

IN PURSUIT OF FREEDOM

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IN EARLY MAY I heard from fellow Howard University students that the Congress on Racial Equality was looking for volunteers to ride from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans by bus to determine whether bus station facilities were integrated in compliance with Supreme Court rulings. I was sympathetic to the idea, but approaching final examinations and a 34-hour-a-week job made my participation at that time out of the question.

I forgot about the CORE-sponsored trip, known as the Freedom Ride, until Monday, May 15th, when the morning papers were delivered to the dormitory desk at which I was working and I saw pictures of a fellow Howard student with whom I had participated the past year and a half in the Non-Violent Action Group (N.A.G.) of Washington, leaving a flaming bus on the outskirts of Anniston, Alabama. The caption said that the student, whose name is Henry Thomas, had been struck on the head as he left the bus. I was infuriated.

In protest against the savagery displayed by segregationist mobs at Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery, I joined N.A.G. in picketing the White House and also spent a few hours on a CORE picket line at Trailways bus terminal. Pedestrians didn't coldly pass by our signs as they usually do, but stopped and stared, deep in thought.

Late one evening, two members of N.A.G., Paul Detriecht and John Moody, called at my room to say goodbye before leaving for Montgomery. Paul and John joined the Freedom Riders in time to attend the meeting, at the Montgomery First Baptist Church, which became the target of an angry mob. The National Guard was called out and the Freedom Riders went into hiding to avoid possible arrest and segregationist fury. While in hiding, Paul called N.A.G. and pleaded for as many as possible from the District to come down to Montgomery. The project seemed to be at its most trying stage and my brothers in the South needed every person they could possibly muster, so I decided to go. I could quit the 60-cent-an-hour job and either take exams early or have them put off until I returned.

The next few days were a sleepless scramble to have exam dates changed, find some place to leave my clothes and books, resign from my job, constantly debate my reasons for going, and continue my regular studies. I knew that my parents would oppose my decision, so I

wrote them a letter of explanation (which I mailed while already on the way to Alabama). I consoled myself with the thought that all revolutions have created such conflicts within families: even Gandhi and Tolstoy had to further the nonviolent movement against the wishes of their families.

At 11 p.m. on Friday, May 26th, Frank Hunt, also a N.A.G. member, and I boarded a Greyhound bus in Washington with tickets for Montgomery. Frank is a recent graduate of the University of Maryland and was on the Freedom Ride during a vacation from his job as an *Afro-American News* reporter.

At our first stop in Virginia Frank and I were confronted with what the Southern white has called "separate but equal." A modern rest station with gleaming counters and picture windows was labelled "White," and a small wooden shack beside it was tagged "Colored." The colored waiting room was filthy, in need of repair, and overcrowded. When we entered the white waiting room Frank was promptly but courteously, in the Southern manner, asked to leave. Because I am a fair-skinned Negro I was waited upon. I walked back to the bus through the cool night trembling and perspiring. This was the pattern at all rest stations from Washington to Jackson, Mississippi.

During our one-day journey Frank and I discussed race problems and eavesdropped on other passengers' conversations. An Air Force man just back from overseas sat in front of us talking to three other white passengers about the Freedom Riders. The consensus was that the integrationists should be hung from the nearest tree. At this point Frank pulled his straw hat over his face and sank down in his seat, and I resumed work on a take-home mathematics exam. At one point a woman spoke loudly about the hardship she was suffering as a Negro, saying that she was the last hired at a job, the worst paid and the first fired. She complained about the high rents one had to pay even to live in a slum. The whites in the front showed no reaction to the woman's loud tale of despair. It was as though the bus riders were from two different worlds, the inhabitants of each being invisible to those of the other.

