

Freedom Riders

Fifty years ago, young Americans risked their lives on a journey that would change the nation forever

Characters

- James Farmer, black director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)
- Tom Gaither, black CORE staff member
- Gordon Carey, white CORE staff member
- James Peck, white CORE volunteer
- Mae Frances Moultrie, black Freedom Rider
- Hank Thomas, black Freedom Rider
- Joseph Perkins, black Freedom Rider
- Klansman, white supremacist
- Moses Newson, black newspaper reporter
- Diane Nash, black activist with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
- Fred Shuttlesworth, black minister
- John Lewis, black Freedom Rider
- Jim Zwerg, white Freedom Rider
- John Seigenthaler, white U.S. Department of Justice official
- Susan Wilbur, white Freedom Rider
- Martin Luther King Jr., minister and civil rights leader
- Robert F. Kennedy, U.S. Attorney General
- Guard at Parchman State Prison Farm
- James Bevel, black Freedom Rider
- Narrators A-E

Note: All characters were real people.

PROLOGUE

Narrator A: In December 1955, a black woman named Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man. At that time, segregation [separation by race] was a fact of life in much of the South. Her arrest sparked a 54-week **boycott** of Montgomery's buses by the city's blacks. The protest helped end segregation in Montgomery's bus system and catapulted a local minister named Martin Luther King Jr. to fame as a **civil rights** leader.

Narrator B: U.S. Supreme Court decisions in 1946 and 1960 had outlawed segregation on interstate buses and trains, as well as in bus and train stations. But many Southern authorities ignored the rulings, or refused to enforce them. In 1961, a group of 13 young Americans, black and white, chose to challenge this indifference to the law. They called themselves Freedom Riders.

SCENE 1

Narrator C: It's February 1961. At CORE's Chicago offices . . .

James Farmer: How do we make people see that interstate buses are still segregated in the South?

Tom Gaither: Gordon and I had an idea. Let's get a racially mixed group of people to travel together.

Gordon Carey: When the media covers our "Freedom Ride," Americans will *have* to take notice!

Farmer: It could be dangerous. The Ku Klux Klan might attack us, and we can't trust the police to enforce the law.

Gaither: Our people will be trained in nonviolence. If someone hits them, they won't strike back.

Farmer: Ah, the public will see us standing up for our rights—and the Klan acting like thugs. Let's do it!

Narrator D: CORE carefully picks and trains Freedom Ride volunteers. At a training session . . .

James Peck: This will be a non-violent protest. People are going to yell at you, and maybe even beat you. You have to stay calm.

Mae Frances Moultrie: Does this mean I can't defend myself?

Peck: You can cover yourself, but you can't strike back.

Moultrie: Should we expect violence when we get down South?

Peck: Let me put it this way: Write a letter to your family in case you get killed.

