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Rosa Parks: Angry, Not Tired; She'd Be 101 Today

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The way we learn history shapes how we think about the present and the future. Consider what most Americans know about Rosa Parks, who was born 101 years ago, on February 4, 1913.



Martin Luther King, Pete Seeger, Charis Horton, Rosa Parks, and Ralph Abernathy at Highlander Folk School's 25th anniversary celebration in Tennessee in 1957

In the popular legend, Parks is portrayed as a tired middle-aged seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, who, at the spur of the moment after a hard day at work, decided to resist the city's segregation law by refusing to move to the back of the bus on December 1, 1955. She is typically revered as a selfless individual who, with one spontaneous act of courage, triggered the bus boycott and became, as she is often called, "the mother of the civil rights movement."

That popular legend is misleading. Parks' defiance of Montgomery's segregation laws was not an isolated incident. It was part of a lifelong crusade to dismantle Jim Crow. She was a veteran activist and part of a local movement whose leaders had been waiting for the right moment to launch a campaign against bus segregation.

In hindsight, it may appear that the boycott's success was inevitable. In fact, its effectiveness was the result of the Montgomery leaders' decisions about tactics and strategies and their capacity to mobilize thousands of ordinary people in a complex, year-long grassroots challenge to the city's political and economic establishment.

Parks' fierce determination to challenge racism was part of her upbringing. She recalled, "I had almost a life history of being rebellious against being mistreated because of my color." Discussing her grandfather, Sylvester Edwards, she wrote, "I remember that sometimes he would call white men by their first names, or their whole names, and not say, 'Mister.' How he survived doing all those kinds of things, and being so outspoken, talking that big talk, I don't know, unless it was because he was so white and so close to being one of them."

In the 1930s, she and her husband, Raymond Parks, a barber, raised money for the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, nine young, black men falsely accused of raping two white women. Involvement in this controversial cause was extremely dangerous for southern blacks. In 1943, Parks became one of the first women to join the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In the 1940s and 1950s, the NAACP was considered a radical organization by most southern whites, especially politicians and police officials. Joining the NAACP put its members at risk of losing jobs and being subject to vigilante violence.

In 1943, Parks made her first attempt to register to vote. Twice she was told she didn't pass the literacy test, which was a Jim Crow invention to keep blacks from voting. In 1945, she passed the test and became one of the few blacks able to exercise the "right" to vote. She served for many years as the NAACP chapter secretary and director of its youth group. As NAACP youth director, Parks helped black teenagers organize protests at the city's segregated main public library because the library for blacks had fewer (and more outdated) books, but blacks were not allowed to study at the main branch or browse through its stacks.

One of Parks' closest allies was E.D. Nixon, former chair of the Alabama NAACP and a leader of the nation's first all-black labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Nixon -- a protégé of A. Philip Randolph, a socialist agitator, writer, and union organizer who founded the Brotherhood with the dual purpose of promoting workers' rights and civil rights -- was a gifted organizer and strategist. Nixon, Parks, and other NAACP leaders had frequently talked about challenging Montgomery's segregated bus system and the bus drivers' abusive treatment of black riders.

Parks was also friends with (and occasional seamstress for) Clifford and Virginia Durr, white, upper-crust New Deal progressives who had been active in civil rights efforts -- he as a lawyer, she as a volunteer. Mrs. Durr encouraged (and put up the money for) Parks to attend a 10-day interracial workshop during the summer of 1955 at the Highlander Folk School, a training center for union and civil rights activists in rural Tennessee. Founded by Myles Horton in 1932, Highlander was one of the few places where whites and blacks -- rank-and-file activists and left-wing radicals -- could participate as equals. Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Lewis, and Stokely Carmichael and many other civil rights activists attended workshops there. Throughout its history, but particularly during the civil rights movement, Highlander faced hostility and repression from local and national right-wing politicians, and was briefly shut down in 1961 for violating state segregation laws.

At the workshop that Parks attended, civil rights activists talked about strategies for implementing integration. She recalled:

One of my greatest pleasures there was enjoying the smell of bacon frying and coffee brewing and knowing that white folks were doing the preparing instead of me. I was 42 years old, and it was one of the few times in my life up to that point when I did not feel any hostility from white people.

The Highlander experience strengthened Parks' resolve, showing her that it was possible for blacks and whites to live in "an atmosphere of complete equality" and without what she called "any artificial barriers of racial segregation."

