

# I WAS A FREEDOM RIDER

by Robert McAfee Brown

Two weeks ago today I was in jail.

Along with four other white ministers, three Negro ministers, and two Jewish rabbis, I was arrested for "unlawful assembly." The nature of our unlawful assembly was this: we were sitting in the lobby of the Tallahassee Air Terminal waiting to have a cup of coffee together before taking a plane for New York.

We had arrived at the terminal about twenty-four hours earlier, planning to leave on a 3:25 plane that afternoon. The airport restaurant had a sign on the door marked "Closed," although several people inside were eating. The restaurant manager would not admit us, for this was the afternoon of the monthly cleaning. He was most apologetic, but he couldn't open up again until 4:30.

At this point, our group had to make a decision. Originally eighteen strong, we had been traveling since Tuesday morning as members of an interfaith Freedom Ride, testing facilities for interstate passengers at bus terminals all the way from Washington, D.C., to Tallahassee, Florida. We were now at the last stop on our journey. Eight of the group had obligations back home of such a pressing nature that they had no alternative but to fly out on the scheduled flight. But ten of us decided to stay over and test the restaurant.

4:30 came. Did the restaurant open? It did not. Nor did it open at suppertime, nor at any time later in the evening. As the hours passed, we decided to wait in the terminal until we were served. As

an integrated group, engaged in interstate travel, we were entitled to service in that restaurant. We decided, with no fanfare or fuss, that we would eat nothing at all until the restaurant served us. (The newspapers played this up as a "hunger strike." It didn't seem that spectacular at the time. It simply seemed the one logical thing to do under the circumstances.)

After dark, an ugly-looking mob began to gather outside the terminal. Word had gone out that a bunch of "nigger-lovin' Freedom Riders" were at the airport, and members of the White Citizens Council apparently decided to go out to the airport and get rid of us. The police would not allow them in the building itself, so they simply lined their cars up outside, sat on the fenders, and glared at us through the plate-glass walls. As the mob increased in size, one of the reporters (we think) called the State Police to come and augment the protection being given by the city police.

When the terminal closed at midnight, we were driven back to the city by Negro friends, convoyed by police cars, and we slept on the floor of a Negro church. The pastor's son warned us to sleep in shifts and to keep all the doors locked, but there was a State Police car outside through the night, and no "incidents" occurred.

We went back to the airport about 7:30 the next morning, but the restaurant was still closed. We resumed our foodless vigil. Finally, about 12:30, a group

of policemen crossed the lobby. We were confronted by the City Attorney, told that our presence constituted "unlawful assembly," inciting to riot, and that we had fifteen seconds to get off the airport grounds. (One of the local Negro ministers left at our bidding. He was getting into his car by himself when he was arrested for unlawful assembly. Why? He had not gotten off the airport facilities in fifteen seconds.)

Since we did not disperse, but asserted that we had every lawful right to be there, we were placed under arrest, driven into town, fingerprinted, relieved of all our personal belongings, and placed in the Tallahassee jail, swelling to forty-two the number of inmates in a jail designed for twenty-four. (I will not elaborate on the experience in jail, but if there are readers who have not yet made a vocational decision, I assure them that the field of prison reform is wide open.)

## Training for a Freedom Ride

How did it happen that a group of ten ministers and rabbis ended up sleeping on the floor of the Tallahassee jail? As early as a week before our arrest, most of us had no thought that we would soon be on a Freedom Ride. But CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), a group dedicated to approaching the race problem by nonviolent means, decided to organize a Freedom Ride composed of ministers and rabbis, to demonstrate that church and synagogue gave more than lip service to rights for Negroes. Out of the original group of seven white ministers making the trip, five, as it turned out, were from New York Presbytery. In addition to myself, these included the Reverend Wayne C. Hartmire, Jr., the Reverend Malcolm R. Evans, the Reverend Edward A. White, and the Reverend Robert J. Stone.

We met in Washington for an intensive training session under CORE's supervision, the day before the trip began. Here are some of the things that are particularly impressed upon trainees: (1) Every Freedom Rider must promise to employ only nonviolent means. We had to sign a statement that, if attacked, we would not strike back, and that we would do nothing that could be interpreted as an aggressive action. (2) We were told that our primary purpose was to see if the law was being enforced,

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though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

And so it went. No one had suggested that we "have a service." No one had "structured" an order of worship. Things simply took place as they took place, and we all found ourselves instinctively turning to the source of our faith—the living God who visits his children in their distresses—and we were bolstered and buoyed beyond description.