The Montgomery bus station was surrounded by Army jeeps, trucks, and the National Guard in battle gear. Some of the soldiers, who could be seen as they moved from the shadows into the light of the station, had

fierce looking beards, which had been grown for the coming Civil War Centennial celebration. We found the people from the Christian Leadership Council who had been sent to meet us and drove away cautiously, realizing that the least traffic violation would be an excuse for our arrest. We eluded the detectives following us and, winding our way through the city, went to Reverend and Mrs. Abernathy's house, where we met seven other people with whom we were to continue. The house was protected by the National Guard. We didn't meet Reverend Abernathy, for he had been taken to jail with other leaders.

Arrival and Arrest

At 7:00 Sunday morning, we entered the Montgomery bus station amidst a confusion of photographers, reporters, National Guardsmen and bus passengers. The white lunch counter was closed before we arrived and when we entered the colored waiting room, its lunch counter was quickly shut down.

With two rifle-carrying Guardsmen in the front seat and jeeps leading and following the bus we sped to the border. Waiting rooms at all stops along the way were closed. At the state line the commanding officer of the Guard boarded the bus and in a pleasant voice wished us luck, saying that we could expect a long stay in Mississippi.

Once across the state line we passed a couple of police cars, which began to follow us. At our first stop the station was cordoned off a block in every direction. A police officer jumped on the bus and forbade anyone to move. One woman, who was a regular passenger, frantically tried to convince the police that she was not involved with us. After checking her ticket the police let her get off.

As we rolled toward Jackson, every blocked-off street, every back road taken, every change in speed caused our hearts to leap. Our arrival and speedy arrest in the white bus station in Jackson, when we refused to obey a policeman's order to move on, was a relief. A paddy wagon rushed us down the street to the police station.

While being interrogated I asked the detective if he knew that legally and by the moral standards America professes to the world we had a right to act as we did and that his actions were helping to tear down any respect the world might have had for our country. He said that this might be so but that the South had certain traditions which must be respected.

While waiting in line to be fingerprinted and photographed we were watched by huge policemen who repeatedly inspected their pistols. As a Negro inmate walked past on an errand an officer stamped his foot,

which sent the fellow scurrying away like a whipped puppy. The giant men with stars on their chest roared with laughter, having displayed the brand of Southern hospitality we might expect.

At 2 p.m. on May 29th, after spending the night in a barracks-like room of which I can only remember, with trepidation, a one-foot-high sign written on the wall in blood, "I love Sylvia," our group joined nine other Freedom Riders in court. The others were from Tennessee and were among those who had been attacked in Birmingham and Montgomery. In the court's opening exercises Judge Spencer repeated frequently that, "This is a regular Monday afternoon court."

We were charged with a breach of the peace and then the tall, wiry state prosecutor examined Police Chief Wray, the only witness called to the stand. Chief Wray said that we had been orderly but had refused to move on when ordered to do so by his men. Mr. Young, our lawyer, asked if he would have required us to move on if we had entered the colored waiting room. Chief Wray said no. Mr. Young concluded that we must have been arrested for integrating the white waiting room. Chief Wray's face turned from its usual dirty white to a rose red.

The judge picked up a piece of paper and *read* the verdict: "Guilty as charged. . . two-hundred dollar fine or work it off in jail at three dollars a day." We refused to pay Mississippi a continental.

Reunion in Jackson

On Tuesday, we were taken across the street to the county jail and locked up with the first group to have been arrested in Jackson. I had finally caught up with Henry Thomas, John Moody, and other friends. Paul Detriech was held in the city jail with other white Freedom Riders. Henry told me that a couple of days earlier they had been taken to the county penal farm. While there several of them, including a young lady, had been beaten with blackjacks for not replying "yes, sir" to the warden's queries. When the F.B.I. learned of the incident, the Riders were returned to the county jail, and the warden brought before a prison board. The warden justified his actions by saying that he had struck all of them, including the frail woman, in self-defense. The board acquitted him.

