

“If they were going to die, I was going to die with them”

Jimmy Allen Ruth, 1961 Freedom Rides bus driver, dead at 83

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Jimmy Allen Ruth, the Tennessee Trailways bus driver who, in 1961, braved the Ku Klux Klan and racist lawmen to carry civil rights movement “Freedom Riders” deep into the then-Jim Crow South to challenge racial segregation, died on June 2 at the age of 83 in Bartlett, Tennessee.

Ruth, who was white, began commercial bus driving after graduating from Chester County High School in 1956. An accident in the late 1960s left him partially paralyzed and unable to drive passenger buses, but he worked as a truck driver for another 30-plus years before retiring in 2001.

Ruth considered his job driving Freedom Riders from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi his life’s greatest accomplishment.

Ruth, then 23, took the risk of driving the bus when no one else would, after racists in Alabama had attacked the first Freedom Riders bus, a Greyhound en route from Washington D.C. to New Orleans, Louisiana. In Anniston, Alabama, local law enforcement colluded with the Ku Klux Klan to burn the black and white riders alive in the bus. They were able to escape, probably after the fuel tank exploded during the burning, but they were badly beaten by Klansmen.

A replacement bus took the riders to Birmingham, Alabama, where the notorious police commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor, organized a mob that savagely beat the riders with chains, pipes, and baseball bats. White riders were singled out for the worst violence. After the Birmingham attack, no more bus drivers could be found, Greyhound said, and the ride to New Orleans was aborted.

After these events in Alabama, to dare to drive an

integrated bus through Mississippi—the deepest of the Deep South—took enormous courage. “[E]very Trailways driver turned down the job except Ruth,” a family obituary noted. “He agreed to drive the students and never asked any questions although he was aware of the risks involved. Ruth was willing to aid in the cause for freedom and justice at all cost.”

The ride, escorted by National Guard troops, arrived without incident, though a dozen riders were arrested upon arrival in Jackson.

The Freedom Rides Movement was started in 1961 in Washington D.C. by 13 women and men—seven African Americans and six whites—who traveled to the South by bus and train to integrate public transportation.

The segregation of public transportation was a bulwark of the Jim Crow system of racial segregation and second-class citizen status for African Americans. The legal basis for segregation in fact started in public transportation, in the notorious *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case of 1896, in which the Supreme Court established the reactionary “separate but equal” doctrine, ruling races could be legally separated. Handed down as an antidote to the Populist movement, in which white and black sharecroppers had challenged Democratic Party domination, racial segregation was quickly applied throughout the South.

Under Jim Crow all public space was segregated: buses, trains, street cars, schools, bathrooms, water fountains, movie theaters, and so on. Daily interactions between the races were governed by a code of behavior designed to humiliate and degrade blacks. Simultaneously to *Plessy*, the Democratic Party set about stripping the right to vote from blacks—and many poor whites—through a series of notorious election

rules, including poll taxes, the “all white primary,” literacy tests, and “the grandfather clause.” This regime was backed up by the threat of racist violence that was always aided and abetted by “southern lawmen”—some 4,000 blacks were lynched in the South from the 1870s through the 1940s according to one study.

Two rulings by the Supreme Court, during its relatively brief reformist stage, undermined segregation in public transportation: *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946) and *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960). These rulings were decided on the narrow grounds that segregation in transportation between states violated the Interstate Commerce Act. The Freedom Riders, organized primarily by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), set out to take advantage of these rulings. The administration of Democratic President John Kennedy, under the direction of his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, slowly and reluctantly intervened against the southern wing of its own party.

It is estimated that as many as 450 people—black and white, male and female, young and old—risked their lives to participate in the Freedom Rides. Their bravery deserves to be remembered. That the Freedom Riders’ protest, like the entire civil rights movement, was ultimately channeled behind the same party that ruled the South was an expression of the tragic failure of the American labor movement to break from the Democratic Party, or, for that matter, to even gain much of a foothold in the South.

That Jimmy Allen Ruth, a 23-year-old working class white man from rural Tennessee, took such a stand, however, testifies to the potential and necessity, then and now, to unite workers across the racial boundaries fostered by the ruling class—a lesson that is obscured in the current age of identity politics. Racialist efforts like the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, which seeks to distort and revise history, with the core argument that anti-black racism resides in the “DNA” of white people, cannot explain someone like Ruth.

In 1961, Ruth gave expression to the best traits of the working class—selflessness, solidarity, and courage. If all that mattered to him was his “whiteness” he would have turned down the drive to Jackson, Mississippi. Instead, he risked everything. As he told a local Tennessee newspaper in 2011 on the 50th anniversary of his drive, “if they were going to die, I was going to

die with them.”



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