

The Anniston Star

Friday, May 14, 2021





Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

The mural of the Greyhound bus can be seen at the Freedom Riders National Monument.

Anniston's place in civil rights history and memory

By JENNIFER GROSS, PhD

I recently had the pleasure of talking with Ray Arsenault, the author of the ground-breaking work “Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice.” Our conversation ranged from small talk about our families, Ray’s recent retirement as the John Hope Franklin Professor of History at the University of South Florida to the 60th anniversary of the Freedom Rides and the national monument site in the old Greyhound bus station on Gurnee Avenue.

Ray and I first met a decade ago as part of the 50th anniversary. He was part of Freedom Rider 2011, a re-creation of the original rides organized by PBS to coincide with the airing of the documentary, “Freedom Riders.” True to the original ride, the group of college students, 1961 Freedom Riders, and participants stopped in Anniston. Unlike 1961, the group had a warm welcome and visited the two bus murals on Noble Street and Gurnee Avenue.

I remember this event vividly, not just because it was a moving recognition of that pivotal moment in the civil rights movement and Anniston’s history, but because it differed so drastically from what I had found upon moving to Anniston in 2001.

In 2001, there were no murals. There wasn’t even a historical marker out on Highway 202 where the bus was burned. There was literally nothing publicly noting the infamous role our town had played in the history of the civil rights movement. It is an observation that Ray made as well on his initial visit to Anniston in 2006 when he first brought students to town tracing the rides.

Fortunately, much has changed.

In 2007, a historical marker was erected at the site of the bus burning. Shortly thereafter, several city notables, white and black, began an effort to publicly acknowledge the role Anniston played in the Freedom Rides, capitalizing on some of the historical tourism money being raked in by other Southern cities like Birmingham and Montgomery where the movement and the violent reaction to it had played out. These efforts produced the murals and culminated in the 2017

designations of the sites of the bus station and the bus burning as a national monument. The bus station site opened to the public in April 2021.

As a historian of the Civil War era, I asked Ray what he thought about the national monument designation after all these years, especially in the context of the nationwide effort to remove the Confederate monuments that dot public spaces throughout the South. Beginning in the decades after the war and accelerating during the Jim Crow era, white Southerners spent ungodly amounts of money on Confederate monuments, which they placed not in cemeteries near the Confederate dead, but instead on

courthouse lawns and town squares.

These monuments tell a story. It is not a story of the wartime heroism of Confederate soldiers as many modern supporters claim. It is a story of white supremacy and the effort to maintain it after slavery was abolished. The prominent placement of the monuments in these public spaces was an effort to convey that message to one segment of the Southern population specifically, Black Americans.

In recent years, growing numbers of Southerners have encouraged the removal of these monuments to more appropriate venues, like museums and cemeteries. That push has met with a great deal of resistance throughout the South. Four years ago, the Alabama state legislature passed a measure that

established a \$25,000 fine against cities or counties that removed monuments in place 40 years or more. In recent days, state legislators, white and mostly Republican, are working to strengthen that legislation by putting in place additional \$10,000 fines for any person who facilitates the removal of such a monument. Despite this pushback, in 2020 the city of Anniston did remove its Confederate obelisk from

the median on Quintard Avenue. Today, all that remains is a concrete pad.

So why does it matter that the Confederate monument is gone and the national monument to the Freedom Rides is in place? It matters because monuments tell us more about the people who erect them than they do about the historical event or person they are supposedly meant to commemorate. The Southerners who erected the Confederate obelisk hoped to tell and reinforce a story of a white South in which Black Americans were second-class citizens. The Southerners who began working in the early years of the 21st century for the Freedom Riders National Monument wanted to tell a different story, a story of courage in the face of racial hatred, a story of love for this nation’s democratic ideals, a story of racial healing and equality. The Freedom Riders story, Ray pointed out, shows that “we’re not hapless and hopeless change can occur if people have enough courage and conviction.”

On this 60th anniversary of the Freedom Rides, as our nation continues to battle the forces of racism, inequality, and injustice, may we all embrace the memory of the courage of those original 436 Americans — white and black, rich and poor, Northern and Southern, male and female — who were willing to risk their lives to create what Martin Luther King, Jr. famously called the “beloved community.” We haven’t achieved the beloved community yet, but the more we celebrate Americans like the Freedom Riders who fought for its values, the closer we get to that destination.

Jennifer Gross, PhD, is an associate professor of History at Jacksonville State University.

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Sitting on the grass in front of the Forsyth store, Freedom Rider Ed Blankenheim catches his breath after inhaling smoke from the Greyhound bus burned by Klansmen on May 14, 1961. Photo by Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star



Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

The historical marker at the Freedom Riders National Monument was installed in 2017.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Hank Thomas speaks with Anniston fireman Emmett White in front of the Forsyth home. White was the Anniston fire chief until December of 1960, but continued to volunteer.

Hank Thomas: One of the original Freedom Riders

By SHERRY KUGHN

At about 1 p.m. on Sunday, May 14, 1961, 19-year-old Howard University student Henry “Hank” Thomas came into Anniston with 17 other passengers on a Greyhound bus. He remembers the tension he felt as he rode through town with the group, seven of whom were Freedom Riders on his bus, and representatives of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). Already, they had encountered resistance in other states and knew that the Klan members in Alabama might do more than only resist.

The blacks and sympathetic white Riders on the Greyhound bus had left Washington, D.C. several days prior to arriving in Anniston. Their goal was to test the rights of blacks to travel on Interstate Highways, rights affirmed by two Supreme Court rulings that allowed them to sit wherever they pleased while riding on public transportation. The Freedom Riders’ plan was to swing through the Southern states, head west through Mississippi and then further south to New Orleans, La. During that swing, they headed to Anniston’s bus terminal, located at 1031 Gurnee Avenue.

On a day that has become known as “The Bus Burning,” the tension that Thomas felt as he entered Anniston proved prophetic. Tension turned to threats when they reached the terminal where a white mob of at least 50 or more surrounded the bus. The Riders stayed on the bus and endured 20 minutes of screams, taunts and attacks as members of the mob hit the bus with metal rods and other weapons. Someone slashed the bus’s tires.

Anniston policemen arrived and directed the bus as it left town. Cars filled with members of the mob followed the bus as it proceeded west on Alabama 202 and headed out of town past the city limits. Once over the line, two cars pulled in front of the bus and slowed it down. Next, two of the bus tires went completely flat, and the driver had to stop.



Hank Thomas with Corporal Jemison and Investigator Eil Cowling.

The mob then attacked again with renewed violence. They knocked out windows and rocked the bus back and forth in an effort to turn it over. Someone threw a cluster of fiery rags through a broken window causing a fire and billows of smoke.

Thomas was one of the first Freedom Riders to get out, as all began choking and trying to escape. He exited a door while other Riders and passengers crawled out of broken windows.

Thomas, hardly able to see or breathe, began crawling on the ground and tried to stand. A member of the mob approached him and struck him in the head with a baseball bat, which sent him reeling.

During the attack, others from the bus were then beaten with chains, rods and bats. A mobster stomped one Rider in the chest. Something alarmed the mob, either an exploding tire, a shot fired into the air from a state trooper or perhaps the choking and toxic smoke, — no one is certain — but the white mob backed off. The Freedom Riders gathered across the



Hank Thomas now.

highway and assessed their injuries. Some bled. Some, including Thomas, had head injuries. Most of them continued choking.

Thomas, along with the other Riders, spent the next several hours at Anniston Memorial Hospital, where he and they received little or no treatment. Eventually, eight cars driven by black supporters from Birmingham rescued them and took them to the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth who arranged for their care.

In March, Thomas, 79, spoke over the phone about The Bus Burning from his home in Stone Mountain, Ga., where he lives with his wife, Yvonne. He spoke of receiving water on that day from an unlikely source. “This twelve-year-old girl was running in and out [of her house] to bring us water. She was an angel of Anniston,” he said.

Thomas was referring to Janie Forsyth, who now lives in California. Once, at a reunion of the Freedom Riders, Thomas made sure they gave her an ovation.

During the phone conversation, he

also remembered how many of the mob members on the day of The Bus Burning were dressed in their church clothes, having worshipped on Mother’s Day. Thomas spoke of hoping he will be able to attend the ceremony in Anniston to memorialize the bus station and, later, to develop the site of the bus burning.

“I am hoping to see at least one or two of the people of Anniston who were at the bus burning,” Thomas said, “not for me to vent my anger on, but to help them see what they were a part of.

“My wife and I are in our reflective age,” Thomas said. “We count our blessings.

After Thomas’s role in the Freedom Rides ended, he was drafted into the Army, where he served in Viet Nam as a medic. While there, he was injured and spent five-and-a-half months recovering at Walter Reed Army Hospital. It was there he decided he would overcome the things that had happened to him by becoming a businessman. In addition to raising two children, he and Yvonne have seen much success.

One of their first business endeavors was a Dairy Queen franchise. Afterward, they obtained a Burger King and then a McDonald’s restaurant. Eventually, they owned four Marriott hotels, two Fairfield Inns and two TownePlace Suites. Thomas became president of Victoria Hospitality Properties and vice-president of Hayon, Inc. The couple is now retired and has several grandchildren. He is a proud grandfather and said nothing pleases him more than to speak at their schools and tell the story of how people should love one another.

The Thomases’ business success has also allowed them to provide many scholarships for students at Talladega College, Tuskegee College, Morehouse Medical School and the Tupelo campus of Mississippi State University.

“I played a small part in helping Americans realize some of the terrible things they did to other Americans,” he said.

THE RIDERS

GREYHOUND BUS

Bus Driver: O.T. Jones
Roy F. Robinson, Georgia Regional Manager, Greyhound

Freedom Riders

- Joseph (Joe) Perkins, 27, was CORE field secretary and the group chair for the Greyhound bus. He was from Owensboro, Ky.
- Edward (Ed) Blankenheim, 27, was a student at the University of Arizona from Tucson, Ariz.
- Albert (Bert) Bigelow, 55, was an architect from Cos Cob, Conn.
- Genevieve Hughes, 28, was CORE field secretary and was from Washington, D.C.
- Jimmy McDonald, 29, was a folk singer and CORE activist from New York, N.Y.
- Mae Frances Moultrie, 24, was a student at Morris College and was from Sumter, S.C.
- Henry (Hank) Thomas, 19, was a student at Howard University and was from Elton, Fla.