### Encouragement in Georgia and Florida

Shortly after midnight we left Sumter for an all-night run to Jacksonville, Florida, with a fifteen-minute "rest stop" at Savannah, Georgia, at 3:45 in the morning. For some reason, I dreaded this stop at Savannah most of all. We had been told that there was "no telling" what kind of reception we would get there. Whereas a few people told us there would be no trouble, others said, "Well, that's Klan country down there. . . ." I think I expected a mob to be waiting for us in the wee small hours of the morning, with next to no policemen on hand. But the fears were groundless, and I emerged as a man of little faith, for there were no incidents whatever. The "White" and "Colored" signs had already disappeared, and we were able to complete all of our tests without trouble, i.e., to use the rest rooms, waiting room, and lunch counter in integrated fashion.

During that long, dark interval between Sumter and Savannah I apparently had a subconscious fear that our bus was going to be stopped by hoodlums—a most unlikely possibility, as a matter of fact, since we had a police escort all the way to the Georgia border. Nevertheless, I remember our coming to a sudden halt at the edge of a small South Carolina town. In my drowsy, but imagination-charged, stupor, I looked out the front window of the bus and saw both sides of the deserted street lined with white, hooded figures: the Ku Klux Klan had found us out at last! It was a matter of several seconds before reality caught up with fantasy, and I saw, to my relief, that I was really looking at nothing more forbidding than an orderly deployment of freshly painted parking meters flanking each side of the main street.

We arrived in Jacksonville, Florida,

for breakfast, and were able to integrate the interstate facilities there without incident. This was, I think, the first time that Negroes and whites had been served together in the restaurant. At all events, we got courteous service and were grateful to the members of the restaurant staff for behaving in a totally admirable way.

### Desegregation and hatred

When we got to Tallahassee at lunchtime, large crowds of Negroes and whites were awaiting our arrival. The white crowds looked ugly, the Negroes, as always, friendly. Many of the latter, apparently, wanted to witness the actual moment when Negroes and whites would eat together side by side in the local terminal. ("We came down to see history made," one of them said to a member of our group.) A Negro minister and I were forcibly ejected from the "White Men's Room" by two of Tallahassee's less amiable citizens, but when we reported this to the police, they ejected the ejectors.

We were served together at the lunch counter, although the atmosphere was a far cry from Jacksonville. The white waitresses would not serve us. Negro help were brought in from the kitchen to take our orders. (Did any group of waiters, I wonder, ever receive better tips than those Negroes got from us?) I must report that I have never seen such expressions of hate as were on the faces of the white waitresses in that terminal, as they stood there observing us with contempt and disgust. That I felt less than overflowing love toward them in return is only a dreary indication that sin is common to us all.

Having been served in integrated, if not hospitable, fashion before hundreds of prying eyes in downtown Tallahassee, I don't think any of us really expected difficulty at the airport, five or six miles out of town, where there could only be a handful of prying eyes to observe us eating together. But that, as I have already shown, is where we were wrong.

### Why did we do it?

So much for a brief account of what we did. Why did we do it, and what has been accomplished? The over-all reasons for our participation in the Freedom Ride are very simple and very basic.

As Jews and Christians, we believe that all men are created in the image of God. All men. A violation of human dignity is not only a violation of our fellow men, but an affront to the divine dignity as well.

As Americans, we believe in liberty and justice for all. For *all*. When equal

facilities are not available for all, then liberty and justice have become hollow words.

We believe that segregation denies both of these things. It not only violates the image of God in man, but it violates the conception of liberty and justice for all. Therefore, it is wrong, and therefore, it must be opposed.