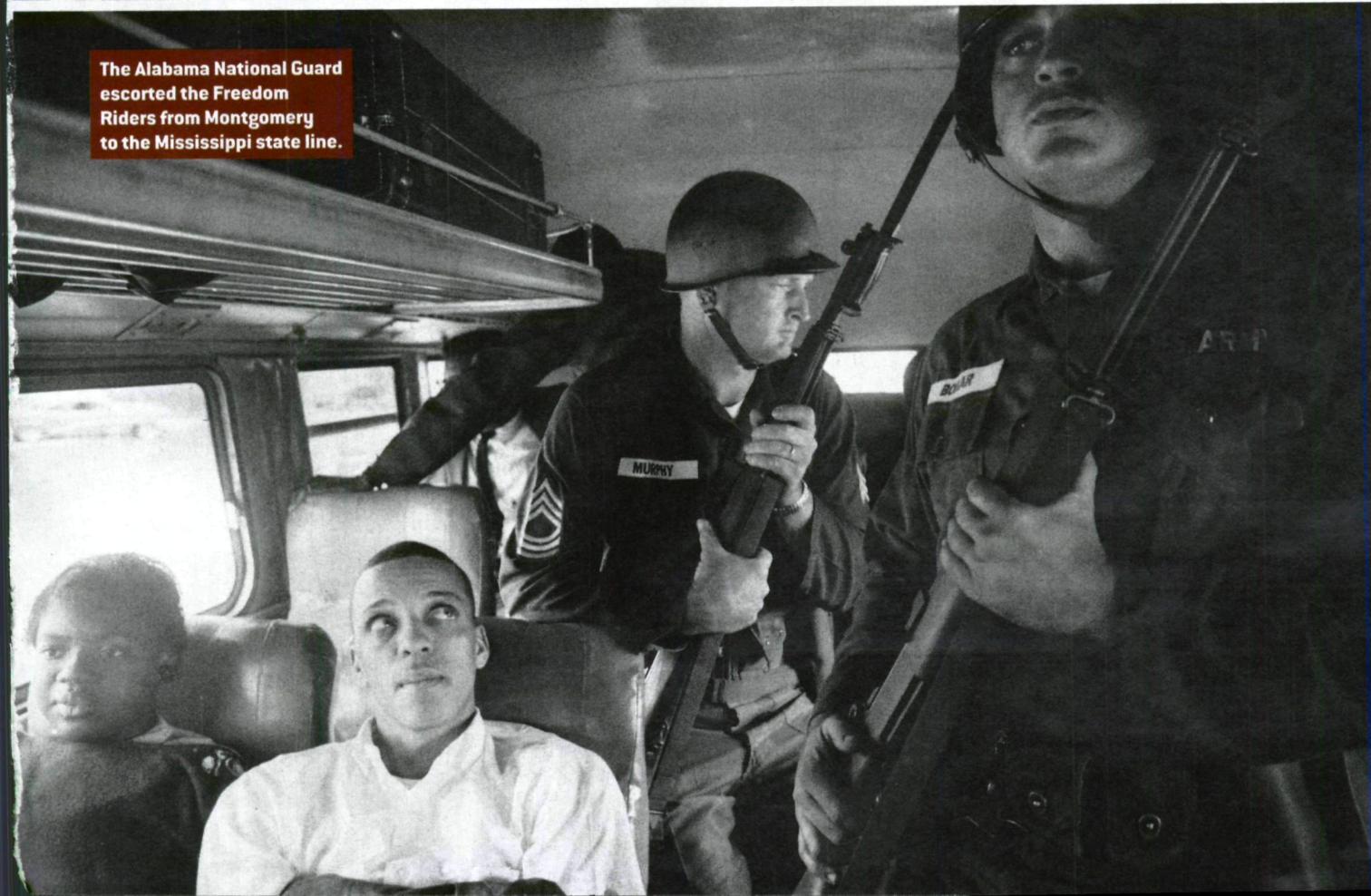
ON THE BUS, MAY 1961



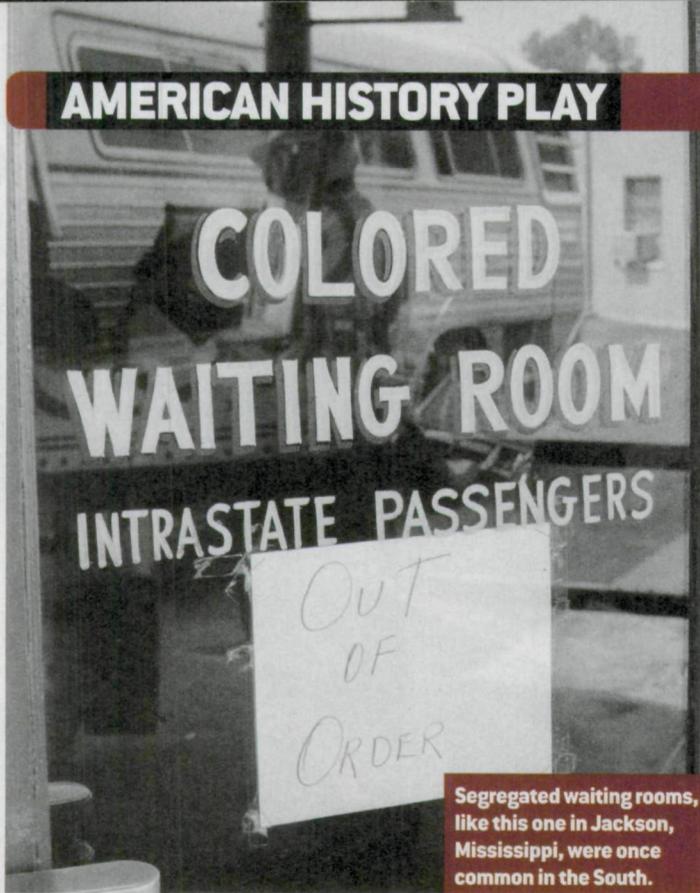
Freedom Riders barely escaped a firebombed bus outside Anniston, Alabama.



