



1965 Freedom Ride

Secondary History activity

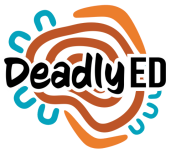
12-26 February, 1965



Student Action for Aborigines in front of their Freedom Ride bus, 1965

The 1960s was a time that saw the rise of mass political protests and activism. The peaceful protests and demonstrations by the Black Power movement in the US were frequently aired on television screens and widely covered in newspapers across the globe. There were many aspects of the plight faced by Black Americans that resonated with First Nations peoples in Australia. The ways in which Black people in America were challenging racial violence inspired many First Nations activists in their own pursuits to challenge the status quo in Australia.

In response to the ever-growing grassroots movement in Australia, a group of students from the University of Sydney formed the collective Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) in 1965. SAFA, who were led by Arrernte and Kalkadoon man Charles Perkins, had witnessed the US' 1961 Freedom Rides that aimed to shed light on racial segregation, white violence and police brutality. Inspired by such a movement, SAFA decided that they would replicate this demonstration by going on their own freedom ride – a ride that would change Australian history.



In many rural and regional towns across New South Wales, First Nations people were excluded from swimming pools, clubs, cafes, cinemas, and were often refused service at shops and bars. Many First Nations people were still forced to live on missions and reserves on the fringes of towns, where the living conditions were often overcrowded, lacked proper sanitation and access to basic amenities like running water and electricity.

On February 12, 1965, thirty-three SAFA members boarded a bus ready to embark on a mission to shed light on the Aboriginal experience that was underpinned by racism and discrimination in regional towns of New South Wales. The Freedom riders made their way through towns such as Wellington, Gulargambone, Walgett, Moree, Lismore, and Kempsey. Their aims for each town were clear:

- to bring public attention to issues in health, education, and housing for Aboriginal people
- to challenge racial barriers imposed upon Aboriginal people
- to inspire other Aboriginal people and Australians to actively resist and challenge the racism, prejudice and mistreatment of First Nations people across the country
- and to achieve the above aims by way of peaceful protest.

Walgett:

In Walgett, SAFA protested the local RSL's decision to refuse entry to Aboriginal people including Aboriginal ex-servicemen who had served in the world wars. SAFA had also rallied to challenge a womenswear store that didn't allow Aboriginal women to try on dresses. SAFA's presence angered the local towns peoples particularly as local Aboriginal people joined in on the protests. Tensions boiled over quickly in Walgett forcing SAFA to flee. Several cars and trucks followed the SAFA bus out of Walgett intentionally trying to run it off the road. The pursuit was caught on camera and the evidence of endemic racism was broadcast across the media.



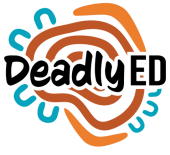
Moree:

In Moree, SAFA's protest focused on the local swimming pool as Aboriginal people were banned from using it. After some pressure, the pool manager allowed Aboriginal people to use the facilities if they were 'clean'. SAFA felt they had been successful in Moree, however, after they had left, the pool manager reimposed the ban. SAFA returned to Moree to challenge the pool manager once again but were met by a hostile and violent crowd who spat at them and threw projectiles. SAFA were escorted from town, but the incident received huge press coverage gaining worldwide attention. The media coverage forced the Moree Council to overturn the local pool's ban.

Bowraville:

As SAFA began to make their journey back to Sydney, they stopped off at Bowraville on the Mid-North Coast to draw attention to segregation rules at the local picture theatre. Here, they challenged the theatre for making Aboriginal people buy their tickets under strict processes – they were only allowed to enter the theatre once the picture had started and had to sit in a particular section of theatre that was partitioned off away from other white guests.

The fifteen-day journey across rural and regional New South Wales gained significant attention and many Australians were forced to bear witness to the inherent racial divide common within Australian towns. Charles Perkins went on to report the events of the Freedom Ride to the 1965 Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) conference in Canberra, and protests continued into 1966 as SAFA continued to advocate for Aboriginal people in New South Wales. SAFA's presence as a political force paved the way for changes in rural New South Wales, and sparked debate about how the government failed to address Aboriginal affairs. Their efforts would later act as a precursor to the infamous 1967 referendum.



Learning Activities –

Yarning about the 1965 Freedom Ride:

1. Would SAFA's aims still be relevant to anyone who is continuing to fight against racism and discrimination faced by First Nations peoples today? Why?
2. If you were able to form a collective of students to raise awareness about an issue, what would it be and how would you carry out your protest?

Discussing Country:

1. Using the AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia find the Country names for the places mentioned throughout the article.
2. Using a map of New South Wales mark the journey of the 1965 Freedom Ride.

Writing the past:

1. Conduct further research on the 1965 Freedom Ride and write a newspaper article highlighting the impact and significance of SAFA's actions.



Teacher notes:

- Further information and primary source materials can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- To further expand this perspective in your teaching and learning program view SBS' Living Black: Season 22, Episode 2 Freedom Rides, or Rachel Perkins' Blood Brothers – Freedom Ride four-part documentary.

Australian Curriculum links:

- the contributions of significant individuals and groups in the campaign for the recognition of the rights of First Nations Australians and the extent to which they brought change to Australian society (AC9HH10K10)
- the significant events and methods in the movement for the civil rights of First Nations Australians and the extent to which they contributed to change (AC9HH10K11)