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WRITINGS

BOOK REVIEW "BLACK IN SELMA"

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That Sunday In Selma

BLACK IN SELMA
The Uncommon Life of J.L. Chestnut Jr.
By J.L. Chestnut Jr. and Julia Cass
Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 432 pages;
\$22.95

REVIEWED BY ROBERT L. ALLEN

In the annals of the Civil Rights movement, the name Selma, Ala., is synonymous with unbridled police brutality against nonviolent demonstrators.

"Bloody Sunday" — March 7, 1965 — is remembered as the day a few hundred black people tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma and walk to Montgomery, the state capital, to petition Governor George Wallace for the right to vote.

Almost immediately, the marchers were attacked by state troopers and a mounted posse led by Sheriff Jim Clark. Teargassed, then beaten bloody by white men wielding nightsticks, the unarmed demonstrators were charged time and again by the troopers and posse. Hours later, the nation watched in horror as the savage attack was replayed on television news programs.

One of those present that day was J.L. Chestnut Jr., a black attorney — in fact, the only black attorney living and working in Selma. For Chestnut, as he writes in "Black in Selma," it was an appalling sight but not a surprise; he had seen Sheriff Clark's posse attack demonstrators before.

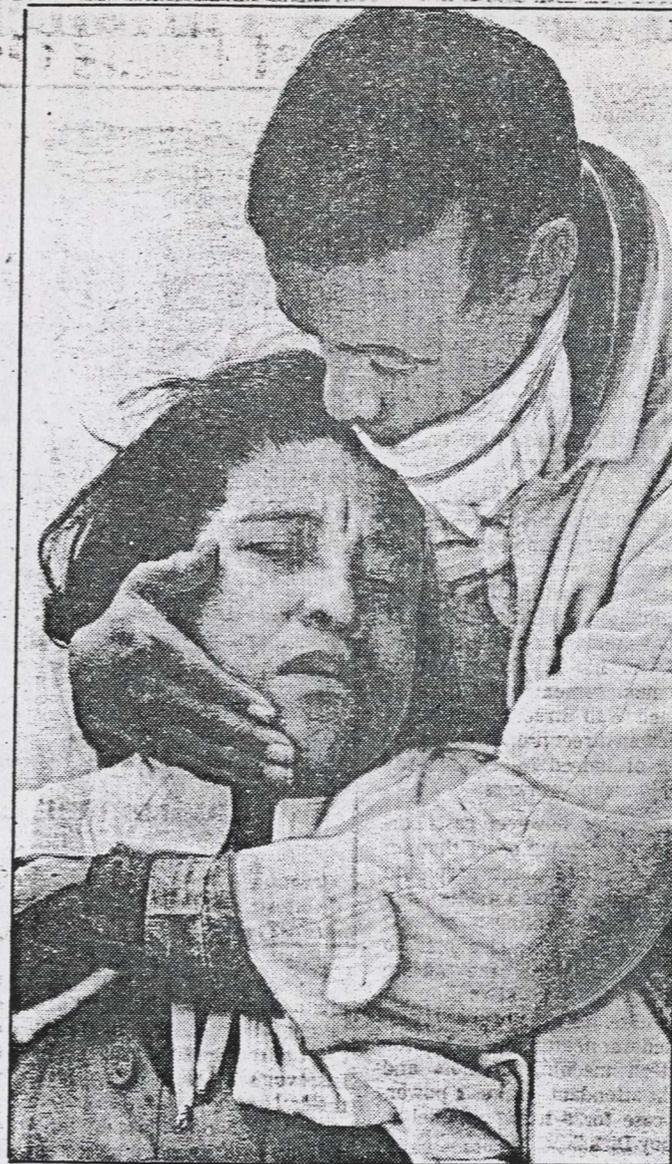
Then 34 and a native of Selma, Chestnut had returned to his hometown after studying law at Howard University in the 1950s, he writes. He had thought that through litigation, persuasion and peaceful demonstrations, the South could be prodded to

change. On Bloody Sunday, he says, he abandoned all hope.

In this candid and thoroughly engrossing autobiography, Chestnut presents an insider's view of racial politics in Selma. He describes his rise from small-time gambler and showman to civil rights lawyer and powerful leader in Alabama politics. But this book is as much a portrait of a community — really two communities in unstable equilibrium — as it is story of one man's life. As the sole black lawyer in Selma, Chestnut enjoyed unique access to the black and white elite. He looks at them and at ordinary citizens with compassion but without sentimentality.

He describes Claude Brown, a well-meaning but fundamentally accommodationist black minister who was bewildered by the upsurge of civil rights activities in a previously quiescent black community. John F. Shields, Chestnut's mentor and high school civics teacher, is portrayed as a solitary, proud man, a prophet in the Southern wilderness who influenced few except the occasional student. Shields believed the old (plantation) South must end and urged Chestnut to study law and learn to fight the "evil damn system."

Chestnut describes Marie Foster, a tireless organizer for voting rights who taught citizenship classes to local blacks. It was a measure of her indomitable spirit, he says, that despite "failing" the rigged voter registration test for almost 10 years, she urged others to fight for the right to vote. James A. Hare, a white circuit court judge and Southern blue-blood, is shown here fighting bitterly to maintain segregation at any cost yet continuing a



Teargas victims during 'Bloody Sunday' in March 1965

Luther King Jr., Jackson, Walter Mondale, James Baldwin and other national figures, but the strength of his book lies in its acute observations of the local political scene — a scene repeated in dozens of small towns across the South.

Chestnut is no less frank in looking at himself. While he makes clear his commitment to the black community, he is honest enough to show himself defending a wealthy, notorious racist who was accused of shooting a working-class white man he caught looking for deer on his land. Chestnut admits he took the case for the money and the credibility it would win for his law firm in the white community.

He also admits that his law practice and politicking left little time for his wife and family, and that he nearly lost one of his sons to a life of crime because of this neglect. Excessive drinking clouded his life and judgment for many years until he finally gave up alcohol.

"Black in Selma" is a refreshing book that depicts a dedicated but flawed man who strives to lift his community and himself out of the pit dug by segregation.

Neither saint nor devil, J.L. Chestnut gives a vividly human face to the men and the women of Selma — white as well as black — whose struggles, hopes, contradictions, optimism, cynicism and general thrashing about helped shape today's South. ■

Robert L. Allen, a Southerner by birth and upbringing, is author of 'The Port Chicago Mutiny.'

peculiarly Southern, ultimately patronizing "friendship" with Chestnut, who valued the relationship and used it to learn of the whites' plans.

Chestnut also portrays the infamous Clark, county sheriff, as lower class and rabidly racist. A point man for the Southern establishment, Clark became dispensable, Chestnut says, as civil rights laws were changed. Repre-

senting the white South in the era of change was Selma Mayor Joe Smitherman, Chestnut writes. Described as the ultimate political opportunist and manipulator, Smitherman is seen hobnobbing with remnants of the racist White Citizens' Council one day and glibly welcoming Jesse Jackson into Selma the next.

Chestnut records fascinating encounters with the Rev. Martin