

Back on the Bus: *Remembering the Freedom Riders.*

By Calvin Trillin The New Yorker July 25, 2011 Issue

Last fall, at a gathering in Santa Fe on the subject of storytelling, I met a woman whose name sounded familiar. It turned out that I had last encountered her precisely fifty years before. She was then a six-year-old African-American girl, Ruby Bridges, being escorted into William Frantz School, in New Orleans, by federal marshals every morning, and I was a reporter standing across the street from the school, observing a gang of women who were spewing obscenities and racial epithets at her. I remember “black ape” as one of the phrases they were particularly fond of. Morning after morning, I stood amidst those women, some of whom seemed to have settled comfortably into their role as featured players on the evening news. When I approached one of them with a question during the second week, her response was “I only speak to Martin Agronsky”—then a well-known correspondent for NBC. Ever since, I’ve had on the wall of my office a photograph, taken by a *Life* photographer, of a worried-looking little girl flanked by two men wearing U.S. Marshal armbands. In Santa Fe, I told Ruby that it was nice to see her all grown up.

The desegregation of the New Orleans schools took place toward the beginning of a year I spent in the South, in the Atlanta bureau of *Time*—from the fall of 1960 to the fall of 1961. It’s a period now being recalled in any number of half-century commemorations, because a lot happened in that twelve-month span. The public schools of New Orleans and Atlanta were desegregated. A federal judge ordered two black students, Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes, into the University of Georgia. Sit-in movements succeeded in desegregating lunch counters and other public facilities in Atlanta and Nashville. Freedom Riders made their way through the South in an effort to demonstrate that Supreme Court decisions desegregating interstate transportation were routinely flouted on buses and in waiting rooms. Both before and after those twelve months, there were extended periods—from the Montgomery bus boycott, in the mid-fifties, until the first sit-in, in 1960, for instance—when the civil-rights story faded from the front pages. The country had not yet begun to see segregation as a moral wrong that had to be addressed rather than as a regrettable regional peculiarity. The reporter I replaced as the junior man in the two-man Atlanta bureau had left six months before I arrived; the reporter in that position when I returned to Atlanta early in 1963, just before the brutal response of police dogs and fire hoses to demonstrations in Birmingham shocked the nation, told me that, as far as he could tell, the civil-rights story had pretty much petered out.

During the year I was in the South, I occasionally worked on something other than civil rights. During the first burst of national coverage of the John Birch Society, whose founder famously believed that Dwight D. Eisenhower was an agent of the Communist conspiracy, I was dispatched to Macon, Georgia, to look into the early life of the man the society was named after. (I concluded that it had probably been named appropriately: as an undergraduate at Mercer University, a Southern Baptist school, Birch had managed to provoke a heresy trial of several professors.) Now and then, I was assigned to contribute to what was called a “business roundup”—phoning around to bankers to hear what they had to say about interest rates or inflation or the housing market. Mostly, though, I’d be at the airport early in the week for a flight to someplace where Jim Crow was being threatened. (Air transportation was one reason for the bureau’s location: it used to be said that when you die in the South you might go to Heaven, but you’d have to change planes in Atlanta.) Atlanta itself was going through sit-ins, boycotts, mass meetings, and an impending school desegregation. Even on weekends, I was on what we sometimes called the Seg Beat.

I wonder whether I would have remained in reporting if I had spent twelve months in the South when the civil-rights story was in one of its dormant periods—twelve months of nothing more exciting than the occasional folksy conversation about interest rates with Mills B. Lane, Jr., of the Citizens & Southern National



The author interviewing John Lewis in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1961. Photograph by Donald Uhrbrock / Time & LIFE Pictures / Getty

Bank. *Time* was then practicing what was called “group journalism,” so that the correspondent in the field filed a long report for the writer in New York, who used it (among other sources) to write for a senior editor, who sometimes rewrote the piece with the fluidity available to someone who is working without the encumbrance of having read the original file. It was said that *Time* was a great place for a reporter to work unless he read the magazine. But I never felt that I’d been wasting my time on reporting that didn’t show up in the finished product, because I found myself building knowledge on a single subject: race. Any writing requires a leap of confidence—you have to convince yourself that somebody is going to be interested in what you put down on the page—and believing that you know more about the subject than most of your readers do can work wonders for your confidence.

