PLAY IRT GUIDE

Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

February 9 through March 5, 1993 by Sue Greenberg

THE RIDE THAT STARTED A *MOVEMENT*

On the evening of December 1, 1955, in the southern town of Montgomery, Alabama an attractive, 42 year-old African-American woman named Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus and began a journey that changed the course of America. Mrs. Parks had just finished her day as a tailor's assistant at the Montgomery Fair, the town's leading department store, and was on her way home to her husband Raymond, and her mother, Mrs. Leona McCauley.

She waited in the cold of the Christmas season for the bus she had ridden many times before. When the bus arrived, Mrs. Parks entered the front of the bus, dropped her 10-cent coin into the box and found a seat. Frequently in the past, Mrs. Parks had had to pay, then return to the street and reboard the bus from the rear door. Often, the bus had taken off before the black passengers could reboard, thus costing them a lost bus fare.

That evening, Mrs. Parks was lucky enough to find a seat on the aisle in the first row of the "colored" section. The first 10 seats on the bus were reserved for white passengers only. Even if no whites were on the bus, hard-working blacks were not allowed to sit in the empty seats in the "white" section if the back of the bus was full. If all "white" seats on a bus were taken and whites were left standing, blacks had to give up their seats at the back of the bus. That was the law in Montgomery and the bus drivers, all of them white, had the power to enforce the rules.

In 1955, Montgomery still had a segregated bus system and way of life. Blacks and whites did not attend the same schools, drink out of the same public water fountains, use the same public restrooms or eat at the same restaurants. These segregation laws applied not only in Montgomery and the South, but throughout the country. Life was very different in America than we know it today. Blacks and whites were not treated equally either in practice or under the law.

The Cleveland Avenue bus was very crowded. Several black people were already standing in the back when the bus stopped at the Empire Theatre and a few white people boarded. The whites filled up their section and one white man was left standing. When the bus driver noticed that the white man was still standing, he looked at the four blacks sitting in the front row of the "colored" section and said "Let me have those front seats." A black gentleman was seated next to Mrs. Parks and two black women were seated across the aisle. No one moved. All four remained seated. Then the bus driver said again, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." The segregation laws required that all four give up their seats to accommodate one white man. No black passenger was allowed to sit in the same row as a white passenger.

Rosa Parks poses in the front seat of a Montgomery bus on December 21, 1956—the day the buses were integrated. (UPI/Bettman)

The man in the window seat next to Rosa Parks stood up and moved to the back of the bus. The two women across the aisle also gave

The United States Supreme Court today affirmed a decision of a special three-judge U.S. District Court in declaring Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional. The Supreme Court acted without listening to any argument; it simply said, "the motion to affirm is granted and the judgment is affirmed." — *ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court ending the Montgomery bus boycott*

The Boycott

up their seats. Mrs. Parks moved over to the window seat but made no effort to move to the back. Many claim that Mrs. Parks was tired from a hard day at work, but she has been quoted as saying that that was not the case. Mrs. Parks was tired of inequality, of the illogical and unfair treatment of blacks under the segregation laws . The bus driver saw Mrs. Parks still sitting and asked her if she was going to stand up and she replied, "No." He then informed her that he was going to have her arrested and she answered politely, "You may do that." A few minutes later, two policemen arrived and placed Rosa Parks under arrest as a violator of the segregation laws.

There has been much historical speculation as to whether Mrs. Parks planned this action: she suggests that it was a spontaneous act, one born more of frustration than of a sense of anarchy. A mild-mannered, intelligent woman, Rosa Parks was far from revolutionary in her actions. She was not at that moment trying to integrate the buses of Montgomery. She was simply trying to get home to her family. But as has been the case throughout history, change sometimes occurs when one person will say "no" to inequality. In that one word, Mrs. Parks was saying she had as much right to the bus seat as the white man. She was saying that it was her human right to be treated fairly and with dignity and not as a second-class citizen. Mrs. Parks believed her race had endured the unjust practices of segregation for much too long. It was time for a change. December 1, 1955, marked the last day Rosa Parks would ever be forced to move to the back of the bus.

A representation of "Jim Crow." This symbol originated with a minstrel man named "Daddy" Rice who, in 1832, introduced a blackface act based on the capers of a slave by that name. Lyrics for the act went, in part, like this: "Weel-a-bout and turn-a-bout! And... jump Jim Crow..." Jim Crow became the popular term used to refer to the segregation laws. (Library of Congress)

News spread quickly through the black community. Rosa Parks was a well-respected leader in the black community and was, at that time, secretary of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She was also very active in her church and other civil organizations. Her reputation was beyond repute. This arrest marked the beginning of a movement that would change the black man's standing in America forever. ◆

The black community of Montgomery, Alabama, came alive with the news of Rosa Parks' arrest. One of the first groups to take action was the Women's Political Council. Mrs. Jo Ann Robinson, an energetic English professor at Alabama State College, was the president. Mrs. Robinson and E.D. Nixon agreed that Rosa Parks' action might provide the rallying element needed to bring about a change. They decided to call a one-day boycott of the buses. Monday, the day of Mrs. Park's trial, was selected as the day of protest.