Law Enforcement

- Ell Cowling, Alabama Highway Patrol, state investigator
- Harry Sims, Alabama Dept of Public Safety, investigator.

Media

- Charlotte Devree, freelance writer, wife of Howard Devree
- Moses J. Newsome, reporter/photographer, Baltimore Afro-American

Other passengers:

- Larry A. Harper, 22, BM
- Roberta Holmes, BF
- Roy J. Powers, 39 WM
- Two other, unknown

TRAILWAYS BUS

Freedom Riders

- Frances Bergman, 57, was a retired elementary school teacher and administrator from Detroit, Mich.
- Walter Bergman, 61, was a retired professor from Detroit and husband to Frances. He was beaten so badly on the bus in Anniston and when it arrived in Birmingham that he never

fully recovered. He sued the FBI after an informant, Gary Thomas Rowe, indicated the FBI was aware of Klan’s plans to attack the Freedom Riders. He won his case.

- Herman Harris, 21, a student at Morris College in Sumter, S.C., and was from Englewood, N.J.
- Ivor (Jerry) Moore, 19, was a student at Morris College and was from Bronx, N.Y.
- James Peck, 46, was the group chair and editor of CORE-lator. He was from New York, N.Y. He was the only one to participate in the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation and the 1961 Freedom Ride.
- Charles Person, 18, was a student at Morehouse College and was from Atlanta, Ga.
- Isaac (Ike) Reynolds, 27, was CORE field secretary and a student at Wayne State University. He was from Detroit, Mich.

Media

- Simeon Booker, writer, JET and Ebony
- Ted Gaffney, freelance photographer for JET and Ebony

Unknown

- According to Walter Bergman and Charles Person, seven or eight white males got on the bus in Anniston, beating the riders and forcing them to segregate.

Freedom Riders who started out with the original groups, but left for various reasons before the two buses entered Alabama:

- Benjamin Cox, 29, was a minister from High Point, S.C.
- James Farmer, 41, national director of CORE. He had to leave the ride to attend his father’s funeral.
- Robert Griffin, 20, was a student at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, N.C. and was from Tampa, Fla.
- John Lewis, 21, was a student at American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tenn., and was from Troy.

SOURCES

Arsenault, Raymond. Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation, US Department of Justice, 149-BH-16

Charles Person: An identity affirmed



Johnson Publishing Company Archive. Courtesy Ford Foundation, J. Paul Getty Trust, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Smithsonian Institution

Charles Person has shared his memories of being the youngest Freedom Rider to take part in the planning and, in 1961, the carrying out of a plan to integrate buses that traveled the Interstate system. The new book, *Buses Are a Comin': Memoir of a Freedom Rider*, co-written with author Richard Rooker, is available online. The book is published by St. Martin's Press. Only 18 years old at the time of the rides, Person had to obtain permission from a parent to participate. During the rides, he received a head wound that caused him problems for many years.

BY SHERRY KUGHN
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The influence of Charles Person's mother, Ruby, probably saved his life. After graduation from high school in Atlanta, Person, who only weighed 126 pounds at the time, decided, as a college student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, to take part in the Civil Rights Movement. He was only 18 years old and needed parental permission. His mother said no, but his father overruled her objection. Later, after he had experienced violence during the Freedom Rides, he chose another path in life as he remembered her concerns.

Once he had arrived at college, Person, an outstanding math and physics student, became involved in the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR), a group that encouraged students to engage in nonviolent protests against segregation. It wasn't long before he was arrested and jailed for taking part at lunch counter sit-ins and at other places designated "for whites only." His activism attracted the attention of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a group organizing an effort to allow blacks to sit wherever they wished on buses traveling Interstate highways. Such a right had been denied in the South but affirmed twice by the U.S. Supreme Court.

CORE needed volunteers to take part in what was to become known as the Freedom Rides. Person, who had been taught the principles of non-violence during his previous activism, joined in.

"We were taught, when threatened, to stick together as a group, never as a solo," Person said in a phone interview in March. "We had to protect the women and young girls because they would get knocked over and exposed. We men put our bodies between the whites and the women."

During many of the sit-ins, in some of the less-violent confrontations, Person learned to study as he sat at lunch counters, even as he and his fellow students endured the condiments and cigarette butts thrown at them. Other acts of intimidation did not dissuade their efforts.

Person, knowing the Freedom Rides might be more dangerous than sit-ins, sometimes prayed for God's protection as the effort got underway.

"There were times that I should have been scared, and I wasn't," he said, "probably because I was eighteen years old."

Person, who was riding the second bus that headed into Anniston, a Trailways, tried to exit when the bus reached the terminal. However, members of the white mob punched him in the face and began beating him and others with weapons. Other members of the white mob picked

up Person and James Peck and dumped them in the seats at the back of their bus, where the two lay bleeding and dazed.

Afterwards, the two recovered the best they could and proceeded on towards Birmingham. When they arrived there, another mob of whites seized and beat them as they attempted to head towards a whites-only lunch counter.

At some point during the beatings, someone laid a particularly hard blow to the back of Person's head, which caused a large and bony knot that eventually required surgical removal.

During the beating in Birmingham, Person was able to escape and make his way to the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth's parsonage where he was safe.

Eventually, after the attacks in Birmingham, Person returned home where his family greeted him warmly.

"I would have returned to the movement, but the Army was recruiting black candidates for the military academy and, also in deference to my mother, I didn't return," Person said.

Eventually, he decided against going to the military academy and, instead, chose to serve his country in the U.S. Marine Corps.

For years after his military service ended, Person didn't tell others that he was a Freedom Rider, not even his wife JoEtta. However, one day, when he visited Birmingham's Civil Rights Museum, he signed his name onto a log at the front desk. A reporter saw it, approached him, and asked if he was the Freedom Rider Charles Person. As his astonished wife looked on, he affirmed his identity and gave the reporter his first-ever interview about his part in the history of the state of Alabama and the nation.

Today, Person and JoEtta live in Atlanta. He retired in 1981 from his job as an electronic technician for the Public School System of Atlanta.

When asked about Person's message to young people today, he related a story about his grandfather.

"Once, I was complaining that I could not get into Georgia Tech because of my skin color," Person said. "My grandfather asked me if I was going to do something about that, or only complain."

Person chose activism and made a difference in the lives of other black students.

"Since then," Person said, "I have encouraged students to allow change to begin with them and to make a difference. They should find like-minded people and discuss their issues. Then, they should find a way to let their grievances be known."

FREEDOM RIDERS CHALLENGE

Will you remain on the Burning Bus for 60 more years?
Will you crawl out in the midst of smoke, fire and injustices?
Will you struggle up, fighting for your life, and the lives of many generations for 60 plus more years?



Bridge Builder

An old man going a lone highway
Came at evening cold and gray
To a chasm vast, deep and wide
Through which was flowing a sullen tide
The old man crossed in twilight dim
The sullen stream had no fear for him
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow Pilgrim near
"You are wasting your strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again will pass this way;
You've crossed the chasm deep and wide;
Why build you this bridge at even-tide?"

"The builder lifted his old gray head
Good friend in the path I've come," he said
"There followeth after me today a youth whose feet
Must pass this way;
This chasm that has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;
He too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him."

-Allen Dromggole

Freedom Riders Park Board Members: Georgia Calhoun - Co Chairman, Charles Person - Co Chairman, Pete Conroy - Co Chairman, Anthony Dixon, Charlie Doster*, Willie Duncan, Bernard Emerson-Inactive, Teresia Hall, Dr. Bill Harbour-Co Chairman*, Maudine Halloway, Dr. C.W. Jairels-Inactive, Trudy Munford, Walter Prater, Terris Morris Tucker, Mary Waldrep, Penelope Williams*

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It began like any other small-town Sunday.

BY PHILLIP TUTOR
ptutor@annistonstar.com

Sunrise, as it often does on late spring days, illuminated the beauty of the Cheaha Valley on Mother's Day 1961. Like a newborn, the day carried expectations of church and family celebrations and the relaxation of the week's grandest time.

Anniston awoke slowly, gently, its Sunday morning routine hard to disrupt. It was cool, not quite 60 degrees, when dawn broke. Newspaper carriers finished their last routes with The Star's Sunday edition, the heftiest of the week.

In slippers and robes, subscribers sat down with their morning coffee and were greeted by the day's headlines. "Laos Peace Pact Signaled by Three Warring Groups," The Star's lead story proclaimed. Beneath it were others: "JFK Plans Message for Rally," "Strife, Plots Tear State Legislature" and "Okay Given Plans Here on Museum."

In Wellborn, family and friends of teenager Judy Chandler were still ecstatic from the night before, when Judy won the first Miss Wellborn beauty pageant.

On Christine Avenue, the family of prominent Anniston businessman Carter Poland, owner of Poland Soap Works on 10th Street, was in mourning after his sudden death on Saturday. Up the street at Anniston Memorial Hospital, nurses' Sunday morning workloads were lessened because 29 patients had been released the previous afternoon.

WHMA AM-1390 — "Your Good Music Station" — signed on at 6 with an hour of gospel music. Fifteen minutes of world and national news would soon follow.

Across town, rich families and poor families, black families and white families, rose in seeming unison to ready their Sunday best. Fifteen denominations were represented in the town's 100 churches, and elders and deacons and priests were preparing each of them for the day's anticipated Mother's Day services.

At Anniston Country Club on Highland Avenue, where the monied white residents lounged, nearly 50 golfers would soon arrive for another round of qualifying for the club's spring invitational. Jim Martin's 72, shot the day before, was the score to beat.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

The morning of May 14, 1961, on the west side of Noble Street

8:30 a.m.: Expecting a wonderful day

Just before 8:30, churchgoers began trickling in to The Church of St. Michael and All Angels, one of the city's architectural and spiritual masterpieces. Invoking the mood of the day, St. Michael's invited mothers and children to be guests of the rector at a Mother's Day breakfast in the church's assembly room.

An hour later, the city's houses of worship resonated with the activity of Sunday School lessons and fellowship hours. Smiles were abundant. Ministers looked over their notes for their coming sermons. They expected big crowds, Easter-like, in a few hours. The day, warming nicely without a cloud in the sky, was evolving with storybook precision: stunning, comforting, inviting. The type of day when families would worship together, lunch together and spend the afternoon doing nothing more than enjoying each other's company.

On television, Birmingham's WBRC-6 signed on the air with "The Gene Autry Show."

Anniston's bus stations on Noble Street and Gurnee Avenue were quiet.

