University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

4-1-2010

Test Ride on the Sunnyland Bus

Ana Maria Spagna

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Spagna, Ana Maria, "Test Ride on the Sunnyland Bus" (2010). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters.* Paper 72.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/72

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Buy the Book

RIVER TEETH LITERARY NONFICTION PRIZE

Series Editors:
DANIEL LEHMAN, Ashland University
JOE MACKALL, Ashland University

The River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize is awarded to the best work of literary nonfiction submitted to the annual contest sponsored by *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative*.

Buy the Book

Test Ride *on the* Sunnyland Bus

A Daughter's Civil Rights Journey

. . . . . .

Ana Maria Spagna

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln and London

Buy the Book

© 2010 by the Board of Regents
of the University of Nebraska

All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United
States of America

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Spagna, Ana Maria.
Test ride on the Sunnyland bus :
a daughter's civil rights journey
/ Ana Maria Spagna.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-8032-1712-6
(paperback. : alkaline paper)
1. African Americans—Civil
rights—Florida—Tallahassee—
History—20th century.
2. Boycotts—Florida—Tallahassee—
History—20th century.
3. Tallahassee (Fla.)—Race
relations—History—20th century.
4. Spagna, Joe, d. 1979.
5. Spagna, Ana Maria. I. Title.
F320.N4S63 2010
323.1196'073075988—dc22
2009034320

Set in Janson by Kim Essman.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

Buy the Book

If a young person of this generation came to me and said "What should I do? What should I be doing?" I would say "Find a way to follow the dictates of your conscience. Find your own inner compass and follow it. Do what is right. Be kind. Don't hate. Love is a better way. Don't become cynical. Forget about your own circumstances and find a way to get involved in the circumstances of others." JOHN LEWIS

. . .

Struggle is important and at the same time if it's possible, you try to eke out some corner of love or some glimpse of happiness within. And that's what I think more than anything else conquers the bitterness. BOB MOSES

Buy the Book

Buy the Book

Contents

PART ONE. I THINK I CAN SERVE

1 In Front of Speed's 3
2 Never Go Back 16
3 The Tallahassee Bus Boycott 27
4 The Acquaintance of Grief 39
5 The Forgotten Coast 54
6 Something More 67

PART TWO. A HIGHLY PERSONAL THING

7 Handwriting 81
8 Herndon 94
9 The Cloven Hoof 104
10 City of Hope 118
11 Folsom 134
12 Community Care 147
13 A Real Difference 158
14 Orchard Burning 172

PART THREE. FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

15 Every. Single. Day. 189
16 Tarpon Springs 209
17 Not Forgotten 220
18 Heroes and Sheroes 236
19 Always Go Forward 252
Epilogue: No Big Deal 262
Acknowledgments 269

Buy the Book

Buy the Book

Part One

I Think I Can Serve

Buy the Book

Buy the Book

CHAPTER ONE

In Front of Speed's

The paint-peeling sign above the door is barely legible: Speed's Grocery. I stand on the sidewalk sweaty with nerves. This can't be the place, I think. This is nothing like I pictured. Behind heavy iron bars, darkened windows sport stickers for cigarette brands: Newport, Camel, Winston. Men with graying beards and ball caps pulled low lean against the storefront, paper bags in hand, while I loiter across the narrow tree-lined street, rereading the plywood sign. *Beer Milk Ice* it reads, and below that, *Meats Bread Grocery Lotto*. Beside each line of words coils a hand-painted rattler, the mascot of Florida A&M University, only two blocks east. But there are no students here, no one younger, by the looks of it, than forty. There are also no women. I've been in crowds like that before, plenty of times, but this time it's different. There are no white people in front of Speed's, and I have never, in thirty-eight years, been the only white person anywhere.

I snap a picture and hesitate before I step off the curb and cross the street, walking fast, too fast, in dress loafers and too-hot black jeans, a brand-new digital camera dangling from my wrist.

"Leonard Speed?" I ask. "Dan Speed? Anybody know them?"

The men are silent.

One fellow, his eyes cataract scarred and rheumy, tells me that he's from New Jersey and that he's trying to find work. He stares at me hard.

Buy the Book

"I'm a good worker," he says.

I nod uneasily.

Another guy leans back on a car hood and grins wide, gamely pretending to pose for the camera, album-cover style. I smile shyly and pretend to snap a photo.

