

# Rosa Parks

Parks, Rosa



## Record Information

Source: New York Public Library. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Photograph and Prints Division.

Record Type: Photograph or Illustration

Date: b. 1913–d. 2005

Also Known As: Rosa Louise McCauley;

## Description:

Rosa Louise (or Lee) McCauley Parks was born in Tuskegee, Alabama. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks boarded a municipal bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was ordered by the driver to give up her seat to a white man. When Parks refused, she was arrested, jailed, and brought to trial. Her public act of resistance against the laws of racial segregation sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which brought national attention to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the cause of civil rights for African Americans. Parks has been called the mother of the modern Civil Rights movement. In 1987 she founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute of Self Development in Detroit, Michigan.

Rosa Parks worked as a tailor's assistant in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. At 5:00 the afternoon of December 1, 1955, she left the shop, and caught a downtown bus home. "The custom for getting on the bus for black persons in Montgomery in 1955 was to pay at the front door, get off the bus, and then re-enter through the back door to find a seat" (Parks and Reed 1994: p. 21). Parks sat down in the first row of seats behind the "whites only" section. Soon the bus filled up with whites. One white man was left standing with no seat. The bus driver glanced back and ordered all four black passengers in the front row of the "coloreds only" section to give up their seats. In Montgomery, if the white section filled up, blacks in the back were expected to give up their seats to whites. Not one passenger budged at first; eventually three got up, but not Rosa Parks. "The driver of the bus saw me still sitting there, and he asked was I going to stand up. I said, 'No.' He said, 'Well, I'm going to have you arrested.' Then I said, 'You may do that'" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 116). Little did Parks know on that eventful afternoon, when enough had just become enough, that her act of defiance was the beginning of a revolution that came to be known as the Civil Rights movement.

On February 4, 1913, Rosa Parks was born a year after her parents' marriage. Her parents didn't get along well, and when she was two and a half, Rosa's father headed North for a better life, leaving his wife Leona to fend for herself and their two children (Rosa and her baby brother Sylvester). Leona McCauley brought her children to live with her parents while she taught nearby.

Rosa Parks's great grandfather had been a poor Irishman named James Percival, who had come to Pine Level, Alabama, before the Civil War to work as an indentured servant on the Wright plantation. As an indentured servant, he couldn't leave until his debt, or indenture, to the Wrights, who had paid for his passage, was paid off. Meanwhile he fell in love with a young black woman who was a slave on the Wright plantation. They married, and through hard work managed to save enough to buy 18 acres of land from the well-to-do Wright family after the Civil War. The Percivals were the only black family (they would have nine children) who owned their own property. One of their children was Rosa's grandmother Rose, whom she was named after. Rosa's Grandfather Sylvester had bitter memories of the cruel white overseer on the plantation where he had lived, and thus he hated whites. "The one thing he wanted most of all was for none of his children or anyone related to him to ever have to cook or clean for whites" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 18).

Hence his daughter Leona, Rosa's mother, became a teacher in the black grammar schools of rural Alabama. At 24, Leona Edwards had married a young construction worker, James McCauley, and moved to Tuskegee, Alabama. Rosa and her younger brother were happy children. Their grandparents were a leisurely couple who liked to take them fishing and tell them stories. There were lots of farm animals to play with and plenty of trees to climb. "Pine Level was my whole world," recalled Rosa (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 8). It was a tiny town with only three shops lining a dusty street and not a single railroad or bus line running through it. Pine Level was too small even to be segregated, but that didn't mean that blacks and whites socialized, or that there was no Ku Klux Klan. "At the time I didn't realize why there was so much Klan activity, but later I learned that it was because African-American soldiers were returning home from World War I and acting as if they deserved equal rights because they had served their country" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 30). Rosa's grandfather always slept with a rifle by his side.

