

Legacy of a Civil Rights Icon - Hank Thomas

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A Rider wishes for reconciliation

Mississippi state Sen. John Horhn of Jackson, right, presents Hank Thomas with a resolution honoring him for his work during the Freedom Rides of 1961 at the Capitol in Jackson, Miss., on March 16. Photo: Associated Press

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Among photographs of old friends and paintings from the civil rights movement, Freedom Rider Hank Thomas keeps a small piece of the bus he nearly died on. It is a reminder he does not need, but a reminder nonetheless.

“That day has never left me. It’s a part of the road that I’ve traveled,” Thomas said, speaking by phone last week.

Thomas was one of seven Freedom Riders on the Greyhound bus that was firebombed in Anniston on May 14, 1961. He was 19, a student at Howard University, the historically black college in Washington, D.C.

Even though his first attempt ended in Anniston, Thomas returned with another wave of Freedom Riders, eventually landing in Unit 17 of the Parchman prison farm in Mississippi, a destination shared by hundreds of Riders.

All told, Thomas was arrested 22 times in the course of his civil rights activism.

After the Freedom Rides, he joined the Army and headed to Vietnam. Shot during an ambush in 1966, he spent more than five months recuperating in the hospital.

After the Army, he moved to Atlanta, where he is now a successful businessman who owns several hotel and fast food restaurant franchises.

Thomas said a 1994 trip to Vietnam gave him a chance to come to terms with what he had seen in the war. He described the trip as a defining moment in his life, a chance to reconcile and to heal.

He had hoped for a repeat of that experience this month in Anniston. Thomas tried to meet with one of the men charged (but never convicted) in the firebombing of the bus. But the man refused.

“I guess he can’t come to grips with what he has done, but I have moved on with my life, and I’ve had a very blessed life,” Thomas said.

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Thomas will be in Anniston Wednesday and Thursday to take part in the events remembering the Freedom Riders.

He hopes to rejoice in what he and his fellow civil rights activists were able to do. Educational opportunities, fair housing, workplace opportunities and an end to the Jim Crow laws that fueled the fire that nearly killed him are all due in part to the Freedom Rides, he said.

“Our sole function was to change these kinds of things. Well, we did.”

The 50th anniversary Freedom Ride will end with five days of reflection and celebration in Jackson, Miss., a place very different from the Jackson of 1961.

“We came to Jackson 50 years ago. You had a white, segregationist, racist mayor. You had a white police chief. All those positions have been replaced, and now you have a black mayor. You have a black woman for a police chief,” he said.

“You have more black elected officials in the state of Mississippi than in any other state in the South; percentage-wise, more than any other state in the nation,” Thomas added.

Thomas is one of only two surviving Freedom Riders from the Greyhound bus destroyed in Anniston. The other, Genevieve Hughes, is in bad health.

Thomas expects only a handful of living Freedom Riders will make it to Jackson. “But they will go,” he said, “and they will rejoice in what they’ve done.”

Eddie Burkhalter is news editor for the Piedmont Journal.