

Freedom Rides

By Rebeca Boria

The Freedom Rides were rides that went from Maryland to New Orleans where the law was passed. There were two different buses that took the group to the places the riders traveled. The group of thirteen people was separated between those two buses. The ride was in the hands of C.O.R.E (Committee On Racial Equality) but the riders got scared so S.N.C.C(Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee)took over the operation. This is the story of what happened.

The Freedom Rides had an impact on U.S. history. The rides took place during the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was a time of rebellion and tragedy of black people. When the judges ruled that all interstate travel should be integrated, the Freedom Rides helped enforce the law and not make it a law that comes in one ear and out the other.

James Farmer (one of the original freedom riders) said, "Why didn't the federal government enforce its law? We decided it was because of politics. If we were right in assuming that the federal government did not enforce federal law because of its fear of reprisals from the South, then what we had to do was to make it more dangerous politically for the federal government not to enforce federal law. And how would we do that? We decided the way to do it was to have an interracial group ride through the South." (Hampton, pg.7)

I agree with James Farmer's statement. The Government wouldn't help because they didn't want to deal with the south's rage of hatred. They probably didn't want the states to split again like in the Civil War.

The Freedom Rides were originally started by C.O.R.E. With the help of Gordon Carey and his friend Tom, who thought of the idea of the Freedom Ride, C.O.R.E. started to recruit and carefully screen people for the ride. 13 people (7 black & 6 white) were picked and trained to be non-violent. After the last training they went to dinner in Washington D.C. in a Chinese restaurant. "To me this meal was like the Last Supper, because you didn't know what to expect going on the Freedom Ride"(Hampton, pg.7), said John Lewis (an original freedom rider.) Then the C.O.R.E committee split the riders up for the Greyhound and Trailways bus.

The Freedom Ride started on May 4, 1961 from Washington D.C. and went until May 17, 1961 in New Orleans. The C.O.R.E. organization picked that date; May 17, 1961, because it was the seventh anniversary of the Supreme Court's Brown decision. The Brown decision is when the black people won the case to have integrated schools. A couple of days earlier, James Farmer sent out letters to the President of the United States, John Kennedy; the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy; the Director of the FBI, Mr. J. Edgar Hoover; and the Chairman of the Interstate Travel. He also sent letters to the presidents of Greyhound and Trailways. He sent those letters to tell those people the Freedom Riders were coming and needed protection of the FBI.

The Freedom riders went through parts of Virginia, with problems. The first problem was in Charlotte, North Carolina. One rider came off the bus and wanted

to get his shoeshine and a haircut in a 'white' barbershop. The rider was arrested and went to court but the jury threw out the case. So the riders went on. In Rock Hill, South Carolina, at the terminal, when the black people went into the 'white' waiting room, a group of young white men came and beat them up and left the riders unconscious outside the waiting room.

So far the Freedom Riders traveled from Rock Hill, South Carolina to Atlanta, Georgia. May 13 was the day that James Farmer left for his father's funeral. Then on May 14th the riders left for Birmingham. Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth telephoned the riders. He was informing them that the Klansmen had been preparing for their arrivals for weeks and to be careful. The riders didn't know that the K.K.K was coming to their bus two hours earlier.

While the Trailways bus was leaving Anniston, Klansmen boarded the Trailways bus and threw the black people into the back of the bus. James Peck and Walter Bergman came to the front to intercept their bodies. Instead they both got hit on the head, but Bergman got hit so bad he was paralyzed for life. The Klansmen told the driver to drive on. When they got to Birmingham, the riders saw 20 men with metal pipes waiting for them at the station.

The freedom riders tried to get to the waiting room but of course they couldn't make it. James Peck was left unconscious in an alleyway. When James came to he said, "I wonder whether I'm going to live or die." (Hampton, pg.76) Then he was knocked out again. When he woke up the second time his friend came to get him. Bergman, his friend, came and took him to the hospital. James got fifty-three stitches on his head. (The police weren't there because it was mother's day so they went home to their mothers).

Now, the Greyhound bus had trouble because they never reached Birmingham. They were held back. Here's their story on why they were held back.

When the Greyhound bus parked at the terminal in Anniston a mob with weapons like pistols, guns, blackjacks, clubs, chains and knives stood where everyone could see them. That was to intimidate the riders. Then the riders decided to skip testing the terminal there in Anniston because that would be suicidal. When the bus was pulling out of the terminal the mob came and slashed the tires. The bus still drove on to the highway when but tires burst. The mob was right behind them. When the bus stopped the mob surrounded the bus. They broke windows and threw bombs inside. The doors were locked, but the riders got out before the bus burst into flames.

The FBI told the Birmingham police that the Freedom Riders were coming there. They knew that one of the officers was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Burke Marshall (assistant attorney general in charge of civil rights for assistant attorney general in charge of civil rights for Robert Kennedy) said, "It is insane as it is unbelievable that people presumably otherwise sane, sensible, and rational would have this kind of reaction simply to where people were sitting on the bus." (Hampton, pg. 79)

Burke Marshall heard information about what might happen at the Birmingham terminal. For example, the officers would absent themselves and

wouldn't help protect the riders. The Bureau knew what was going to happen but didn't tell any one, until something happened to the riders. If they had told Burke Marshall the Klan would think that someone was snitching on them.

John Patterson (the governor of Alabama) was saying the riders should mind their business. The riders should stop causing trouble and get out of the state. He said that the riders pushed and shoved to gain publicity for the ride, but also created violence at the same time. If they kept coming they would only make violence, so they should stay out of the state of Alabama and not be troublemakers.