Mrs. Robinson called on her council members and formed a committee to create a leaflet. The leaflet urged "every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial of Rosa Parks. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school or anywhere on Monday." Students helped distribute some 35,000 leaflets. They rang doorbells and visited homes, schools, shops, bars and restaurants in the black community.

In the meantime, E.D. Nixon organized a meeting of 50 community leaders. They met at the church of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Among those gathering at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church were ministers, heads of social and political clubs, business men and teachers. The group made plans to distribute 7,000 additional leaflets. They also laid plans for alternate methods of transportation. They set up car pools and called on the 200 taxicabs owned by blacks. A mass

meeting was also scheduled for Monday at Holt Avenue Baptist Church.

On Monday, December 5, 1955, the whole city of Montgomery watched the big yellow buses roll down the streets empty—empty of black riders. "It was a miracle," said King. "The once dormant Negro community was now fully awake," he continued. "It was the beginning of a new age for an oppressed people," said another black minister.

The long walk had begun in Montgomery. Thousands of blacks walked miles to work and school. Others car pooled. The black taxi companies charged passengers the same 10 cents required by the bus. Hundreds of other blacks donated their cars and picked up blacks waiting on street corners. The first day of the boycott was a huge success.

Over 5000 people gathered at Holt Street Baptist Church to celebrate. They stood jammed together: the laborer and the professional, the domestic worker and the upper-class lady, people of different religious beliefs, social values and classes. They had pulled together for a common cause and succeeded. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was called on to be the main speaker. "We are here because we are American citizens," he said in his opening sentences. He went on to say, "there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." He called for dignity, for staying united as they stood up for their rights as American citizens. King told the thousands cheering in the congregation that, "right here in Montgomery when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, 'there lived a race of people, of black people . . . of people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights.' " After that meeting, the black community was on fire for freedom.

They effectively organized and upheld the boycott for over a year. In the face of police beating, Ku Klux Klan threats and bombings of churches and job firings, they continued to stay off the buses. In a trial that lasted less than five minutes, Rosa herself was found guilty of violating the segregation laws. She was fined 10 dollars and court costs of 400 dollars. She appealed the case.

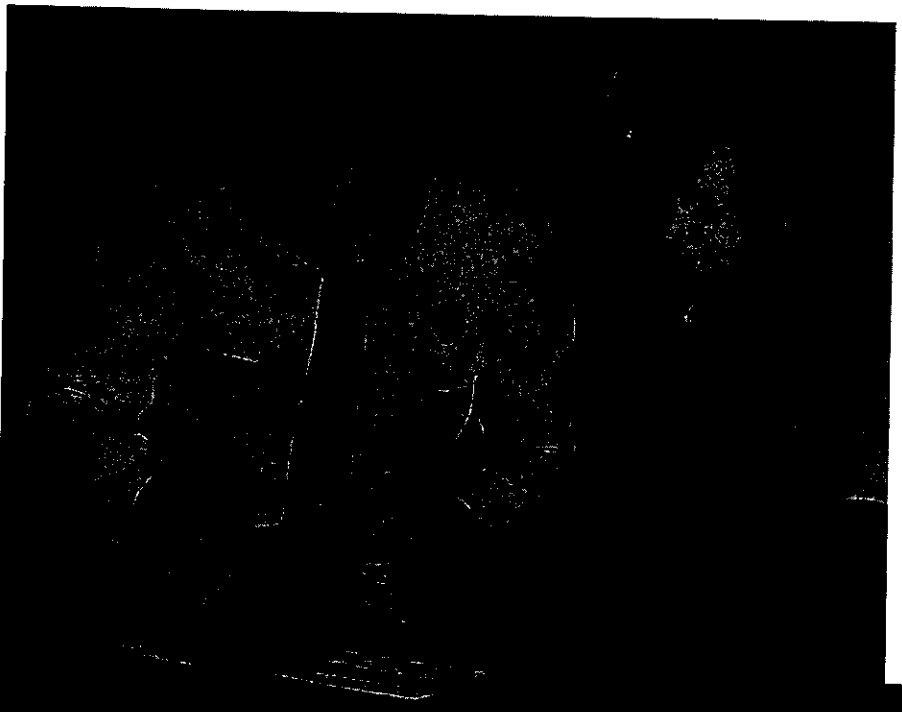
The boycott received international recognition. Money and support for the cause flooded in from all over the world. The boycott received national coverage in almost every newspaper and television newscast. Dr. King told the community at a mass meeting, "We are caught in a great moment of history. It is bigger than Montgomery . . . The vast majority of the people of the world are colored . . . . We are part of a great movement to be free."