"This place for sale?" he asks.

"No," I laugh. "I mean, I don't know."

Finally, a third man, more dignified, tall and heavyset and mustached, steps forward. His approach is more direct.

"What are you doing here?"

His age and stature, his bearing—or maybe the mustache—remind me of my father, so I think this might be my chance. I garner my courage.

"My dad used to hang out here fifty years ago."

"Your dad? What's his name?"

"Joe Spagna."

"Joe Spagna?" He draws out the last name "Spaaawn-yuh?" Questioning. Unbelieving. I grow hopeful. He could have known him. He looks about the right age, and it seems like he's recognized the name. "Spaaawn-yuh? A Spanish guy?"

My dad wasn't Spanish. He was Italian. Actually, he was white. Just plain white. And that's what this guy is getting at, I know: what would a white guy be doing hanging around a place like this? That's part of what I want to know too.

. . .

One sunny Saturday morning in January 1957—forty-nine years ago today—my father, Joseph Spagna, along with five other young men, waited to board a bus right here in front of Speed's. Their plan was plain: to ride the bus together—three blacks and three whites—to get arrested and to take their case to the U.S. Supreme Court. But it was dangerous as hell. The morning was quiet, lazy even, and the boys were relaxed, but

Buy the Book

the atmosphere, nevertheless, was charged. It was not as if they did not know what they were doing.

For starters, the gathering itself was very nearly illegal. Of the six young men, five were college students—two attended Florida State University, and three went to Florida A&M—and social intermingling among students from the white school and those from the black was strictly forbidden. A grad student at Florida State, a friend of my father, had recently been expelled for inviting three students from A&M to a Christmas party on campus. Moreover, this small grocery, of all of the groceries in town, was steeped in controversy. A week earlier shotgun blasts had taken out the front windows as a warning to the owner, Dan Speed, to cut the crap. The crap, as it were, was the Tallahassee bus boycott, a seven-month-long struggle to integrate city buses, which was, at this point, flailing. The boys were there to revive it.

Though the Tallahassee boycott is less well known than the one in Montgomery, Alabama—the one Rosa Parks started and Martin Luther King Jr. led—it took place at exactly the same time and seemed, at first, to be as equally successful. Starting in May 1956, blacks in Tallahassee refused to ride city buses. Through the heat of summer and the cool grace of autumn and into early winter, domestic workers and laborers, teachers and city employees, woke at dawn to walk long miles across the capital city. A group of black citizens, led by the grocer, Dan Speed, and the charismatic Reverend C. K. Steele, organized mass meetings and funded a clandestine carpool. As in Montgomery, the bus company suffered, long-standing discrimination was exposed, and victory seemed within reach. Then in December, the U.S. Supreme Court issued the order to integrate buses in Montgomery, and in Tallahassee all hell broke loose.

The holiday season turned violent. Crosses were burned on

Buy the Book

church lawns. Gunfire broke out nightly. Bomb threats accrued. Two days after Christmas, Dan Speed and C. K. Steele and a dozen other ministers met for a planned integrated bus ride, a celebration of sorts of the victory in Montgomery, but they were greeted at the downtown depot by a mob wielding barely concealed weapons.

"I detected how tense the situation was," Steele later said. "There were men from out of town, and most of these were, I guess, Ku Klux Klansmen, buying up hatchets, hammers and carrying them around town."

They called the ride off right then and there.

Soon the city council drafted a new ordinance, Ordinance 741, to maintain segregation in Tallahassee at all costs, and for all intents and purposes the bus boycott was dead.

So Steele called a mass meeting at his church, Bethel Missionary Baptist, a meeting not unlike those he'd called regularly over the past seven months, except that this one was poorly attended. The violence had scared off most supporters. The few who lined the wooden pews that January night were the stalwarts, the true believers, and to them Steele made an impassioned plea. They needed volunteers, both blacks and whites, he explained, to ride a bus together and test the bogus new ordinance. The riders would get arrested and, if necessary, take their case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Was anyone willing?

The room fell silent.

My father stood. He'd been one of a small handful of white students who had been attending the mass meetings.

"I think I can serve as one of the persons," he said.

