

## THE FREEDOM RIDERS: BACK AFTER 50 YEARS

Like it or not fifty years worth of our children and grandchildren have scarcely been given the opportunity to remember those dark days and even darker nights of the manifestations of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi. Indeed it is difficult to totally appreciate how far we have come as a state if we continue to shield where we have been. This concern was raised in earnest with me during the past semester as I taught a class in Mississippi Government and Politics. When I raised the question as to who Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney were only three of thirty students had ever heard of them. While I will admit to struggling with the process of adapting to my age relative to college students born 40 years after I was, I was still taken aback that such a watershed artifact of our history had managed to escape their twelve plus years of education.

No set of events has served to shape a state's identity to the extent that the struggle for Civil Rights has shaped and in some respects continues to shape the identity of Mississippi. There are many white Mississippians who, like me, were in their teens when the Civil Rights movement showed up on the steps of our schools, churches, businesses and neighborhoods. Many of us were old enough to remember, sometimes vividly, the events that accompanied the arrival of the "Movement" yet we were perhaps too young to have absorbed the tradition of racial separation that, by law, made second class citizens out of nearly half of our fellow Mississippians.

A few weeks ago I had the chance to pick up the 2010 book Freedom Summer by Bruce Watson. This book told well the stories of the myriad of unthinkable events of the summer of 1964 in Mississippi that culminated in the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Wrapped around the daily newsmakers of this pivotal summer were the horrifying deaths of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the efforts to find their bodies and subsequently to bring their killers to justice. This was a rare weekend where I spent no television time and remained thoroughly engrossed in recalling events that I had first learned about by watching news bulletins on a fuzzy pictured black and white television whose roof antenna had to be adjusted manually after every gust of wind. It kept occurring to me as I read Watson's book that only a few weeks before twenty-seven out of thirty students, most of whom were Mississippians, had known nothing of the fate of the three Civil Rights workers in a rural Mississippi county much

less any of the hundreds of similar events that shaped Mississippi's image in the eyes of the nation.

Also, at around this same time the first news was published of the upcoming (May 22 – May 26) 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion of the Freedom Riders coming to Mississippi. In essence the Freedom Rides of 1961 kicked the door open for the events that would culminate in the voter registration efforts of Freedom Summer in 1964 and ultimately the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. While the struggle for equal rights for African-Americans soon engulfed the entire nation, the states of the old Confederate south were the focal point and Mississippi was arguably “ground zero” for the most protracted efforts.

This past week in the midst of the debate over legislative redistricting the National Board Chair for the Freedom Riders, Hank Thomas ironically was in the Mississippi Capital. Mr. Thomas was in town winding up preliminary work in preparation for the Freedom Riders 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion in Jackson. I can only imagine the satisfaction he must have taken in watching the 40 plus members of the legislative black caucus and the other members of the House and Senate engage in sometimes heated but always civil debate on the pivotal issues related to redistricting. Hank Thomas and his colleagues, many of whom have likely not returned to Mississippi since 1961, will indeed find a state that has changed dramatically. Furthermore the Freedom Riders can rightfully take credit for being at the van guard of those changes.

Now there remains one area that needs to be addressed with regard to the work begun by the Freedom Riders. There are apparently a couple of generations that have missed the stories of these events of the Civil Rights movement that have shaped who we are as a state. This gap in information being conveyed to our children and grandchildren must be corrected. The history and civics classes in our schools must begin to tell the story just as it happened. Ironically, the group that had such a prominent hand at the beginning of the quest for racial equality, by its return to Mississippi fifty years later, may be the catalyst for lifting the curtain that has obscured the events of fifty years ago and making them a formal part of our history. Such would be a fitting commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Riders.