10 a.m.: A bus heads for Anniston

At 10 a.m., an aging Greyhound bus left Atlanta for its normal Sunday morning route to Birmingham. It was a holiday morning, so the passenger list was sparse. Of the 14 people on board, seven were Freedom Riders, black and white, who were testing the equality of America's interstate transit system. Also on board were two journalists, Charlotte Devree and Moses Newsome, two undercover agents of the Alabama Highway Patrol, Cpl. Ell Cowling and Harry Sims, and the Greyhound bus line regional manager, Roy Robinson.

As the bus inched its way through western Georgia, Anniston's sanctuaries opened their doors. At 10:50, several churches began their Mother's Day services; others followed at the customary time of 11. The Bible Belt, in full display.

Dr. B. Locke Davis at Parker Memorial Baptist entitled his sermon, "A Christian Home." At Central Church of Christ at 16th and Noble streets, Pastor Elbert M. Young preached "I Surrender All." The Rev. J. Phillips Noble of First Presbyterian Church delivered his sermon, "God's Exceeding Love." At St. Michael's, Dr. Earl Ray Hart's sermon was entitled, "Happiness."

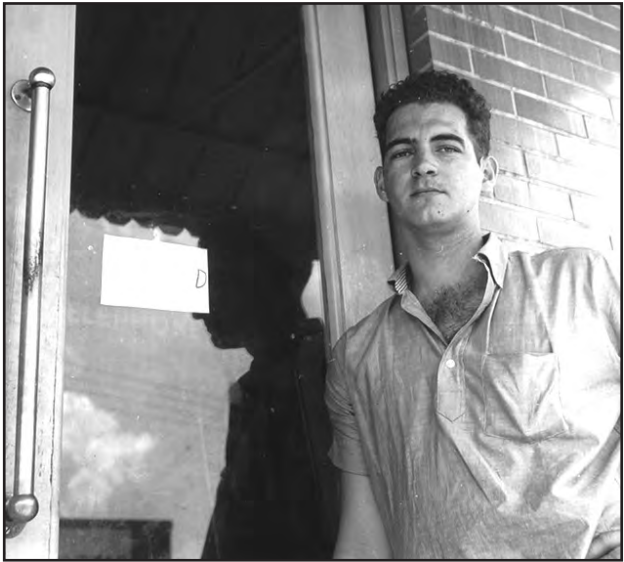
As Anniston's spiritual leaders were delivering their weekly messages, 90 miles to the east, another bus, a Trailways bus, was leaving Atlanta for Birmingham. On the bus were seven Freedom Riders. A few seats were occupied by Klansmen. Traveling along were a reporter and photographer from Jet magazine.

On McClellan Boulevard, cooks at Lee's Drive-In Restaurant hurried to prepare for an expected overflow Mother's Day crowd. All week, Lee's owners had advertised 99-cent ½ fried-chicken lunches. Families who took mom out to eat would also receive a free Mother's Day gift.

Around 11:30, as Anniston's churches were in full bloom, the Greyhound bus stopped in Tallapoosa, Ga.,

on the Alabama-Georgia border. Thirty minutes later, it would make its final stop in Heflin, before arriving in Anniston.

The day was getting warmer, as May days tend to do in Calhoun County. Clouds began to form overhead, though no one was expecting any rain.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Judson Glass, son of operator of the Greyhound bus station in Anniston, stands beside the door of the bus station with the "closed" sign, which was placed on the door at approximately 12 noon, May 14, 1961.

At noon, Anniston's churchgoers flowed from the sanctuaries, where they'd heard moving messages by the city's best pastors and priests. Glen Addie Baptist heard the words of the Rev. Billy Kitchens. At West Side Baptist, the Rev. Durro E. Wood delivered the sermon. The Rev. L.J. Chambliss did the same at West Anniston Baptist Church.

In the early afternoon, workers at the city's movie theaters readied for the day's matinees. Golfers at ACC traipsed about the course. Families went to lunch, either at home or at the few open restaurants. Baseball fans who used to follow the Anniston Rams, the city's minor-league team that disbanded in 1950, went home to listen to the Birmingham Barons on WHMA or watch the Major Leagues' game of the week: Detroit at the New York Yankees, on WBRC. At Anniston's churches, pastors regrouped to prepare for night services and the expected large crowds.

On Gurnee Avenue, there was activity at the Greyhound station.

The blinds were lowered. The door was locked. A white sign was taped to the right-hand door's glass window. "Closed."



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

The Greyhound bus arrives approximately 12:50 p.m. moving north on Gurnee Avenue between Tenth and Eleventh Streets on the east side of the street. In the FBI files, it is noted that the bus was allowed to circle the bus station and come into the loading dock without interference.

12:50 p.m.: Calm gives way to storm

The lunch hour was ending when the first Freedom Riders bus pulled onto Gurnee Avenue just shy of one o'clock. A few people standing on the side of the road watched the bus as it drove through town. Arriving via U.S. 78, it headed north, circled the station and entered the loading area from a back alleyway. No one was around; no ruckus, no police, no commotion. Roy Robinson, the Greyhound Bus Co.'s regional manager, was the first of two people to get off the bus. The Freedom Riders stayed put.

Nearby on Noble Street, people began to arrive at the



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Roy F. Robinson, regional manager of the Greyhound bus station, was the first person to disembark from the bus.

Calhoun Theater and The Ritz to buy tickets for the afternoon's matinees. Some of them were soldiers from Fort McClellan, a pleasant and familiar downtown sight on Sunday afternoons. A military-themed double-feature — "Korea Patrol" and "Drums in the Deep South" — would begin at 1:40. "Return to Peyton Place," starring Carol Lynley and Jeff Chandler, was scheduled at 1:50.

A few blocks away, a crowd of about 50 men emerged as Robinson opened the bus door. Mother's Day civility disappeared. An 18-year-old Klansman sat down in front of the bus to keep it from escaping. Toughs yelled racial insults at the Freedom Riders. Windows were broken, and someone slashed the bus' left-front tire. Police arrived, but made no arrests.

Later, Anniston Police Chief J.L. Peek told a Star reporter that he "saw no violation of the law. In all the mob, I did not see a soul I knew, and I know a lot of people."

Just after 1:30, Peek's officers moved the mob from the



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Anniston police arrive at the Greyhound bus terminal as the crowd gathers around the bus.

front of the bus and allowed it to continue its trek westward. Patrol cars escorted the bus to the city limits. Cars carrying Klansmen and others followed behind.

Around town, Annistonians went on with their day. Some traveled south to Oxford Lake. Some joined the McClellan soldiers at the movies. Others enjoyed the traditional day of rest: at home, no work, just family and friends. Many looked forward to returning to church later that evening.

Six miles outside of town, near Forsyth and Son Gro-



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

A line of cars follows the Greyhound bus as it passes the Monsanto Chemical Company on what is now Highway 202.

cery on Alabama 202, the driver of the Greyhound bus pulled over to the side of the road, his slashed tire flat. Police officers hadn't followed that far, but the mob had.

Soon, the second Freedom Riders bus would pull into Anniston.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Greyhound bus driver O.T. Jones examines the left front flat tire. The window, which was broken at the bus terminal, is in view.

1:45 p.m.: Violence on our streets

For 45 minutes, the disabled bus starred in a scene of violence and destruction on the city's western boundary, near Bynum. Undercover agent Ell Cowling, now armed, bravely kept the mob from entering the bus. More windows were broken. Through one of those windows someone tossed burning rags into the bus, which the Riders couldn't put out.

It would change Anniston's place in history.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Freedom Rider Ed Blakenheim and Joe Perkins, CORE field secretary, are seated in front of the Greyhound bus as Cpl. Eli Cowling stands in the doorway. The reflection of the bus window shows a group of men gathered in front of the Forsyth store.

In less than five minutes, the Riders and the other passengers had all escaped the smoking, burning bus, some through broken windows, others through the main door.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Some lay on the ground, wheezing, gasping for air. Others fretted about the mob, and wondered why patrolmen who'd finally arrived weren't doing more than they were.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Passenger Roberta Holmes and Freedom Rider Ed Blakenheim sit on the grass in front of Forsyth's as Jimmy McDonald, Freedom Rider, and Cpl. Eli Cowling stand facing the Greyhound bus.

Around 2 p.m., with the Noble Street movie houses doing brisk business, the second Freedom Riders bus pulled into town. It stopped briefly at the Trailways station on Noble. There, Riders nervously got off the bus, bought a few sandwiches at the station's lunch counter and returned to their seats.

For the next 20 minutes, Klansmen intent on moving the Riders to the back of the bus beat them, hit them in the face, kicked them in the head, and pulled them toward the back rows. Blood flowed. On Mother's Day, violence was erupting at two separate spots, on two different buses.

By half-past 2, the Greyhound bus on 202 was no longer a bus; it was a scorched, metal shell that wouldn't make it to Birmingham intact. Black smoke billowed skyward. An ambulance arrived from town and, after tense moments between the ambulance driver and Agent Cowling, took a few of the Riders to Anniston Memorial's emergency room.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

One of the passengers is carried on a stretcher to an ambulance.

As the Greyhound Riders were at the emergency room, seeking help from reluctant hospital staff and trying to arrange rides out of town, the Trailways Freedom Riders bus began moving toward Birmingham, its Riders beaten but alive.

Golfers at ACC, like movie-goers on Noble Street, were unaware. Though the club's course was only a mile or two east of downtown, the commotion on Noble Street and

out on 202 wasn't heard on Highland Avenue. The day was gorgeous, the temperature nearing 87. The golfing was good.

At 3 p.m., the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses began its afternoon service. "Maintaining an Honorable Marriage" was the message of presiding minister E.J. Painter.

At 4:15, the Trailways bus with its battered Freedom Riders pulled into the station in Birmingham. The beatings commenced, again.

5:15 p.m.: A day's meaning

Their sunny Mother's Day hardly complete, Annistonians sprang back to life in the evening. The calendar was full. Out at Fort McClellan, the heralded Women's Army Corps band held its weekly concert at 5:15; all county residents were invited to attend. Workers at the Calhoun Theater cleaned the aisles in preparation for the 6:35 showing. Out at the Midway Drive-In Theater, owner Thomas Coleman hoped for a big crowd for the 7 p.m. showing of "All in a Night's Work," starring Dean Martin and Shirley MacLaine. Likewise, the Bama Drive-In was about to open its gates for that night's Peter Ustinov feature, "The Sundowners."

