

The forgotten fifth girl: a story of the 16th street church bombing

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In the year of 1963, Sarah Jean Collins was just a twelve-year-old girl who lived in Birmingham, Alabama. She lived in her crowded, but happy home with her parents, Julius and Alice, and her six siblings, never imagining of the tragedy which would forever change her life. After all, she had such a bright future ahead of her.

This straight-A student dreamed of going to college, becoming a nurse, and seeing all of her siblings one day starting a family of their own. Yet an act of hatred changed the course of history. Having grown up in Birmingham- known for being one of the most segregated and racially discriminatory cities in the United States- violence was no stranger to Sarah Jean. It was a regular occurrence to hear the murders of local black citizens; whether they were part of a civil rights protest or riding the handlebars of their brother's bicycle (as such was the case of thirteen year old Virgil Ware, who was shot in the face and chest by an Eagle Scout leaving a segregationist rally). And perhaps the deaths of those like Virgil Ware would have been forgotten in history if it was not for five little girls chatting in a church basement's bathroom.

To this day, the black Baptist Church in Birmingham still sits on the intersection of 16th and 6th Street. Being the first and largest black church in Birmingham, it served as a hub for political rallies on a local and national level, which hosted various civil rights leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was a hub for the African American community and a sanctuary from the violence of the outside world. That is, until September 15th, 1963.

Due to the church's close ties to the Civil Rights Movement, it had received several calls threatening bombings. Unfortunately, when these threats came

with no action, there wasn't much to do except ignore them. After all, the authorities were never any help; and Birmingham had had so many racially motivated explosions and cross burnings since the 1940's, the city had been dubbed "Bombingham". The only call that came that morning was picked up by fourteen year old Carol McKinstry, the Sunday School secretary, who was picking up reports in the church's office. As the phone began to chime, she picked it up only to hear a male caller say into the phone "three minutes", before hanging up on her.

She picked up the rest of her papers, making it only a few steps down the hall before being hurled down to the floor in an explosion at 10:22 am. Of the two hundred parishioners in attendance at the church, 23 were seriously injured and four little girls were killed. That day, Sarah Jean Collins lost her big sister in the blast, as she was burned and blinded by shards of glass flying into her eyes. They were in the women's restroom in the church basement, absentmindedly combing their hair and chatting about the upcoming events that morning. McKinstry, having passed the girls a few minutes before going upstairs to the office recalled, "We were all good friends, and we were excited about two things that Sunday.

It was Youth Sunday, and that meant we got to do everything. We were the choir. We were the ushers, the speakers. The second thing was, after church we were going to have a gathering with punch and dancing." In an interview with Democracy Now!, fifty years after the explosion, Sarah Jean Collins relates the final moments with her sister, Addie Mae. "I was in the ladies' lounge when the bomb went off.

You know, I remember Cynthia, Denise and Carole walking inside the lounge area and went in where the stalls was. So when they came out, Denise passed by Addie and asked my sister to tie the sash on her dress. And I was across from them at the sink. And when Denise asked her to tie the sash, and I was looking at her when she began to tie it, and then all of a sudden, boom! I never did see her finish it, finish tying it. So, all I could do was say, call out, ' Jesus!' because I didn't know what that loud sound was.

And then I called my sister, ' Addie! Addie! Addie!' And she didn't answer me." Bloody and lying amongst the rubble of the church walls, projectiles of glass sticking out of her body, Sarah Jean heard the voice of her sister, Janie. She asked her sister where Addie was, since she never her respond as she called out her name. Janie simply said that Addie had hurt her back, and would see Sarah Jean in the morning. This was only to keep her little sister calm, as it was discovered that in an entanglement of limbs, her sister Addie Mae Collins, as well as her three friends, all died on impact.

Sarah Jean Collins would spend two and a half months following the attack at Hillman Hospital recovering from her injuries. Doctors operated on her, attempting to remove the glass from her eyes, chest, and stomach; but due health concerns about removing some of the small shards, her doctors were forced to leave some pieces of glass embedded in her eyes. Collins recalled, " when they took the bandages off my eyes, the doctor asked me what do I see out of my right eye. I told him I couldn't see anything out of my right eye. And when he took it off my left eye, all I could see was just a little light."

The explosion left her permanently blind in her right eye, with only seventy percent of her vision in her left.

The trauma of her injuries, and the brutal death of her sister resulted in post-traumatic stress disorder. After leaving the infirmary, sporting a poorly fitted glass eye which fell out too easily, Sarah Jean was teased at school, her grades started to drop due to memory issues, and never went on to attend college so she could escape the ridicule of her peers. After the explosion, Robert Chambliss- a member of the Ku Klux Klan- was brought on trial for the murder of the four girls killed in the bombing. Although a witness identified Chambliss as the white man getting out of a turquoise Chevrolet and placing a suspicious box under the church's steps, it was found that there was not enough evidence to prove his involvement in the murder beyond a reasonable doubt. On October 8th, 1963 Chambliss was found not guilty of murder and received a hundred-dollar fine and a six-month jail sentence for possessing the fifteen sticks of dynamite.

It would not be for another fourteen years before the Birmingham girls would begin to see justice. Following the bombing, the FBI opened an investigation which determined that four men affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan had participated in the deadly attack: Robert E. Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, Herman Frank Cash, and Thomas E. Blanton. Although the FBI had amassed several counts of evidence against the men, and motions were made to prosecute, the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, repeatedly shut down the movement for trial.

At last in 1971, Bill Baxley was elected attorney general of Alabama and requested the original FBI files on the case. He discovered that Hoover blocked testimony, and the FBI did not turn other evidence over to Jefferson County prosecutors and the organization had accumulated over 9,000 of FBI documents and surveillance audio tapes in evidence against Chambliss which had not been used in the original trial. On November 18, 1977, Robert Chambliss was tried, found guilty of murder, sentenced to life in prison at age 73. On October 29th, 1985, Chambliss died in prison without ever admitting to his role in the bombing. On May 17th, 2000, the FBI announced that the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing had been carried out by the Ku Klux Klan splinter group, the Cahaba Boys- referring to the first permanent capital of Alabama. The case was reopened once again for the trials of Thomas Blanton and Bobby Frank Cherry.

Blanton was convicted in 2001, and Cherry in 2002. A fourth suspect, Herman Frank Cash, died in 1994 before he could be tried. The Birmingham Baptist Church Bombing struck a nation with the unnecessary deaths of four little girls. Over 8,000 strangers of every color attended a joint funeral ceremony in honor of three of the four girls (since one family preferred a private ceremony). But the deaths of these girls did not go unnoticed.

Following the bombing came the march at Selma, Martin Luther King's famous Letter From Birmingham Jail and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. In the end, Sarah Jean has not been forgotten in history. We remember her in the church which still stands today on that street corner. We remember her as she carries on the life her sister, Addie Mae, never got to

live. We remember her like Bill Baxley did as he reopened the Birmingham Church case when he was under no obligation to do so.

We remember her in how such a great tragedy eventually helped make the world a better place. Although her story was once lost in the shadow of the four other girls who died that morning, Sarah Jean Collins will go on in history as the girl who lived.