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POWERED BY YOU AND The Clarion-Ledger

Book lauds freedom riders

JERRY MITCHELL • JMITCHELL@CLARIONLEDGER.COM • MAY 30, 2008

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Mississippi's segregationist spy agency carefully collected photographs of incoming freedom riders in 1961 for its files of those labeled "agitators" - unintentionally preserving for posterity a record of the nation's civil rights pioneers.

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Nearly a half century later, photographs of these riders, then and now, appear in a new book, Breach of Peace - a portion of which appears in Oprah magazine.

"By carefully recording names and preserving the mug shots, the (Mississippi Sovereignty) Commission inadvertently created a testament to these heroes of the civil rights movement," wrote author Eric Etheridge, a native of Carthage.

Some of those freedom riders are expected to join him today at Lemuria Book Store.

On May 4, 1961, the first of hundreds of civil rights activists began riding buses into the South, testing a 1960 U.S. Supreme Court decision that concluded racial segregation was illegal in bus and train stations.

These men and women, young and middle-aged, black and white, were met with resistance and, in some cases, violence.

A white mob burned a bus in Anniston, Ala., and several riders were beaten, among them a young John Lewis, who now serves as a congressman from Georgia.

After that violence, debate raged among civil rights activists over whether these freedom rides should continue on to Jackson, recalled Dave Dennis. "We spent all night sitting around, talking about it."

That evening became one of the most important in the life of Dennis, then a 20-year-old Dillard University student.

He originally joined the movement to impress a beautiful woman.

Now he had to weigh whether he was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.

By morning, the group had decided a new group of riders would make the trip to Mississippi.

"That's when I got the religion of the movement," Dennis said. "When I got on that bus, no one expected to make it to Jackson. To get on the bus was my baptism in fear."



Dave Dennis is shown in a 1961 mug shot taken when he was jailed for civil rights work. The mug shot was collected by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. Ellen Ziskind is shown in a 1961 mug shot taken after her arrest for civil rights work.

BOOK SIGNING

Eric Etheridge will sign copies of his book, Breach of Peace, at 5 p.m. today at Lemuria Book Store, followed by a 5:30 p.m. slideshow.

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As soon as the riders hit the Mississippi state line, they were all arrested. "We couldn't get off the bus, couldn't go to the restroom," Dennis said. "We went straight to jail."

Many other riders followed the same path. Through September 1961, more than 300 riders were arrested.

Most of them rejected bail, causing the Jackson City Jail to overflow.

But Mississippi authorities quickly made other plans, and soon sent many of them to the State Penitentiary at Parchman.

While behind bars, the riders sang the freedom songs.

"They kept getting in trouble for the singing," Etheridge said. "They took their clothes away from them. They took their mattresses away and hosed them down."

One day at Parchman, guards put a cell full of African-American men into a hole, he said. "It was all about getting them to say, 'Yes, sir.' The guards said, 'You're going to say, 'yes, sir, or you're going to die.' "

For most freedom riders, the event would stand as an important moment in their lives, he said. "For some, it was a transformative experience."

Joan Pleune, then a 22-year-old student from the University of California at Berkeley, calls it "the defining experience of my life. I'm active in the anti-war movement, and I get arrested regularly in Washington, but nothing has ever measured up to that experience."

Etheridge was 4 and living in Carthage when the Freedom Rides took place.

He doesn't recall that but remembers other things from the era, such as separate entrances and waiting rooms for "white" and "colored" at the doctor's office. "I knew the race story from the daily life angle," said Etheridge, who graduated in 1970 from St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Jackson.

For the past several decades, Etheridge has worked as an editor for magazines such as George and Rolling Stone before deciding to take on new projects of his own that would include his love of photography.

He knew little about the history of the civil rights movement in Mississippi but wanted to know more after the records of the now-defunct Sovereignty Commission were opened.

In 2004, he became curious what, if any, photographs were in the now-public commission files.

About 500 or so, but they're just mug shots, the staffer said.

The response piqued his interest, and he soon found himself staring at these black-and-white pictures of 310 riders.

"Nobody was intending to make this a beautiful and compelling collection, but that's kind of what they did," he said. "I thought they deserved a much wider audience."

In some shots, he saw confidence; in others, a real presence.

He decided to track down as many of the riders as he could and take new photographs of them. "It became a way into my own history," he said.

After his days as a freedom rider, Dennis continued to work in the civil rights movement and helped organize Freedom Summer in 1964 with Bob Moses.

Since 1991, he has worked with Moses' Algebra Project, to improve the math skills of African-American students.

He works in New Orleans and sometimes shares with students the philosophy of nonviolence that was part of the movement.

"When you tell stories about being beaten, the average kid is like, 'You took that? I would have fought back,'" Dennis said.

What those students don't realize, he said, was to fight back in those days could have meant death.

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