As the sun set on May 14, 1961, there were two Annistons: one in the churches, where spoken words touched the souls of those sitting in the pews. The other was at Anniston Memorial, where the emergency room was filled with Freedom Riders and nurses and FBI agents and police officers. Klansmen and bullies were outside, waiting.

At 7:15, South Side Baptist Church on Constantine Avenue began the first of its week-long revival services. At 7:30, at First Christian Church's revival, evangelist Faust A. Matthews spoke on "Bringing Truth for Open Hearts." The Rev. Philip Noble delivered the message "How to Keep Life in Focus" at First Presbyterian. Dr. Davis' sermon at Parker Memorial was entitled, "Unto a Full-Grown Christian."

Anniston's services lasted until after sundown, the flocks twice-churched for the coming week. Residents returned home, where some turned on their televisions for the Sunday night entertainment of Ed Sullivan and Jack Benny on WBRC and Walt Disney and Shirley Temple on WAPI.

Most Freedom Riders, meanwhile, didn't depart Anniston Memorial until nearly midnight, when rescuers arrived from Birmingham to whisk them to safety. Of the thirteen passengers treated at the hospital, three were admitted. Two of the Freedom Riders remained overnight.

At daybreak the next morning, Star editors were preparing the Monday afternoon edition. Adrenaline flowed in the West 10th Street newsroom. When the press rolled, the front page headline told the story of Mother's Day 1961: "Mob Rocks, Burns Big Bus In County Racial Incidents." Rightly, The Star heralded Cowling's bravery: "Investigator Hero In Attack On Bus."

That afternoon, nine time zones away in Russia, Radio Moscow commented on the Anniston bus burning. Mother's Day in the city, equally beautiful and horribly violent, had become a global event.

This narrative was created using information from Federal Bureau of Investigation files, archives of The Anniston Star and "Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice" by Ray Arsenault. A version of this story was published previously in The Anniston Star.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Anniston firefighter Joe Evans extinguishes the fire on the Grayhound bus.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Enoch Hughes, Anniston fireman, in the burned-out Greyhound bus.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

The Greyhound bus arrives approximately 12:50 p.m. at the Greyhound bus station in Anniston. It is noted in the FBI files that 500 pieces of ammunition were alleged to be in the vehicle parked in the garage.

May 14, 1961, was the beginning of a long season of protest

BY TIM LOCKETTE

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It was Mother's Day.

People who picked up the Sunday edition of the Anniston Star that morning would learn that peace talks were underway between warring factions in Laos, the Alabama Legislature was fighting over redistricting and actor Gary Cooper had died at age 60.

There was no mention of the Freedom Riders, a group of civil rights protesters, black and white, who were traveling across the South to challenge segregation at interstate bus stations. Six months earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that segregation on interstate trains and buses was illegal because it violated the Interstate Commerce Act.

Anniston had already seen its first unintentional Freedom Rider months earlier. When Arthur "Art" Bacon, a Black senior at Talladega College, returned by train from Christmas break on Jan. 2, 1961, he walked into the Anniston train station and took a seat in a whites-only waiting room. Bacon had read the Supreme Court decision and assumed it was in effect. White attackers beat Bacon, and Talladega College students later marched in the city to protest the beating.

The attack on Bacon drew little nationwide attention. And something similar was true for the Freedom Riders who started their journey across the South in May 1961. When three Freedom Riders took a beating in Rock Hill, S.C. on May 10 — one of the first violent conflicts of the rides — it made only the inside pages of The Star, for instance.

When the first Greyhound bus left

Atlanta around 11 a.m. that Sunday morning, many Calhoun County residents may have been unaware the Freedom Riders were rolling their way.

But someone knew.

When the bus arrived at the Greyhound station on Gurnee Avenue, according to news accounts from the day, the station was already closed. No police were on hand, but a mob of white segregationists — 50 strong, or 150 or 200, depending on the account you read — were there.

The group held up the bus in the alleyway next to the Greyhound station. One man lay down in front of the bus to keep it from moving. Police arrived and at about 1:30 p.m., they ordered the crowd to part and let the bus move forward. By that time, white attackers had already smashed some of the bus windows and, crucially, slashed its tires.

Klansmen in cars followed behind the bus, out to the western edge of the city near Bynum, where the slashed tires finally forced the Greyhound driver to stop. Members of the white mob tried to storm the bus but were held back by Ell Cowling, an armed officer of the state law enforcement agency, who had been riding the bus undercover. The attackers threw burning rags into the bus, and soon the vehicle itself was burning.

Freedom Riders escaped through windows and the door of the bus. Joe Postiglione, a freelance photographer for The Anniston Star, arrived in time to catch a photo of the bus in full flame, with Freedom Riders on the ground nearby, still gasping for air.

Less than half an hour later, a Trailways bus carrying another group of Freedom Riders pulled up in Anniston. Klansman



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

The Greyhound bus is shown at the intersection of Tenth and Gurnee Avenue as it leaves Anniston.

again attacked, beating passengers of that bus, but the Trailways bus made it out of town and headed to Birmingham — where another round of beatings awaited.

Whatever the attackers intended, on Mother's Day in 1961 they achieved exactly the opposite. Postiglione's photo of the burning bus appeared in newspapers around the world the following day, along with pictures of the later events in

Birmingham — a reminder of the brutal intent of Alabama's most ardent segregationists.

The events of that day were the start of a long season of protest. By the end of the year, the Interstate Commerce Commission — which had long declined to enforce the integration ruling — relented, ordering integration in bus stations even in the South.

Firemen: Duty over fear

BY SHERRY KUGHN

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When the call came into the Anniston fire department, firemen Joe Evans and Enoch Hughes rushed out of Station 4 on 15th Street to where the bus was burning on the old Birmingham Highway, which is now Alabama 202. They had heard about the violence that had taken place at the bus station on Gurnee Avenue.

The two reached the top of John Hardy Hill in Wellborn, looked down and knew the situation was bad. The fire, the smoke, and the threat of violence from the crowd faced them, but they approached the scene anyway.

Upon arrival, the two recognized that people might still be in the burning, smoking bus.

Safety first for human life were words that likely jumped to their minds. They ran to the bus door and perhaps helped people out. They made sure everyone was out of the bus and administered oxygen to those who were overcome, and other firemen arrived.

"Joe's job was to put the fire out," said David Boyd, a retired Anniston fireman and assistant chief, who has published a history of the Anniston Fire Department. "There was an extensive fire, and the firemen attacked the fire."

Boyd worked with Evans and Hughes, but he only talked to Evans about that

eventful day. "They did their duty," Boyd said. "They went down there and did what they could. Back then, medical training was not a part of a firefighter's duty, but they had some oxygen equipment. There is a photo at the library showing them administering oxygen to someone."

Another person remembers hearing Evans tell what happened that day.

His son Scott, 65, was only about six years old when the bus burned; however, he grew up hearing his father tell others about the bus burning. He remembers Evans, who later became captain, saying that he dragged people out of the bus. Scott said

his father never mentioned to him about being afraid, nor would he have treated blacks any differently from whites.

"It didn't matter to him what color you were," Scott said. "He looked at people as people, and he didn't divide them up in color."

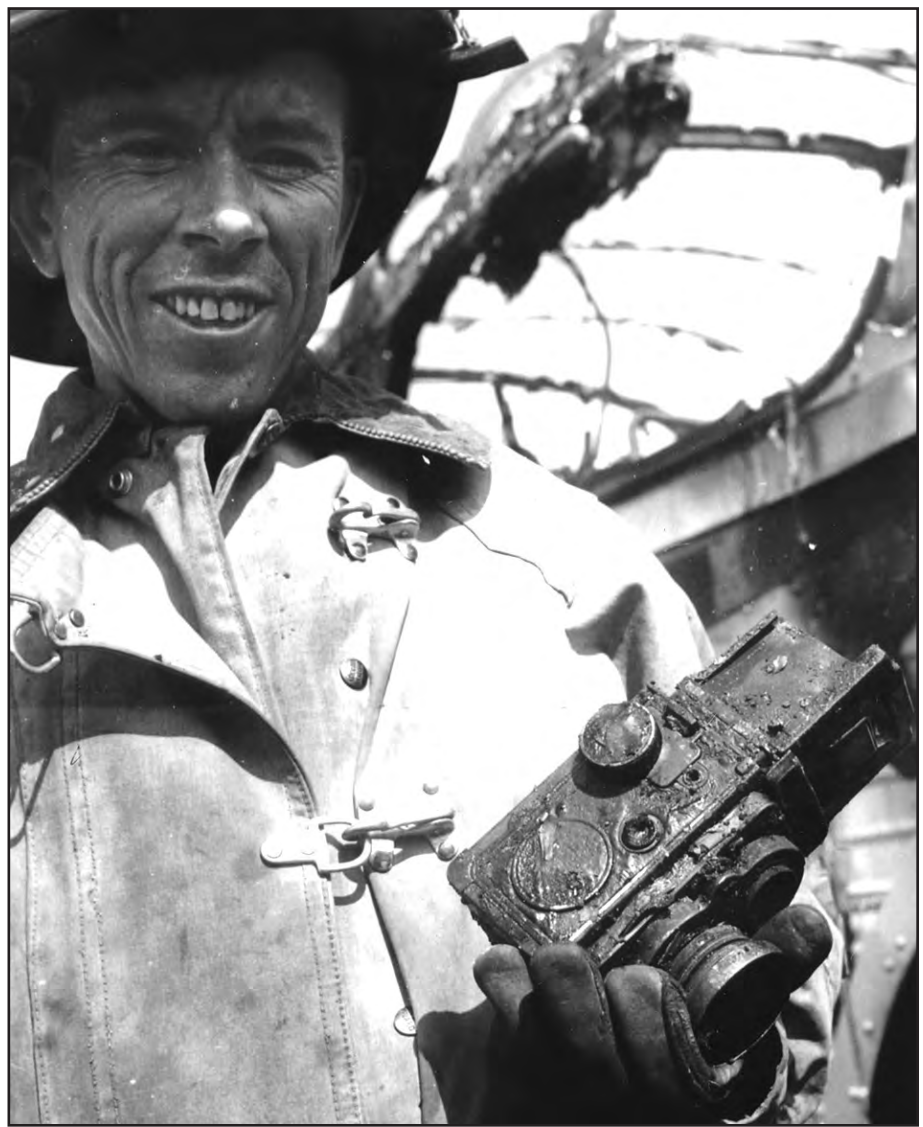
Scott said he knows his father's attitude about those of a different race because

he often brought black co-workers or black policemen by the house whenever he was working.