But the *way* it is opposed is crucially important, and for this reason: we are living in the midst of a world revolution in which, all over the world, colored groups are rising up to demand the rights that white groups have long denied them. It is sheer folly to think that the United States is immune from the consequences of this revolution. So we must ask our questions in a new way. The question is not "Will there be further integration?" The question is, "Will further integration be achieved *by peaceful means or by violence*?" In other countries it is being achieved by violence. In America there is still a chance that it can be achieved peacefully. We white people cannot be grateful enough that men like Martin Luther King are still the leaders of Southern Negroes. For the rise in power of other Negro forces (such as the Black Muslims) makes clear that it may soon be too late to achieve integration by nonviolent means. I remain haunted by the statement of one of Alan Paton's characters, who says something like this: "The thing I'm afraid of is that when the white man finally gets around to loving the black man, the black man will have nothing left but hatred for the white man."

### But why a Freedom Ride?

Perhaps this means we must work for integration. But how does it add up to participation in a Freedom Ride? Here are a few reasons that make sense to me:

1. The fact that the Freedom Rides are conducted by integrated groups shows that white and colored are, in fact, capable of working together, and this in itself is a positive witness.

2. The Freedom Rides are a way of engaging in tangible action. The church is properly indicted today for saying a lot about racial equality and doing practically nothing. For churchmen to participate in a Freedom Ride *as churchmen* is at least a modest symbol of the concern on the part of the church to be actively involved in the struggle for social justice.

3. Our participation in a Freedom Ride was a way of trying to express our solidarity with our Southern Negro brethren. The most humbling and heart-



rather than to break existing laws. The law reads that all interstate passengers must be served in nonsegregated fashion in bus terminals. When we sat down at a lunch counter as a group of Negroes and whites, in other words, we were not breaking the law; we were simply trying to discover whether or not the local proprietor was breaking the law or obeying it. (3) We were told that we should not court violence or seek arrest. The purpose of a Freedom Ride is not to create incidents, but to have the law obeyed. The most "successful" Freedom Ride possible would be one without incident, in which Negroes and whites were peaceably served according to the provisions of the Constitution. If arrested, however, we were to accept arrest peaceably.

### Encouragement in North Carolina; discouragement in South Carolina

The group left Washington the following noon. Only a few events of the trip can be recorded here. Raleigh, North Carolina, was perhaps the most hopeful spot of all. In the Greyhound terminal we not only had breakfast together in the lunchroom without incident, but white and colored local ministers came into the lunchroom and ate with us. Raleigh stands high in our book as a demonstration of what can happen when a city, quietly but determinedly, decides to obey the law of the land.

At Sumter, South Carolina, we had our first encounter with potential violence. The episode was ugly and ambiguous. The lunch stop was not a regular Greyhound terminal but a place called "Evans' Motor Court"—a name that will be forever etched in my memory—several miles out of town. As we got out of the bus, a gang of perhaps twenty or thirty toughs materialized. Entrance to the lunchroom was blocked by the proprietor, who told us that he ran a private establishment, that he had no contract with Greyhound, and that he was not subject to the provisions of the Supreme Court decision. "We been segregated," he said, "and that's the way we gonna stay." An emotionally charged sheriff then took over the entrance way and said, "You heard the man. Now move along. I'm ready to die before I let you cross this door." One of the local citizens was heard to say to another local citizen, "I got a snake in my truck over there I'm

just dyin' to let loose among them nigger-lovin' Northerners."

We were not sure what to do.

We finally decided not to enter the lunchroom, since it was (apparently) not covered by the provisions of the Supreme Court decision we were testing. Some of the group still feel, I think, that we should have tried to go in anyhow. Perhaps we lacked courage. Or maybe we were simply exercising common sense. At all events, we made the decision not to try to integrate Evans' Motor Court. Later on, when the battle over the terminals has been clearly won, the battle over facilities like Evans' Motor Court will have to commence. I believe some of the members of our group will be in the initial testing party.

We integrated the Greyhound terminal in Sumter itself without incident, and spent the afternoon and evening at a local Negro church. Here we received unexpected renewal. We were exhausted and emotionally drained after the affair of Evans' Motor Court. We drifted into the sanctuary of the Negro church, one at a time, to pray and (if the truth be told) to rest. Pretty soon one of our group found his way to the organ. Another suggested a hymn. We sang it. We

sang several. And all the hymns seemed to have been written expressly for us. There was nothing that we needed to have said to us more desperately than "Faith of our fathers! We will love Both friend and foe in all our strife, And preach thee, too, as love knows how

By kindly words and virtuous life." Those were our marching orders. We sang "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," and it spoke to us in our particular distress:

"Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head."

