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It was a sad but memorable day

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It was an unforgettable day for Berdine Erickson — a sad day, but one that will linger in his memory.

Fears had been expressed for his safety. His wife, children, relatives and friends warned him he was walking into a very dangerous situation.

"Why risk it?" they asked. "What will you accomplish?"

But Berdine, a religious, sensitive man imbued with a deep compassion for all races and especially for underdogs, wasn't about to be turned away from a mission he deemed important. He would march in a city on which the eyes of the nation were focused that April day nearly 19 years ago. Not a stroll in a Memphis park. Or a tour of the business section. He would be one of the few white people mixed in with thousands of blacks marching through streets lined with hostile spectators. Armed police and National Guardsmen were standing atop stores and along the parade route to prevent violence.

It was a misty morning. A heavy fog had descended upon the city. By the tens of thousands, blacks from all parts of

the country, but mostly from the Deep South, had converged on Memphis. Four days earlier their leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., had been assassinated while standing on the balcony of a Memphis motel.

"This was to be a memorial march," Berdine said. "At the time I was co-director of industrial therapy at Rochester State Hospital." Later he became the ombudsman for the now-defunct institution.

Responding to urging by officials of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Erickson represented the Minnesota AFL Council in the parade. He had prepared a double placard — a sandwich board — to carry as he walked the 2½-hour route.

"I wore a green button which identified me as being a marcher," he recalled the other day. "At the airport I was met by a black man who took me to my hotel."

Memphis was in a siege mentality that week. It was then a city of about a half million people, with about 40 percent being blacks. Two months earlier, 1,375 men, mostly sanitation workers but also other employees of the Department of Public Works, went on strike. Black workers felt they were being discriminated against by the city and cited being sent home when it began raining. This resulted in pay for only two hours. However, white workers were told to stay on the job and received a full day's pay.

Town & country scene



Local 1733 of sanitation workers was all black. It had no official status, and the Memphis mayor insisted he would never sign a contract making it legal. The strike, however, was merely a symptom of the city's major problem.

In the meantime, garbage was piling up after the strike took effect. It became a festering sore. Ministers called for boycotts of white stores. White people stayed away from the downtown area for fear of trouble. The streets were empty and stores were virtually devoid of customers the next week.

"Dr. King came to Memphis to see if he could resolve the troubled situation," Berdine said. "He was gunned down before he could go into action."

The march in King's memory took place on April 8, 1968.

"I carried an umbrella because of the misty rain," Berdine said. "I had to leave it behind because of an agreement with the police that the strikers would not carry anything that could be used as a weapon. We walked

eight abreast but not in a straight line, sort of weaving back and forth like a huge ribbon."

Tall and fair complected, Berdine stood out from the others in his section.

About 30,000 people took part in the march. They came from all walks of life and included Rosa Parks, the black housemaid whose aching feet started the bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala., 12 years earlier.

Berdine describes the spectators as orderly but unsympathetic. On the return march from Memphis City Hall, where a memorial service was held for Dr. King, he heard somebody saying, "The poor, misguided people." That was one of the kinder remarks.

For the Rochester man, the scene was unbelievable. He remembers National Guard troops lining the parade route, guarding the fronts of business places and perched on rooftops with weapons at the "ready."

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is Monday. On Sunday at 5 p.m., a memorial service in honor of the fallen black hero will be held at Rochester Community Baptist Church in the southeast section of the city. King would have been 58 this month, and to mark the second observance of the national holiday in his memory, the Federal Holiday Commission is urging Americans to observe his birthday "with the compassion, caring and activism that marked Dr. King's life."



Erickson