

Birmingham, Alabama: The Forties

The Cause

The 20th century Southern United States was a world where public space was equally shared and dominated by people of diverse class and economic background—people with many differences but yet one specific attribute, they were white. This time period brought about many personal battles of African Americans who fought against the segregation of all peoples. Many of these battles have gone unnoticed and undocumented throughout the past decades. Historians in general have often overlooked the well-organized movements, as well as their goals and spokespersons, which led to the success of organized collective movements.

During the mid-1940s, when the nation was involved in a world fight against Hitler's idea of Aryan Supremacy as a threat to Western democracy, white supremacy and segregation remained extremely evident in the Deep South. Birmingham, Alabama was the place where many African American voices began to be heard, especially those of the youth who believed that United States soil should no longer justify racism. Public spaces (commons), such as city streets, streetcars and buses became the most common place for exhibiting militancy and taking a stand.

During WWII the wartime economy created many job opportunities, which led to a great migration to the cities. This movement placed additional stress on already limited transportation, such as buses and streetcars. The fight for space and position of public areas, such as sidewalks, stations, depots, stores, elevators, buses and streetcars, became a breeding ground for intense racial conflict and discrimination. The Jim Crow laws led to the justification of unfair and unequal treatment of the black community. Many incidences of protest and violence took place on public transportation throughout this period of time. Segregation on city buses was identified by the use of color boards. These boards were not stationary and could be moved according to the number of passengers at the driver's discretion, which created another issue.

The Actions

Bus drivers and streetcar conductors carried guns and blackjacks and used them regularly to maintain order. Many of these "self-defined" police also carried an attitude of racism. Several accounts include those of drivers and conductors that physically attacked black passengers for questioning the passing of a stop, swearing or not moving quickly enough to the back of the bus. In 1944 many reported incidences stemmed from black passengers who were continually passed up or were unable to board the buses to allow for "potential" white



passengers. This caused passengers to arrive late to their destination and/or expired transfers. In this case they would have to repurchase an entire ticket. Oftentimes passengers were made to purchase at the front door, but then were directed to board at the back. It was not uncommon for these passengers to be left in the dust as the driver pulled away without allowing them adequate time to board. Additional confrontations occurred when drivers intentionally returned the wrong change or gave all coin when changing a large bill.

In addition, several incidents occurred where white male passengers, mainly working class, took it upon themselves to banter and attack African Americans. They threw them off the trains, slapped them or drew guns on them. One of the most noted examples was that of Steven Edwards who was sent to the back of the bus to make room for the whites. Rather than following the request, Steven opted to leave the bus and demanded the return of his fare. This resulted in being shot twice by the bus driver and then again twice by a male passenger. Neither of the shooters was blamed for the incident, but Edwards was fined \$50.00 after being declared guilty of disorderly conduct.

Incidents of Opposition

The attitude on public grounds was far different from that of workers entering the workplace. Blacks entered the workplace as disempowered producers, but in public spaces they too were consumers. This attitude created situations in which blacks refused to pay the fare or attempted to pay only a portion of the fare as a protest to their second-class citizenship. This was a time where clothes status was a big issue. Black service men were often empowered by their uniforms. Assertive actions included blacks that deliberately sat next to white females, occasionally pulled knives on drivers when asked to go to the back or moved color boards forward. Though some of the actions of the black male were physically confrontational, most of the opposition displayed by black women tended to be profane and militant. Arrests were generally made for cursing.

Not all battles were for the masses. Some were more personal, generated by the need for personal autonomy, masculinity, dignity and freedom. Young black males were not only involved in verbal and physical confrontations, but attacked the physical property; such as disengaging trolley cars. Subway graffiti was a common site. School children often set off bells, which may have been considered a childhood prank, but in the realm of what was taking place became a much bigger issue.

A Few Exceptions

Not all drivers expressed racial prejudice. Empathy was evident and acts of kindness were displayed in a few reported incidences that told of how drivers took a stand against the unnecessary measures used by many. One example is that of a driver who asked two white



women to move to a side seat to make room for blacks. Another incident tells of a police officer who boarded a bus and demanded the color boards be moved back because two black passengers were sitting across from whites. The driver felt it was unnecessary to move the boards, which would cause some blacks to stand, especially when the white passengers were nearly ready to unload anyway. The driver refused to follow the police officer's request and the officer then filed a complaint against him.

Employment

Transportation problems were accompanied by employment problems. This included less pay, lack of training opportunities, which were offered only to the white worker, as well as less desirable positions of industry. This caused many blacks to migrate to the north where better opportunities were available or join the armed services. Most jobs for women were given to white women only and the black women who longed to leave the drudgery of housework and/or needed to help share responsibility in the family's finances, had to take a position as a service worker in someone else's home. The fear of blacks taking jobs from whites was another element, which fostered unrest between the two groups.

In Conclusion

1. The actions of the mid to late forties allowed unorganized blacks to make governing public transit more difficult and gave attention to the highly contested aspects of Southern regulation of public space.
2. The issue was not based on the fact that African Americans wanted to sit among the whites, but rather that they wanted to be treated more fairly, have a right to be heard, be provided rightful space and be treated with respect and dignity.
3. Many people have looked at the issues surrounding inequality in the workplace, but for the Southern black workers the biggest battles centered on the use of public space. Problems in the work place were much more easily identified, but in areas of common space the sheer numbers and random movement of people made this an area of repression and acts of race and gender oppression. However undocumented or recognized today, these deliberate acts of protest led the way to a more organized civil rights movement.

