

A Brief Biography of Rosa Parks (1913 – 2005)



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Rosa Parks became the “Mother of the Modern Day Civil Rights Movement” when she transformed the nation on December 1, 1955 by defying racist policies in defense of her human right to dignity and equal treatment.

Rosa Parks was born Rosa Louise McCauley in Tuskegee, Alabama on April 2, 1913. She was the granddaughter of former slaves and the daughter of James McCauley, a carpenter, and Leona McCauley, a rural schoolteacher. Upon the separation of her parents when she was two, Rosa moved to her maternal grandparents' farm in Pine Level, Alabama with her mother and younger brother, Sylvester.

Rosa attended the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, a private school founded by several liberal women from northern states. She then went on to a laboratory school set up by the Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes (now known as Alabama State University), but was forced to drop out when both her grandmother and mother fell ill.

In 1932 Rosa married Raymond Parks, a barber, who had long been active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). While Rosa worked with the organization's state president, Edgar Daniel Nixon, to mobilize a voter registration drive in Montgomery, Raymond Parks worked to help free the defendants in the famous Scottsboro case, in which nine young black men were accused of raping two white women. An all-white jury convicted the nine men and sentenced eight of them to death, despite strong evidence of their innocence. All of the Scottsboro defendants eventually gained their freedom, but the process took nearly 20 years.

Rosa Parks recalled in an interview, *"I worked on numerous cases with the NAACP, but we did not get the publicity. There were cases of flogging, peonage, murder, and rape. We didn't seem to have too many successes. It was more a matter of trying to challenge the powers that be, and to let it be known that we did not wish to continue being second-class citizens."* (Academy of Achievement, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/par0bio-1>)

By 1955, the segregated seating policies on public buses had long been a source of resentment within the black community. Black citizens were required to pay their fares at the front of the bus only to exit and re-board the bus through the back door. Sometimes white bus drivers would drive away before African American passengers were able to re-board the bus. When a bus was crowded, typically during peak travel hours, black people riding in the reserved “colored” section in the back of the bus would be forced to give up their seats to white people. If there was no standing room left for whites, they would be forced to leave the bus.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks took her seat in the back of the bus, just behind the whites-only section. When she and three other African-American bus riders were told to relinquish their seats to white passengers, Rosa Parks refused. The bus driver had Rosa arrested and taken to police headquarters. She was released later that night on \$100 bond. Parks detailed her feelings at this moment in her autobiography, Rosa Parks: My Story: *“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. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”*

The Montgomery chapter of the NAACP had been looking for a case to challenge the legality of segregated bus seating and decided to mount a protest in Rosa Parks' name. In addition, the Women's Political Council (WPC) led by JoAnn Robinson, had the idea of a one-day bus boycott and wanted to initiate the boycott in protest of Rosa Parks' arrest.

Within 24 hours, the WPC distributed more than 52,000 fliers asking black Americans--who comprised 75% of Montgomery's bus business--to boycott the city buses on the day of Rosa Parks' trial. On December 5, Montgomery buses went empty, and Rosa Parks was convicted by the local court and ordered to pay a fine of \$14, which she refused to pay. What was planned as a one-day bus boycott became a 381-day protest, during which time 42,000 protesters walked, carpooled or took taxis instead of riding the segregated Montgomery buses.

Shortly thereafter, the newly-appointed president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), Martin Luther King, Jr. filed a case in a United States District Court on behalf of the organization to desegregate the public buses in Montgomery. The district court ruled for the plaintiffs, declaring segregated seating on buses unconstitutional. When the case was taken to the Supreme Court, the segregation of Montgomery public buses was declared illegal, and on December 20, 1956, the Montgomery buses were officially desegregated.

Due to constant harassment by white people following the Supreme Court decision, and lack of employment, Rosa Parks and her husband relocated to Detroit, Michigan in 1957. Mrs. Parks worked as a seamstress in Detroit until 1965 when U.S. Representative John Conyers (D-Michigan) hired her to serve as an administrative assistant in his Congressional office in Detroit. She held this position until she retired in 1988.

In 1987, ten years after the death of her husband, Mrs. Parks founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development which sponsors an annual summer program for teenagers called Pathways to Freedom. Select youth groups tour the country in buses and learn about the history of the civil rights movement and Underground Railroad sites. In 1992, Rosa Parks published her autobiography Rosa Parks: My Story for young people to learn about her real life story.

Rosa Parks received numerous awards and tributes in her lifetime, including the NAACP's highest honor, the Spingarn Medal, in 1970 and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Award in 1980. In 1996, President Bill Clinton awarded Rosa Parks with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given to a civilian, and in 1999 the United States Congress honored Rosa Parks with the Congressional Gold Medal.

Rosa Parks resided in Detroit until her passing at the age of 92 on October 24, 2005. On October 27, the United States Senate passed a resolution to honor Rosa Parks by allowing her remains to “lie in state” in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. Rosa Parks became the 31st person and second African-American so honored, and the first woman ever to lie in state in the Rotunda.

References:

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