Once I’d accepted the job, I had, of course, done some reading. I knew from W. J. Cash’s “The Mind of the South” that the scene then conjured up by the phrase “antebellum South”—a cultivated plantation owner composes poetry at his Louis XIV desk while dozens of his slaves sing in the cotton fields—was drawn from Hollywood rather than from history, even if most white Southerners accepted it as gospel. I knew from C. Vann Woodward’s “The Strange Career of Jim Crow” that physical separation of the races was not something that had always been part of the fabric of life in the South but a system that had been installed in the eighteen-nineties, after Reconstruction. Mainly, though, what confidence I had came from dealing with the subject week after week. I heard so many sermons in black churches that I began holding what I called the Martin Luther King Extended Metaphor Contest. (King himself was ineligible, since he would have won in a walk every week.) I knew all the verses to “We Shall Overcome.” My expense account included items like “trousers torn in racial dispute” and “after prayer-meeting snack, Tuskegee, \$3.75.” I could calibrate a white Southerner’s racial views by the way he pronounced the word “Negro.” I’d been exposed to enough Ku Klux Klan terminology to know a kleagle from a klaxon from a klavern. I had watched ordinary people make momentous moral decisions—a white mother in New Orleans deciding that she had to walk her first grader past that gang of screaming women outside William Frantz School in defiance of a white boycott, a Greek-immigrant diner owner with tears in his eyes telling black sit-in students in Atlanta that, as much as he sympathized with their cause, serving them would mean the end of his business. I was deeply immersed in what my daughters call my Boy Reporter Mode. I loved it.

The University of Georgia has celebrated two anniversaries of its desegregation. At the fortieth, a building was renamed the Holmes-Hunter Academic Building. During a panel at the fiftieth, last January, Robert Cohen—a civil-rights historian who taught for a time at Georgia and is now at N.Y.U.—said that, given the academic and cultural constrictions of Jim Crow, he thought that what had happened a half century before was not that the university was desegregated but that it was freed. Under Jim Crow, Cohen said, Georgia could never have hoped to attract enough professors of distinction to become a first-rate university. How many prominent musicians and artists were going to visit a campus that had, for instance, withdrawn an invitation to Dave Brubeck when it turned out that his combo included a black bass player? Cohen didn’t even have to mention how an all-white Georgia football team would have fared in today’s Division 1 competition. What he was saying, it seemed to me, was that desegregation had freed a place like the University of Georgia to become part of the United States. In the year I was there, the South—a region where people were constantly being told that what stood between them and the “mongrelization of the races” was racially designated drinking fountains—sometimes seemed like a foreign country.

Or was it, as some would have claimed, simply a section of this country where the presence of two societies was out in the open and codified? For black people, the Jim Crow practiced in the Deep South was, of course, a different order of misery from the form of racial separation that existed in the rest of the country, but it wasn’t as if the rest of the country was casually integrated. Kansas City, Missouri, my home town, was largely

segregated—black people had their own movie theatre and restaurants, for instance—even though it was segregated without signs and rhetoric. When I graduated from high school, in 1953, the schools in Missouri were legally segregated, and, given the absence of speeches connecting that fact to the preservation of the Kansas City Way of Life, I wasn't even aware of it. The board of education referred to in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education*, in 1954, was, of course, in Topeka, Kansas—sixty miles down the road, in what had been an antislavery state. At Yale, the first place I'd lived outside Missouri, there were perhaps four or five black students in my class of a thousand or so, and it was taken for granted that a corps of black retainers from New Haven served white students in clubs and societies. The father of Constance Baker Motley, the lead lawyer for the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund in the University of Georgia case, was for a time the chef at Skull and Bones. I had never lived in a state whose United States senators warned about the mongrelization of the races, but when I spent that year in the South anti-miscegenation laws were still in force not only in Missouri but in such states as Wyoming and Indiana.

