

Freedom Riders

SEE ALSO: History; Munro, L; Perkins, C; Politics; Racism; Referendum 1967

A group of about 30 Sydney University students (including two Aboriginal people) who, in February 1965, undertook a 3,200 km bus tour of northern NSW towns investigating and protesting discrimination against Aborigines. Considered by some to be the most significant act in Aboriginal-European relations in the twentieth century, this tour marked the beginning of substantial European awareness of the problems of Aboriginal people. It was led by Charles Perkins and Jim Spigelman, with help from Ted Noffs and Bill Ford.

They planned to survey race relations and conditions of Aboriginal housing, education and employment in towns with large Aboriginal communities. In most towns the students uncovered an informal but effective colour bar: Aboriginal people were refused service in shops, confined to separate sections of cinemas, banned from hotels and clubs, excluded from public swimming pools and socially ostracised.

At two towns in particular – Walgett and Moree – the tour achieved notoriety

as clashes with crowds of antagonistic residents attracted national media attention. In Walgett the students demonstrated outside the Returned Services League (RSL) club, which barred Aboriginal ex-service personnel from membership. In Moree, they picketed the town swimming pool, where only Aboriginal children attending with school parties were admitted. After an hour's angry debate with the

pool manager and the mayor before a large crowd, six Aboriginal children with the students were allowed into the pool. The students returned to Moree several days later and were again confronted by a crowd of irate townspeople, who spat on them and pelted them with eggs and fruit as police escorted them from the town.

Both Walgett and Moree experienced racial disturbances during the mid-1980s,



Charles Perkins (centre left) who participated in the Freedom Ride to Moree in 1965 that produced this happy occasion (photograph courtesy News Limited)

FREEDOM RIDERS

but the tour had focused attention on the gross discrimination suffered by many Aboriginal people. It also educated Aboriginal people in the towns it visited, many of whom had previously resigned themselves to accepting discrimination. Lyall Munro (Jrs) active political involvements began in Moree, where he had been one of the six children the freedom riders had escorted into the town swimming pool.

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FURTHER READING: Perkins 1975; Read 1988^Δ