

Prison Notes of a Freedom Rider . . . Robert Martinson

THE FREEDOM RIDES began as an effort to enforce the Supreme Court decision in the *Boynton* case, but quickly developed into a prolonged, nation-wide campaign to fill the jails of Mississippi. This strategic shift in emphasis—from Freedom Ride to “jail-in”—was improvised under great pressure as a response to the unyielding tactics of Southern officialdom. Against the deadly reality of a “century of litigation” there seems to be no alternative to direct action.

Any form of direct action in the South today may lead to jailings. (The mass arrest of hundreds in Albany, Georgia and New Orleans are only the most dramatic recent cases in point.) Nevertheless, the “jail-in”—a deliberate, planned effort to fill the jails—is something new. On a small scale, the jail-in received its most severe test in the Maximum Security cell block of the State Penitentiary at Parchmann, Mississippi.

What does it mean to go to jail for freedom? How did the Freedom Riders stand up to this difficult test?

I joined the first California contingent which left San Francisco on June 17 and was arrested in Jackson, Miss., on June 22. I spent thirty-nine days in jail—a week in the Jackson city jail, two weeks in Maximum Security and about a week in an all-white male dormitory. I have returned to Jackson twice since my release, the first time in response to a mass arraignment, and again to have my second trial in front of a court of record. I spent three weeks of intensive training at a CORE institute in Virginia and, in my spare moments, I have attended press conferences, given talks and walked on picket lines. I do not think my experience is atypical. I do not remember any passionate desire to spend a good part of my life commuting between San Francisco and Jackson. By its legalistic maneuvers, the State of Mississippi has transformed me—and how many hundreds

of others?—into practically full-time civil-rights militants. This is only the most obvious result of America's first organized jail-in.

It is really laughable to read the often repeated charge that we were “paid agitators” or, in another version, “hardened racial troublemakers.” We were, if anything, the typical American “innocents abroad,” totally unprepared to cope with the curious customs of Southern justice, completely untrained in nonviolence. Armed with nothing but our good intentions, we traveled across half a continent to lend our bodies to the struggle against bigotry. If my own informal poll is correct, very few of the Riders were previously active in civil rights, especially those from the North. They were not professionals; they were not even CORE members. If the truth be known, the Riders received their “training” from the State of Mississippi, not from the NAACP.

OUR GROUP of fifteen volunteers was probably not too atypical. There were twelve whites and three Negroes, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-four. About half of the group had lived or worked in the South at one time or another; two were from New Orleans. They came from many walks of life, but a good percentage were students or ex-students. One man left behind a wife and two small children. We were joined at the last minute by Father Grant Muse, who came with the blessings of his Bishop, the Rt. Rev-



erend James A. Pike of the Episcopal church. Looking back on it, our ignorance of what was to come was truly astonishing.

Our “training” in New Orleans consisted of an afternoon of lectures given by CORE staff member Jim McCain, who worked under the constant fear of arrest. With the best will in the world, he could not prepare us for the unknown. It became increasingly clear that we were involved in a “movement” rather than a planned offensive. As the crush of Riders streamed through the New Orleans check-point, the most that could be accomplished was to reduce the confusion to some sort of order. It was a heroic effort at organization improvised under the most difficult conditions.

In Jackson, everything was routine and efficiency. Our arrest produced headlines back home in the San Francisco Bay Area, but it was just another day in the busy life of Captain Ray of the Jackson city police. As our mixed group entered the “white” waiting room at the train depot, he issued his famous command for the umpteenth time before the small crowd of onlookers: “Move on.” We refused. We were under arrest at last!

THE OPERATION had been rationalized with true American ingenuity and worked with wondrous speed. Captain Ray, looking more harassed than ferocious, checked us off on a list that had been phoned to him by the CORE staff in New Orleans. Everyone was present. The paddy wagon was ready with its special detail of officers; Judge Spencer of the municipal court was ready; our lawyer was ready. The sentence of four months and \$200 was by now routine. As we passed through the various stages of confinement—fingerprinting, photographing, questioning—we were treated with grim but frigid politeness. I felt more like an inductee than a prisoner. There was a little banter as we waited to be questioned by the overburdened officials. Captain Ray had worked up some rather devastating repartee and many of the Riders were eager

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to test their wits against the enemy, now that he seemed so human. After all, shouldn't the spirit of nonviolence melt the heart of the most rigid nonbeliever?

