
Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement

Rosa Parks: A Woman of Power

Rosa Parks has been known for decades as the African American woman who refused to give up her seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama. This bold move triggered bus boycotts all throughout the city. She is known now as a civil rights activist that was a significant driving factor behind desegregation of public facilities in the South. Parks was not the first black woman to refuse her seat to a white man, but yet she was seen as an inspiration (Klein 2013). There was something about her overwhelming courage, dedication, and pride that made her a leader all throughout the country in a matter of hours.

Rosa Parks was an African American woman who was born in Tuskegee, Alabama on February 4, 1923. Her desire to push for civil rights came from her grandparents, whom she lived with as a child. They were former slaves that would constantly preach to Parks about the importance of equality ("Rosa Parks Biography"). She attended a segregated school, but received a fairly good education. By the time she was an adult, she found herself in Montgomery, Alabama working as a line-worker in a textile factory ("Rosa Parks Biography"). She began her life as an outward civil rights activist in 1943 by joining the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, also known as the NAACP ("Rosa Parks Biography"). She was actively involved in the organization; she was a secretary of the president and was a youth leader throughout the organization. As far as Parks was concerned, if there was a will then there was a way and she was going to change the world by advocating civil rights. Parks was a determined, articulate, and brave young woman that was willing to do whatever it took to be an equal.

On December 1, 1955 Parks got on a segregated bus after a long day of hard work. At this time, the social norm was for the whites to sit at the front of the bus while the blacks sat at the back. Parks boarded the bus and sat at one of the seats closest to the front that was still designated for blacks. Once the bus began to fill, the bus driver realized several whites were standing, waiting for seats, while many blacks were comfortably seated. At that point, the bus driver asked Rosa to give up her seat to the white citizens that were standing; Rosa refused. She felt that she should not have to give up her seat ("Rosa Parks Biography"). First and foremost, it was wrong to treat any race inferior to the other. But secondly, Rosa was seated in an "African American section." She was seated where she was told to be seated, so why should she have to get up? The bus driver called the local police on Parks and she was arrested shortly after the incident, but was released on bail that same night ("Rosa Parks Biography").

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Parks has since been treated as a hero, but a lot of the information taught about Parks is incorrect or speaks only the half-truth. The first truth to be told is that Parks was not the first African American woman to not want to give up her seat. There were three other women prior to her: Aurelia Browder, Mary Louise Smith, and Susie McDonald (Klein 2013). The second truth is that this act of civil disobedience was in no way pre-meditated. Parks did not know that she was going to be standing up for a cause she believed in that day. She simply had gotten on the bus and was not willing to be disrespected yet again. The third truth, and perhaps the largest in my opinion, is that Parks did not refuse to give up her seat due to her being tired. She even wrote in her own autobiography, “No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in. (Klein 2013)”

I feel that Parks was not taught in her correct historical context because she was meant to be a one of a kind, a true leader. The people needed Parks to be the spark of a revolution. If people were told that others had done the same as her prior and she had it planned for months, it would not seem as heroic. I believe that over time, the myths continued and began to spiral out of control. Parks was an incredible woman and I am very happy she was able to start a civil rights revolution, but I also believe her acts were greatly exaggerated. People wanted someone to stand up to the mistreatment, someone who feared nothing but fear itself, and someone who did what they always couldn't; they made Parks this woman.

After Parks' encounter on the Montgomery bus, president of the NAACP, E.D. Nixon, began organizing a boycott of city buses all throughout Montgomery with Martin Luther King Jr. as the leader. He began placing local ads to urge other African Americans to stay off of all city buses on December 5, 1955; the day of Parks' trial. There was a great success with over 40,000 African American commuters who supported Parks and her actions (“Rosa Parks Biography”). Since the initial boycott was so successful, the boycott continued with great success for many months. The buses sat empty and the city began wasting tax dollars on nothing. There were revolts throughout the city to protest the boycott, but the African Americans pressed on. By June 1956 racial segregation was deemed unconstitutional by the Montgomery district court (“Rosa Parks Biography”). Finally, after legislation was passed, bus segregation was ended all throughout the city so the boycott continued until December 20, 1956; lasting a total of 381 days of protest thanks to Parks and her incredible courage.

In later years other campaigns, such as the “Don't Buy Where You Can't Work” campaign, used the Montgomery bus boycott as leverage. In the late 1920s and early 1930s this campaign was launched to urge blacks to not shop in white stores throughout their neighborhoods that they were incapable of working at (“Don't Buy...”). As far as these citizens were concerned, why bother giving a store business when they are ignorant and refuse to let the community work within the business? The NAACP was also behind this campaign; urging the citizens to commit to a mass civil rights protest that could change the country, just like the Montgomery bus boycott. Thankfully for them, it did change the views of the people just like the prior campaign.

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Whites had no choice but to hire blacks for skilled and white-collar positions if they wanted to stay in business (“Don’t Buy...”). The campaign was a bustling success that once again showed the importance of peaceful protest and black activism.

While there were dozens of people involved in the fight against segregated buses in cities all over America the majority seems to focus in on Rosa Parks. I feel this is because Rosa parks just so happened to be in the right place at the right time. Parks did this right in the most oppressed time for African Americans in the South. While slavery was no doubt an absolute tragedy, there is nothing more frustrating than being told you are free and yet still being treated as an inferior being. Parks was sick of it and so was everybody else; the only difference was that she decided to take a stand (or rather a seat).

As I had mentioned prior, E.D. Nixon and the NAACP were leaders in the fight against segregation yet they are rarely mentioned by scholars today. Nixon was the president of NAACP and he arranged countless boycotts, rallies, civil disobedience movements, and personally dedicated his life to the cause. They were determined people who wanted to get all of the African American citizens fighting for legitimate freedom. Nixon and the NAACP did not want to sit back and accept this life of turmoil for what it was; they wanted action. As the old saying goes, “If you want something done right then you just have to do it yourself.” Nixon and the NAACP was a genuine example of this expression.

Rosa Parks was an incredible woman with the opportunity to help direct the masses in a fight for equality. She did more than just refuse to give up a seat on a bus; she began a revolution. She taught tens of thousands of people what it can mean to stand up for not only a cause, but a dream. While Rosa is a true inspiration she did not do it on her own. She had the help of E.D. Nixon and the entire NAACP. With their help she managed to gain local support and begin the Montgomery bus boycotts that changed segregation legislation forever in the South. The Montgomery bus boycott strategy was used many years after in a variety of situations pertaining to more than just black activism. Parks was a true inspiration and leader with a heart full of courage, faith, and determination.

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