There was no question as to whether or not we would sing an "Amen" at the end of that one.

One of the rabbis prayed—and we were one with him in all of Israel's pangs and agonies over 4,000 years of history so that they became our pangs and agonies, and our present pangs and agonies were only one more tiny chapter in the ongoing life of the people of God. But we were now again part of the ongoing life of the people of God, so we could be sustained by repeating together, "Yea,

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ening thing about the whole trip was the courage of the Southern Negroes who openly identified with us at all our stops along the way. This called for courage on their part far greater than anything that was ever demanded of us. For we could leave. But they have to stay. Because of openly identifying with us, they will be subject to all sorts of reprisals, petty and not so petty, after our departure.

This I will remember longest—the astonishing courage of those Southern Negroes. I would like to give the names particularly of the Tallahassee Negroes who came to our aid. But this would only make them more liable to local reprisals. I do not worry, however, that their names are not recorded here. For I know that their names are written in heaven.

4. I hope that our action gives encouragement to Southern "liberals." They cannot, for local reasons, engage in Freedom Rides or perhaps even openly approve of them, but they can perhaps pick up and build upon whatever a Freedom Ride may have done to loosen segregation patterns in their own towns. Possibly the most creative result of our own trip was an opportunity, made possible by a white minister in Tallahassee, to meet (on the night before our trial) with a group of about fifty solid, substantial white Tallahasseeans. Here I had a chance to give a rationale of our action. I may not have convinced many people, but at least we could discuss the segregation issue rationally, rather than emotionally, and I interpret this evening as one of the most potentially hopeful events of the entire trip. As a result, three of the white ministers came to our trial the next day and stayed throughout. Perhaps only a Southerner will know what courage that took.

5. All Freedom Riders are pledged to nonviolence. This is fundamental. It is also a most effective counter to the argument that Freedom Riders are a bunch of crackpot "agitators," "lawbreakers," communists, or what have you. Such charges are simply an irrelevance in the face of the facts. And since the alternative to the method of the Freedom Rides is the alternative of violence and bloodshed, I believe that the Freedom Rides should continue, stepped up in intensity, rather than diminished. They represent the creative alternative to violence.

6. I had a final question to answer before participating in this Freedom Ride: "What right has a Northerner to 'meddle' in the South's problems?" There was a time when I treated this question with respect. I now feel that it poses a totally false issue. For it implies that Christian

ethical concern is dictated by geography. What a Christian is allowed to do is determined by his regional status. On these terms there could never have been a Christian missionary movement, either foreign or national in scope. The fact of the matter is that segregation is not a Southern problem. It is not a Northern problem. It is a human problem. Therefore, it must be opposed, wherever it is found, by anyone who feels it to be wrong. We are not exempted from ethical concern simply because of the place we happen to have been born. (I wish some Southern Christians would take a Freedom Ride north and point out some of our remaining sore spots. We need their help.)

Have we "accomplished" anything? Who can say? Negroes and whites have now been served together in the bus terminals of Jacksonville and Tallahassee—but it may be a long time before they are served regularly. We have established contact with a lot of brave souls between Washington and Tallahassee—but they will have to endure much more heartache and humiliation before their battles are won. At the end of the day one doesn't try to assess the success or failure of such a trip. He simply offers it up to God, trusting that God can use its successes and its failures in the ultimate fulfillment of his purposes.

### What next?

Let the final word be down to earth. What happened at the trial? We were charged with "unlawful assembly," it being stated that our presence in the airport terminal was an incitement to riot. The St. Petersburg *Times* reported:

"City witnesses testified that at no time did the Freedom Riders do anything to incite a riot, the basis of the law they were arrested under.

"In fact, City Attorney James Messer (who was also a witness) said it was the white citizens who were ready to riot. He said the Freedom Riders were arrested because there were 'rumors' of trouble, not because they did anything but sit peacefully in the airport waiting room. None of the white group was arrested."

Such was the evidence of the prosecution. Nevertheless, after ten hours, the judge found us guilty of unlawful assembly and gave us the maximum sentence possible under Florida state law, \$500 fine or sixty days in jail.

The case is being appealed to a higher court. Our lawyer believes that he can make a test case out of our arrest. I cannot conceive that he will be wrong.



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