



Cheyenne Frontier Days Ad in
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Chapter 8

The Bus Ride

Summer, 1960

Boys, racial discrimination was boiling over in the 1960s and I'm sad to say it's still on full boil today, nearly 60 years later. In the summer of 1960, blacks—who, at the time, were referred to as “Negroes” or “colored”—couldn't eat in the same restaurants or drink from the same water fountains as whites. They had to ride in the back of the bus, while whites rode in the front. In Denver, Hispanics were called “Mexicans” regardless if they came from Spain or Latin America. Everyone attended segregated schools. (Segregated schools were attended by one race only, whites attended school with other whites, and Negroes attend school with other Negroes.)

The population of Golden and most of Jefferson County was almost entirely white, so I had very little experience with people who didn't look like me. My knowledge of other races came from watching racial violence on the TV news. Surprisingly to me, racial unrest wasn't just between whites and Negroes or whites and Mexicans; it was across all races. Two of my friends and I got a very personal look when we found ourselves in a tough situation on a bus to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Here's what happened.

It was 8:00 a.m. and the temperature was already over 80 degrees that late July morning in 1960. The school bus that Roger, Eric and I boarded with 30 overachieving paperboys was sweltering. We were headed to the rodeo in Cheyenne. The trip was a reward for papers well delivered. Mistakenly, we thought it would be a good time.

Apprehension gripped the three of us as we boarded the bus in Denver. We arrived late and managed to miss the bus full of suburban white kids like us. The passengers on our bus were Negroes and Mexicans, and they attended Denver's segregated schools. They knew each other but we probably looked as strange to them as they did to us. Most of the boys were older than us and immediately separated themselves by race. Paco, a lean boy wearing a wife-beater (a white sleeveless T-shirt), and tight Levis, and sporting new tattoos on sinewy arms, led the Mexicans who boarded the bus first and took the first five rows. Buster, a large boy with bulging biceps protruding from a clean purple T-shirt, short hair and a gold front tooth, led the Negroes to the middle rows. That left a back row for Roger, Eric, and me; we were clearly the minority in the back of that bus.

Paco and Buster eyed each other menacingly. Their eyes locked and the stare-down was only interrupted by the Mexican chaperone giving orders. “Stay in your seats! No eating or drinking on the bus! And, no fighting!” he commanded loudly looking from Buster to Paco.

Golden was lily-white. There were no Negroes and only two Mexican families in town and one of them, the Johnsons, had a surname that sounded white to us. Roger, Eric and I didn’t know what to expect, but as we took our seats, we looked at each other as if to say, “This isn’t good.”

Not thirty minutes after the bus rolled out of the parking lot, Paco and Buster started throwing insults at each other.

“Hey boy, I didn’t know monkeys could ride bikes. How you manage to deliver papers?”

“Careful who you call boy, Taco,” Buster replied, emphasizing the T. “I don’t know nothing about monkeys on bikes, but hey, don’t delivering papers take time away from stealing hub caps?”

“Shouldn’t you and your kind be riding in the back of the bus instead of those white boys? Don’t you know your place?”

“I’ll show you my place, Taco. I’ll kick your skinny ass up one side of this bus and down the other!” Buster growled, starting to his feet.

By that point the chaperone had had enough. “Stop that talk! I don’t want to hear it!” he screamed.

The single Mexican chaperone and a Negro bus driver tried to keep order, but it was impossible. Tension grew as insults and a few spit wads flew between the two groups. Roger, Eric, and I were oddly left out, probably because there were only three of us and we were younger and smaller. We became the cheering section, laughing and celebrating the better insults and keen throws from either side. But, our participation served to escalate the confrontation as each side sought immediate revenge after being humiliated by our laughter.

One hundred miles and two-and-one-half tense hours later, we arrived in Cheyenne and everyone filed off the bus. A few shoves were met with threats, but before it could escalate into anything more, the chaperone pulled everyone into a circle and gave us our rodeo tickets and the rules for the day. Then we set off to the rodeo and the sideshow. We had to be back on the bus by 4 p.m.

Boys, Here's What Happened

Roger, Eric, and I headed to the rodeo to watch bare-back riding, steer wrestling, calf roping and the best of all, Brahma bull riding. We were captivated as cowboys were thrown in all directions and as the rodeo clowns tormented the bulls in an effort to save the thrown cowboys.

Then it was on to the sideshow, where we gorged ourselves on cotton candy, corn dogs, and pop (soda). Our conversation focused on the fight we knew would break out on the ride home; we were not at all sure we would get home in one piece. We considered calling our parents, but it was a long-distance call and by then all our money was spent. We agreed no one was going to make the long drive to rescue us anyway.

We boarded the bus for the return trip with the temperature nearing 100 degrees. Some boys tried to sleep, but it was no use. Soon, the insults and spit wads were flying again and tempers flared once more. Once again the chaperone did his best to separate the antagonists, but one man was no match for thirty boys, some in their mid-teens.

As we watched from the back of the bus, Paco took dead aim and nailed Buster in the middle of the forehead with an especially juicy spit wad.

“You fuckin’ Spic! I’m gonna kill you!” Buster screamed.

“Bring it, Nigger!” Paco yelled in reply, smacking his fist into his palm.

That started it for real. Buster came out of his seat and started throwing fists at Paco, landing a solid punch that brought spurts of blood from Paco’s nose. Paco returned the favor, landing a hard left to Buster’s right eye, and opening a deep cut that added more blood to the scene. Suddenly, everyone in the first ten rows of the bus was involved in the fight. Fists were flying, curses were exchanged, and blood splattered everywhere.

The bus driver hit the brakes, throwing the combatants off their feet into the backs of seats and onto the bloody floor of the bus. He and the chaperone waded into the pile of fighting bodies, dragging the boys out of the bus by the hair, the shirt, or whatever they could grab.

Once everyone was out of the bus and most of the bleeding had stopped, the bus driver informed the paperboys that another outburst would put the offending parties off the bus for good.

“You can walk for all I care,” he screamed. “We’re getting back on the bus, but this time I want you guys in the back,” he demanded, looking at Paco and his gang. “And you guys in the middle,” he said, pointing at Roger, Eric, and me. “And you in the front,” he said pointing at Buster and his buddies. My two friends and I were now the buffer zone between the Negroes and the Mexicans.

We boarded the bus amid grumbling from paperboys of all races. Soon, everyone was in his appointed spot, and the bus was rolling toward Denver again. Roger and I noticed that Eric was looking pale. The combination of corn dogs, cotton candy, pop, a rough ride, searing heat, and blood was too much for him. He looked at us dolefully, then put his head between his knees, and barfed. A howl went up from everyone as the putrid stench filled the hot air of the bus. While the smell was sickening, it served a purpose; it kept the fighters apart. Everyone wanted to be as far away as possible and pushed to opposite ends of the bus leaving the three of us in the stinking middle.

Finally, we arrived in Denver and the paperboys stampeded out of the bus, gulping fresh air. Our supervisor, Ila was there to meet us. We described the fight and gave Eric credit for keeping the warring sides apart, but agreed to pass on the next award trip. A month later, I quit my paper route to play football. I thought it would be safer.