The rhetoric did make a serious difference in the views of white Southerners. It seeped through the defenses of people who thought of themselves as independent and enlightened. It was an article of faith among Southern white people, for instance, that non-Southerners simply couldn't understand the situation, partly because they didn't understand black people. A remarkable number of white people I met in the South—not just obvious bigots but respectable, decent people who may themselves have even thought that change had to come—believed racial incidents occurred only because of meddling by outsiders. Yankee reporters were, of course, part of the meddling process. (“Where you from?” was the first question asked of a reporter who encountered a deputy sheriff. “I work out of the Atlanta bureau” was not considered a satisfactory answer.) If resistance to change included violence, the press was not just resented but targeted—particularly members of the press who were recording the violence in pictures. In Atlanta, *Time* shared an office with *Life*, and I used to say to Donald Uhrbrock, a *Life* contract photographer, “When we get in one of those situations, at best I don't know you. At worst, I'm one of the people chasing you.” Even in the relatively progressive confines of Atlanta, where I had college friends who were natives and where there was an abundance of Yankees in southeastern branch offices, my presence at a social gathering could cause some strained questions or an argument or, worst of all, an attempt to enlighten me about “the Negro” with what I came to think of as yard-sale anthropology. Once, when there was no answer to a phone call I'd made on the Fourth of July to a friend who was studying in Paris, it occurred to me that he might be at the U.S. Embassy's annual Independence Day party. Before I realized where I was, I found myself wondering why the Embassy didn't have such a party in Atlanta.

There were two major commemorations of the Freedom Rides anniversary this spring, one in Jackson, Mississippi, and one in Chicago. (The Chicago event had originally been set for Washington, D.C., where the Freedom Rides had begun. But Oprah Winfrey, who wanted as many Freedom Riders as possible to be either in the audience or onstage for the taping of a show dedicated to the anniversary, offered to fly everyone to Chicago and pay for two nights in the convention-center hotel.) In simplest terms, the Jackson gathering—which was officially co-hosted by Governor Haley Barbour and Bennie Thompson, a black congressman from Mississippi—was a commemoration of a historical period, in the spirit of reconciliation and even apology. The Chicago gathering was a reunion organized by people who believe that the struggle is still going on. One of its organizers, the Reverend Jim Lawson, who fifty years ago had instructed the students of the Nashville movement on the principles of nonviolence, still gives classes in nonviolence. Two others, Diane Nash, a leader of the Nashville movement, and C. T. Vivian, a minister who was active in Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, are still working with a project in Neshoba County, Mississippi. A fourth, Ralph D. Fertig, was recently the plaintiff in a Supreme Court case challenging the constitutionality of the Patriot Act. I wasn't surprised to hear that those four organizers of the Chicago gathering had distributed a letter explaining, in strong language, why they wouldn't be attending the Jackson event. Even within the movement, the Freedom Rides were contentious from the start.

They came along at a time when the civil-rights story in the South was shifting. Before the sit-ins gained traction, the story was often covered from the white side of the street. There were a few black lawyers, like Constance Motley, bringing legal cases, mostly in school desegregation; there were a few black students involved in desegregating the schools. But the story was mainly about how white people would respond to pressure to change. Would the governor who had campaigned on a platform of “not one, no not one” close the University of Georgia if Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes were ordered in by a federal judge? Would business leaders in Atlanta or New Orleans find some peaceful accommodation to school desegregation and thus avoid the turmoil that could lead to the economic stagnation expressed as “another Little Rock”? Increasingly, during the year I was in the South, the impetus moved to the black side of the street.



Mug shots of Freedom Riders arrested on May 24, 1961, in Jackson, Mississippi, after arriving from Montgomery, Alabama. They were arrested after going into a whites-only waiting room and refusing to move on when asked to do so by police. Courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History

In Montgomery, during the Freedom Rides, I heard Martin Luther King say that while *Brown v. Board of Education* had been the legal turning point in the movement, the Montgomery bus boycott and the sit-ins were the psychological turning point. With hundreds of black students from local universities risking injury by sitting nonviolently at whites-only lunch counters, it had become more and more difficult to claim that both white and black people would be content with the Southern Way of Life if outsiders would just stop interfering. To put it

another way, black people—particularly, young black people—got tired of waiting and took matters into their own hands.

King said that the Freedom Rides were an extension of that psychological turning point. Under the sponsorship of the Congress of Racial Equality, the campaign had begun on May 4, 1961, when two buses embarked from Washington, D.C.; it was abandoned ten days later, in Birmingham, after the riders on one bus were attacked by a mob there and the other bus was firebombed in Anniston, sixty miles or so to the east. Within days, students from the Nashville movement appeared in Birmingham to take up where CORE had left off—riding from there to Montgomery and eventually on to Jackson. But at the beginning many black leaders in the South had not, in fact, seen the Freedom Rides as an extension of the Montgomery bus boycott and the sit-in movements. Privately, people like Medgar Evers, the field secretary for the N.A.A.C.P. in Mississippi, expressed serious reservations or even outright hostility.

