

A Negro Tourist in Dixie

by Bettye Rice Hughes

IT WAS mostly curiosity that caused me to set out from Los Angeles on a tour of the South by bus last November, just twelve days after the Interstate Commerce Commission's order went into effect forbidding separation by races in interstate busses and terminals. My trip lasted six weeks and carried me through Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and part of Mississippi.

The purpose of my tour was twofold: I wanted to see at first hand how many Southern states were complying with the ICC ruling; and I also wanted to see if a female Negro tourist traveling alone—unheralded and unprepared for—would receive a different reception from that which had greeted the Freedom Riders.

The trip began uneventfully. I traveled straight across the middle of Arkansas and saw no "White" or "Colored" signs on the rest rooms or waiting rooms. I was certainly not welcomed with open arms and I could sense the hostility brought on by my presence in some towns, but I was served without incident.

In Memphis I encountered the first separate waiting rooms. There were stares from other passengers when I went into the main waiting rooms, but nothing more. I was served in the restaurant. In Monteagle, Tennessee, I saw the first evidence that the "Colored" and "White" signs had recently been removed. After a while I began to look for the different methods used in covering over these signs. In no case were new ones installed. Above the doors of rest rooms the color designations were often painted out or covered with metal strips, leaving an off-centered "Men" and "Women." But there were still four rooms, their racial backgrounds identifiable by location and by the length of the covered-up area on the signs.

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I realize now that my naïveté about Southern customs was a protective cloak. Even when white people appeared to ignore me, my actions often drew stares from Negro passengers. I was subjected to my first real attempt at discrimination in Florence, South Carolina. I had transferred from Trailways to Greyhound. The bus was an express from New York City and was crowded with passengers going home for Thanksgiving. Florence was the first stop in South Carolina. I had not intended at first to go inside the terminal. I wasn't particularly hungry and I was a little short of money anyway. But a Negro girl sitting next to me, a native South Carolinian, said she wished she had a Coke and a hot dog and I thought I might as well join her. I asked her to go in with me, but she refused and asked me to bring her a sandwich.

There were no signs, so I went in the waiting room in front of me and on through to the restaurant just as I had been doing in other cities. As I walked into the restaurant the cashier looked up, turned red, and started pointing and yelling, "There's another one just across the waiting room!" Since she was looking everywhere but directly at me, I wasn't entirely sure at first that she was talking to me. I thought she might be talking to an elderly white man in front of me. (So did the poor old man, who turned and went out.)

Then I noticed a young Negro fellow who had been following me stop abruptly and leave the restaurant. There was no mistake about whom she meant. Stalling for time, I feigned innocence and asked her, "What's the difference? This one's fine, thank you." The cashier gave me a look that was anything but cordial but turned away from me to attend to her cash register. As soon as I moved toward the counter, a tall white counterman followed, and all the myths, half-truths, exaggerations, and facts concerning treatment of Negroes in the South swarmed through my mind. He kept repeating, "There's another one for you over there, through that door."

"What's the difference?" I asked him. "All I want is a sandwich."

"Just go on over to the other restaurant and you'll find out the difference," he said. He began to get redder and I got scared. "I don't want to stand here and argue. Just go on over to the other restaurant where you belong."

"I'm not arguing," I insisted, "but one's as good as another with me."

At this point he stalked off and I felt sure he was going to get the police or the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klan—maybe all three. To my surprise, all he did was go back behind the lunch counter.

By now most of the white passengers were pointedly staring at their food. No one uttered a word and only a few even glanced at me. A customer got up from the counter and I sat down. I had no idea what was going to happen. I was sure I would not get service, but I did not intend to leave and give the counterman the satisfaction of saying that I went because of his threats. So I sat.

Just before the end of the lunch break, a waitress came over and took my order. My bravado had paid off. Nevertheless, when I returned to the bus I was no longer optimistic about what might lie ahead as we moved farther South, and I dreaded the next bus stop.

And yet at Charleston and Savannah, much farther South, I received service in restaurants and went into the main waiting rooms and rest rooms without incident. The other Negro passengers, who went to the waiting rooms formerly designated as "Colored," had started watching to see what I was going to do at the rest and lunch stops. Several of them asked me, "Are you riding for us?" I said that in a sense I was. But no one offered to go into the main waiting area with me.