The Alabama National Guard escorted the Freedom Riders from Montgomery to the Mississippi state line.



AMERICAN HISTORY PLAY



Segregated waiting rooms, like this one in Jackson, Mississippi, were once common in the South.



Although he was seriously wounded by a mob in Montgomery, Alabama, Freedom Rider Jim Zwerg said, "These beatings cannot deter us from our purpose. . . . We want only equality and justice, and we will get it."

SCENE 2

Narrator E: On May 1, 1961, seven black and six white Freedom Riders leave Washington, D.C., on a public bus. In Atlanta, they switch to two buses headed for New Orleans. Defying local segregation practices, the riders sit together on the buses and in bus stations along the way.

Narrator A: On May 14, as they approach Anniston, Alabama . . .

Hank Thomas: The Ku Klux Klan is forcing the bus to pull over.

Joseph Perkins: They punctured the tires! Will they get us next?

Klansman: You think you can integrate Alabama? We'll kill you first!

Words to Know

- **boycott** (*n*): an organized protest in which people refuse to do business with a store, an organization, or a city
- **civil rights** (*n*): guarantees of freedom and equal treatment under the law

Moses Newson: Look out! That guy has a gasoline bomb!

Narrator B: A Klansman tosses the bomb through a window, and the bus bursts into flames. The Freedom Riders and other passengers escape, only to be beaten by the crowd.

Narrator C: The second bus isn't burned. But in Birmingham, Alabama, its riders are forced off and beaten by another Klan group.

Narrator D: Pictures of the burning bus and the beatings in Anniston and Birmingham shock people worldwide. To protect the riders and ease tensions, President John F. Kennedy has them flown from Birmingham to New Orleans.

Narrator E: In Nashville, Tennessee, SNCC activist Diane Nash organizes a second group of volunteers. She calls a civil rights worker in Birmingham.

Diane Nash: Reverend, we're heading your way to pick up where the first Freedom Riders left off.

Fred Shuttlesworth: Do you know that the first group was

almost killed here in Alabama?

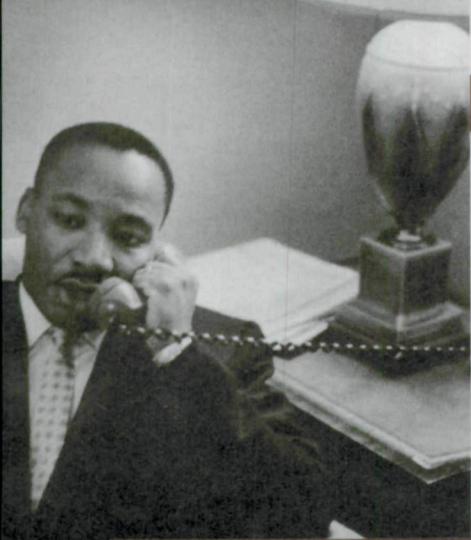
Diane Nash: If we let violence and fear stop us, the civil rights movement is over. We're coming!

