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Rosa Parkes at 100

- Features -

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In 1988, Rosa Parks attended a film screening of the first segment of the documentary “Eyes on the Prize” in Detroit. Afterward she spoke about her involvement in the civil rights struggle, and I was lucky enough to be in the audience. She was a small woman with a quiet but steel-sharp voice that made an ever lasting impression on her audience.

Born Rosa Louise McCauley on February 4, 1913 in Tuskegee, Alabama, she recalled growing up on her maternal grandparents' farm outside Montgomery. The white children were bussed to school while the Black children had to walk to their grammar school. One day, as she was walking home, a white boy threw a rock at her. In spite of her grandmother's advice that resistance would just cause more trouble with whites, she picked up the rock and threw it right back at the boy.

Not everyone in her family urged caution, though. When the Ku Klux Klan marched by her grandparents' home, her grandfather stood at the door with a shotgun. Rosa recalled that she would sit on the porch with him sometimes, later explaining, “I wanted to see him kill a Ku Kluxer.”

Rosa Parks dropped out of high school to care for her grandmother and, later, her mother. When she married Raymond Parks in 1932, he was already a member of the NAACP. Together they followed the Scottsboro case, where nine Black youth were falsely accused of raping two white women and railroaded to prison. Encouraged by her husband, she finished high school and after the third try, succeeded in registering to vote. Both were also members of the Voters' League, which helped African Americans pass racist "literacy" tests associated with the voter registration process.

When she joined the Montgomery NAACP in 1943, she was its only female member, but before long, she became the chapters secretary. The following year she traveled to Abbeville, AL to talk with a 24-year-old mother who had been kidnapped on her way home from church by seven armed white men. The men had gang-raped her and left her on the side of the road. With local support, Parks helped form the Committee for Equal Justice and publicized the case nationally. However, two all-white grand juries still refused to indict the accused.

By the summer of 1955, Rosa Parks was able to attend the Highlander Folk School, an educational center focused on developing activist leaders concerned with workers' rights and racial equality. Months later, Emmett Till was brutally murdered while visiting relatives in Mississippi. Parks attended a mass meeting that discussed his case and what actions African Americans could take to protect their rights.

Like many other African Americans in Montgomery, Rosa Parks had found the city bus drivers to be aggressive enforcers of the segregation policy. Fifty years prior, the city had passed an ordinance segregating bus passengers by race. Although conductors were to assign seats by race—with a moveable sign that differentiated the white and "colored" sections—there was actually no law that required African Americans to move once they were seated. However, as the white section filled up, drivers moved the sign back and forced the whole row of seated African Americans to give a seat to a white. They also required African Americans to board the bus, pay the fare and, if whites were already seated, to exit and re-enter through the rear door. When, in 1943, Rosa Parks paid her fare and moved to sit down, the driver, told her she had to get off the bus and use the back door. Before she could re-board, he drove off.

On the evening of December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks was sitting in the "colored" section of a bus when the driver—who turned out to be the very same man who had drove off and left her standing in the rain a decade before—moved the “colored” sign down a row and demanded that four seated passengers, including Rosa Parks, move. At first, no one

did, but after the driver insisted, the other three got up from their seats. Parks maintained she had a right to the seat; the driver called the police and she was taken off the bus and arrested for a violation of the city's segregation law. In subsequent interviews, Rosa Parks made the point that she was tired—“not so much tired after a day's work, but tired of being humiliated and bullied. She was asserting her rights as a human being and a citizen.

Parks was bailed out that same evening by E. D. Nixon, former president of the NAACP chapter and leader of the Pullman union, and Clifford and Virginia Durr, her friends and supporters. The NAACP had been looking for a test case to challenge the law and on the following morning she agreed to let them take her case.

JoAnn Robinson, a professor at Alabama State College and member of the Women's Political Council, pointed out in her memoir that most African Americans who rode the Montgomery buses had been humiliated by the drivers, despite the fact that they constituted 75% of the ridership. She immediately proposed a one-day boycott of the buses on December 5, the day set for Parks' trial. Robinson and Nixon conferred with Black ministers, got a front-page article into Sunday's edition of *The Montgomery Advertiser* and organized a mass meeting for Sunday evening. The WPC quickly produced nearly 50,000 leaflets and organized their distribution throughout the community, asking every African American to boycott the buses. On Monday, each bus in Montgomery rumbled along its regular route virtually empty.

After Parks had been found guilty and fined, the Montgomery Improvement Association was founded that same night with a new minister in town, Martin Luther King, Jr., as its president. The MIA decided to extend the boycott, raising the demands that Black riders should be treated with courtesy, seated on a first-come basis and Black drivers hired. The community organized carpools, traveled in Black-operated cabs that charged ten cents—the bus fare at the time—or walked long distances to honor the boycott.

During the 381-day boycott, segregationists retaliated by torching African American churches and the homes of both King and Nixon. The city counter-attacked by forcing the cancellation of the taxi insurance and arresting people under an old anti-boycotting law.

Armed with the recent *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the legal team challenged segregation on public buses. The following June, a federal court declared the law unconstitutional and when the city appealed, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the ruling. Montgomery was forced to repeal its law. With that, the Montgomery Improvement Association declared a victory and lifted the boycott.

Meanwhile, Rosa Parks was fired from the department store where she worked and her husband was forced to quit his job. Unable to find work, they moved to Detroit, where her younger brother and sister-in-law lived. She worked as a seamstress until John Conyers was elected as a U.S. Representative, when she then began working as his secretary (a position she would hold for almost 25 years). She and her family faced a number of health problems but she gave talks and interviews until she was in her nineties. A committed activist, she also participated in the boycott of South Africa's apartheid regime. In 1992, her autobiography, *Rosa Parks: My Story*, aimed at young readers, was published and three years later her memoir, *Quiet Strength*, came out. She also set up the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, whose mission focuses on educating African American youth about the Civil Rights Movement.

Probably the three most prominent women in the 20th century Black freedom struggle are Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker. I never met the other two figures, but Rosa Parks struck me as a woman who, although plagued by family illnesses, financial difficulties, and her own poor health, was determined to seek justice and share her experiences and knowledge, particularly with young people. Interestingly enough, unlike many of the male civil rights leaders, none of these three women were preachers, professors, or politicians, but rather organizers and workers.

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Certainly there are many more women who played an important role in the Civil Rights Movement. As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Rosa Parks' birth, you might also be interested in reading JoAnn Robinson's 1987 memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, Danielle McGuire's book, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance*—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power, Jeanne Theoharis's *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, and *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, which contains over fifty personal accounts written by women veterans of SNCC.