

Jottings: A lasting regret

Pat Perkins

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Jeannie and I decided at the last minute not to climb aboard a bus or train, one of the two or three major regrets in my life.

When did Jeannie and I begin to think that it was too hot to go? On Aug. 17 when the Long Island temperature was 77 F? Certainly not on the 26th when it registered a pleasant 73. It must have been Washington, D.C.'s temperature on Aug. 27 — 81.3. For decades afterward I believed that it was the high, unbearable heat that kept us from boarding on buses at the New York Port Authority or Penn Station, joining thousands of fellow pilgrims from Milwaukee, Little Rock, Birmingham and Boston for the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.



COURTESY PHOTO - Perkins

Wednesday, Aug. 28, 1963 — the landmark day when Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech that a poll of 1,999 scholars ranked as the top American speech of the 20th century. Sixty-thousand white Americans joined the mainly Black supporters in this defining moment of the American civil rights movement.

Jeannie and I decided at the last minute not to climb aboard a bus or train, one of the two or three major regrets in my life. I cannot remember what the other two are, but we were not there.

I loathe hot weather, preferring instead to have icicles hang from my nose. Either that or nothing above 72. But 81.3 isn't exactly a major heat wave.

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The next day journalists cited that the 250,000 civil rights supporters undoubtedly contributed to the feeling of extreme confinement and exhaustion. Some recall the day as one of the hottest in their lives; others, that it was a mild summer day. Hundreds cooled off their feet in the Reflecting Pool. But Jeannie and I were not there.

We missed not only the speech heard around the world, broadcast live via radio and television but also spotting celebrities — Mahalia Jackson; Josephine Baker who flew in from Paris; Peter, Paul and Mary; Rosa Parks; Joan Baez; Bob Dylan; Diahann Carroll; James Baldwin; Sidney Poitier;

Burt Lancaster and Charlton Heston. Charlton Heston? Yes, Charlton Heston! And Marlon Brando holding up a cattle prod from Gadsden, Alabama as a sign of segregation hatred. We could have been contenders! But Jeannie and I were not there.

Addendum: It was a pleasant summer day in New York on Aug. 28, 1963, when Manhattan police wrongly accused George Whitmore, Jr., an African American, of a double homicide known as the Wylie-Hoffert Career Girl Murders. Whitmore's treatment by authorities was cited as an example that led the U.S. Supreme Court to issue the guidelines known as the Miranda rights. The Court called Mr. Whitmore's case "the most conspicuous example" of police coercion in the country when it issued its 1966 ruling to establish a set of protections for suspects including the right to remain silent.

Pat Perkins is a member of Jottings group at the Lake Oswego Adult Center.