

As an event, despite the immense media coverage, the recent demonstrations in Georgia carried all the significance of one-hand clapping.

Whatever their claim, the estimated 20,000 marchers accomplished nothing for civil rights. Instead, they may have frittered away some of that moral base which provides the true strength in any struggle against bigotry.

No county in the nation may have a worst history in treating minorities than Forsyth County, Ga. In a single terrible night, on the eve of World War I, every black man, woman and child was ordered out under threat of the lynch rope and the arsonist's torch. Their lands and homes were bought up at confiscatory rates.

In the seven decades that followed Forsyth County remained "lily white." However, until recent years, nobody in this country, including its neighbors, gave a tinker's dam for Forsyth; it was hell's back-acre: desolate farms and towns coming apart with empty storefronts and abandoned buildings.

Despite its treatment of his people, the county wasn't worth one minute of Martin Luther King Jr.'s time, not that anyone has discovered. During the mighty civil rights struggle 20 years ago Forsyth didn't earn a footnote.

Maybe not by coincidence, the sweeping changes brought to the south by Dr. King were accompanied by Atlanta's transformation into a sprawling metropolis, the economic center for the entire southeastern United States. The sprawl and the economic growth leaked into next-door Forsyth County, principally in the form of a reservoir which became a recreational area.

Because of distance and bad county roads, only recently did developers start eyeing Cumming, the county seat, as a place for future housing; it had not become a commuters' community, not yet. On the other hand, a few Atlanta families bought and fixed up old houses; they accepted the long drive to their offices for the value they found in real estate and living in a rural area. None of the newcomers was black; but there have been no reports that whites refused to sell to blacks in recent years.

Why did no black try to move back into Forsyth County? Certainly, the imposing array of federal fair housing laws would have come into play if any minority would have been refused the right to purchase real estate; Georgia has similar laws on the books.

No record came to light in the recent reporting that indicated any effort to integrate Forsyth County peacefully, before the demonstrations. The impression was created that a group of Atlantans decided one day to create a ruckus by marching on Cumming. To guarantee a maximum of noise, they banged the media drums hard as they were able.

The game was won before it began that first Sunday demonstration. Publicity brought racist bigots swarming into Forsyth County from miles and miles around; the bedsheet brigade had

a field day. Every rock and fist delighted the march organizers; it proved they were right. Sweet were the wounds they carried away that day, but not nearly so juicy as the harvest the following week.

Multitudes descended upon Atlanta the next Sunday, more than followed Moses out of Egypt. Estimates said 20,000, including reporters from every corner of the globe. So many, not everyone could be accommodated on the hired buses; some had to be left behind. Places were found for the media, of course.

When they reached the outskirts of Cumming, they were greeted by rows of state police and ranks of national guard soldiers, backed up by Georgia and federal officials. Among the goodly crowd of spectators were an obliging number of those willing to grab for glory by performing racist rituals for the cameras, submitting to arrest for the ceremony. TV shows had hard news that night, always difficult to come by on Sunday.

Brushed aside in the publicity were statements and protests by county leaders. They denied none of Forsyth's terrible past, but allowed as how they were willing to change with the times. They wanted a chance to prove they were not their grandfathers, so to speak.

So the very next week the marches' black leaders brought their spouses and a few friends and sang hymns in Cumming's white churches. Nobody denied a splendid Sabbath was had by all. No reporter asked why the blacks had not tried to attend services, or if they had, before whistling up their first demonstration for the media. That question may have constituted bad manners if thrown at Christian men and women on that particular Sunday.

At any rate, the Forsyth County saga is not finished, not by any means. There's talk of suing for compensation for crimes committed against blacks in the county over 70 years ago. That sounds fair. The chief question in my mind is who should pay?

Injustices perpetrated against blacks and other minorities were not limited to that one county in the first part of this century. Forsyth's terrible night preceded by only one year the federal government installing segregation as official policy in 1913. No state in this nation was immune from the virus of race hate occasioned by the mass migrations of blacks from farms for the first time since the Civil War period.

The stains of past sins must be wiped out. But laws and the example set by Dr. King show the way. In courts and in our churches lies the answer. Street confrontations serve chiefly to excite that fear which underlies all bigotry. In their claim upon support from all decent Americans, today's civil rights leaders must exercise with prudence the power they enjoy from this nation's willing majority.

Recent events in Forsyth County, Ga., reflect credit on no one, but prove again the cliché that two wrongs do not make a single right.

## Roy Meachum

# Marching in Georgia

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