

BOOK REVIEW

When a burning bus captured the nation's attention

By Jerry Hames

The turbulent 1960s saw the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, rising resistance and demonstrations against the Vietnam War and a new surge in the struggle by black Americans for equal rights.

In 1960, despite the Supreme Court's ruling striking down school segregation six years earlier, there remained massive resistance in the South to school integration. On another front, in 1961, the first sit-in that eventually would integrate lunch counters took place at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, N.C. It was the beginning of a movement that would lead to sit-ins in 54 cities in nine states.

That summer also saw the first wave of so-called Freedom Riders. Although the Supreme Court had declared segregation illegal in interstate bus terminals, the law was not enforced. In response, James Farmer, director of the Congress on Racial Equality, began to send interracial groups of Freedom Riders to ride buses in the South.

The first buses left Washington for Louisiana on a route that would take them through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and into Alabama — first to Birmingham and then to Anniston, a small industrial city 60 miles east of Birmingham.

On May 14, 1961, a group of about 200 angry men surrounded and attacked a Greyhound bus at the Anniston station,

throwing stones and slashing its tires. Six miles from the city, when the bus was forced to stop, a mob armed with chains, clubs and pipes broke windows, fire-bombed the bus and then clubbed the escaping passengers. The most seriously injured, Walter Bergman, was kicked unconscious, suffered a stroke and was confined to a wheelchair for life.

"Anniston had the capacity for racial violence that was equal to any other community in the South," Phil Noble writes in "Beyond the Burning Bus."

"Some felt the horror of the tragedy," he says. "Others said, 'It's too bad, but they got what they deserved.'"

Noble, then minister at Anniston's First Presbyterian Church, was caught between two forces. With clarity, he

that crumbled in baseball and the emerging prophets of social change, especially the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The book is carefully researched, but it is Noble's story of how he found himself leading a biracial council of men — what some of his critics called the "race relations council" — for a tumultuous two-year period.

Other Southern cities had failed dismally in attempts to establish biracial councils, so much so that Anniston's success led President John F. Kennedy to congratulate Alabama Governor George Wallace and Anniston's mayor, Claude Dear, on its achievement. Immediately, Wallace called Dear to express his dislike that such a council had been created, Noble reports.

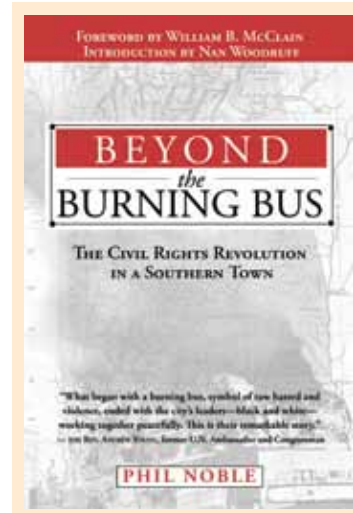
His appointment as the council's chair caused an "eerie silence" both from his parishioners and friends, he recounts. Because of the personal risks involved, council members met at irregular times and places. "We would set a date and time for our next meeting, and then a half-hour or hour before the meeting I would call and tell members the place [to meet]," Noble writes. The group alternated between such locations as a church, the YMCA, a bank's board room or the Chamber of Commerce.

Because white and black members of the council were strangers to each other, Noble describes how he talked about the need for respect and for a sense of trust in how they dealt with one another. Eventually, Noble succeeded.

"The minister at Grace Episcopal Church told one of his members who was to serve later on the Human Relations Committee that we had gotten to a first-name basis, black and white," Noble writes. "The member was indignant that there would be such familiarity, that blacks would call whites by their first names."

Deeply entrenched customs pervaded the South then, and segregation still ruled. The council had mixed results in attempting to desegregate the city's public buildings without incident or violence. An attempt to integrate the public library, undertaken with the approval of the library board, resulted in the beating of two black council members by a group of about 50 whites on the library steps. As the two attempted to flee by car, one was wounded by gunfire.

It is worth noting that, while the



Beyond the Burning Bus

By Phil Noble

NewSouth Books, Montgomery

\$19.95 pp.;
\$7.99 Kindle



Photo/Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

A Greyhound bus carrying Freedom Riders to Birmingham, Ala., was stopped outside of Anniston by a mob of whites, who burned the bus and clubbed the riders.



Photo/courtesy of Phil Noble

Author Phil Noble, center, with the Rev. Bob McClain and Nimrod Reynolds, who were beaten as they attempted to integrate the city library.

recounts the bus tragedy and other acts of racial violence that alarmed the city's business, elected and religious leaders and eventually brought them together to create a biracial Human Relations Council that set about quietly to dismantle old segregation laws and deeply held customs.

Although, as the title suggests, the book's focus is on how Anniston's white and black leaders came together to work peacefully, Noble also lays groundwork leading to the civil rights movement, describing the changing patterns of segregation after the Second World War, the litigation against states' rights policies that condoned apartheid, the racial barriers

mayor and newly elected town commissioner supported the work of the biracial council, the police chief and most members of his force did not.

Noble describes how thin a line the council members trod. "The black community thought we were going too slow, and the white community thought we were going too fast," Noble says. "Our churches were no exception."

"One of the reasons for the success we had was that we were able for the most part to maintain that balance. We made enough progress so that the black community did not feel completely frustrated, and, at the same time, the progress was gradual enough so that the white community accepted it." ■

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