"When he died," said Scott, a retired military veteran, "there were a lot of black people at the funeral. I think some of them were the relatives of the ones he helped the day of the bus burning. As a result of the way he was, I never had a problem working with people of any race. Dad never spoke bad about anyone. They were all people."

“They went down there and did what they could.”

— David Boyd, a retired Anniston fireman and assistant chief



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

Anniston fireman Enoch Hughes holds the burned camera that belonged to Moses J. Newsome, a Black reporter/photographer who was part of the CORE-organized Freedom Ride.



Special to The Anniston Star

The Anniston Star staff, 1959. From left, back row: Stewart Ridgeway, engraver; Sam Jones, reporter; Cody Hall, reporter; Mac McCants, wire editor; George Smith, sports; and Taylor Smith, managing editor. Middle row: Billie Merrill and Cornelia Alston, Society. Front row: Unknown; Jim Chisum, reporter; Joe Postiglione, photo; and Jim Lowry, outdoor writer, reporter, photo.

Jones, Postiglione recorded events of the day for The Star

BY BILL EDWARDS

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“Racial incidents.”

That’s the label The Anniston Star’s readers saw on their front page Monday afternoon, May 15, 1961. It described the white mob terrorism directed the previous day against those who would test the government’s will to enforce integration law.

The crucial difference between this and other stories they had read about racial conflict: This one had happened in their own town.

Sam Jones had written this article, a taut example of his skill at capturing a narrative. After a lead paragraph that stated what had happened and what the result was — “sent at least a dozen passengers to Memorial Hospital” — Jones introduced not one but two conflicts. One was the conflict between the mob, described as “ugly” and “rowdy,” and the people on the bus trying to stay alive and unhurt, while the other, noted in a secondary headline, was between the people testing the integration law and the law enforcement officers.

“A spokesman for the Congress of Racial Equality ... said lawmen on the scene ‘let this happen,’” according to the article.

There was at least one exception, reporter Jones told readers. A 45-year-old state criminal investigator by the name of Ell Cowling had been assigned to ride the bus that carried the Freedom Riders and routine passengers. Cowling had never experienced a mob like the white men attacking the bus, yet he bravely “stood in the door and kept them out till he fell out from smoke” that had filled the interior of the vehicle, according to a Greyhound official who happened to be on board.

The Page 1 article was, of course, important enough to present with eye-catching typographic treatment — the first two paragraphs received larger print. It was positioned in the top right corner of the page, where the biggest news of the day normally goes.

Sometimes a dramatic event off the beaten track slips by unrecognized for its larger importance, but not this one. The writer included the descriptive phrase “that drew the nation’s attention to Anniston” because as Model City residents read their news 24 hours after the fact, words and images had already been transmitted around the world.

Indeed, there were the pictures.

As television established its journalistic credentials in the early 1960s, newspaper editors understood they needed to reserve space for their own visual presentation, too. For that, The Star relied on the work of Joe Postiglione, a photographer who went by the name of “Little Joe” in the credit lines that appeared with his work. And static pictures were needed.



Obviously there were no devices at the time whereby the news-consuming public could freeze a motion picture, so the work of “Little Joe” became all the more important for people to see so they could understand what had happened.

The wire services Associated Press and United Press International both transmitted Postiglione’s photographs to member publications, according to David Weintraub, a South Carolina writer in his essay “Eye on Image-Making: A Dream Revealed Blog.”

Front-page photos that Star editors chose that day showed riders on the ground outside the bus gasping for air; lawmen trying to control the white mob;

Ell Cowling, the state investigator riding along who helped protect the passengers; and some of the racists who had gathered at the bus station on Gurnee Avenue to try to prevent the vehicle from leaving. Inside the May 15 issue, more “Little Joe” pictures showed the interior of the burned-out bus and victims of smoke inhalation trying to catch their breath.

The Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, in its exhibit about the bus burning, describes Postiglione as “an aggressive and determined photographer [who] followed the mob that intercepted the Greyhound bus.

“He caught the Freedom Riders in the immediate aftermath, their clothes ashen,

their faces distraught, and the flames and smoke from the bus in plain view.”

His images “were shown around the country and around the world,” writes Dr. Turkiya Lowe, chief historian for the National Park Service, on the website of The Conservation Fund, which helps preserve vital places of human and natural history in the U.S. “The media played a role in prompting federal action and making the events known to so many people.”

On May 17, 1961, according to the FBI files related to the bus burning trial, The Anniston Star turned over 56 of the 66 photographs taken by Postiglione of the Greyhound bus station and site of violence as an investigative aid.

At the end of the month, on Tuesday, May 30, 1961, Postiglione’s observations as a professional photographer at the scenes of the attack were entered into the record of the U.S. District Court in Montgomery. Federal Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. presided over the hearing, sought by the Justice Department to establish the extent of KKK involvement in the mob action and to obtain an order requiring Birmingham and Montgomery police to protect future interstate passengers.

“Called to the witness stand by government attorneys, Postiglione described the scene at the Greyhound station, named several persons whom he recognized in the crowd, and possibly linked the Klan with the Sunday incident,” Montgomery reporter Judith Rushin wrote on special assignment for The Star.

Postiglione, on a tip, had arrived at the Greyhound station early Sunday morning but subsequently learned the Freedom Riders’ bus would not be there as early as expected. He left the station but nearby saw a few men gathered nearby.

“Approaching the group, he told one man that the bus was not coming. Another man reached on the floorboard of his car and got a shotgun saying, ‘I’m ready for them,’ Postiglione related,” according to the article.

When the bus with damaged tires pulled out of the station a little after 1 p.m., Postiglione got into his car and followed it at a speed of about 30 mph along with a caravan of cars that joined in from all intersections.

Exactly a year after the bus-burning, Postiglione, described as “a free lance photographer working on assignment from The Star,” won third prize in the category Spot News Photography in the annual Alabama Associated Press Association for the bus-burning images. (Postiglione snagged first place, too, for a picture of a racial demonstration at City Hall early in 1961.)

For his prose, Jones tied for first in the overall news writing sweepstakes prize, and won first prize outright for newspapers in The Star’s size category.



The April 1956 attack on Nat King Cole—ordered by Carter—was only the beginning. As early as 1955, Adams had posted a sign on his service stations: “We Serve Whites Only,” and over the following years, he repeatedly assaulted Black would-be customers. Twice, he pistol-whipped Blacks who stopped for gas; when one black couple asked for a fill-up, he responded by pushing the

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Chairman

Dan Carter, retired University of South Carolina Professor of History, is the author and editor of seven books, including a history of the Alabama 1930s Scottsboro case and "The Politics of Rage," a biography of former Alabama governor George Wallace. Carter won an Emmy for the PBS documentary of Governor Wallace that was based on his book. He is nearing completion of a biography of Calhoun County native, Asa Carter (1926-1979) who changed his identity to "Forrest Carter" in 1973 and wrote four best-selling books before his death in 1979.

Adams' rampage continued through the decade. In 1960, he organized the burning of over a hundred KKK crosses throughout the county, including the homes of several Black residents considered too "militant" and bragged

But, as singer Bob Dylan said in his 1960s anthem, “the times they are a’ changing” and the Brewster case seems to have been a turning point in Anniston. The community created a \$20,000 reward for the arrest of the man who had killed the father of two, and the Anniston Star published a withering editorial. In Anniston, wrote Managing Editor Brandt Ayers, “We have had our scientists, our statesmen, our men of industry and commerce...We have built our schools and churches. We have extolled our past...And we have made a society

The sins of the father: Not hers

By **Theresa Shadrix**

Eve Cole believes she has broken a generational curse.

As the youngest child of Kenneth Lamar Adams, she remembers the violence, the white robes, and how her father, the Grand Dragon of the Dixie Klan, was feared by the community and adored by white supremacists.

"I was either feared because I was his daughter or I was admired because I was his daughter or I was hated because of it."

In a phone call from her Dothan home, she reflected on the man suspected of orchestrating the May 14, 1961, attack on the Freedom Riders in Anniston. The same man who held the entire community captive through intimidation and violence.

Eve was born in 1957, just one year after her father was arrested for inciting a riot and attacking Nat King Cole during a performance at the Boutwell Auditorium in Birmingham. With two older brothers and one sister, she completed the Adams family. She was not like her siblings, though.

Born with a congenital absence of both arms, she had to learn to adapt to the world around her. As a young girl, she was not aware of her father's activities with the Ku Klux Klan. All she knew was that he helped her become independent. She said that he taught her the little things, like driving and swimming, and to believe in herself. "He was my number one encourager. He always believed that I could do anything I set my mind to. So that was huge for me."

As a student at Wellborn High School, she excelled in academics and life. She learned to type with her feet in the school's typing course and graduated sixth in her class in 1976. She married Ronny Cole a few months after graduating and eventually produced two children from that union. Her high school internship at the Anniston Army Depot turned into a career, where she marveled everyone at her ability to type with her toes.

Still, with all the achievements at work, in her marriage, and raising two children, the reality of her childhood and the role her father played in white supremacy in Alabama is difficult.

Although he was not physically abusive to her, the combination of alcohol and hate

brought violence to her mother. And, just like in the community, there was no one to call for help as her father was tightly connected to law enforcement.

Although he never talked about his arrests, convictions, or Klan activities, guests in her home and people who surrounded her father were not the Country Club elite. "I had, you know, a lot of people around me that had been to jail, had murdered, just creepy people," she said. "But, that's the people he could tell what to do." She recalls a brief period of peace when she was nine or ten and her father lived with Asa Carter, Ku Klux Klan leader and author of Governor George Wallace's 1963 "Segregation Now. Segregation Forever" speech.

Her memories are littered with moments of her father's hatred toward Blacks, and even the thought of what he might do impacted her life. Like when she was voted "Most Intellectual" at Wellborn and discovered that the male honoree, Doug Satcher, was not only Black but was related to Albert Satcher, a young Black male her father shot in 1969. After staying home to avoid having her picture made, she returned the next day, only to be pulled out of class for the photo. Terrified, she said she was forced to explain to the yearbook adviser that a picture of her with a Black classmate would bring wrath from her father. The image was not published.

Living with the trauma of her childhood, she realizes she can't change the past. She cherishes the memories of her husband, who died in 2003, and how they raised their children. "My kids and grandkids don't hate. They were raised to love diversity, and they truly live that." Her adult life, she said, has been surrounded by love, which is in stark contrast to that of her father, who died alone in his home in 1990. The sins of her father are not hers. "I guess being born different made me have a heart for everybody."