By the time Rosa was old enough for first grade, she already knew a lot about racial discrimination. The school for white children in her neighborhood was brand new, with shiny windows and central heating in winter, and the children had their own school bus. Rosa's school, by contrast, was a one-room shack with only shutters for windows and a log stove for heating. Although Rosa's family was not extremely poor, there was no money to send the children to better grammar schools in Montgomery, 20 miles away, so Parks attended school in Pine Level. Perhaps because her mother was a teacher, Rosa could read by the time she was four, and she enjoyed school. Grandfather Sylvester did not teach his grandchildren to hate whites. Instead, Rosa recalled, "I learned to put my trust in God and to seek Him as my strength" (Parks and Reed 1994: pp. 16-17). When Rosa finished sixth grade and could go no further in Pine Level, her mother enrolled her in the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls. This private school for African Americans had been run for generations by white women from New England. The religious values these teachers instilled in their students, however, seemed different from what most white churches preached in Montgomery. Rosa learned that "I was a person with dignity and self-respect, and I should not set my sights lower than anybody else because I was black" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 49).

As a result of their involvement with African Americans, Rosa's white teachers were shunned in Montgomery. Not even the white churches would tolerate their presence on Sundays. During the school year, these courageous women attended African-American churches, and in summertime, they returned to their homes in the North. At that time, the early 1920s, the school received its funding from the president of Sears, Roebuck & Co., a Jewish Northerner named Julius Rosenwald. He was deeply concerned with the plight of African Americans in the South, especially their lack of educational opportunities. He donated a considerable fortune to funding decent one-room schools for black children, known as Rosenwald Schools, throughout the Deep South.

After Rosa graduated from Montgomery Industrial School, she attended the private Lab School at the Alabama State Teachers College for Negroes in Montgomery. This was the only school available to blacks who wanted more education. Rosa's mother Leona paid for her high-school education out of her meager earnings, and she stayed there through the 11th grade.

Meanwhile, a young man had his eye on Parks, though the feeling wasn't mutual. "I just spoke politely to him and didn't give him another thought" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 55). His name was Raymond Parks, though he preferred to be called Parks. He worked as a barber in Montgomery, and what attracted him to Rosa was more than her physical beauty. Even at 18, she carried herself with dignity and pride. He knew from his own experience—he was in his twenties—that it was hard to find a girl or woman with race pride in heavily segregated Alabama. Though he had a meager education compared to his future wife, he was the first person she had met who was active in the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), which had only a weak presence in Alabama. Rosa was 19 when she married Raymond Parks in Pine Level on December 18, 1932. Their close marriage lasted nearly 50 years, until her husband died of cancer in 1977. Right after their marriage, Rosa Parks continued working full time, but obtaining her high school degree meant a lot to her. So she returned to school at night and on weekends, and in 1933, she proudly received her high school diploma. In those days, very few African Americans in the Deep South graduated from high school. Raymond Parks influenced his wife to become more active in civil rights. He was deeply involved in voter registration, a complicated, expensive process for African Americans. First, a literacy test was required. Rosa tried to register to vote for the first time in 1943. She was told that she had failed the literacy test—even though she had learned to read by the age of four and had a high school degree. Second, everyone had to pay a poll tax, but African Americans in Alabama had to pay the tax retroactively—each year from the time they had turned 21 (the legal voting age) to the year they registered to vote. When Parks finally became a registered voter at age 32, she owed 11 years' worth of poll taxes, but she paid. Finally, a white person had to vouch for an African American registering to vote. Parks was able to meet this requirement, but her husband never did succeed in getting registered.

By the end of World War II in 1945, Rosa was a leader in the Montgomery Voters League and the secretary in the local Chapter of the NAACP, whose president, E. D.

Nixon, was working as a Pullman porter. Nixon had organized the Alabama branch of A. Phillip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and also headed that local office. Parks loved her job at the NAACP: "I recorded and sent membership payments to the national office, answered telephones, wrote letters, sent out press releases, and kept a record of cases of violence against black people" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 84). In addition, she headed the NAACP Youth Council, which attempted to draw youngsters into the sphere of the NAACP's activities. "One of our projects was getting the young people to try to take out books from the main library instead of going to the little branch across town that was the colored library" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 94). For all of these responsibilities, including her work for the Voters League, Parks received no pay. When Nixon asked her to volunteer as his part-time assistant in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters' local office, Parks gladly accepted. Her full-time job as a seamstress could never provide the personal fulfillment that her volunteer work did.

