



Annie Lee Cooper

Today I turn a hundred years old. A hundred. Y'all believe that? My Momma lived to be a hundred-and-six years old though, so maybe I shouldn't be surprised. But Lord am I proud and grateful to be alive after all these years.

Now, I've seen amany things in my lifetime, and that is what i'm here to tell y'all about today.

Now I ain't gonna sit here and lecture you about all the laws and what not, because let's be honest, nobody wants to hear that. *laughs* But, imma tell y'all a story instead... My Story.

Ya see, My name is Annie Lee Cooper, and I was born on June 2nd, 1910 in Selma, Alabama. When I was little, back when I was bout, this tall *Motions to ground* I was livin in Selma, Alabama. I was one of 10 children. You believe that? Boy it was crazy, but it was also a lot of fun, and there was plenty of love to go around in our household. Mama and Daddy kept a firm hold on all of us, they made sure to raise us strong and proud of who we were.

I dropped out of school when I was in 7th grade. Im not too proud of that, so don't drop out of school. But, I also don't regret that, because after I dropped out, I went to move with my older sister in Kentucky. Kentucky was good. I was able to register to vote in Kentucky. In fact, I was registered in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, **AND** Ohio. I was able to vote for what I wanted for my future..

Then mama got sick, and I returned to Selma in 1962 to take care of her. Now, ya see when I returned, I thought I'd be able to register to vote, just like I'd done in 3 previous states. So there I go, mindin my own business up to the Court House. They gave me my applications, and I filled

out every question they had on it. And they was all right. I had memorized these questions and the answers, but when I took my applications back to the clerk, he looked at me with a scowl and says 'Nothing ain't right till I say it is!' Boy, did I have to bite my tongue. I knew they was right. And I knew that he'd do anything he could to make sure something'd be wrong.

Sure enough, he started asking me questions that wasn't even on the applications. Questions im sure most of y'all don't know. Now lemme ask you, Can any of you's recite the preamble of our constitution? *wait for someone to raise hand* Anybody?

"We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the generate welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish the Constitution for the United States of America."

Can you believe that? Little ole me reciting the preamble of our constitution... These were the absurd questions they'd ask us after doing the literacy tests, just so they would deny our applications. As if that wasn't bad enough, places also charged poll taxes. I was denied, went back home, studied and memorized some more, and was determined to return..

Thats when Dr.King came to town, and my my was he a mighty man. I remember that first march we took with Dr.King, the members of the SCLC and SNCC were with us too. We made our way to the county courthouse, and there standing in front of the doors was sheriff Jim Clark, and his men, with their batons in hand, and smug looks on their faces.

Soon as we got there, we all got down on our knees, put our hands over our heads, and only Dr.King and the members of the SCLC and SNCC stayed standing. We were silent, but not Dr.King. He says 'We just came here to register to vote.' Then the sheriff said 'Now yall know yall can't do that, so go on back.' Dr.King clenched his jaw, my knees were getting tired, but I wasn't bout to fall or stand, I was gonna stay with my people. King said 'It is our constitutional right to be able to vote, in fact, in the state of Alabama, we poses that right sir.' In fact, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States prohibits federal or state governments from infringing on a citizen's right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. But Sheriff Jim Clark wasn't tryna hear it. He began making his way down the Courthouses front steps, and had his billy club in hand.. Before anyone could react, he started pushing people and beaten em down, telling us to get off his street. As he was making his way towards the back, he pushed old Mr Lee Jackson down, even after Jimmie had told him that he had bad knees and couldn't sit.. The Sheriff wasn't try a hear that, so he says to Jimmie, 'Get out my way boy!' But ha see, Jimmie was young, and wasn't thinkin straight, so he just shoved the sheriff.

I saw that sheriff place his hands on his gun in its holster, and I was afraid. But lemme tell you, that fear did not stop me, no sir. I got up, and BAM, gave that sheriff a good right hook to the jaw. He didn't see it coming, and it knocked him down! Lord, God forgive me but that man deserved it, and I ain't exactly sorry bout it either.

After the Sheriff got up, he tried to hold me down but I wasn't goin, it took him and 3 other officers to hold me down, and at that, they had to handcuff me TWICE. But I was tired and angry, so I kept resisting.

They took me down to jail and that was a whole nother issue! It was hot, cramped and just smelled awful.. But I prayed. Yes I did. I prayed for Jimmie Lee. I prayed for Dr.King and the rest of the people who marched, and I prayed for myself.

Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot February 18th, while trying to protect his Mama from being beaten by a state trooper after they'd participated in a night March, he died 8 days later...

But that wasn't the end of it, You see, few weeks later, on March 7th, other wise known as 'Bloody Sunday', Hosea Williams from the SCLC, and John Lewis from SNCC led the first attempted March from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. We made our way through Selma, and across the end of the Pettus bridge, but waiting on the other side was the state troopers and local lawmen.

They look at us and says 'Y'all got two minutes to turn around and disperse.' Two minutes.. Students can even get out a classroom and out the building for a fire alarm with two minutes. And here these men were, with they guns and they clubs and mean looks on their faces and they gonna give 600 people TWO minutes..? John Lewis asked to speak to major Jim Clark, and major John Cloud said they're wasn't nothin to speak about, and within 30 seconds, he commanded his men to advance, and I remember seeing them putting on those treacherous masks and thinking to myself 'Am I about to die? Is this how Ima go..?'

Before I could even snap out of my thoughts, a big cloud a tear gas swept over the crowd and I just heard screams. It got hard to see or breathe, but I could hear and feel everything happening around me.

I could hear the shouts of the lawmen, and the noise of their horses running through the crowds. Then I felt they hands on me, and one of em hit me in the back of my head with a club, then another hit me on my face and I fell. The rest of it seems like a blur...

I looked to my right and I saw my fellow neighbors, my people being beat, crying, bleeding.. It pains me now, even after 45 years, the wounds feel fresh. I wake at night sometimes when the events seem to find their way back into my mind...

That Sunday was hard, but it was not the worst. The worst part of everything that happened was having to live day after wretched day being treated as if I was nothin. As if my people weren't nothing and we weren't ever gonna be nothing...

But 3 weeks after Bloody Sunday, on March 25th, I was there alongside Martin Luther King, and Thousands of people to Montgomery, and I cried. Yes sir, they'd finally cracked little ole Annie Lee Cooper. But I was proud to cry, and I will gladly admit to crying, for on that day I didn't cry tears of pain or sadness, but tears of hope. I was finally starting to see that this world was gonna change and my people were gonna change it..

But lemme tell you, it ain't over... It ain't over, but I'm so glad and thankful to be able to say that I lived to see it beginning to change for the better, and I hope that yall get to see this war end... I have hope, for you and your futures, and I hope that after coming here today, I have enstilled a bit of that hope in yourselves.

Thank you.