The next Saturday six young men met up in front of Speed's. The three white boys—Jon Folsom, James Kennedy, and my dad—arrived in a late-model Studebaker, parked now on a side street while the blacks—Johnny Herndon, Leonard Speed,

Buy the Book

and Harold Owens—walked the quarter mile from the A&M campus. Together they stood in shirt sleeves on the corner, sweating in the winter sun; they lit cigarettes and sized each other up. Three of them were big guys, over six feet tall, former football players. That might come in handy. They shuffled their feet, drew long on their cigarettes, and looked around, and Leonard Speed, the grocer's son, passed out crisp new dollar bills to cover the ten-cent fare, for as long as it might take.

"I went there to meet some friends of mine," my father later testified. "We had no purpose in mind. We were just going over there—a Saturday morning jaunt, college boys."

He was, of course, lying.

. . .

People who knew my father in 1957 describe a distinctly unheroic character: disheveled, nearly bedraggled, a wannabe beatnik who carried dog-eared paperbacks in the pockets of a tattered coat and slept on a bare mattress in a small rented room strewn with weeks of old newspapers. He was hardly the typical G.I. Bill student. Not that anyone knew he was a vet. No one knew much about him, not even his friends, though he had many. He liked to talk, but never about himself, and never, ever, about his past. He was an English major, fanatic about literature, so mostly he talked about books. Once at a popular café in the center of the Florida State campus, he was in the middle of a heated discussion of *Paradise Lost* when the jukebox got too loud; he marched across the room and yanked the plug.

Though he loved all books, any books, he was especially excited about the new stuff. *On the Road* would come out later that year, and though Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" had been officially censored by the government, it circulated widely in the wake of its infamous initial reading. The trial of Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, around

Buy the Book

the corner from where my father would later own a bookstore himself, was going full-tilt. My dad, for his part, wrote to Ferlinghetti and got a free copy of "Howl," which he read aloud at parties. I can't imagine my father doing such a thing, but he was young, I suppose, and he was passionate. Not just about literature.

On the streets of Tallahassee within view of the majestic state capitol building sat small wooden homes in rows with rusty tin roofs and clothes drying on the line: the homes of black folks, or the ones left standing after many were demolished a decade earlier to make room for new state office buildings. Just a few blocks south, across the railroad tracks, blacks lived even more poorly. Only two paved streets connected the strictly segregated sections of the city, and the injustice of the situation bothered my dad. That's part of what I want to know, too: *why*.

I mean, of course I know why it rankled—segregation was wrong as rot—but there were plenty of white folks in Tallahassee, and all over the South, who knew as much and didn't do a thing about it, probably didn't think there was a thing they could do about it. I want to know why he did it. Where did he find the courage to stand up at the mass meeting to become permanently and perilously "notorious," as one history book describes him, in that sunny college town? I would ask him myself. But I can't. He's been dead now for twenty-seven years.

After his death, scraps of the bus story became part of Spagna family lore. Here's how it went: once upon a time, Dad sat on the back of a bus in Florida and got arrested, but if he'd gone to jail, at that time, he'd have been killed as a so-called "nigger lover," so the NAACP paid for him to leave the country until the statute of limitations ran out. Where the story came from, I can't say. I never heard it until after he died, and by the time I reached adulthood, I had it figured for bullshit. For one

Buy the Book

thing, I knew enough, or thought I did, to know that a white man sitting in the black section of a bus was not nearly the crime that a black person sitting in the white section was. He might be an eccentric, even a detestable "nigger lover," but not a criminal. For another thing, while my father had, in fact, left the country for several years—he spent most of the 1960s in Mexico and South America—he'd also supposedly owned a bookstore in San Francisco at some point and built a small cabin on a beach in Marin County. Since immediately after returning from South America, he was married and having kids, well, the timeline wasn't holding up.

I liked the story anyway. I told it often, mostly because it explained why I'd been born in Bogotá, Colombia, better than saying that my dad was working for Catholic Relief Services and my mom was on a Fulbright scholarship. Those two labels—the do-gooder and the egghead—embarrassed me as a teenager. In hindsight, I don't know why I was so ashamed of plain good intentions, but I do know why I wanted to avoid any talk about my dad. He'd died too young. He'd abandoned us. For twenty-seven years, I'd been in no mood to forgive my father or even to think much about him. Until, last January, when I headed off to Tallahassee.