Through Nixon, Parks met Virginia Durr, a white woman whose father had been a minister in Montgomery. She was the wife of Clifford Durr, a prominent lawyer. Because of their interest in civil rights, they were an unpopular couple in white Montgomery. Durr encouraged her to apply to the Highlander School in Tennessee, run by Myles Horton, a white man deeply committed to social justice. "The school offered workshops to train future leaders so they could go back home and work for change using what they had learned at the school" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 103), recalled Rosa, who attended classes there every summer.

Nonetheless, on the day she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man, Parks didn't have any intention of making waves. She was tired and looking forward to dinner with her husband and mother at home. But her real fatigue was not physical. "All I felt was tired. Tired of being pushed around ... Tired of the Jim Crow laws. Tired of being oppressed. I was just plain tired" (Parks and Reed 1994: p. 17). As Rosa Parks sat in jail in Montgomery on the evening of her arrest, word of her plight spread quickly. A few hours later, her husband arrived, bringing with him Nixon and the Durrs, who got her out of jail. Virginia Durr gave her friend a bear hug, which shocked everyone; whites were not supposed to show affection to blacks in segregated Alabama. Meanwhile, Nixon was secretly thanking God that he had finally found the right person to challenge segregated busing in Montgomery. "This avid church-goer looked like the symbol of Mother's Day" (Wright 1991: p. 38), recalled a friend about Parks, whom everyone knew and loved.

At home with her husband and mother, Rosa wasn't at all sure she wanted to become a "test case" against segregated busing and have her life turned upside down. To be sure, she knew she would never take another city bus again. But did she want to become the focal point of a citywide boycott of the bus system? By morning she had made up her mind to go along with Nixon. Her decision took great courage, as the weeks and months ahead would show. The boycott brought to prominence a young, new preacher in town, Martin Luther King Jr., and resulted in a Supreme Court decision ruling segregated busing in Montgomery unconstitutional. That would be just the beginning. "I had no idea when I refused to give up my seat on that

Montgomery bus that my small action would help put an end to the segregation laws in the South" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 2).

On the Sunday following Rosa Parks's arrest, all African-American churches in Montgomery urged their congregants to boycott the buses the next day, December 5, when Parks was to stand trial. Church volunteers distributed 35,000 leaflets to passers-by urging them to stay off the buses. As a result, African-American bus riders, constituting 66 percent of the bus company's customers, found alternative ways to get to work on Monday.

The Monday boycott was a dazzling success. Rosa Parks was tried and, after a brief trial, found guilty, a verdict that enabled her lawyers to appeal her case, if need be, all the way to the Supreme Court. That evening a tumultuous gathering filled the Holt Street Baptist Church inside and out, as the question of whether to continue the boycott was considered. In just a few days' time, Rev. Ralph Abernathy and other pastors in Montgomery had formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), to lead a prolonged bus boycott, should it come to that. The new pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King Jr., agreed to serve as the MIA's president. That evening, he delivered the first of many memorable speeches, laying down the principles of love and nonviolence that would guide the forthcoming struggle. The crowd in the church resoundingly approved the boycott's continuation.

"The boycott lasted through that week, and then through the next. No one had any idea how long it would last" (Parks and Haskins 1992: pp. 141–142). Its resumption was met with intense hostility by the bus company, as well as by the mayor and city council of Montgomery. White churches remained silent throughout, perhaps to avoid the fate of one Lutheran pastor in town, Reverend Robert Graetz, whose public support of the boycott led white supremacists to bomb his home.

Meanwhile, the Parks' lives were turned upside down. Raymond Parks lost his job as a barber, and Rosa lost hers as a seamstress. Rosa's mother got in the habit of answering the phone, to spare her daughter and son-in-law from hearing the many death threats and hate calls. Parks was thankful that her apartment was never bombed, as Nixon's and King's homes in Montgomery would be. Meanwhile, deep religious faith sustained her throughout the whole ordeal. "I felt the Lord would give me the strength to endure whatever I had to face. God did away with all my fear" (Parks and Reed 1994: p. 17).