CORE, which had its headquarters in New York, was not unknown in the South. Jim Lawson was a member. John Lewis, a leader of the Nashville sit-in movement, was on both a CORE bus from Washington and the bus that Nashville students rode from Birmingham to Montgomery. There was a CORE chapter in New Orleans. By and large, though, those of us on the Seg Beat thought of CORE as a Northern organization. It was led at the time by James Farmer, an imposing man with a mellifluous voice—we sometimes called him “the black Orson Welles”—and the most cynical view of the Freedom Ride was that it was an attempt by Farmer to gain some standing for CORE in the South, where there was jockeying for influence among the N.A.A.C.P. and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

As many critics within the movement saw the Freedom Rides, a group of outsiders had come up with a way of reinvigorating the old lie about a peaceful South being beset by outside agitators—leaving the locals to deal with whatever repercussions were left behind. White liberals were particularly incensed. In Montgomery, where first the press and then the Freedom Riders were set upon by a mob when the bus from Birmingham arrived at the Trailways station, a local man I thought of as open to the proposition that black people ought to be treated as full citizens said to me, “I was sickened today. For the first time, I was ashamed of being from this town. But this is not sympathy for those nuts. I hate them.” It occurs to me now (it didn’t then) that if people were going to show that Supreme Court decisions on desegregating interstate waiting rooms had been ignored in the South, those people would have to be outsiders either where they got on the bus or where they got off the bus. Most of the people on those first CORE buses did live in the North, but Farmer rejected the outsider label from the start. “We don’t believe we’re outsiders,” he said, “because we’re Americans.”

A Gallup poll in the spring of 1961 found that only one in four Americans approved of the Freedom Ride. (The Kennedy Administration, for a variety of reasons, simply wanted it to go away; one of the speakers at the Chicago gathering referred to John and Robert Kennedy as “the brothers grim.”) There had been a similar pattern with the sit-ins. Partly because sitting in at a department-store lunch counter involved consciously breaking the law—and in a privately owned establishment where the proprietor presumably had a right to decide whom he would serve—it had been opposed by some people in the movement, not to speak of many people outside the movement. (The same poll indicated, at a time when the Nashville sit-in movement had pretty much completed the desegregation of the city, that fifty-seven per cent of Americans believed the sit-ins and other demonstrations would hurt rather than help the chances of Negroes being integrated in the South.) The sit-in movement, though, had an almost romantic appeal—polite, well-dressed black college students sitting peacefully at a lunch counter while hooligans harassed or even attacked them. Once, when I was allowed in the Atlanta jail to interview some students who had been arrested at a sit-in, I could hear the faint sound of singing grow louder as a guard and I walked toward the cell where they were being held; by the time we reached the cell, the freedom songs, echoing off the jailhouse walls, sounded like a full church choir. I can still conjure up the scene in my mind; I can still hear the singing.

The Freedom Ride was a tougher sell, even after the baton was passed in Birmingham from CORE to the Nashville movement. It appeared that the South's disregard of Supreme Court rulings on interstate transportation could be dramatically demonstrated only if the Freedom Riders who integrated bus stations were met with violence—whether the violence was described by Southern politicians as “looking for trouble” or by nonviolent theoreticians as “cleansing the soul with blood.” A number of places in Virginia and the Carolinas and Georgia had simply allowed the Freedom Riders to mill about in the whites-only waiting room until their bus left, and then returned to segregated business as usual. Jim Lawson was blunt about the violence. “Chances are that without people being hurt you cannot solve the problem,” he said.

By the time the Freedom Ride was stalled for a few days in Montgomery, a united front had formed, but there remained differences in how to proceed. While people like Martin Luther King were trying to convince Attorney General Robert Kennedy that the federal government was obligated to provide protection for the Freedom Rides, people like Jim Lawson, who had volunteered to be on the first bus into Jackson himself, were arguing that protection should be declined, since the issue was not whether black people could use desegregated facilities as long as they travelled in a heavily armed caravan. I had witnessed what would happen without protection. We'd followed the bus by car from Birmingham to Montgomery, where the police escort melted away at the city limits and the Freedom Riders arrived at a station that didn't have a policeman in sight. (Yes, Don Uhrbrock, the *Life* photographer, was among the first to be assaulted; when the attackers went for his camera, he had the presence of mind to give them a blank roll of film that he had palmed, keeping the roll that provided *Life* with a full-page picture of one of them pulling back his foot to kick a TV cameraman who had been knocked to the ground.) At a mass meeting in Ralph Abernathy's church during the Montgomery hiatus, it was, in the opinion of many, only an unorganized but eventually effective perimeter of U.S. marshals that prevented the mob from storming the church or burning it down.