The thirty or more of us occupied five cells and a dining hall on the top floor. At night we slept on lumpy bags of cotton and were locked in small, dirty, blood-spattered, roach-infested cells. Days were passed in the hot, overcrowded dining room playing cards, reading, praying and, as was almost inevitable, fighting among ourselves over the most petty things. The sermons offered during our self-imposed devotional period by such men as the Reverends Lawson, Viven and Dunn

were refreshing. But I guess any invocation of freedom and equality sounds excellent to a man behind bars. In the evening one of the prisoners in the cell block below ours sang Negro spirituals with the voice of a lonely, wild animal. At every rift one could feel the pain that must have inspired it.

Time crawled painfully, 15 days becoming 45 meals, 360 hours, 100 card games or 3 letters from home. The killing of a roach or the taking of a shower became major events, the subjects of lengthy debate. But morale remained high; insults and brutality became the subject of jokes and skits. The jailers' initial hostility was broken down by responding to it with respect and with good humor. Mr. Young later informed us that the treatment of all prisoners in Jackson jails improved after our matriculation.

On June 12th, a man named Leon Horne was put in with us, and was readily accepted. The next day, after spending the night sleeping in his clothes on an unmade bed in my cell, he was taken away by the turnkey. We never saw him again until we managed to smuggle a newspaper into the jail and found his picture on the front page. In a press conference he had called us everything from Communists to embezzlers of publicly solicited funds. We learned later from our lawyer that Horne had formed the first N.A.A.C.P. chapter in Jackson and run off with its funds. The authorities continued to hold him and one day two of our fellows were placed in a cell close enough to talk with him. He told them that he had been forced into making the statements. This is believable, for the authorities put pressure on two others to make similar statements. In one case, a Negro woman was intimidated by a white woman prisoner who beat her with a shoe, while the authorities pressed her, but she failed to yield.

The police were more successful in their tactics with Reverend Gleason. They took him out, bought him cokes, candy and a meal at a local restaurant and the good Reverend told the Southern newspapers just about anything they wanted to hear. When he got to his home in Chicago he denied all that he had said in Jackson.

The jails began to bulge as even Mississippi Negroes, who according to Southern whites are happy, began to join in the protest. To relieve the crowding, about fifty of us were piled into trucks at 2 a.m. June 15th and sped off into the night. It was rumored that in spite of a law against putting persons convicted of misdemeanors into a penitentiary, we were going to the state penitentiary.

Parchman Penitentiary

In the light before sunrise a small caravan of trucks led by a police car sped north on Highway 49 over the flat Mississippi land. Two Negro children walking

through a field of young cotton were silhouetted against an orange and blue horizon as they stopped and knowingly pointed to the swiftly moving prison trucks. The procession turned on to the grounds of Parchman Penitentiary, stopped briefly at the main gate, and then moved directly to a restricted area of the sprawling plantation.

One of the larger vehicles, containing twenty-six of the political prisoners, had broken down and was being towed the last few miles to the prison by a pick-up truck which carried luggage. The little pick-up towed its monstrous burden past an observation tower, through a barbed-wire-fence gate, and came to rest in a muddy yard by the front door of a squat, modern red-brick building.

The barked commands of a law officer sent all except two of the Freedom Riders scurrying from the truck into a double line at the front of the building. Surrounded by a group of gun brandishing hecklers, tired unshaven men helplessly listened as sun-reddened faces, sagging from age and dissipation, spat vile remarks at them.

Torture

Terry Sullivan and Felix Singer, the two white men who remained in the truck, were refusing to cooperate with their captors. So far their limp bodies had been carefully handled. Hearing a commotion behind them, the men in line turned around in time to see Terry and Felix being thrown from the van onto the wet sand-and-gravel drive. They were then dragged through wet grass, mud puddles, and across a rough cement walk to the rear of the group. There was both pain and conviction in their faces. One of their tormentors laughed:

"Aint no newspapermen out here, what you actin' like that for?"

Terry replied: "We refuse to cooperate because we have been unjustly imprisoned."