Bus segregation had long been a source of anger for southern blacks, including those in Montgomery, the state capital. "It was very humiliating having to suffer the indignity of riding segregated buses twice a day, five days a week, to go downtown and work for white people," Parks remembered.

In 1954, soon after the Supreme Court's Brown decision outlawing school segregation, Jo Ann Robinson, an African-American professor at the all-black Alabama State College, and a leader of Montgomery's Women's Political Council (WPC), wrote a letter to Montgomery mayor W.A. Gayle, saying that "there has been talk from 25 or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of buses." By the following year, the WPC made plans for a boycott and was waiting for the right person to be arrested -- someone who would agree to test the segregation laws in court, and who was "above reproach."

In 1955, two teenage girls -- Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith -- were arrested in separate incidents for refusing to give up their seats, but Nixon decided that neither of them was the right person around whom to mobilize the community. Parks, in contrast, was a pillar of the black community. She had graduated from high school, which was rare for a black woman in Montgomery then. At 42, she had a wide network of friends and admirers from her church and civil rights activities.

On Thursday, December 1, 1955, Parks finished her work at the Montgomery Fair department store, boarded a city bus, and sat with three other blacks in the fifth row, the first row that blacks were allowed to occupy. A few stops later, the front four rows were filled with whites. One white man was left standing. According to law, blacks and whites could not occupy the same row, so the bus driver asked all four of the blacks seated in the fifth row to move. Three acquiesced, but Parks refused. The driver called the police and had Parks arrested.

People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

Because of her reputation and web of friendships, word of Parks' arrest spread quickly. Nixon called the police to find out the specifics, but was told that it was "none of your damn business." He asked Clifford Durr to call, who soon found out the circumstances of Parks' arrest. Nixon went to the jail, posted Parks' bond, and asked her for permission to use her case to challenge the city's bus segregation laws in court and in the streets.

What followed is one of the most amazing examples of effective organizing in American history.

That night, several black community leaders met to develop an action plan. Robinson mimeographed leaflets urging Montgomery's blacks to stay off the city buses on Monday, when Parks would appear in court. They circulated the leaflets among the city's segregated school system, churches, civic groups and workplaces. Black teachers, for example, told students to take the leaflets home to parents. Robinson and Nixon asked black ministers to use their Sunday sermons to spread the word. Some refused, but many others -- including the newly arrived 26-year-old minister at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, Jr. -- agreed.

The one-day boycott was very effective. Most black residents stayed off the buses. As King would later recall, "A miracle had taken place. The once dormant and quiescent Negro community was now fully awake."

Within a few days, the boycott leaders formed a new group, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and elected a reluctant King as president. The ministers differed over whether to call off the boycott after one day, but agreed to put the question up to a vote at a mass meeting. That night, seven thousand blacks crowded into Holt Street Baptist Church. Inspired by King's words -- "There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression"-- they voted unanimously to continue the boycott.

The boycott lasted for 381 days. Although many blacks walked to and from work during the boycott, the MIA also organized an elaborate "private taxi" plan with more than two hundred cars as a parallel transportation system, an enormous undertaking. Drivers (including a handful of sympathetic whites) picked up and dropped off blacks who needed rides at designated points. Black community activists organized fundraisers to raise money for gas and car repairs to keep the carpool system going. About seventeen thousand African Americans -- almost all of the city's black bus riders -- participated in the boycott, despite threats from employers and others that doing so could cost them their jobs. (The 1990 film *The Long Walk Home*, starring Sissy Spacek and Whoopi Goldberg, brilliantly depicts the day-to-day experiences of Montgomery's rank-and-file bus boycotters).

Throughout the year, MIA leaders successfully used church meetings, sermons, rallies, songs and other activities to help maintain the black community's spirits, nonviolent tactics and resolve against the almost monolithic opposition of the city's white business and political leaders. Montgomery police arrested the carpool drivers for minor (and often nonexistent) traffic offenses. White leaders pressured insurance companies to cancel liability insurance for the drivers, but the MIA found a black insurance agent in Atlanta who agreed to write policies.

In February 1956, more than ten thousand whites attended a White Citizens Council rally in Montgomery, featuring U.S. Senator James Eastland (D-Miss), to encourage the city to resist desegregation. The segregationists also resorted to violence. They bombed the homes of King, Nixon, and Reverend Robert Graetz, a white minister of a predominantly black church, who supported the boycott.