And in truth the Riders left a permanent, ineffaceable mark on the jails of Mississippi. They were a new kind of prisoner. Young, eager to communicate and cooperate, yet determined, they presented an almost insoluble problem for the police mind. Their very existence in such numbers constituted a continuous threat to the caste system and to the hoary traditions of prison life.

The burden of the state was multiplied by the need for special treatment. The Riders had to be separated from other prisoners, especially from Negroes who might get bad ideas. And with good reason, since the Riders took every opportunity to explain, to argue, to make jokes about Ol' Jim Crow, to preach philosophy and morality to their jailers, and to sing their never-ending songs about such upsetting subjects as equality and freedom and love. Even worse, the Riders just could not react properly to threats and punishment. They went on hunger strikes; they volunteered en masse for solitary confinement; they demanded their "rights," not understanding that they had none.

FOR example, one night Captain Ray stalked in with an ultimatum: stop singing or go to solitary. Six of us volunteered. I don't know who was more surprised, ourselves or Captain Ray, but the die was cast (as they say). The door to solitary clanked shut on me. I had managed to smuggle in my glasses and a book and I read for a few minutes from a tiny slit of light under the door. The cell was about six by six by nine feet; it had a hole in the floor for elimination, but was otherwise bare and clammy. Soon the word was out. The jail began to rock with freedom songs, shouts of encouragement and cries of shame. I heard a girl's voice: "Father Muse is in solitary!" After about forty-five minutes, the door clanked open. Both sides beat a strategic retreat in this instance. We kept singing—but we lowered our voices.

This kind of incident was repeated

endlessly. The Riders were being trained by experts. How many thousands of young people are receiving similar educations in the South?

The State of Mississippi finally evolved a rather predictable answer to the problem of isolating the mounting numbers of Riders. Governor Barnett vetoed the dangerous idea of forcing the Riders to pick cotton on the county prison farm and made the fateful decision to send them to the State Penitentiary at Parchmann with the flimsy excuse that there was no room elsewhere. Convicted of a misdemeanor, the Riders were henceforth to be treated as the worst felons!

Thirteen of us were packed into the back of a small, jeep-sized truck. We moved about until we "integrated" the truck and kept changing places in order to ease our aching legs. Our trip was a nightmare of jolts, sudden stops and screaming sirens. As we passed through the small towns on the way North through the delta area, Sheriff Gilfooy's siren moaned the glad tidings to his constituents, who stopped momentarily to watch the latest load of Riders bound for Parchmann.

We smoked our last cigarettes and silently prayed there would be no breakdown. Compared to this sonnolent countryside, with its miles and miles of cotton fields and field hands, Parchmann, in anticipation, seemed like a haven. In my Yankee imagination it all looked like a movie set from *Gone with the Wind*. I found myself humming a little song taught me by a Rider from New Orleans:

There's a man on a big, white hoss;
Don't know his name, but they call
him boss.

The Maximum Security Unit at Parchmann State Penitentiary is a one-story, cement-block structure composed of two wings. It is surrounded by a high, barbed-wire fence with guard towers at the corners. It is a prison within a prison, especially designed to break the spirit of the toughest felon. It contains the Prison's Death Row and the electric chair. (The girl Riders were put in that wing.) The inmates are caged in small, two-man cells and look out upon a bare cement corridor bathed



in perpetual light. There are three sets of electrically-operated doors between them and the precious freedom they have forgone. The doors clang open and shut with an unearthly crash, setting the nerves on edge. It was in this grim mausoleum that the Riders received their last and most memorable lessons.

IT IS impossible to prepare anyone for the humiliating, brutal atmosphere of even the best prison. There are no rules, no precedents.

From the beginning, the gloves were off. We stripped before the guards and a few local notables and rolled our clothes into a bundle. (We stood paralyzed for a few moments while Father Muse patiently explained that he could not give up his only remaining garment—the Holy Sacrament—which he had strapped around his naked body.) We walked barefooted, two by two, into our cages and stood there embarrassed, naked, outraged.

We could see about two inches of the faces of our immediate neighbors and quickly learned the views of the "voices" which made up our little world. Views there were, of all sizes, shapes and intensities. The cell block—like Sartre's *No Exit*—was a constant torment of argument, dogma, prayer and song. The group had elected a spokesman—CORE National Director James Farmer (the guards called him "Farmer Boy")—who somehow managed to maintain an immense dignity while

holding up, with one hand, an oversized pair of prison briefs.