In Chicago, fifty years later, Lawson, who has spent much of the intervening time as the pastor of a United Methodist church in Los Angeles, sounded absolutely unchanged in attitude. “We did not desegregate America,” he said. “We did not dismantle the system.” The letter that he and three other organizers of the Chicago event sent to explain why they wouldn't be attending the Jackson commemoration argued, in effect, that the struggle needed especially to be continued in Mississippi (“A lot has changed in the state, but be assured, racism is alive and well in Mississippi”). The signatories said that the Jackson commemoration was part of an effort in Mississippi that amounted to “stealing the legacy of the civil rights movement so they can profit from tourism.” Some dismal statistics in living standards and education and criminal justice were presented.

At the time, Haley Barbour was still thought of as a potential Presidential candidate. Although that candidacy wasn't mentioned, the letter tapped into a widespread concern that Barbour could use the commemoration as a cover with those minority voters who suspect that he is not truly reconstructed. A few months later, that would have become a particular necessity for him because of an interview in which he credited the Citizens Council with keeping the peace in his home town of Yazoo City during the times of trouble. The Citizens Council, which was founded specifically to resist desegregation, kept the peace in the sense that it favored economic intimidation over violence—having a potential troublemaker fired, say, or kicking his family off land they'd farmed for generations. Barbour made it sound like some benign United Fund committee. Others called it the uptown Klan.

In 1961, Mississippi was thought of as the most intransigent of the Southern states. A few years later, Nina Simone, who could exude a level of anger that made someone like Jim Lawson seem rather accommodating, started singing a song called “Mississippi Goddam.” Ray Arsenault, who has written the definitive history of the Freedom Rides, and who spoke at both commemorative gatherings, likes to tell the joke about the 1964 Freedom Summer volunteer from the North who has finished his training in Ohio and finds himself terrified on the night before he's supposed to leave for Jackson. He kneels and says, “God, please send me a sign that you'll

go with me to Mississippi.” Finally, after a long pause, a deep voice from above says, “I’ll go as far as Memphis.”

Actually, I felt physically safer in Mississippi than I did in Alabama. In 1961, Mississippi’s approach was still dominated by the Citizens Council, which was conscious of how violence could mar the image of a state that was sending speakers north to present itself as a peaceful place to do business. That approach was backed up by the State Sovereignty Commission—a government agency that had evolved into a sort of cornpone Stasi, with investigators who monitored people’s writings and contacts and even their love lives. For a Yankee reporter in Mississippi in 1961, there was a feeling of being watched rather than pursued. Once, when I’d arranged an interview with the mayor of Jackson, I arrived at his office to find that local reporters were there as observers; so were the chief of police, the chief of detectives, the city attorney, a city councilman, and the mayor’s secretary (to make a transcript). The story in the next day’s paper began, “Mayor Allen Thompson told a *Time* magazine reporter yesterday . . .” I felt relatively safe in Mississippi, but also uneasy. I wondered if I was imagining that people I didn’t know seemed to recognize me on the street. When I was ready to file a story overnight, I tried to do it from Memphis or New Orleans; I’d phone my office and say, “I’ve slipped over the border.” After the Freedom Ride finally left Montgomery, I wrote in my *Time* file, “The brutal, chaotic bumbling of Alabama gave way to the well-oiled, kid-glove, image-conscious performance possible only in a monolithic police state.”