As they were pulled down the walk and into the building, a fat red-faced man wearing cowboy boots ran after them, stamping on the corrugated bottom of Felix's canvas shoes and yelling, "Pull them by the feet, pull them by the feet."

A guard with a serious face under his Stetson hat, examining a long black, rubber-handled tube, walked through the gate, past the smiling guards and police, and the curious, worried prisoners, and into the building.

The black tube was a cattle-shocker, which delivers a powerful charge of electricity when applied to the flesh. After the two passive resisters refused to obey a command to undress, the instrument was applied to their bodies. When they realized that the men squirming in pain on the cement floor were not going to yield to the torture, the officials ripped the clothes from their

bodies and threw them into a cell. All of this even though the law forbids corporal or any unusual punishment of recalcitrant prisoners.

The group outside was brought into the hallway, asked to undress, and then herded, two per cell, into the little six-by-ten compartments they were to occupy for the next month or more. The cells were segregated but the cell blocks were not.

A six-foot, three inch, two-hundred-fifty-pound brute stuffed shorts and tee-shirts through the bars to them. These were the only garments they were to wear while inmates of the maximum-security unit of Parchman Penitentiary.

The guard that handed out the uniforms brought the noon meal and sometimes engaged in heated debates about the philosophy of nonviolence and related issues. He was lovingly named Spike. One of our fellows gave him two stamps. One had a picture of Gandhi on it and the other a picture of Robert E. Lee. He said: "Here are two men. One led his nation to freedom through nonviolence, the other left his nation in ruin through the use of violence." From the thick lips of Spike's grizzled baby face came the profound reply: "If your movement would get rid of trash like you it might have



a chance of succeeding." The next day Spike elaborated upon his criticism of the movement. He asked either Abraham Bassford or Price Chatham (it was hard to tell who was talking for we couldn't see each other) why he had come to the South stirring up trouble. The reply was: "Thoreau says in his *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, that under a government which imprisons any unjustly the true place for a just man is also a prison."

Spike rebutted: "If you all wouldn't read so many comic books and look at so much television you wouldn't be in the trouble you are now," and marched down the hall pushing a rattling cart of dishes, another intellectual triumph under his belt.

Processing of the prisoners continued with finger-

printing and photographing. They came for Terry and Felix last.

Their naked bodies were pulled down the row of cells by a Negro inmate in prison stripes to a room at the end of the cell block. There mere muffled sounds of furious motion and a frightening scream which reverberated down the steel-and-cement corridor, leaving indelible marks upon the minds of all who heard it. Then came more cries above the snickering of the guards.

"They're breaking my arm, they're breaking my arm."
"They're beating my head against the cement."

On Saturday, June 24th the guards decided that the Freedom Riders' singing was too loud and took their mattresses away as punishment. At first this was taken as a joke and songs were made up about the incident, but after three days of sleeping on a cement floor or steel shelf with an air-conditioning system on full blast the cell block became silent and gloomy. Another time when the Riders sang too loud for the guards, six of them were dragged down the hall with wrist-breakers (clamps tightened upon the wrists) and thrown into dark six-by-six boxes for a couple of days. As the spunky fellows were being taken to solitary they sang, "I'm Going to Tell God How You Treat Me."

When fellow prisoner Jim Farmer, national director of CORE, went before the superintendent to protest the treatment he was told that if we didn't cooperate conditions would deteriorate. A request was made for a written statement of rules to define what was meant by cooperation, but none was ever issued. Consequently the imprisoned men drew up their own code of minimum standards for they felt that although they were obligated to respect the authorities, the authorities had an obligation to treat them as human beings. The code was:

Having, after due consideration, chosen to follow without reservation the principles of nonviolence, we resolve while in any prison:

to practice nonviolence of speech and thought as well as action

to treat even those who may be our captors as brothers to engage in a continual process of cleansing of the mind and body in rededication to our wholesome cause to intensify our search for orderly living even when in the midst of seeming chaos.

