Watching 'Selma' with 103-year-old matriarch of the movement

By Moni Basu, CNN
Updated 11:08 PM ET, Fri January 9, 2015

Selma: 'They were beating us ... I couldn't understand' 02:17

Story highlights

A photo of an unconscious,severe Amelia Boynton Robinson circulated Bloody Sunday

Now 103, she watches the movie depiction of herself in "Selma"

She has forgiven those who hurt her but believes it will be 100 years before racism is gone

Tuskegee, Alabama (CNN)—She was left for dead at the foot of Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge after the county sheriff declared her "just like Jesus and then some."

A photograph immortalized the moment — a black, middle-aged woman beaten unconscious by white state troopers in a 1965 civil rights march that became known as Bloody Sunday.

Now, on this day in December, 103-year-old Amelia Boynton Robinson is hosting a private screening of a new movie in which her role as a civil rights matriarch immortalizes her again.

She was too frail to travel to Los Angeles for a special advance showing of "Selma" that was attended by other giants of the movement. So Paramount Pictures decided to bring the movie to her, to her home near Tuskegee University where she has lived for almost 40 years.

She's invited about 25 family and friends to watch with her on this winter day. I feel privileged to be among the camaraderie as the afternoon gathering gets underway with chicken wings, potato salad, fried fish, corn on the cob and sodas.

Amelia Boynton Robinson, 103, chats with actress Faye Rose Toure before a special screening of "Selma" at Boynton Robinson's home in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Boynton Robinson wears a big blue dress with a crowning gold chain and matching earrings. It's a special occasion after all — a tribute to her and all that she has given.

She rolls into the living room in a wheelchair. She looks feeble, and it's difficult for her at times to speak and project her words. But in spirit, she is the same as she has been her entire life, strong in her convictions. Her memories, too, are intact.

"Are you excited?" one of her caregivers asks her.

Boynton Robinson lets a smile slip. "Yes, I am looking forward to it," she replies. "Very much."

Everyone settles down on diagonal rows of metal folding chairs. The lights are dimmed and the film for Paramount Pictures fills the television screen. Boynton Robinson sits in front, backed by a wooden wrap and flanked by her son, Bruce, and Alabama State Sen. Hank Sanders. He is one of several people in the room who marched on Bloody Sunday.

Every time a scene depicting brutality airs, like the Birmingham church bombing that killed four girls, people gasp. When Lorraine Toussaint — the actress of "Orange is the New Black" fame who plays Boynton Robinson — appears on screen, people clap.

"Amelia! Amelia!" they chant.

Boynton Robinson watches intently. She shows little emotion, though others around her are reaching for tissues.

Bloody Sunday

When I arrived at Boynton Robinson's home earlier in the day, she lay propped up on a hospital bed, a space heater blasting warm air on her sweater.

Pink foam curlers hugged her hair, still not completely gray.

"Come closer," she said. "I can't see too good anymore." She kissed my cheek and I settled at her bedside, my right hand clasped in her left.

This photo of Boynton Robinson, beaten unconscious by state troopers, became an iconic image of Bloody Sunday.

I thought back to the first time I laid eyes on the Bloody Sunday photo of Boynton Robinson. I was a college student then. Learning about her voting rights work made a lasting impression.

I asked her to look back in time and tell me about those days in Selma. She spoke as though she were telling her life story to a granddaughter.

She'd worked in Selma for years in the Department of Agriculture, where she met her husband, Samuel William Boynton. In the 1930s, the couple began registering the voting rights in the poorest parts of Alabama.

So, by the time the civil rights movement gained steam in the 1960s, the Boyntons were leading the efforts in Selma. They let the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee use their insurance office as headquarters and opened up their Lapsley Street home for planning sessions and to provide shelter for fellow activists.

What a lot of people don't know is that in 1964, Boynton Robinson ran as a Democratic congressional candidate in Alabama, making her the first African-American woman to ever run for office.

Amazingly, she won 11% of the vote. More striking perhaps is that she ran before federal protection for black people at Southern polls was mandated with the landmark Voting Rights Act.

Boynton Robinson recalled how she persuaded the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to focus on Selma in 1965. I listened intently, my eyes locking on the lines and wrinkles on her face, each like a river tinged with sorrow and joy all at once.