Throughout Florida all "Colored" and "White" signs had been removed, and at the terminals that had separate waiting rooms I received service along with the other passengers. My courage had returned somewhat, so once again I was not prepared for trouble. When I entered the main restaurant in Tallahassee, a white man yelled back to the kitchen, "Tell Roy to come here!" Roy came out of the kitchen with his dishwasher's apron on. We were both black. So Roy could serve me, the ICC ruling would be obeyed, and the management could save face. Very neat. I had read of this happening to other Negro travelers in the South, but when I was faced with a real live instance I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Roy came over, very nervous, and asked for my order. I smiled at him and said, "What are they doing? Making you

the scapegoat?" No answer. So I put on a sober face and gave him my order.

My first stop in Alabama was at Dothan. I had been worrying about Alabama all night. When we got to the terminal, I saw no "White" or "Colored" signs, and when the other Negro passengers went into the once segregated waiting room I went into the main waiting room and then into the restaurant. As I sat down I noticed the ICC ruling against discrimination on the wall and I must say it made me feel much better. The waitress took my order while a Negro cook stared through the service door from the kitchen. After she had brought my coffee, I heard the waitress say to a white woman sitting at the counter, "I know how you feel. I don't like it either but there ain't nothing we can do about it." The white woman got up and walked out.

But after I had sat over my coffee about five minutes, the waitress came over, smiled at me, and asked me where I was from. She stayed and talked. How did I like the South? Where was I going? As I was paying my check, she called after me, "I hope you have a nice trip."

From Dothan I traveled northeast into Georgia. At the major stops in that state—Atlanta, Macon, Savannah—I saw the separate waiting rooms but no "White" or "Colored" signs in the terminals. I went into the main waiting rooms and adjoining rest rooms and ate in the main restaurants. But at the smaller towns where the interstate express busses do not stop, the signs were still up, and all along the highway I noticed that Negroes and whites were still using separate waiting rooms. Discrimination is still rigidly enforced for passengers traveling within the state of Georgia. Only the interstate Negro passengers would sit in the middle or to the front of the bus. All other Negro passengers moved as far back as they could even though posted at the bus entrance was a sign stating that according to the ICC ruling, passengers were to be seated without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin. In Georgia and also in Alabama I often saw white passengers stand up in the aisles for miles rather than sit down beside a Negro passenger. I also saw a Negro woman stand for two hours rather than take an empty seat beside a white passenger.

At Winfield, Alabama, a white man had been holding the

door of the restaurant open for the bus passengers. But he took one look at me and slammed the door in my face. Nothing was said by the driver, by me, or by the bus passengers following. I just opened the door and went into the restaurant. As soon as I had sat down, the waitress was in front of me to take my order. I smiled to myself: this sort of hospitality was nearly as hard to bear as more direct forms of hostility. But I was given service.

Of all the towns I stopped in, I was most apprehensive about Anniston, Alabama. It had made international headlines six months previously when a bus carrying Freedom Riders had been burned. There were stares and an oppressive silence as I sat and drank my buttermilk. Negro passengers who had gone into the "Colored" waiting room would glance in at me. But I was served.

When the Greyhound express bus to Los Angeles reached Mississippi, it took what seemed to me a curious route. It certainly would have been faster to go from Alabama straight through the middle of Mississippi and then down to El Paso—the main transfer point for all Southern routes. Instead, we took a sharp turn northward, went across the northeastern tip of Mississippi, and without making a rest stop ended back "up north" in Memphis before we turned back down to El Paso. In other words, interstate passengers going from east to the west by Greyhound bus over the southern route never set foot on Mississippi soil.

On the return trip through Arkansas and Texas, I was given service in all the restaurants. At Dallas there were separate waiting rooms, but both Negro and white passengers as well as Indians and Mexicans were in the main one. There were, however, no Negroes eating in the main cafeteria during the time I was there.

Frankly, I do not know whether the treatment I received was due to the fact that I was traveling in the wake of the Freedom Riders or whether it was because I was traveling alone and without publicity. It may have been a combination of both. I felt that the threat of violence was always there—particularly in South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama—but somehow it never erupted.

My own feeling, as one who is naturally interested in the

securing of full rights for all members of my race, is that the advances that have been won through group action may now be reinforced by individual action. I believe that what must happen next is for Southern white people to get used to seeing Negroes in waiting rooms, rest rooms, and cafeterias. And it is just as necessary, it seems to me, for Southern Negroes to get used to seeing other Negroes bypassing the segregated areas so that they may take courage and insist on the best facilities and service available for their money.

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