nearly 50 years on, Boynton Robinson still follows the news and is disturbed by recent events with echoes of the Jim Crow era, such as the demonstrations in Ferguson, Mo., protesting the killing of Michael Brown, as well as the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida. "I still see a lot of discrimination," she says, sadly. "I don't think it will be until another 100 years that people will truly be colorblind."

But the mother of two laughingly describes President Obama — who is being called upon to award her the Presidential Medal of Freedom — as her "third son" and "believe[s] in him like a religion." She treasures the framed letter she received from him and the first lady on her 103rd birthday in August. "It's a dream come true to have a black man in the White House," she says.



Amelia Boynton Robinson stands with the civil rights memorabilia exhibited in the basement of her home in Tuskegee, Ala., in 2006. Today, the collection is housed at the University of Tuskegee.

Photo: Dana Mixer

That said, she adds, "The door is just cracked open."

"Only until all human beings begin to recognize themselves as human beings will prejudice be gone forever," she says. "People ask me what race I am, but there is no such thing as race. I just answer: 'I'm a member of the human race.'"

As for the future, Boynton Robinson is building up her strength to appear at the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in March 2015. "I'll be there," she says, determinedly. "And I'll be holding my head up high."

There is an ongoing appeal to help keep Mrs. Amelia Boynton Robinson in her own home and fund her round-the-clock caregivers. Donations can be made to Mrs. Amelia Boynton Robinson, P.O. Box 333, Tuskegee, Ala. 36087. For more information, visit villageofhopetuskegee.com.