

'Speak Truth' offers intimate look at the South in the '50s

All he wanted to do was buy a Boy Scout uniform for his stepson.

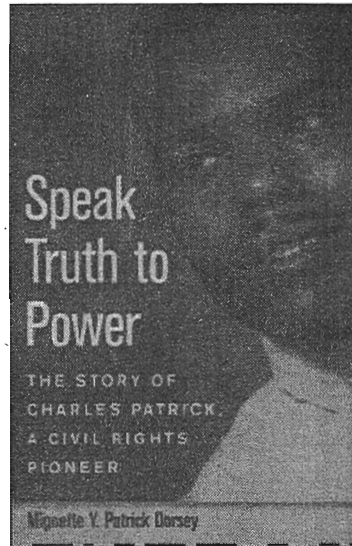
The year was 1954. The man was Charles Patrick, an African-American veteran of two wars. The place was Birmingham, Ala.

"Speak Truth to Power," by Mignette Y. Patrick Dorsey, is an intimate account by a daughter who would like to see wider acknowledgment given to the inadvertent contribution her father made to the civil rights movement. Dorsey's book chronicles the events that transpired after her father was unjustly beaten while in police custody in Birmingham.

The story begins on Saturday, Dec. 11, 1954. Thirty-six-year-old Charles Patrick was taking his stepson Carl, 12, to the Loveman, Joseph and Loeb department store in downtown Birmingham to buy a Boy Scout uniform. He had a difficult time finding a parking place that day, but eventually saw a man pulling out of a spot about a block from the store.

Just as the man pulled out, a white woman pulled into the parking place that Patrick had been waiting to occupy. Patrick got out of his car and approached the woman, informing her that he was there before her and deserved the recently vacated spot. The woman abruptly responded that she was taking the parking place because her husband was a policeman. After a brief exchange, Patrick drove off to find another place to park. Before getting back in his car, however, he apparently told the woman, "He doesn't own the streets of Birmingham."

The woman who took Patrick's parking place that day was Margaret Lynch, the wife of Arthur Lynch, a patrolman with the



"Speak Truth to Power: The Story of Charles Patrick, a Civil Rights Pioneer," by Mignette Y. Patrick Dorsey. Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 2010. 130 pages, \$16 (paperback).

Birmingham Police Department. Later that evening, Patrick was arrested in his home and charged with "vagrancy and disorderly conduct." He was taken to the Birmingham City Jail, where he was incarcerated in cell No. 4902.

Sometime after his arrival at the jail, Arthur Lynch and his partner, Jack Siniard, showed up and asked to see Patrick. They were allowed into the cell by Earl Jackson, the deputy warden. All three men were in their mid-30s at the time. They proceeded to beat Patrick severely for "sassing" Arthur's wife. Their intent was obviously "to teach him a lesson."

Jesse Smiley, one of Patrick's cellmates at the time of his incarceration, was very explicit in his recollection of what happened that night.

"The big policeman put his

foot right on Patrick's neck and kicked him in the head three or four times," Smiley testified. "He might have been bleeding inside, too, because his trousers were bloody."

The beating received extensive coverage in the Birmingham News, as well as the Birmingham Post-Herald, and was quickly picked up by the national media. Dorsey found the extent of the reporting unusual, especially for the time period.

"The Birmingham News took unprecedented stands throughout my father's trial," Dorsey observes. "Stands that included front-page coverage coupled with bold editorial positions.

"There is a force greater than abusive power: truth," she writes. "When Patrick spoke truth to power he became a point of convergence for two races. Many whites joined blacks in singing the same song, one that demanded justice for Patrick."

The public outcry against Patrick's treatment was swift and loud; the FBI began investigating the matter almost immediately. The majority of the book details the sequence of events that ensued, the reaction to those events and how the incident eventually affected the lives of everyone involved.

Dorsey centered "Speak Truth to Power" on a series of interviews with her father that took place over a seven-year period, beginning in 2002 when Patrick was 83 years old. These interviews were augmented by carefully researched newspaper accounts, official court records and conversations with others who were present at the time.

The primary appeal of the book is the personal narrative that Dorsey brings to the story of her father. She gives the world a glimpse of what the world was like in the South in the 1950s — and how it was changing. She writes with passion and emotion, and manages to evoke those feelings in the reader.

When you finish "Speak Truth to Power," you feel that you really know who Charles Patrick was and why he mattered.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.