Theresa Shadrix is the former special publications editor at The Anniston Star (2005-2012) and former managing editor of Longleaf Style magazine (2006-2012). She is an English Language Arts and journalism teacher at Jacksonville High School and adjunct instructor at Jacksonville State University.



Submitted photo

Freedom Riders bus-burner says he's a changed man; shares bold new outlook

By **Troy Turner**

The only surviving arrestee from the infamous 1961 bus-burning attack on civil rights Freedom Riders traveling the South says: "I was blind, but now I see."

The man who recently turned 85 and helped burn a bus that day is today trying to burn a memory.

"I was involved, yes, but I blindly walked into it," said Jerome Couch. "We did the Black race wrong, with a capital W."

It is the first time in the 60 years since the events of that day that Couch has shared an interview with his reflections on what happened along a rural Alabama backroad and at an Anniston bus station in a series of violent attacks that jarred a nation.

Then and now

The Jerome Couch of 2021 is a man quick to crack a smile and just as quick to crack open a Bible. He claims repentance for his deeds back in what he refers to as those dark and confusing days of his early life; and by his account and that of others who know him, he is entirely a different man, one who strives every day to help others ahead of himself.

The Jerome Couch of 1961, however, was a much different character, and his story is one that serves as a clear reflection of how Jim Crow law once ruled the South, influenced generations of haters, and yet spawned an era of change that remains a mission in progress.

The history of events that occurred during Mother's Day, May 14, 1961, is easy to find in any chronology regarding the civil rights era of the 1950s and '60s.

Freedom Riders, they were called, boarded buses in cities such as Atlanta, as one group of riders did that day on a Greyhound bus bound for Birmingham. Their goal was to bring attention to the continued segregation of public services, including bus and train transportation, despite recently enacted federal law demanding equal access for whites and blacks.

Throughout the South at a time when the conclusion of the Civil War to end slavery was not yet a century old, there remained a deep-rooted hatred of federal intervention in state and local affairs, and an even deeper hatred from many whites toward blacks who, in many cases, risked their lives to establish a new culture for themselves and future generations.

Jim Crow law, on the other hand, was the unwritten rule by which many Southerners still abided in 1961, and that meant blacks sat at the back of the bus, drank from different water fountains, used separate restrooms, and did not receive equal customer service in restaurants, hotels or other white-owned businesses.



Photo courtesy of Troy Turner

In 2016, Troy Turner discussed his role in the field of journalism at the Opelika Lions Club and was introduced by Lion Jerome Couch.

tion that raged in Anniston when word came that the Freedom Riders were on the way.

"I was involved. I was there," he recalled. "But I got to looking at this whole thing, and I got to looking at this and said, why am I out here? I don't believe in all of this!"

His actions back then, however, suggested otherwise.

Ku Klux Klan leaders were out to recruit more young white men who were convinced blacks remained undeserving in taking away jobs and seeking equal social status where only a hundred years earlier, they were slaves.

Jerome was ripe for recruitment, and he played a significant role when the Freedom Rider bus arrived.

He was among those who slashed its tires, and then, according to court records, he drove in front of the bus and slowed it down once it made its way outside of town on the rural road where it finally stopped. There it was firebombed, and its escape-attempting occupants severely beaten.

Jerome did not share specifics about his role in the attack.

However, six Anniston-area men charged and arrested for the bus-burning went to court only to have the hearing lead to a mistrial because of issues with the jury. The men later entered "no contest" pleas in January 1962, Jerome one of them.

Sever all ties

Roger Couch (not related) was sentenced to a year and a day in jail, added to a five-year sentence for a separate burglary conviction involving the theft of \$14,500

from an Anniston man.

Jerome and the other four men were sentenced to one year of probation, on the condition that they sever all ties with the Ku Klux Klan.

Among those arrested and charged, only Jerome survives today to talk about it; yet he still shies away from those days he wishes he could forget.

"The last time someone requested an interview with me on this was from someone with the Oprah Winfrey Show," he shared. "I said no."

That was 10 years ago.

Realizing that he can never escape his past, Jerome decided to change his future. He searched for, and found, God.

And with Him, the forgiveness Jerome hopes others finally will allow, to help him cast away the dark shadows that still follow him.

'Flat-out wrong'

"I was young and easily influenced. But I have had a big, big change of heart," says Jerome. "This country has done some bad things. One of them is slavery."

"And we have had some Jim Crow laws that were just flat-out wrong."

He still ponders how the Jerome of today could be someone who supported the KKK those many years ago. "I was in it for maybe six months," before realizing it was a bad move, he said, even without the court mandate that he part ways with the hate-oriented Klan.

He worked several jobs over the years, becoming a mortician and working at funeral homes for a career.

One of those jobs took him to Opelika, and while living there, Jerome became

active in numerous civic activities, including in the Lions Club, and as one of the most active members of the Keep Opelika Beautiful organization.

Jerome is "one of the greatest KOB volunteers," said director Tipi Colley Miller, publicly praising him in a column published in the local newspaper.

Fellow Lions Club members enjoyed Jerome's active efforts over the years to lure community leaders to the club's meetings, where various issues of the day routinely were discussed and service-project ideas were conceived.

Jerome, who keeps his phone number and email address private and remains leery of media requests, has since moved from Opelika, but he has taken on another mission of sorts: personal ministry.

And, he's written a book.

Not about the events of Anniston, but rather, about the sometimes humorous, sometimes sad stories in the life of a funeral home worker.

Dealing with regret

The name of his book is meant as a pun to reflect his work in the graveyard, but also his life.

It is titled: "I Will Let You Down."

He laughs, calling it a humble confession that he can fail as a man, even doing his job.

But in letters down below the title on the cover: "GOD WILL NEVER LET YOU DOWN."

"I just regret that I got involved in all of that," he says of his youthful sins. "I let a lot of people down by getting involved in something I shouldn't have gotten involved with."

"I regret it, but that's water over the dam."

Instead of dwelling on that in a depressing way, Jerome has taken his faith-led changes into street corners and churches and anywhere else where people are willing to hear his witness and a dose of homespun humor meant to lift spirits and create smiles.

Anywhere, that is, except a media world that seems more interested in Anniston than God.

"I am a failure myself. If God had not sent His son Jesus Christ to die for our sins, we all would be a failure," Jerome said, on his way home from handing out copies of his book at a church back in Opelika. "But instead, we all can be saved and through Him have a new life."

Jerome paused. Then added: "He saved me."

Troy Turner is a former executive editor of The Anniston Star (2000-2006), having since worked at newspapers across the U.S. before being promoted to corporate leadership in New York for the nation's second-largest newspaper company. He recently started his own strategic communications agency based in Auburn and can be contacted at troyturner0077@gmail.com.

Freedom Rider reflects, encourages youth to be the change

By **Theresa Shadrix**

Jim Zwerg, 81, believes that change comes from getting involved. From his New Mexico home, he spoke about his time as a Freedom Rider and encouraged today's youth to "be the change in the world" through action. After all, it was why he became a student activist and Freedom Rider 60 years ago.

Freedom Rides

After the May 14, 1961, attacks on the Freedom Riders from the Greyhound and Trailways buses, the 13 original riders left Alabama on commercial flights to New Orleans. They were beaten and weary. Student activists in Nashville, Tenn., heard about what happened in Anniston and Birmingham and were determined not to let violence win. They were invigorated and energetic. Jim Zwerg was one of those students. The Wisconsin native said that it was at Beloit College in his home state that he first noticed the discrimination of a segregated society. During his freshman year, his college roommate, who was black, experienced racism and introduced Zwerg to the teaching of nonviolence. "I witnessed the physical and verbal abuse that he encountered, both on and off-campus. And he was a class act."

Zwerg later applied for and was accepted as an exchange student at Fisk University, a historically Black college in Nashville. "When I got down there, I was very naive about life," he said. "You didn't have instant awareness of what was happening in your community, let alone around the world." When he could not watch a movie, eat out, use the same restrooms, and shop at the same stores as his Black friends, he was both confused and irritated. He said the segregation of stores and facilities was "the dumbest thing I've ever heard." When a campaign to integrate movie theaters was launched, he witnessed a demonstration by black students. "They were dressed up very nicely. But they just stood there," he said. "They weren't carrying any signs or placards. They weren't shouting any slogans." He commented to another student that they didn't seem to be making a difference. That student was John Lewis, who, at 21, was already active in the civil rights movement in Nashville.

Meeting Lewis, who later became a congressman in Georgia, would have a profound impact on Zwerg. "I'd never met a young person my age that just had his act together. He was a very devout person with a very deep, profound faith. He had absolutely embraced nonviolence. It was his way of life. He was committed to it." Lewis, who died in July 2020, shared

the principles of nonviolence and scripture at workshops. It is what led Zwerg to get involved. "The bottom line is if you sit there and say you have faith, but you don't show it, you don't take action to help others. Basically, what good is it?" When Zwerg joined the efforts of the Nashville students to integrate movie theaters, his first demonstration was with Piedmont native William "Bill" Harbour. "I went to the ticket counter, and I got two tickets. And I turned to my partner, Bill Harbor, and we made it into the lobby." The students did not give up. It's an attitude that carried them through a successful movie theater integration campaign and toward the Freedom Rides. While they were celebrating their victories, they also heard about the defeat of the Freedom Riders in Alabama. After having an emergency meeting, he said they determined the ride had to continue. "If you let the segregationists think that all he had to do is get violent enough, and you turn tail and run, it could have set back this whole civil rights movement, you know, years, if not decades." Zwerg was one of 18 volunteers to continue the Freedom Rides and 10 who would travel to Alabama to complete the ride, three females and seven males. On May 17, after leaving their wills with Diane Nash, chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), they purchased tickets in Nashville and boarded a bus for Alabama. Zwerg and Paul Brooks were arrested by Bull Connor, commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, as they arrived in Birmingham. Their time in the Birmingham jail did not deter them. Zwerg and the Freedom Riders would continue in the journey, encountering violence in Montgomery on May 20. Even as he and John Lewis were being attacked by Klansmen, he felt peace and forgiveness. "I asked God to be with me, and I asked Him to give me the strength to remain nonviolent and to forgive them." He said he experienced something beyond himself. "I felt a total peace come over me. I felt that I was just surrounded in a hug of love." Zwerg, a retired minister, looks back on the Freedom Rides with the same mindset about love, forgiveness, and action he had 60 years ago. He also looks toward the future and what young people can do. "If you think the world needs to be more loving, start with yourself."