The group divided the day into periods and desperately tried to stick to a rough schedule. After breakfast (grits, coffee, molasses and white bread) came devotions—a period of prayer and song usually led by one of the ministers. This was followed by a special time set aside for debate and argument. (Bitter wrangling about tactics had threatened to undermine the precarious solidarity of the “voices.”) After lunch came the “quiet hour” to sleep away the interminable afternoon. After dinner there were devotions once more and then blessed sleep—if it came.

Votes were necessary to settle the never-ending debates that broke out over large matters or small. There were many strategies and many tactics offered; everyone had to “resist,” each in his own way. Any creative act, no matter how small, was automatically a violation of prison discipline.

Imagine the frustration of maintaining democracy under such physical conditions. Someone in cell No. 2 on the far side makes a motion which is ponderously passed from cell to cell, to our “pivot man” and down the thirteen cells on our side. Assuming the motion managed this precarious passage without distortion (or objection), the debate began.

Each person's remarks and interpositions had again to be passed around the block. After everyone had had his full say, the voting would begin. “How does cell No. 4 vote?” “One for, one against.” “O.K. Cell No. 5, what about you?” “Two abstentions. We want to explain our abstentions.” A series of low groans would break out. This democratic spirit was doggedly defended to the very end. The Freedom Riders would not conform to the authoritarian structure of prison life.

In Parchmann, we had only ourselves to rely upon for passing the time — no games, cards or reading matter, no cigarettes, no exercise, nothing but time, endlessly advancing in minutes, hours, days. So some chewed white bread into paste and made chess sets. Others constructed tiny decks of cards. Some sang and told stories or played Twenty Questions. Others moaned or shouted unexpectedly. Some went on hunger strikes and others went to solitary, where they were joined by their brothers. At the twice-weekly showers, some creative souls draped themselves in sheets and mimed subversive morality plays before the outraged guards. And at times the cell block rang with an almost maniacal roar as the Riders (innocent no more) shouted in unison against the outrage done to their bodies and souls.

And yet even here the spirit of the movement prevailed. In these almost hopeless conditions the democratic forms continued. Solidarity was somehow recaptured through song, prayer and discussion. Even our nemesis—Deputy Sheriff Thysen—seemed a little surprised, even curious. He asked a young Negro why he was smiling and received no answer. He repeated the question in his deadly way: “Boy, what you got to smile about? You in jail, you know.”

“Sheriff,” he answered, “you just wouldn't understand. I'm smiling because I'm free.”

And I was witness to the fact that, indeed, a new kind of freedom—tough, critical, unsentimental, knowing—is being forged in the jails and prisons of the South. Those who emerge from these jails will never be the same again. They will go on to fight other battles and train other Riders. Mississippi will learn that it has aided the process it set out to hinder; it has educated the ignorant and trained the naive. From the depths of their cells in the Maximum Security Unit at Parchmann, the Riders have shown the entire nation the depths of their attachment to freedom and democracy and the truth of one of their songs:

The only chain a man can stand
Is the chain of hand in hand.

FEUDING FOR SPACE . . . by Carl Dreher

TRADE associations are not straws, but they show which way the wind blows. In 1959 the Aircraft Industries Association, the coordinating and public-relations arm of the aircraft fabricating companies, burgeoned forth as the Aerospace Industries Association. The change was in recognition of the waning importance of military aircraft and the rising role of rockets and mis-

CARL DREHER, an engineer turned writer, has long been observing, for The Nation, the social and political implications of the technological-arms race.

siles. If it were not for the uneuphonious sound, the United States Air Force might well follow suit; soon it will be logging more mileage in vacuum than in air. The militarization of space under the direction of the aerospace forces of the United States and the Soviet Union is proceeding apace and during the next few years can hardly be reversed except by a nuclear war, which would simultaneously reverse everything else.

Our own space planners are even more prolific in their projections and promotions than are those of the enemy. A few years ago our creative spirits came up with Project Midas,

an orbiting infrared detector designed to give warning of the ascent of an ICBM. Midas is impeccable; if the Soviets would only refrain from launching ICBMs, it would have nothing to detect—except our own ICBMs. Defense, however, does not stop with detection and the Air Force has little confidence in the Army's Nike Zeus, designed to destroy the ICBM in the terminal phase, as it hurtles down on the target. The Air Force wants to go after the ICBM in the boost phase, when it is a sitting duck, comparatively speaking. This system, which goes under the innocent-sounding

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