Whites tried to use the legal system to their advantage. On February 21, city police indicted 89 blacks under an old law prohibiting boycotts. King, the first defendant to be tried, was found guilty and ordered to pay \$500, plus another \$500 in court costs, or spend 386 days in the state penitentiary. The others were released on bond and appealed their arrests.

During the boycott, MIA leaders negotiated with city leaders to try to find a resolution. Montgomery's white political officials felt increasing pressure from the national media attention and the economic losses caused by the dramatic drop in bus ridership (blacks had accounted for 60 percent of the passengers).

Some business leaders, who were losing revenue because blacks were less likely to shop in downtown stores, also expressed concern. Initially, boycott leaders did not demand a complete end to bus segregation. On December 8, the boycott's fourth day, King and other MIA leaders met with bus company officials and political leaders to propose a desegregation plan similar to ones already adopted in Mobile, Alabama, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. They simply asked that blacks be able to board from the back of the bus and move forward as they sat down, until there were no more seats; whites would board from the front. (Under the existing system, blacks paid at the front and then had to disembark and walk to the back entrance.) They also demanded that the white bus drivers be courteous to all patrons and that the bus company hire black drivers. The white leaders rejected the proposals.

When it became clear that the white establishment would not compromise, MIA leaders decided to file a federal lawsuit against Montgomery's segregation law as a violation of the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment. Fred Gray, a young black attorney, handled the lawsuit (with Durr's behind-the-scenes help). On June 4, the three-judge panel voted two to one that the segregation laws were unconstitutional. Montgomery County's lawyers immediately began an appeal to the Supreme Court, so MIA leaders continued the boycott. On December 20, 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that the segregated bus system was unconstitutional. That day, an integrated group of boycotters, including King, rode the city buses.

During the boycott, Parks and her husband lost their jobs. In 1957, they moved to Detroit, where Parks continued her quiet involvement in the civil rights movement. She worked for several years as a seamstress at a small factory in downtown Detroit. From 1965 until her retirement in 1988, Parks worked as a receptionist in the Detroit office of Congressman John Conyers, a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus. (The House had three black members in 1955 compared with 43 today).

The Montgomery boycott propelled the civil rights movement into national consciousness. King became a public figure. The MIA's success led King and other black ministers to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which became a major instigator of civil rights protest. The movement picked up steam after February 1, 1960, when four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, organized the first sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter. The sit-in strategy spread quickly throughout the South, led primarily by black college students who formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The Highlander School played a key role linking the adult and student wings of the civil rights movement.

Although the civil rights agenda is still unfinished, the freedom struggle resulted in many legal victories and important social, political and economic changes that transformed America. Rosa Parks became an American icon. Schools, streets and community centers are named in her honor. In 1999, President Bill Clinton presented her with the Medal of Freedom, the highest award the U.S. government can bestow on a civilian. When Nelson

Mandela visited Detroit in 1990, he insisted on meeting with Parks. Mandela said that Parks had inspired him while he was jailed in South Africa.

The real Rosa Parks -- who died in 2005 -- is more interesting than the legend. Parks did not single-handedly "spark" the bus boycott. She was part of a network of organizations and activists (including many women) who had the leadership capacity and resources -- telephone lists, mimeograph machines, access to teachers, clergy, and others -- to act strategically. Although legend has framed the Montgomery boycott as a spontaneous outburst of protest, it was rooted in the experiences of Parks and other activists, who had learned valuable lessons from their mentors in the labor and civil rights movements.

Indeed, the success of any movement for social change depends on the often invisible day-to-day work of unsung grassroots leaders who make important choices about strategy, tactics, fundraising, developing new leaders, cultivating allies, deciding when to engage in lawsuits and elections and when to resort to protest, picking battles they can win, and knowing when to compromise.

Contemporary struggles for justice -- union campaigns, environmental activism, efforts to promote fair trade, the campus crusade against sweatshops, challenges to U.S. militarism, battles to sustain the momentum of gay rights and women's equality, and agitation to preserve and expand the victories of the civil rights movement -- may seem modest by comparison to the movements of the 1960s that began in Montgomery in 1955. But one of the key lessons of that era is that history is full of surprises.

Many ideas that were once considered outrageous, utopian and impractical are today taken for granted. The radical ideas of one generation often become the common sense of subsequent generations. That only happens when people like Rosa Parks -- a movement activist -- join forces for the long haul.

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