Theresa Shadrix is the former special publications editor at The Anniston Star (2005-2012) and former managing editor of Longleaf Style magazine (2006-2012). She is an English Language Arts and journalism teacher at Jacksonville High School and adjunct instructor at Jacksonville State University.



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POWER THAT MOVES

On May 14, 1961, an interracial group of civil rights activists, known as the Freedom Riders, were attacked during their journey through Anniston, Alabama. The courage and perseverance of the Freedom Riders helped ensure the integration of interstate transportation and change the course of American history. Sixty years later, they continue to inspire us, and Alabama Power takes pride in honoring that legacy by recognizing the Freedom Riders as Power Movers.



Joe Postiglione/The Anniston Star

As the crowd of men gathers, Roger Couch sits in front of the Greyhound bus. The Anniston Star photographer Joe “Little Joe” Postiglione was approached and asked why he had a camera around his neck. Joe replied, “Hell, don’t ask me. Ask Ken. You all sent for me.” No further action was made by the individual. This picture was taken at waist level without the crowd being aware their photo was being taken.

Investigating the bus burning

By GARY S. SPRAYBERRY

Most readers of The Anniston Star are familiar with the May 1961 attack on the Freedom Rides. It established Anniston as a key battleground in the long struggle for civil rights, exposed the city to national and international condemnation, and spurred local efforts to begin the process of desegregation. It was a turning point for the community.

Yet, very little has been written about the FBI investigation into the attack and the subsequent trial of the men responsible for burning the bus.

It’s a story almost as harrowing as the bus attack itself.

The bus burning

On Mother’s Day, May 14, 1961, a Greyhound bus carrying members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) arrived in the city of Anniston. CORE had come to the South to test a recent Supreme Court decision (Boydton v. Virginia) barring segregated facilities along interstate routes. The Riders encountered little resistance as they made their way through Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. But in Anniston, their luck ran out.

At the Greyhound station on Gurnee Avenue, Klansmen and other white supremacists surrounded the bus. They screamed obscenities at the passengers, smashed windows, and even slashed one of the tires with a switchblade knife. After several agonizing minutes, Anniston police officers arrived on the scene and cleared a path for the bus to leave.

As the Greyhound pulled out of the station and headed west toward Birmingham, dozens of Klansmen ran to their cars and trucks to give chase. Six miles outside of Anniston, a flat tire forced the bus to pull over to the shoulder of Highway 202, near the Forsyth and Sons Grocery store. Again, an angry, howling mob surrounded the bus. When the terrified passengers refused to vacate the vehicle, someone tossed an incendiary device through a back window. Within minutes, flames had consumed the bus.

The next day, photographs of the burning bus appeared in The Anniston Star and newspapers around the globe. Suddenly, the Model City had become ground zero in the civil rights movement.

The investigation

Within hours of the attack, FBI agents were out in force in the community, knocking on doors and gathering evidence. They interviewed dozens of residents, and encountered considerable resistance among the white population of Anniston.

One of the first people that the FBI called upon was Klansman William “Bill” Chappell who had served as a veritable ringleader for the mob at the Greyhound station and in front of Forsyth’s Grocery. Chappell, who owned an upholstery shop in town, had paraded around the bus with a club in his hand, daring the Riders to step outside, calling them all “dirty communists.” He became so incensed, one witness said, that he started to weep.

Quizzed by the agents about his role in the attack, Chappell was rude and evasive.

After several rounds of questions failed to dislodge one piece of useful information, the agents decided to break off the interrogation and try elsewhere. When they stood to leave, Chappell blurted out that he wanted “to show them something.” The two men followed the Klansman to the rear of his house, where he had left a box containing two white kittens and a black one. Chappell said he was “going to kill the colored kitten and hang the two white ones out and let them air [to] punish them for integration,” then he roared with laughter.

Days later, while interviewing another witness, the agents discovered that Chappell had written a poem about the Freedom Ride assault and, with the help of some fellow Klansmen, distributed it throughout the community. An excerpt: *Our eyes are wide open, and our ears are too. If they know what is good, they will pass*

on through.

Let them go back to Russia, where the whole thing began, The Communist bastards are making sport of us men.

The insolent bastards are dumb, we all know.

The city of Anniston must have Jim Crow.

I am sorry this happened on our Sabbath Day.

May God forgive us, this is all I can say.

Chappell hardly stood alone in his defiance. Joe and Kenneth Adams, the owners of Adams Oil Company and the suspected masterminds of the bus attack, avoided the FBI for days. The brothers had been waging a war against the civil rights movement for years. In April 1956, for instance, Kenneth attacked singer Nat “King” Cole on stage at the Birmingham Municipal Auditorium, insisting that Cole and other African American artists were corrupting white teenagers with their “jungle music” and making them more susceptible to black political and social gains.

When agents caught up to Joe Adams in the wake of the bus burning, the service station owner demanded, “Do you have a warrant for my arrest?” When they replied no, Adams said he had nothing to say and that “they were wasting their time.” Kenneth managed to elude the agents for more than two weeks. Even after his arrest, he “refused to allow the FBI to humiliate [him] with fingerprinting and photographing.”

Roger Couch, arguably the most belligerent participant during the bus attacks, consented to an initial interview with agents and then tried to downplay his involvement. At the Greyhound station on Gurnee Avenue, Couch had taken a seat on the pavement in front of the bus, preventing it from leaving. Agents Clay Slate and Joe Landers asked Couch about this, but he denied it. When they presented the eighteen-year-old with a photograph that clearly showed him sitting in front of the bus, Couch told them he suffered from epilepsy and had only sat down because he felt dizzy and feared an oncoming seizure. Couch had a long criminal record, and he had spent a better part of his teenage years in and out of reformatory school and prison. His excuses failed to move the two veteran FBI agents.

Even people who had nothing to do with the attacks appeared defiant and uncooperative. A former employee of Adams’ Oil Company, Harry Norton, told investigators he was a “rebel at heart” and said that if he had been at the bus station on Mother’s Day he would not have hesitated to beat “hell out of” the Riders.

Another resident, speaking anonymously, told the agents that he “wished everyone on the bus had been burned to death” and that the “CORE group was asking and looking for trouble.”

Filling out one of his daily progress reports, one of the FBI men concluded: “It has been most difficult to get people to talk.” Either they were “in sympathy with what transpired,” he surmised, or they were “afraid of the Klan as well as Kenneth and Joe Adams.”

The latter seemed closer to the truth. Nearly every person the FBI interviewed admitted to knowing Kenneth Adams, but few were willing to speak out against him. Taxi driver Dalford Roberts, who had initially cursed the Riders but later administered oxygen to some of them after the attack, told agents: “I know I am in the middle, but I’m afraid to talk for fear of the life of my wife and child.”

He was not alone. Several others said they would not divulge any information for fear of what Adams and his followers might do to them. The ones who did cooperate received weeks of threats and harassment. Anniston Star photographer Joe Postiglione, whose images of the burning Greyhound appeared in newspapers around the world, received a number of death threats by phone and in the mail. One letter warned, “You are so boastful of your wonderful haul during the Freedom

Ride. Be sure little yellow coward you make enough to last you the remainder of your life. Your work in this part of the world is over.”

According to many of the residents the FBI interviewed, such tactics had become standard procedure during the civil right era. Anyone who questioned the motives of men like Kenneth Adams or who appeared “soft” on integration could expect a threatening phone call or anonymous letter in the mailbox. Conformity was paramount in the fight to uphold segregation.

The trial

Remarkably, considering the level of fear and anger in the community, the FBI had gathered enough evidence by the end of May 1961 to begin making arrests. Four assailants—Roger Couch, Frank D. Johnson, Jerry Eason, and Dalford Roberts—were apprehended by agents and charged with the destruction of a motor vehicle engaged in interstate commerce, a federal crime punishable by up to twenty years in prison and \$10,000 in fines.

With each new arrest, additional details emerged about the bus burning. For example, during the attack, Eason and two other men held the bus door shut, preventing anyone from exiting the burning vehicle. Ell Cowling, a plainclothes detective who had been surreptitiously placed aboard the bus by Alabama Gov. John Patterson to observe and protect the Riders, brandished his revolver and ordered the men to back away so the passengers could escape the flames. His actions probably saved many lives during the Mother’s Day attack.

In subsequent weeks, the FBI arrested six other men, Kenneth Adams, William Chappell, Frank Tolbert, Cecil “Goober” Lewallyn, Jerry Z. Willingham, and Jerome Couch, who, contrary to published reports, was not Roger’s brother. On the day of the attack, after the bus escaped the Greyhound station and headed west, Willingham and Jerome Couch had pursued it along Highway 202. At one point, they even maneuvered their vehicles in front of the bus and slowed to a crawl to keep it from gaining any speed. Eventually, the bus had to pull over in front of Forsyth’s Grocery, so the driver could tend to the flat tire.

On September 1, the defendants, excluding Roberts (who became a witness for the prosecution), were indicted by a federal grand jury in Birmingham.

After his release on bond, Kenneth Adams threatened to sue the FBI for “false imprisonment and for violation of [his] constitutional rights.” Adams told reporters that the arrests were “part of a plot by the integrationist FBI to frame nine law-abiding white men including myself...Because I refused to allow the FBI to humiliate me with fingerprinting and photographing, the FBI illegally kept me under false imprisonment...in violation of my constitutional rights and Rule 46 of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure.”

Adams said he had only consented to fingerprinting after his attorney, J.B. Stoner, advised him to do so. At his upcoming trial, Adams said that he would “positively prove that the Freedom Riders set the bus on fire from the inside,” and that Attorney General Robert Kennedy and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover “have been engaged in a conspiracy to cause trouble in the South.” He added, “The grand jury should have indicted them.”

On the night of September 5, Robert Kennedy, J. Edgar Hoover, CORE director James Farmer, and the two FBI agents who had investigated the bus burning, Slate and Landers, were hanged in effigy in front of a welder’s shop in West Anniston. Two hundred residents gathered to witness the event. Kenneth Adams’ attorney, J.B. Stoner, stood atop a flatbed truck and harangued the crowd through a crackling PA system, calling the recent indictments of Adams and the others a “Communist conspiracy.” He urged the spectators to join his organization, the National States Rights Party, and help expedite the “creation of a wholesome White Folk-Community.” Stoner, of course, had been involved in the segregationist cause since the 1940s and had been a suspect in numerous

bombings around the South.

