

## **Black History Month: Hank Thomas, Freedom Rider**

**By DAVID NOLAN**

Murray High School graduate Henry (Hank) Thomas is cited in many books for his civil rights activities in the 1960s. He was one of the original Freedom Riders who traveled through the South on Greyhound buses in 1961, protesting segregated facilities at bus stations along the way.

They met with much violence, including mob beatings and firebombing, and wound up in Mississippi's infamous Parchman Prison. Forty years later, Thomas took part in an anniversary tour of the South, sponsored by Greyhound, where the surviving Freedom Riders were greeted by mayors and presented with apologies and civic honors in the same places where they had been so mistreated decades earlier.

Thomas was also one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the leading civil rights groups of the 1960s. With the boldness of youth, SNCC went into the most difficult areas, like Mississippi, to organize the movement for racial equality.

Today, Thomas is a millionaire businessman in Atlanta, where he owns several fast food franchises (friends call him "Mr. McDonald's"). He was honored at a Freedom Fighters Appreciation Banquet at the Willie Galimore Community Center in his hometown in 1992. When presented with the key to the city, his first question was "Will it open the jail?"

He had some familiarity with the local jail. Back in 1960, while on break from his studies at Washington's Howard University, Thomas got together with some friends to plan a sit-in at the lunch counter of the McCrory's store on St. George Street. When the others failed to show up, he conducted the sit-in all by himself. He was arrested, and they thought he must be crazy, so an attempt was made to send him to a mental institution. In truth, he was crazy for nothing but freedom. The Rev. Thomas Wright of St. Mary's Baptist Church got entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. to put up bail money so that Thomas could be released.

The legendary attorney William Kunstler, who represented Thomas in the Freedom Rider trial, wrote about him in his 1966 book "Deep in My Heart." More recently, Pulitzer Prize-winner David Halberstam wrote at length about Thomas in his book "The Children" (1998) that deals with the student sit-in leaders and what they did with their lives.

Unfortunately, as you read these words, Henry Thomas' former home at 155 Twine St. is being demolished -- yet another local civil rights landmark vanishing before our eyes.

David Nolan is a St. Augustine author and historian. For 25 years, he has collected and written about the black history of St. Augustine, drawing from personal interviews and oral histories, microfilms and news clippings of The St. Augustine Record and The Florida Times-Union, the files of the St. Augustine Historical Society Research Library, the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, Atlanta, and other resources from around the United States.