

May 25, 1962

Committee of Inquiry
33 Park Row, New York 38, New York
COrtlandt 7-6270

Att: Marvin Rich

Albert Bigelow (white), in his fifties. Quaker of Cos Cob, Conn. Naval Commander during World War II. Married; has two daughters, seven grandchildren. Captain of the Golden Rule, boat sailed into Pacific bomb area in 1958. Artist; member of CORE.

The first major violence against Freedom Riders occurred at Anniston, Ala., May 13, 1961. Bigelow on the police role there:

Certainly police had foreknowledge of violence, since we did. Our bus, approaching Anniston, stopped while our driver conversed with the driver of an outgoing bus. A traveler from the bus leaving Anniston came onto ours and warned us that an angry mob awaited us.

A crowd of 150, perhaps only 50 active, was ready for us at the Anniston station. Outside, no police were in sight. During fifteen minutes in Anniston, while the mob slashed tires and smashed windows, one policeman appeared in a brown uniform. He did nothing to stop vandalism but fraternized with the mob. A man in a white coverall with dark blue oval insignia on the breast was friendly with the policeman and consulted from time to time with the most active of the mob. Two police appeared and cleared a path. The bus left the station. There were no arrests.

A few miles out on the highway to Birmingham a tire blew and we pulled to the roadside, the mob after us in about 50 cars. They surrounded us again, yelling and smashing windows, brandishing clubs, chains and pipes; I saw all three. They surged around the bus, screamed obscenities and tried to board but were prevented by Eli Cowling of the State Highway police, in plainclothes, who, with a pistol, held back the mob from inside our door. We had thought Cowling an ordinary passenger. His single-handed action showed that a mob can be held off. Again Mr. Cowling stood in our door. For 15 or 20 minutes no other police were in sight. The bus was now being attacked with fury.

The man in the white coverall stood in front of the bus. A state trooper arrived, consulted the man in the coverall but did nothing to stop the vandalism.

2. Bigelow

After about 21 minutes at the roadside there was a very loud crash and shouts of "siege heil." The bus, on fire now, filled with acrid, dense black smoke. All of us, fourteen I think, got out, some jumping from windows. Across the highway, in a state patrol car, three or four police sat joking and laughing.

Outside the bus, Mr. Cowling was again in charge. He fired into the air; the mob did not attack, except for hitting one of us.

We spent from about 2 in the afternoon until 9:30 or 10 at night in the Anniston hospital, where we were taken for smoke poisoning. The mob gathered in the parking lot outside the emergency-room door. A few state and local police mingled with the mob. Newsmen who came said the town was in an ugly mood. They said they had telephoned Governor Patterson to ask whether we would have protection on the 60 miles to Birmingham, and that the Governor had said he would provide no protection for outside agitators.

The Anniston Police Chief was very hostile toward me. I said it was his duty to give us protection; he said it was not my job to tell him his duty.

Later the chief went into the yard and talked with the man in the white coverall. The hospital superintendent had asked us to leave. I felt there might be police collusion in turning us over to the mob.

We were saved by Negroes of Birmingham, who drove out the 60 miles to Anniston, and drove us without incident to Birmingham.