I flew three thousand miles from northwest Washington State, a corner of the country that could not be further, geographically or culturally, from panhandle Florida, especially in January. At home there'd been three feet of wet snow on the ground with more sure to come. In Tallahassee, sun shone brightly on the broad drooping limbs of live oaks. I lugged a bag of thousand-page histories across the Florida State campus, and I sequestered myself in the basement of the library squinting at microfiche copies of the local paper, the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Several crucial issues were missing from the collection, but at first I hardly noticed. I sank happily into the egghead world of

Buy the Book

research, pencil-scratched notes, and musty old books. Then I emerged into the winter sun and drank espresso on park benches in the sun with my partner, Laurie.

Laurie had accompanied me to Tallahassee as moral support. I'd started investigating the test ride story in the winter of 2004 when, on the nightly news, same-sex couples were flocking to San Francisco to get married. Our own civil rights movement seemed on the rise, and I use the word "our" loosely. Though I'd lived with Laurie for fifteen years, I still shied from the gay rights movement, never seeking out the opportunity to participate. And not just gay rights. Though we lived surrounded by pristine wilderness, I ridiculed environmentalists. I couldn't think of one good reason for the Iraq War, but I never marched in protests. Laurie and I had always been apolitical—part of the reason we could live together, two women, so peaceably in a very small town—but lately I'd begun to change. Or the world had. And it was hard not to notice that those changes were for the worse: terrorism, environmental degradation, ethnic cleansing, sure, but also closer to home, the seeds of it all, paranoia, xenophobia, plain old-fashioned hate. I didn't know what to do about any of it because I didn't really believe anything could be done. Worse yet, I didn't know *why* I didn't believe. Sure, I was weary of self-righteous liberalism—so many causes, so little time—and I was wearier yet of the flag-wagging Reagan fervor that had suffused my high school and college years, but as I followed the saga of the couples lining up in San Francisco over the radio from my cabin, and as I listened, too, to the voices rising in shrill opposition, I began to think the real reason I hid out in the woods was this: I was a coward.

Buy the Book

. . .

In front of Speed's, in 1957, an empty bus screeched to a stop. The door opened, and the driver recoiled. He knew that everything, at this point, was up to him. The complicated new city ordinance required that the driver assign riders seats based, supposedly, on weight distribution and the "maximum health and safety" of the riders. He had some time to think as he made change for a ten-cent fare, over and over, from those crisp new dollar bills. Finally, he made his decision: whites up front, blacks in the back. The boys pocketed their change and sat without incident. The driver pulled safely away from the curb and checked his rearview mirror only to see that three of the riders had moved so that now they sat as three interracial pairs.

The bus crawled slowly along the perimeter of the A&M campus, round and round, the boys rode silently, and because the route was entirely on the black side of town and because there was hardly anyone out on a Saturday morning to get riled up, the driver ignored them. So, according to the history books, the boys got off.

Again, they stood on the street and waited until they spied a bus. This one, called the "Sunnyland," was headed for Thomasville Road, across the railroad tracks to the north, toward the white side of town. This new driver was considerably more agitated than the first. He made change hastily and assigned them seats angrily: whites up front, blacks in the back. Again, they dutifully sat. And once again, as choreographed, midway through the ride, three of them stood to switch seats. This time the bus driver caught them red-handed. In other words, he took the bait.

The driver abandoned his route and headed directly for the police station downtown, where the three who had

Buy the Book

moved—Leonard Speed and Johnny Herndon, who were both black, and my dad, Joe Spagna—were promptly arrested and later released on $50 bail.

That night, C. K. Steele called another mass meeting. This time the church was packed to the hilt. Besides the stalwarts and the supporters and the gawkers, this one was attended by about twenty white students from Florida State and eighteen carloads of black students from Florida A&M energized by this new development. When the young men arrived, they received a standing ovation.

My father stood to speak. "I want to live in a country," he said, "where everyone, regardless of race, creed, or color, has equal rights under the law."

There was more thunderous applause.

The glory, such as it was, was over. The trouble had just begun.

. . .

"You need to go over to that grocery store, Speed's," Laurie said.

I'd talked a good game back in Washington about wanting to find living witnesses, to interview people who might have known my dad, but now the library sounded a whole lot easier.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go."