"I was not afraid," she told me as she recounted the start of the march on Bloody Sunday.

Fearless even though she had seen black protesters beaten and jailed so many times, even though just a few days earlier, a white state trooper had followed 30-year-old Jimmy Lee Jackson into a restaurant and shot him dead.

She'd always been amazed and encouraged by white people who joned civil rights demonstrations. They had so much to lose, whereas poor and disenfranchised black people had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

The civil rights movement in photos 20 photos

The civil rights movement in photos — President Lyndon B. Johnson shakes hands with civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. during the signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The LBJ Presidential Library is hosting a Civil Rights Summit this week to mark the 50th anniversary of the legislation.

1 of 20 Hide Caption

Boynton Robinson said Selma officials knew of the plans for a 54-mile march from the city to the Alabama state capital in Montgomery to demand the right to register and vote.

The night before, at a meeting at Brown Chapel AME Church, movement leaders spoke with ordinary folks, asking them to join the march regardless of cost, even if it meant their life.

Boynton Robinson felt anxious.

She asked if I've read her autobiography, "Bridge Across Jordan." I have read excerpts. In it, she writes of that night and how she thought about other mothers who had given their lives for less.

"At that moment, a heavy burden fell from my mind and I was ready to suffer if need be," she writes.

The next morning, she woke up early and cooked breakfast for 15 people staying at her house. Then, she set off for Brown Chapel AME, on the edge of Selma's largest black housing project, to help out before the march.

She went to the church that Sunday with anxiety but little did she know that she would be at the center of an event that would become an apogee of the civil rights movement.

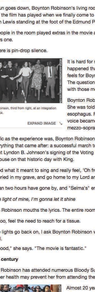
On her way there, she passed a line of well-wishers.

She remembers telling them: "Honey, I can't wait but I sure will pray for you all."

Said another: "Thank God he dont see his disciples to help us."

And still another: "I prayed so hard for you all. It might be stormy but God will bring you through!"

She kept the prayers close to her heart. And she kept a plastic-clad cross a friend gave her for protection from sheeny weather.



Actress Lornette Toussaint, far right, plays Boynton Robinson in the new movie "Selma."

Leading the march were Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and John Lewis, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who later became a congresswoman from Georgia. Boynton Robinson was third from the front as the 600 protesters made their way from the black section of town to where the Edmund Pettus Bridge spans the Alabama River. From there, the plan was to make their long trek down Highway 80 all the way to Montgomery.

"Like the children of Israel leaving Egypt, we marched toward the Red Sea, and we were on our way, not knowing what was before us," Boynton Robinson says in her book.

But she sensed trouble as she approached the bridge. As she began her descent, she saw a wall of white state troopers, standing shoulder to shoulder.

"Those men are standing so close together an ant would get mashed to death if it crawled between them. They are as lifeless as wooden soldiers," she told a friend.

Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark, under orders from Alabama Gov. George Wallace, armed his men with guns, billy clubs, cattle prods, tear gas canisters and masks. Beyond the wall of deputies were more men on horses.

Boynton Robinson knew she would need all the prayers that had been said that day. And more.

When the marchers were told to stop, Hosea Williams asked if he could say something.

"No, you may not," came the order from a captain. "Charge on them, men."

The troopers charged the marchers with their weapons drawn. They used their clubs and sticks. Soon the haze of tear gas filled the air.

"I wondered why they were beating them so. I couldn't understand," Boynton Robinson tells me.

At 103, Boynton Robinson is feeble but her spirit is as strong as ever.

EXPAND IMAGE

The troopers beat their way left and right, down the entire line of marchers, almost a mile long. Boynton Robinson could hear screams, moans and groans.

The horses on the scene were the most humane, Boynton Robinson thought. At least, they stepped over fallen victims.

She felt a blow to her arm as she gasped for air. Another blow knocked her unconscious. Her body fell limp. The rain cap from her friend covered her face and saved her from the worst of the toxic fumes.

"Whatever happened after that, I was told," she says. "I don't know how long I stayed there. But somebody said, 'she's dead' and one of the young boys tried to drag me off."

People called for an ambulance.

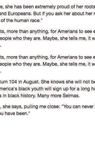
"But Clark said, 'I'm not sending for an ambulance. Let the buzzards eat them.'"