As the first bus was about to pull out of Montgomery for Jackson, Claude Sitton, the Southern correspondent for the *Times*, and I were standing in the Trailways station discussing whether it was appropriate for reporters to be on it. In questions about when a reporter would be crossing the line from reporting on to participating in the civil-rights struggle, I tended to take my cues from Claude, whose sympathy was expressed in the fairness and scrupulousness of his reporting. I didn’t pretend that we were covering a struggle in which all sides—the side that thought, for instance, that all American citizens had the right to vote and the side that thought that people who acted on such a belief should have their houses burned down—had an equally compelling case to make. It wasn’t like trying to remain objective while covering the Michigan-Ohio State game. But at mass meetings I would never have put any money in the collection cup. When, at the invariable end of the meeting, people in the congregation locked arms to sing “We Shall Overcome,” I always edged away toward the exit. Still, I thought we should be on that bus. I reasoned that it was a public bus and we had a right to buy tickets. Also, other reporters were buying tickets. Claude agreed that we should be on the bus, and we sat down just a couple of seats in back of the driver. When the bus finally left the station, there were more reporters on board than Freedom Riders. The passengers also included a small contingent of Alabama National Guardsmen. The bus moved out in a caravan of seventeen state-police cars.

At the Mississippi line, the Alabama escort withdrew. We were joined on the bus by some Mississippi National Guardsmen under the command of Lieutenant Colonel G. V. (Sonny) Montgomery, who later had a long career in Congress. Montgomery said that his orders were to take the bus directly to Jackson without stopping. In what I suppose was a reflection of my confidence that Mississippi was going to handle things in a Citizens Council rather than a Klan manner, I fell asleep. Then I felt Claude poking me. Reverend C. T. Vivian had asked for a rest stop, and Colonel Montgomery was answering in the negative. Vivian, who was sitting right across the aisle from us, began asking how Montgomery rationalized the acts he had to perform every day. I still remember snatches of the speech almost word for word. “What do you tell your wife when you get home?” Vivian said. “What do you say to your child? What do you say to your God when you pray? Or do you pray?” I’d never imagined that a request to leave the room could be made with such eloquence. A Canadian reporter was so moved that he stood up and began shouting at Montgomery to stop the bus. Claude spoke sharply to the Canadian reporter. As I remember his words, he said, “Sit down and shut up. You’re a reporter.”

A photograph that was prominently displayed this spring at the Mississippi gathering shows a bus moving through downtown Jackson. Except for a policeman every ten or fifteen feet, the street is virtually empty. The bus is framed in the foreground by two policemen with German shepherds—presumably Rebel and Happy, the dogs that the Jackson police department borrowed on such occasions from the Vicksburg police department. (When Jackson police broke up a gathering of black people outside a courthouse a month before the Freedom Rides—the crowd had gathered in support of some Tougaloo College students who'd been arrested in Mississippi's first sit-in—it was alleged that a minister named S. Leon Whitney had been bitten, an allegation that the Jackson police vigorously denied.) The police contingent inside the Trailways station was under the command of Chief of Police Detectives M. B. Pierce, whom I'd dealt with before. I suspected that Pierce had been chosen for his unflappability; he would only smile whenever I said to him, "I forget, Chief: was it Rebel that didn't bite Reverend Whitney or was it Happy that didn't bite Reverend Whitney?" When the Freedom Riders went into the whites-only waiting room, they were asked politely by the police to move on, and when they refused they were, just as politely, arrested—a policy that was also followed when a second bus pulled into the Greyhound station a few hours later, and followed for the next few months as people from all over the country showed their support by taking a bus to Jackson and serving ninety days in Parchman Prison. There were three black reporters on our bus, but when they came into the whites-only waiting room they were not bothered. Chief Pierce called that to my attention. "Professional courtesy," he said.

In Jackson this May, the Freedom Riders were praised for their bravery and their effectiveness. (The wrong they sought to demonstrate had indeed been corrected: under pressure from Robert Kennedy's Justice Department, the Interstate Commerce Commission, in September of 1961, mandated that "Whites Only" signs be removed from interstate facilities.) Haley Barbour's speeches were cordial and complimentary and, in at least one case, apologetic. The speakers who shared the podium with Barbour at one event or the other included Jackson's black mayor and its second black female chief of police. As the commemoration began, an article in the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* recalled some of the smears against the Freedom Riders in 1961. Senator James Eastland had called one CORE rider "a Communist agitator and organizer of the most dangerous kind." (I'd heard Murray Kempton, a columnist known for sounding gracious even if he was describing a mobster, say of the same person, "A lovely man. A brave man. Of course, he'd walk a mile to get beaten up.") The editor of the Jackson *Daily News*, the *Clarion-Ledger's* sister paper, had referred in his column to the Freedom Riders as "deranged mammals." The *Clarion-Ledger* article was written by Jerry Mitchell, who over the past twenty years has won renown (and a MacArthur Fellowship) for stories that brought to justice civil-rights-era criminals like Byron de la Beckwith, the murderer of Medgar Evers. The Jackson airport now bears Evers's name.