We drove south on Monroe, the same thoroughfare that the Sunnyland bus had taken. Four lanes wide and traffic clogged, Monroe took us past Thomasville Road and past the bus station, where a small statue of C. K. Steele stood tucked out of view behind orange construction fencing. In the time it took me to climb out of the idling rental car and take a few photographs of the statue through the fence, not a single bus pulled in. In fact, when I'd been planning the trip, I'd considered not renting a

Buy the Book

car at all but instead using the bus system to get around. People I mentioned this to laughed outright. That won't work, they said. The world has changed in the past fifty years, they said. Sure enough, we saw no buses at all, until farther south, past the capitol building, where a lone gray-bearded white man sat cross-legged on the lawn, draped in the American flag, protesting the Iraq War. Then suddenly buses were everywhere. And everyone on the street was black.

"We crossed the tracks," Laurie said.

I flinched. Fifty years later, I thought, not that much had changed. Not enough. The cars were newer, the businesses looked well kept, not shabby, and, well, the roads were paved. But something felt wrong. I'd been forewarned about crime before traveling to Tallahassee, but under those branchy green trees, on sidewalks lined with camellias in bloom, I'd felt plenty safe. I felt safer, certainly, than I did on the streets near my mother's house in California, where on our most recent visit, Laurie and I passed makeshift memorials to gang shootings at suburban intersections. Compared to that, Tallahassee seemed benign, bucolic even, until we pulled up in front of Speed's.

"Go ask," Laurie said.

I froze. We were two white women in a red rental car. We were, in a word, a spectacle.

"What do I say?"

"Tell the truth," she said. "Now, go."

I climbed out and weaved through the crowd on the sidewalk, nodding vaguely, not risking eye contact, and into the store, harboring a ridiculously bookish fantasy. I would ask about Leonard Speed or Dan Speed, and the matronly black woman behind the checkout stand would say *Oh, he's around back* or *See? That's him unloading the milk bottles.* But the clerk was not a black woman, he was South Asian, and he spoke with a heavy lisp. He'd only owned the store a couple of years, he

Buy the Book

said, but he wanted to help. He pulled out a street map and pointed to where a couple other Speed's or Speedy's might be out on the beltway highway around the city. I thanked him and walked the gauntlet of loiterers one more time. At the curb, I hopped back in the rental car, and we drove around the block.

"Maybe he's right," Laurie said. "Maybe that wasn't the place."

"It was," I said. "I found the address in the archives. 801 North Floral Street."

Laurie stopped and put the rental car in reverse.

"You've got to get a picture of the place at least," she said.

So I climbed back out of the car and crossed the street with my camera on a string.

. . .

"Spagna? A Spanish guy?" the fellow repeats.

I hesitate.

I look long at the man, gray at his temples, wondering despite myself what he's doing standing outside a seedy convenience store at two in the afternoon anyway. I don't want to have to make a long explanation.

"Yes," I say. So much for the truth.

The man chuckles. I look not the teensiest bit Spanish. I'm either adopted or a liar.

"You from California?" he tries.

"Yes," I say.

This is partially true. I grew up in California, but I don't usually associate myself with the place. The Pacific Northwest doesn't hold California in very high regard, so I generally avoid conversation about my home state at all costs.

"Where at?"

"Riverside."

Buy the Book

He nods again, grinning, like he's trying to get me to linger, like I'm big entertainment. I'm obviously no real-estate monger. I'm no journalist or historian either, it turns out. I'm no damned good at this.

"You know where that's at?"

He nods again, but I don't think he knows. I don't think he cares. He has something else he wants to say.

"Well, if you remember Tallahassee from fifty years ago, you know how much has changed," he says. Dead serious now. No small talk. No flirting. He means it.

"No, no. I don't remember Tallahassee. It was my dad. My dad, Joe Spagna, he hung around here back then."

"Your dad still alive?"

"No," I say, honest at last. "He's been gone a long time now. Do you know Leonard Speed?"

"Who?"

I look around at the other guys hoping for a smirk or lifted eyebrow, any hint that this might be a bluff.

"Leonard Speed. He was Dan's son. I guess Dan owned this place."

He shakes his head.

"Never heard of him."

He turns away to stare down the shady street past the well-kept lawns and the modest houses, at something somewhere far off in the distance, and I follow his gaze, shielding my eyes from the sun with one hand, trying to focus. I can't see a thing.

Buy the Book