With Stoner and Anniston attorney Hugh D. Merrill heading the defense, the Freedom Ride trial got underway on November 1, 1961, in Birmingham. The proceedings were slated to begin the previous day, October 31, but Judge H. Hobart Grooms told the jurors he had been “reliably informed of jury tampering efforts” and wanted to take another day to investigate the allegations.

When the trial did eventually get underway, the prosecution appeared, by most accounts, to have an open-and-shut case. They had fifty witnesses ready to testify and plenty of photographic evidence. But when U.S. Attorney Macon Weaver began questioning some of the locals, his case unraveled. According to one reporter, “many of the government’s witnesses demonstrated a reluctance to testify, and several had to ‘refresh their memory’ by studying transcripts of their previous statements before continuing. Others who [had] lived in the area for years told the court they failed to recognize anyone at the scene.”

For instance, highway patrol officer M.A. Nunnally, one of the first officers to arrive at the scene of the burning Greyhound, told the court: “I didn’t know anybody taking part. I didn’t take any names and I didn’t make any arrests.” Other witnesses shared his amnesia, telling the court that they could not recall seeing any of the eight defendants at the site of the attack. (The ninth man, Cecil Lewallyn, who was accused of tossing the incendiary device through the back window of the bus, had suffered a debilitating injury in a car accident back in August and was unable to attend the trial.) Perhaps emboldened by these developments, defense counsel Merrill rested his case without calling a single witness to the stand.

On the morning of November 3, Judge Grooms opened the proceedings with two startling announcements. Kenneth Adams, described as a “leader in [the] alleged plot to attack the bus,” was released from custody when Grooms ruled there was not enough evidence to convict him.

A few minutes later, in “a surprise development,” the judge excused a member of the jury, Earl Franklin Hamrick of Arab. According to Hamrick, four men wearing masks had visited his motel room late Halloween night and warned him not to vote for conviction. “I was advised to conduct myself with leniency,” he told Grooms. As it turned out, Hamrick was the third jury member contacted during the course of the trial, and a fourth admitted that his wife had been approached. With such evidence of tampering, Judge Grooms could have declared a mistrial then, but he allowed the jury to begin deliberating the fates of the seven remaining defendants.

On the afternoon of November 3, the foreperson announced that he and his fellow jurors were “hopelessly deadlocked.” Grooms had no choice but to declare a mistrial and set the accused free.

A new trial was set for February 1962, but the defendants chose to enter a plea of “no contest” rather than endure another week of uncertainty in a Birmingham courtroom. On January 16, Judge Grooms sentenced Roger Couch to a year and a day in the state penitentiary. Five others—Chappell, Johnson, Willingham, Eason, and Jerome Couch—were placed on one-year probation. Charges were dismissed against Frank Tolbert and Kenneth Adams for lack of evidence. Charges against Lewallyn were dismissed due to the extent of the injuries he suffered in the automobile accident.

Legally speaking, the sentencing of these defendants ended Anniston’s involvement in the Freedom Ride attack.

But politically and socially, the impact of the bus burning was only beginning to be felt in the city.

Gary S. Sprayberry is a Professor of History and the Chair of the Department of History & Geography at Columbus State University in Georgia.

Could you get on the bus?

By Kris Butcher

Marcus Garvey said, “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” We must remember the entirety of our history, even the moments we want to forget. Freedom Riders National Monument was established to foster reconciliation and racial healing by commemorating the stories, places, and people involved in the 1961 Freedom Rides, a nonviolent



BUTCHER

campaign that brought national attention to the brutal reality of segregation in the South and forces the federal government to take action toward ending segregation in interstate travel.

How does a bus depot, a patch of highway grass, and a few murals promote racial reconciliation? They don’t. However, the stories and legacy of the people who stood against injustice in those places can.

In the spring of 1961, an interracial group of 13 “Freedom

Riders” set out to challenge discriminatory state laws and local custom that required races be separated on buses and in bus station facilities. By the end of 1961, over 400 Freedom Riders risked their lives criss-crossing the South on more than 50 Rides, responding to violence and incarceration with nonviolent direct action. The iconic images of the burning Greyhound bus, taken by The Anniston Star’s Joe Postiglione, and savagely beaten Freedom Riders publicized worldwide, raised awareness of the depths of violent enforcement of segregation in the South, resulting in political action, and inspiring

others to join the civil rights movement. Today, these places do not speak, so the Freedom Rider National Monument is committed to working alongside local partners and community members to tell their stories. The stories of the Freedom Rides continue to challenge and inspire. So, I invite you to visit the places, learn the stories of the people, and ask yourself, “Could I get on the bus?”

Kristofer “Kris” Butcher is superintendent of Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument and Freedom Riders National Monument.

Anniston grows onto global stage

By Pete Conroy

It must have been a flashpoint. How could this average, small-town street, busy with hardware, grocery and seed stores become a global destination? How was Anniston forever thrust into the nation’s discussion of civil rights? Why are people now traveling here to better understand redemption, healing, and history? And, why is the 60th anniversary of the Freedom Rides so important?

The answer is not just because of what happened here, it’s really because of Anniston’s reaction to what happened here. First, the short-term reaction that served as a model to others. And now, the long-term reaction, making the most of a despicable situation for future generations.

Why? It’s also because of the reaction a few original Freedom Riders had to Anniston. In particular, Anniston has maintained a special and personal relationship with Henry “Hank” Thomas, Ernest “Rip” Patten, Charles Person, and the late Bill Harbour. Fortunately, they

didn’t give up on Anniston.

Consider the thoughts of Mr. Person over the past 30 years. He says that at the time of the 40th anniversary of the event, he didn’t want to get off their bus as it passed through Anniston en route to Birmingham. During the 50th anniversary event, he did get off the bus and was surprised to meet a welcoming and warm community. Now, for the 60th anniversary, he says that he has so many friends in the area that he and his wife Joetta would be happy to live here.

It must have been a flashpoint that triggered the historic violence on May 14, 1961. But what we do with this history shouldn’t be. It should be a deliberative, multigenerational effort that encompasses the broadest coalition of people, with the widest array of viewpoints and partners. And so far, so good.

A particular milestone was the establishment of our National Park Monument in 2017. Dedicated to preserving and telling the story of the Freedom Riders — it is forever. Each year,

more planning and federal resources will be dedicated to ensure visitor education and satisfaction. Maybe the best example of another National Park unit’s growth potential is nearby in Fort Payne, where the Little River Canyon National Preserve was established in 1992. With similar slow beginnings, it’s grown to having over 800,000 visitors last year, with an annual economic impact exceeding \$15 million. Similarly, Freedom Riders National Monument has the same limitless potential.

Another developing milestone has been the establishment of the Freedom Riders Training Institute, a program dedicated to the Freedom Riders’ basic tenet of non-violent protest. As a reaction to the death of George Floyd, Charles Person asked to establish an educational program to actually benefit protesters, law enforcement, first responders, the media, community leaders, and others, in preparation for when demonstrations escalate. The result has been a collaboration of professionals

led by the Freedom Riders Park Board, Jacksonville State University, and others from around the nation. The program is being developed as a digital training platform with a curriculum to benefit a variety of audiences. The place to host this training is across the street from the historic Greyhound Bus Depot which has recently been acquired by the Freedom Riders Park Board. It is currently under consideration for massive restoration as a Freedom Rider-themed meeting center.

The vision of a busy, small-town street is certainly back and with continued, coordinated planning, we’ll all enjoy the fruits of people united for the benefit of others, as demonstrated in 1961 by the brave and history-making Freedom Riders.

Pete Conroy is the director of Jacksonville State University’s Environmental, Policy and Information Center (EPIC). He is on the Freedom Riders Park Board and a member of the Freedom Riders Training Institute committee. He can be reached at pconroy@jsu.edu.

Freedom Riders: American heroes

By Philip Howard

How we view the celebration of the Freedom Riders, and the many other celebrations of historical significance to Black Americans, is much debated. Some think we must never forget. Others believe it opens up old wounds. Some are too busy to care. However, some care deeply and love the pursuit of learning. I am in the last group. Like an advancing nonviolent army, the Freedom Riders took the fight against segregation into the heart of the South’s Jim Crow laws. Their determination to be treated equally and fairly was not without loss. No great victory ends without some casualty.

Under the teachings of the great civil rights pioneer and leader, the Rev. Jim Lawson, the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) sought to test the resolve of segregationists. While the Freedom Riders were committed to nonviolent principles, the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens Council groups were not. The testing of the Supreme Court rulings was understood to be an assault

SIX PRINCIPLES OF NONVIOLENCE

1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people. It is active nonviolent resistance to evil.
2. Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding. The end result of nonviolence is redemption and reconciliation.
3. Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people. Nonviolence recognizes that evildoers are also victims.
4. Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform. Nonviolence willingly accepts the consequences of its acts.
5. Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate. Nonviolence resists violence to the spirit as well as the body. Nonviolence love is active, not passive. Nonviolence love does not sink to the level of the hater. Love restores community and resists injustice. Nonviolence recognizes the fact that all life is interrelated.
6. Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice. The nonviolent resister has deep faith that justice will eventually win.

— From The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change

on Jim Crow laws and local ordinances throughout the South.

History is a place to find real heroes and real stories about America — the greatest nation in the world. We hold that title because of people like President

John Quincy Adams and Dr. Booker T. Washington, like Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune, like Genevieve Hughes and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and like Jo Ann Robinson and Virginia Durr: All are Americans who sacrificed to move

America toward that “more perfect Union.”

Learning and celebrating our shared history is not to denigrate anyone. Instead, it’s to commemorate those warriors of peace who had a direct hand in shaping America. The integrated and diverse group of Freedom Riders are conquering heroes. Men and women like Charles Person, Pauline Knight-Ofosu, Hank Thomas, and the additional 400 Freedom Riders were willing to die for liberty and equality. It is never the wrong time to celebrate true patriots. I stand with millions of others, both locally and internationally, who are humbled by the presence and sacrifice of the Freedom Riders. We will never forget and, on this 60th anniversary, we salute you and say thank you. And, that is why we must continue to share the principles of nonviolence and the story of the Freedom Riders. Because the Freedom Riders from 1947 to 1961 represent what is great about America.

Philip Howard is an advocate for conservation and the preservation of civil rights sites across the country, with a specific focus on culturally important civil rights sites and stories in Alabama.



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