Most felt that the search for order and meaning in life could best be carried out in group devotion, where sermons could be delivered and group singing take place. Phrases pertaining to the Freedom Rides were put to the tune of Negro spirituals, work songs, and union songs. When Henry Thomas finished with Harry Belafonte's "Day Oh," it became:

Freedom, Freedom

Freedom come and I gonna go home.

I took a trip down Mississippi way (Hey)

Freedom come and I gonna go home.
Met much violence on Mother's Day* (Hey)
Freedom come and I gonna go home. . . .

Protest and Purification

Cleansing of the mind and body included fasting for some. Fasts were also engaged in as protest. The purpose and extent of these acts of dedication were misrepresented to the public. For example the press reported that Price Chatham lost three pounds. Actually he lost about thirty-five pounds.

Some prisoners refused to fast and flaunted the fact in front of others who were fasting, perhaps in order to compensate for their guilt. Others gave in to their hunger after a few days and soon became boisterous eaters. A few fasted until there was a thin veil between them and death.

Questions have been raised as to the character of people who willingly withstand such punishment. Are they publicity seekers? Are they Communists?

In cell 14 was a middle-aged art dealer from Minneapolis who had three dollars to his name and had come on the Freedom Ride "because it is one way of fighting a system which not only hurts the Negro but is a threat to world peace and prosperity. Some of the same men in whose interest it is to have segregation, so it is for them to have war industries, to recklessly speculate in other countries and in general to meticulously exploit masses of peoples. I also came because I wanted to see for myself what is happening in the South."

My cellmate, a Negro worker, came because he had been chased home by white toughs once too often, because his sister was determined to come, and because a friend of his, William Barbee, had been almost killed by a mob while on a Freedom Ride. He admits that his behavior is not ordinarily disciplined, but he readily accepted any restrictions required of him by the movement. He had sung professionally and took the lead in many of our group songs.

On my right, in cell 12, was the son of a well-to-do business man who had come because it was his moral duty. His aim was to "change the hearts of my persecutors through the sympathy and understanding to be gained by nonviolent resistance." He spoke proudly of his father who had fought hard and "made it," and was constantly defending North America's economic and political system from the attacks made upon it by myself and the art dealer. We never changed each other's views but the arguments passed time and gave us mental exercise.

These three philosophies—political, emotional, and moralist—represent the three major viewpoints I found

*The attacks at Anniston and Birmingham occurred on Mother's Day.

while spending forty days in various Mississippi prisons.

The name of Gandhi was constantly on the minds and lips of most of the imprisoned Riders. Anything Gandhi had said or done was interpreted and reinterpreted to be applied to the situation in Mississippi. As with all religious movements, from Christianity to Marxism, factions arose which read their prophet's teaching as best suited them. Those who went on long fasts justified this by Gandhi's remark that at times he had to fast in spite of his followers' refusals to join him; others, who would fast only when there were numbers large enough to be politically effective, said that they took this stand in accord with Gandhi's practice of only making *meaningful* sacrifices.

At 5 p.m. on July 7th those remaining of the first and second groups were released on appeal bonds after 40 days in jail. When we left, the number of Freedom Riders in jail was close to a hundred. We were taken back to the city jail to sign our bonds in a little pick-up led by a police car.

Colored workers were leaving the fields as we sped down the highway. The women were clad in gay-colored prints, making me think of pictures the old people used to paint in my mind of slave days. How my heart hurt every time we passed a car driven by a Negro, for he would, upon hearing our police escort's siren, come to a stop in the grass by the side of the road, whereas a white driver would only move to the edge of the road and reduce his speed.

Before parting for our various destinations we stood in a circle, grasped hands and sang a song called "We Will Meet Again." As I looked round the circle into my companions' serious faces and saw the furrowed brows of the 19- and 20-year-old men and women, I knew that we *would* meet again.

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