Fifty years before, Ross Barnett, then the governor of Mississippi, had called the Freedom Riders "outside agitators trying to stir up our people for no good cause whatsoever," but in his dealings with the press at the time he'd sounded just as cordial as Haley Barbour. On the day after our bus's arrival, Barnett began his press conference by saying, "I'm pleased to say we're grateful indeed for your presence here. I extend a most cordial welcome to the great and sovereign state of Mississippi." For the reporters who were in Jackson to cover the Freedom Rides in 1961, Mayor Thompson had arranged a tour of the city—including what were then sometimes called "Supreme Court schools," schools built after *Brown v. Board of Education* for black children in an effort to demonstrate that "separate but equal" was something other than a joke. Thompson also gave us badges indicating that we were honorary members of the Jackson, Mississippi, police force.

One of Barbour's speeches was at the unveiling of a plaque that marked the old Greyhound station (now restored as an architect's office) as a stop on what the state is calling the Mississippi Freedom Trail—a tourism scheme that is joining the Mississippi Blues Trail and the Mississippi Country Music Trail. "We have to put our past in front of us if we're going to put our past behind us," Barbour said. Civil-rights-history buffs can soon be guided to, among thirty or so other places, the university where Clyde Kennard applied for admission in the fifties, only to be framed and thrown into jail. They can see where Medgar Evers was shot, in 1963, and where another N.A.A.C.P. leader, Vernon Dahmer, was killed, in 1966, when the Klan firebombed his house. Barbour

said that he has also managed to get the legislature to appropriate twenty million dollars for a civil-rights museum in Jackson—there is already such a museum in Birmingham—and he promised that it would be “a sensationally popular attraction.” Presumably, this is the sort of thing that the Chicago-reunion organizers had in mind when they wrote, “Mississippi white racists have discovered the millions of dollars that can be derived from tourism pertaining to the legacy of the civil rights movement.” Another way to look at it, of course, is as evidence that Mississippi, after half a century, is definitely part of America: it has figured out how to turn its history, even its horrific history, into an industry.

In both Chicago and Jackson, some of those in attendance were carrying around a large book called “Breach of Peace: Portraits of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders,” by Eric Etheridge, one of the organizers of the Jackson commemoration. They were trying to get as many signatures of Freedom Riders as they could. Occasionally, one of them would approach me and say, “Were you a Freedom Rider?” “No, I was just a reporter who was on the bus,” I’d say.

Some of them insisted that I sign anyway, and eventually I decided that they were probably right in assuming that, after fifty years, the line between reporter and participant was not as bright as I thought it was when I worked in the South. In Chicago, I greeted, say, John Lewis, a sharecropper’s son who had grown up to be a congressman, more like an old comrade-in-arms than like someone I’d mentioned in a couple of articles. We had been together at the Trailways bus station in Montgomery, where there was a distinct absence of what Chief Pierce called “professional courtesy.”

I’m no longer as certain as I once was about how bright the line was even back then. During Charlayne Hunter’s first semester at the University of Georgia, she was isolated in a dorm full of hostile coeds, and we spoke on the telephone from time to time. Once, she was talking about an uncomfortable train ride she’d just had from Savannah to Atlanta, and I said that I’d always heard that the train she’d been on—a well-known train called the Nancy Hanks—was particularly luxurious. “Not where we have to sit,” she said. What flashed through my mind had nothing to do with the knowledge I had built up on the subject of segregation in interstate versus intrastate transportation and how long it would take to desegregate the latter. What flashed through my mind was “They can’t make *her* sit back there.”

When one of the sessions in Chicago ended with people linking arms and singing “We Shall Overcome,” I made my usual quiet move toward the door. Suddenly, I felt someone lock arms with me. Instinctively, I started to pull my arm away while looking around to see who it was. It was an older woman in a wheelchair. Was I really going to wrest my arm away from an older woman in a wheelchair? I stayed. Then I joined in. It turns out that I still know most of the verses. ♦

Calvin Trillin, a contributor to The New Yorker since 1963, is the author of “No Fair! No Fair!,” with illustrations by Roz Chast.