Finally the Montgomery bus boycott movement won a resounding victory. The United States Supreme Court declared Alabama state and city laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional. Black people wept for joy at the news. They wept not only at the victory but at the pain they had suffered both during the boycott and for hundreds of years of legal slavery.

On December 20, 1956, the written order for desegregation of the buses reached Montgomery. For a total of 381 days, 50,000 black people waged a great rebellion of non-violence. They won a battle not only over a social system, but over their own fear of white domination.

Rosa Parks would say years later, "I don't recall that I felt anything great about it. It didn't feel like a victory, actually. There was still a great deal to do." She was right. This was only the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Many more victories would have to be won in the black man's struggle for human rights in America. ◆

Rosa Parks fingerprinted by a deputy sheriff in February 1956, at time of arrest of over 100 in boycott case. (AP/Wide World Photos)



"I had no police record, I'd worked all my life, I wasn't pregnant with an illegitimate child. The white people couldn't point to me and say that there was anything I had done to deserve such treatment except be born black." — *Rosa Parks from her autobiography,* My Story

The Confederacy

Alabama was called the "heart of Dixie" because it played such a key role in southern history. Montgomery became the capital of Alabama in 1846. Before the Civil War, the area's rich black soil produced the cotton that became the basis of their economy and was said to rule the South. It also ruled the lives of over two million black people under the system of slavery that made its production possible.

In the fight against slavery during the Civil War, Montgomery became the first capital of the Confederacy. The Confederacy was made up of all the southern states that seceded from the Union. The Civil War (ending in 1865) abolished slavery but not the racism that was deeply embedded in southern life. Although they were legally free, millions of blacks found themselves still trapped in a system of laws and customs of racial inequality. No matter what amendments were added to the Constitution, the system of racism in the South remained the same. "It was a struggle just to be human," Rosa Parks would say, "to be a citizen, to have the rights and privileges of any other person."

In the face of continuous hardship, the black community had to define itself and the importance of its own culture. Rosa Parks would recall those days and years in segregated Alabama as a time of "meager education, meager opportunities, economic deprivation and rigid racial segregation," not just for poor blacks but for all economic levels. In a newspaper interview in the *Chicago Tribune*, she would say that life was "just a matter of survival.....of existing from one day to the next."

By 1955, little had changed in Montgomery, Alabama, since the end of the 1880s. White people were proud of this city that was still known as the Cradle of the Confederacy. Steeped in costum and southern culture, they led genteel lives. It pleased them that the Confederate flag still flew over the state capitol. Police beatings of blacks, the terror of the White Citizens Councils, the Klu Klux Klan's (KKK) burning of homes and churches, and lynchings were all common occurrences. Between the years 1889 and 1941, close to 4,000 lynchings of blacks took place in the South.

For years the black community repressed anger and bitterness. There appeared to be a quiet acceptance of the way things were. The black community was economically dependent on whites and when a black employee spoke up against segregation, that person often lost his or her job. On the surface the system of segregation was seldom challenged, making Montgomery appear as if it had solved the race problem. Underneath the surface, however, discontent simmered in the black community. The Montgomery Bus Boycott allowed over 50,000 black citizens of Montgomery to mobilize their anger and participate in one of the longest and most successful events of passive resistance ever undertaken in America. ◆

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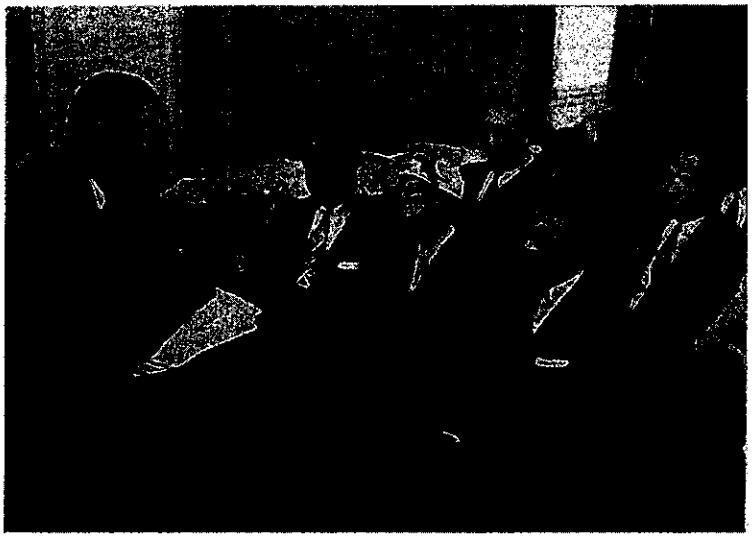
"For many years, we have shown amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we came here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice." — *Dr. King at the mass meeting in Montgomery, Monday, December 5, 1955*



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressing a meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association. The Reverend Ralph Abernathy is in the first row on the left; Rosa Parks is seated next to him. (Don Cravens)