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Documentary marks 50th anniversary of March on Washington

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Aug. 26, 2013 NCR Today

"The March"
9 p.m. EST Tuesday on PBS. Check local listings.

Watch The March - PREVIEW [1] on PBS. See more from The March. [2]

Almost every American above the age of 6 knows who Martin Luther King Jr. was because his name is attached to a federal holiday. No school and for some, no work. We learn, or we know, that because of what he and a group of courageous colleagues and collaborators organized in Washington, D.C., 50 years ago, the American South was legally desegregated in 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act.

In this new documentary on PBS, I learned a lot more about the March on Washington, even though I remember when it happened. A few examples:

The march came about because of the rise in violence in the South, especially in Birmingham, Ala. Random bombings of African-American homes were so frequent that the city was called "Bombingham" in the black community.

The idea for the march, specifically in Washington, came from A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979), the respected president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who convinced President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 to ban discrimination during World War II in defense industries. Randolph knew the only way to effect change was to direct their cause to the president.

The march had two goals: to arouse the consciousness of the nation about the economic plight of African-Americans 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and to propose to President John F. Kennedy a civil rights bill. To put it succinctly: jobs and freedom.

The march occurred a few months after the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves.

The march was carefully planned and organized to be a nonviolent demonstration at the congressional building, but the Kennedy administration was so nervous the organizers changed it.

Kennedy and his brother, Robert Kennedy, were reluctant about the march and tried to talk the organizers out of it because they feared violence. They worried that if violence occurred, it would ruin chances for civil rights legislation. Federal troops were called in to prepare for that eventuality, but it never happened.

The march was needed because the Kennedy administration, which began with such hope and freedom, had become, according to King, "terminally hesitant" and characterized by an "anemic democracy."

Actor Burt Lancaster and a group of Hollywood actors led by Charlton Heston and including Sidney Poitier,

Harry Belafonte, James Gardner and Paul Newman brought a petition signed by 1,500 actors to the march. California studios halted shooting for the day.

Then-Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle of Washington, D.C., threatened not to give the invocation for the march if the speech set to be delivered by now-Congressman John Lewis, then head of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was not modified. It was, and Boyle led the prayer.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech was recorded and broadcast in its entirety on television.

For the Kennedy administration to agree to the march, organizers had to promise two things: The march would be under the control of established organizations (proved controversial) and it would be over in one day and everyone would be out of town by sunset (they were; it was finished in 10 hours).

Roger Mudd, a Peabody Award-winning broadcast journalist, covered the march for CBS, and he was so nervous about what might happen that day that he threw up in some bushes.

"The March" sets out to honor the memory of the March on Washington, and it does so in a clear fashion. It brings viewers back in time through news footage and new interviews with historians and Lewis and other organizers. The documentary includes footage of many events, including the bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955; the Freedom Riders; and Eugene "Bull" Connor, then Birmingham's commissioner of public safety, who decided to turn fire hoses and release attack dogs on peaceful demonstrators. People across the country were horrified by what they saw on television, turning the tide of public opinion toward civil rights.

Denzel Washington narrates. Robert Redford, an executive producer, writes in the press notes: "The story of people who suffered profound injustice in America and fought it with sacrifice and courage is something we should never forget. I hope the generations who see this film will be inspired by it."

With the huge success of recent films -- like "Lee Daniels' The Butler," inspired by the stories of the White House butler from the late '50s through the election of President Barack Obama in 2008; the 2011 film "The Help," based on a novel about black servants in Jackson, Miss., in the early 1960s; the 2012 film "Lincoln"; and the upcoming Walden Family Theater production, "The Watsons Go to Birmingham," commemorating the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church a mere two weeks after the March on Washington -- we as Americans have the opportunity to revisit racism and civil rights in our country.

Although Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech is not featured in its entirety in the film, we get the background of the "I have a Dream" portion. Singer Mahalia Jackson was standing near King during the speech, and as it ended, she told him, "Tell them about the dream." I found this part of the film deeply moving.

After the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin in Florida and the acquittal of George Zimmerman earlier this year, we know Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream has yet to be fulfilled and race is still as issue in the United States. May this documentary inspire Americans today and tomorrow to respect and honor one another, to find a path to citizenship for the undocumented among us, to prefer nonviolence above all other means to resolve problems, and to put people first in the United States and throughout the world.

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