

Beaver County Times Column by J.D. Prose March 07, 2011

As a history buff, U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire has read about the struggle for civil rights in 1960s Alabama, but visiting historical sites and marching in Selma with those who were there 46 years ago put events in a whole new light.

"It's just a huge difference in the understanding of that," said Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township, who spent the weekend in Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, at the invitation of U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga.

Lewis is a civil rights icon who led the March 7, 1965, "Bloody Sunday" march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. "He was almost killed. They cracked his skull and almost killed him," said Altmire, who described Lewis as "a legend."

The "they" Altmire was referring to were Alabama state troopers, who attacked the peaceful marchers headed for Montgomery, beating them with nightsticks, shooting tear gas and charging them on horses.

Televised images of the day horrified many Americans, galvanized civil rights supporters and spurred President Lyndon B. Johnson to champion the Voting Rights Act.

Altmire, a 43-year-old Lower Burrell native, said exhibits on murders and Jim Crow signs left him stunned that blacks were fighting for their civil rights just two generations ago.

"It's amazing that it's so recent," said Altmire, who took his wife and two children along on the trip. "I wanted my kids to be with me to witness it and have that experience," he said.

Coincidentally, Altmire met Geneva College associate professor of communications Todd Allen,

a Beaver Falls resident, in Selma.

Allen, who organizes an annual bus tour of civil rights sites, happened to be in Montgomery for a conference. He saw a newspaper photo with Altmire in the background and decided to look for him at the Selma march.

"As time is passing on, the veterans of that struggle are becoming fewer and fewer in number," Allen said. "It's important to pause, take time and reflect on what the civil rights movement has meant."

It was good to see youngsters such as Altmire's children at the event, Allen said, because young Americans, high school and college students, were very much involved in the protests.

"This is not ancient history," he said.

Allen said the genesis of the Alabama events was voting rights and people today should remember that when they take those rights for granted.

"Everyone," Allen said, "owes it to themselves to come to Selma and march across that bridge and remind themselves what it means to be a citizen."