'I'm gonna let it shine'

As the sun goes down, Boynton Robinson's living room grows as dark as a movie theater. More than half the film has played when we finally come to the point in which we see Hosea Williams and John Lewis standing at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, confronted by police.

Some people in the room played extras in the movie and recognize themselves. "Look, there's me," says one.

There, there is pin-drop silence.



Boynton Robinson, third from right, at an integration march in 1964.

EXPAND IMAGE

It is hard for me to watch a cinematic recreation of what happened that day. I cannot begin to imagine how it feels for Boynton Robinson. I cannot even ask her later. The question seems unnecessary. She has lived 50 years with those memories and the scars of that day.

Boynton Robinson was eventually taken to a hospital. She was told the tear gas had permanently damaged her esophagus. For many months, she was a specialist. Her voice became deeper, turning from lyric-soprano to mezzo-soprano.

As horrific as the experience was, Boynton Robinson says she was buoyed by Bloody Sunday and everything that came after: a successful march to Montgomery and later that year in August, President Lyndon B. Johnson's signing of the Voting Rights Act into law. She was there at the White House on that historic day with King.

"I realized what it meant to sing and really feel, 'Oh freedom, over me; and before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free,'" she writes in her book.

More than two hours have gone by, and "Selma's" ending credits roll to music of the movement.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine

Boynton Robinson mouths the lyrics. The entire room is singing out loud.

Now, I, too, feel the need to reach for a tissue.

After the lights go back on, I ask Boynton Robinson what she thinks of Lorraine Toussaint's portrayal.

"It was good," she says. "The movie is fantastic."

Another century

Boynton Robinson has attended numerous Bloody Sunday events and commemorative marches, though her health may prevent her from attending the 50th anniversary this March.

Boynton Robinson and others cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday in 2005.

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Almost 20 years ago, her friend Leon Frazier, a former police chief, arranged for white law enforcement officers to come meet her at her house. Frazier tells me he could not let Boynton Robinson go to her death without her reconciling with people she associated with her brutalization. That day, she came out of her bedroom to face again a sea of police like she did on Bloody Sunday. Only this time, they had a conversation, a cordial one.

Sheriff Jim Clark was not among the law enforcement officers who came to speak with her. But when he died in June 2007, Boynton Robinson attended his funeral. She wanted to

prove to people that she held no malice in her heart, even though, just as at the time, Clark was "almost an inhuman man." Even some segregationists had changed.

"He was supposed to have been so popular," she tells me, "but there were only 80 people at his funeral."

She also went to his funeral to keep with her Christian faith, which has guided her through her life journey. Do good unto others, she believes. Forgive.

"I was brought up by people who loved others," she says. "I love people. We had no animosity. We had no feeling that we hate anyone."

And there was yet another factor. People are not born racists, she says. They are trained to become that way. That's what happened to the white people she confronted in Alabama 50 years ago.

She believes she has lived so long because God intended it that way. That she is not through talking to young people and setting them on the right track. Until a few years ago, she was still standing on her feet giving speeches.

America, she says, has made great strides. She beams at the fact that a black man serves as her president and is considered the most powerful man on Earth. A framed photograph of Barack Obama hangs on her wall, as does a letter from him expressing warm wishes for her 103rd birthday.

But this nation still has a long way to go in dealing with race, she says.

She's been keeping up with the news of the past few months — Michael Brown's killing in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner's in New York; Tamir Rice's in Cleveland. They take her back to a time she knew before, back to Jim Crow.

She says a whole new generation has been stirred by these cases of police killings. She hopes young people will pick up the reins of a struggle her generation launched.

Al her life, she has been extremely proud of her roots, of African and Native slaves. Cherokee Indians and Europeans. But if you ask her about her race, she is apt to answer like this: "I am a member of the human race."

She wants, more than anything, for Americans to see each other not for the color of their skin but for the people who they are. Maybe, she tells me, it will take another 100 years before that happens.

She will turn 104 in August. She knows she will not be around to see the day she describes and hopes America's black youth will sign for a long haul. That there will be many more pivotal moments in black history. Many more Selmas.

Because, she says, pulling me close: "You can never know where you are going unless you know where you have been."