Narrator A: Alabama officials agree to protect the second group. The President also sends Justice Department official John Seigenthaler to escort them. On May 20, the SNCC Freedom Riders leave Birmingham on a bus in a convoy that includes the highway patrol, FBI agents, and reporters. By the time the bus reaches Montgomery, however, most of the escort has left. Local police are supposed to take over protection. But . . .

John Lewis: Hey, where is everybody? There are no cops in sight!

Jim Zwerg: It's so quiet. Maybe the cops are keeping people away so we'll be safe in the bus station.

Narrator B: But as they get off the bus, more than 200 white men, women, and children surge forward, beating the riders with baseball bats and other makeshift weapons. Lewis, Zwerg, and



Martin Luther King Jr. talked on the phone after a white mob protesting the Freedom Riders surrounded his church in Montgomery in May 1961.



President John F. Kennedy (right) and his brother **Robert**, the Attorney General, discussed ways to handle violence against the Freedom Riders.

another rider are badly beaten. Others run. John Seigenthaler arrives as a white teen is attacking Susan Wilbur.

John Seigenthaler: Quick, Miss, get in my car!

Susan Wilbur: I'm staying, but this isn't your fight. Run while you can!

Seigenthaler (shouting at the mob): Stop! I'm a federal agent.

Narrator C: Seigenthaler tries to show his ID, but a man hits him with a pipe, knocking him out.

SCENE 3

Narrator D: The next day, May 21, 1,200 blacks fill Montgomery's First Baptist Church to honor the Freedom Riders. But outside the church, more trouble is brewing. King calls the U.S. Attorney General in Washington, D.C.

Martin Luther King Jr.: A mob of 3,000 whites has surrounded First Baptist. They're throwing rocks through the windows and shouting threats. They've overturned a car and set it on fire. The federal marshals you sent are outnumbered.

Robert F. Kennedy: I've asked the Governor to send in the National Guard. The churchgoers and Freedom Riders will be protected.

Narrator E: Order is restored. But not until May 24 are the riders able

to leave Montgomery for Jackson. After they cross state lines, Mississippi police arrest them. At Parchman State Prison Farm, they are thrown into hot, overcrowded cells. Some are punished with electric shocks or doused with fire hoses. Yet all remain calm, singing spirituals to boost morale.

Guard: Stop that singing, or I'll take away your mattresses!

James Bevel: Take my mattress. I'll keep my soul.

EPILOGUE

Narrator A: Despite the violence they faced, no Freedom Riders were killed. Others kept coming. During the summer of 1961, more than 430 crisscrossed the South. About 300 ended up in Parchman Prison.

Narrator B: Their protests pushed the federal government to enforce the interstate travel laws. "By the fall of 1961, those signs that said 'White Waiting [Room],' 'Colored Waiting [Room]' came tumbling down," recalls Freedom Rider John Lewis, now a U.S. Congressman from Georgia. The rides "ended, forever, segregation in public transportation." —Sean Stewart Price

This play was adapted from Raymond Arsenault's book, *Freedom Riders*, the basis for an upcoming film, *American Experience: Freedom Riders*, by Stanley Nelson. The film will air on PBS on May 16.

CIVIL RIGHTS: KEY DATES

1954 EQUAL EDUCATION

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court rules segregated public schools unconstitutional.

1955 BUS BOYCOTT

Rosa Parks's arrest for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger sets off a yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

1957 LITTLE ROCK NINE

U.S. troops intervene on behalf of nine black students blocked from entering all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

1960 STUDENT SIT-INS

Black college students help end segregation at lunch counters after a series of sit-ins that begins in Greensboro, North Carolina.

1963 "I HAVE A DREAM"

More than 200,000 people participate in the March on Washington, during which Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his famous speech.

1964 FREEDOM SUMMER

Hundreds of young volunteers face harassment and brutality to register black voters in Mississippi.

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs a law banning discrimination against blacks and women.

1965 VOTING RIGHTS ACT

Congress outlaws literacy tests, poll taxes, and other obstacles to black voter registration.