When the Trailways bus tried to leave Birmingham terminal, a new mob surrounded the bus. The freedom riders had to travel to New Orleans by plane instead of finishing the ride by bus to Montgomery because of the violence. When that happened, John and Robert Kennedy were internationally embarrassed because of the riders' lack of progress.

When the first freedom riders went to the airport John Seigenthaler was sent to control the mob that was at the airport. He said, "I don't ever recall feeling more welcomed by a group of people. They were almost reaching out to touch me." (Hampton, pg.81) There were bomb threats to the freedom riders. Every time a plane flew the people who made the bomb threats would say there was a bomb in the plane. The freedom riders left Alabama and flew to New Orleans where their friends took them into their care.

After what happened, SNCC and Diane Nash took charge to continue the ride. Diane Nash's viewpoint on what happened was that "the future of the ride was going to be cut short if the Freedom Ride has been stopped as a result of violence. The impression would have been given that whenever a movement starts, all you have to do is attack it with massive violence and the blacks would stop. So under those circumstances it was really important that the ride continue." (Hampton, pg.82)

SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) went and got students from Nashville to continue the ride. The Freedom Riders gave sealed letters to Diane, to be mailed out in case they faced death. "That's how prepared they were for death." (Hampton, pg. 82) said Diane. Diane had to keep the press and the cities updated, so they would know that the Freedom Riders were coming to ride through. She also had to keep contact with the Justice Department. Diane also was in charge of getting more people to go on the Freedom Ride. That was a lot for her to do in a short notice.

Miss. Nash and Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth were talking about Birmingham. Shuttlesworth asked, "Young lady, do you know that the freedom riders were almost killed here?" (Hampton, pg.232)

Diane Nash's reply was, "Yes, and this is exactly why the ride must not be stopped." (Hampton, pg.232) When they talked on the phone they had to use codes because Eugene "Bull" Connor (a policeman who was against black people who wanted equal rights) tapped Shuttlesworth's phone. For example, they would say "send the speckled chicken (integrated group), who included pullets (women) and roosters (men), on to Birmingham, and the ride would continue." (Hampton, pg.232)

The Nashville students dispatched members of their "standing army" to Birmingham. When the second riders left Birmingham to go to Montgomery they met problems. When Stuart H. Loory wrote his news report on what happened in Montgomery, he said the mob hit Moe Levy of NBC across the face. That was the first blow that was thrown.

Stuart also got quotes from the governor saying, "It is our duty to maintain the law and I will not allow any group to take the law into their hands. The good name of our state and our people is at stake, and I can state frankly that violence of any type will not be tolerated." (Grant, pg.316)

The governor of Alabama said, "We cannot escort busloads or carloads of rabble-rousers about our state from city to city for the avowed purpose of disobeying our laws, flaunting our customs and traditions and creating racial debts. Such unlawful acts serve only to further enrage our population. I have no use for agitators of their kind."(Hampton, pg.319)

After going to the terminal the riders were badly beaten and some were unconscious. The riders had to stay at Rev. Abernathy's First Baptist Church overnight. They couldn't get out because a mob circled around the church and the National Guard tried to keep away the mob from the church. Robert Kennedy and other top White House officials called Martin Luther King and Abernathy to inform them that the U.S. Marshalls are coming to take the Freedom Riders to Mississippi. The next morning Howard Zinn (one of the Freedom Riders) wrote:

"At seven-thirty in the morning on Wednesday, May 24, with National Guardsman lining both sides of the street near the bus terminal, twelve freedom riders (eleven Negroes and one white) accompanied by six guardsmen and sixteen newspapermen, left Montgomery for Jackson. Before leaving they tasted victory by eating in the 'white' cafeteria at the Trailways terminal. On the road, a convoy of three airplanes, two helicopters, and seven patrol cars accompanied the bus while inside, James Lawson held a workshop on nonviolence."(Morris, pg.233)

The others gave feedback too. "The ride from Montgomery to Jackson was like a military operation," said James Farmer. (Hampton, pg.92) Having the National Guard to protect them didn't ease their fears because they thought the National Guard would turn their guns on them when it came down to a showdown.

The riders heard that their bus was going to get ambushed in the Mississippi border. The National Guard looked behind every tree; they didn't find anything or anyone. The riders had more confidence that no one was going to bother them. While going to the Jackson terminal, the riders sang a song like this:

"I'm taking a ride on the Greyhound bus line; I'm a-riding the front seat to Jackson this time. Hallelujah, I'm a-travelin', hallelujah, ain't it fine? Hallelujah, I'm a-travelin', down freedom's main line".

When the Freedom Riders went to the bus terminal in Jackson, the riders were put in jail saying that they were trespassing. They went to the State Penitentiary for sixty days. While staying at the Parchman, maximum security, the

freedom riders sang songs. The songs were to keep their spirits up so they wouldn't feel like they lost the battle to end the war. The jailers kept threatening to take away the Freedom Riders mattresses if they didn't stop singing. "Now, the mattresses were the only convenience we had in those little cells. They were our link to civilization. So we speak," said James Farmer. (Hampton, pg. 95&96)

They kept singing, "Freedom's coming and it won't be long." The jailers came and took an inmate named Pcewec to take the mattresses away from the riders instead of the guards doing it themselves. Pcewec was crying while he was trying to take away James Farmer's mattresses.

Fred said, "Do you remember when your parents used to whup you and say, "It's going to hurt me more that it hurts you? It hurt Pcewec more than it hurt me."(Hampton, pg.95&96)

While they were in jail, Robert Kennedy made a petition to make Interstate Commerce Commission regulations ban segregation in interstate travel.

These people deserved medals and high honor. They achieved the impossible. Even when they got beaten up they wouldn't stop until they got what they wanted, Equal Rights. This takes a lot of courage to do. This was a good change for the better.