Rides had to be found for the thousands of African Americans stranded without bus transportation. The churches were innovative in their approach to this problem—mobilizing taxi drivers who were willing to charge the 10-cent bus fare, and persuading blacks who owned cars to volunteer as drivers during rush hour. Some church congregations raised money for the purchase of church station wagons to help out the boycotters. In this way, some 30,000 former bus riders stayed off Montgomery's buses during the more than year-long boycott. Many wealthy white women sympathized with the boycott and willingly drove blacks working as domestics in their homes to and from work, even though the mayor asked them not to do so.

In February 1956, an appeals court threw out Rosa Parks's conviction on a technicality, making further appeals impossible. Clifford Durr suggested another way to contest the constitutionality of Montgomery's segregated busing law—by suing the bus company in federal court. The MIA wisely took his counsel. Because of his pro-boycott sympathies, Clifford Durr lost his white clientele, and his law practice went bankrupt. Months later, the lawsuit was taken up by the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. On November 13, 1956, the Court announced its verdict: that segregated busing in Montgomery, Alabama, was unconstitutional and illegal. The bus company would be forced to integrate or shut down. While the Court's decision took another five weeks to become official, it arrived just in time: white-owned insurance companies were refusing to renew auto insurance on vehicles, including church station wagons, that were helping out the boycotters. Montgomery's mayor triumphantly got a court order to prevent boycotters from gathering on their designated street corners, where various taxicabs, station wagons, and private cars picked them up and took them to work. The mayor seemed willing to do anything to stop integration.

The long suffering boycotters, including Rosa Parks and King, could hardly believe they were victorious. The 381-day boycott was finally over. Rosa Parks described the end of the long bus boycott very matter of factly:

The boycott had lasted more than a year. Dr. King, the Reverend Abernathy, Mr. Nixon, and Glen Smiley, one of the few white people in Montgomery who had supported the boycott, a great show of riding the first integrated bus in Montgomery. Some of the books say I was with them, but I was not (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 137).

Rosa Parks was home that day, nursing her sick mother. But desegregation wasn't followed by wholehearted integration; nor would peace be restored between the races for a long time to come. Whites in Montgomery tried and failed to get a "whites only" private bus line established; the disgruntled mayor imposed a curfew on all city buses to prevent African Americans from riding home from work; angry whites occasionally shot at passing buses. The hate calls continued, forcing Parks, her husband, and mother in 1957 to leave Alabama for good and begin a new life in Detroit.

Parks returned to the South many times, however. Her courageous actions as a private citizen sparked a Civil Rights movement throughout the South that would finally lead to the enforcement of civil rights for all citizens. Parks never missed a civil rights march nor an occasion to speak in public. She was much sought after as a speaker. People all over the country were eager to hear from her own lips, not about the "incident" on the bus that would change American history, but what lay behind her quiet, unassuming heroism.

The Parks family led a good life in Detroit. Raymond Parks quickly found employment as a barber, while Rosa was hired in 1965 by Congressman John Conyers of Michigan, for whom she worked until her retirement in 1988. For a long time she had dreamed of establishing "some kind of organization to help young people" (Parks and Haskins 1992: pp. 181–182), to give them hope for the future. In 1987, the widowed Rosa Parks fulfilled her dream when she cofounded, along with her friend Elaine Steele, the Rosa and

Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. With the help of grants and her own funds, the institute opened its doors to Detroit's youth, providing continuing-education, athletic, and counseling programs.

In late August of 1994, Rosa Parks made headlines again, when it was revealed that she had been mugged by a young African-American man who broke into her home in Detroit. The next day, newspapers from coast to coast reported the break-in and assault of the civil rights hero.

In her elder;u years, Rosa Parks spent time doing what she always did best—good works. She also wrote two inspirational books about her life and struggles, which are full of wisdom and religious faith. She also traveled the world over, from Sweden to Japan, to receive "more honorary degrees and plaques and awards than I can count" (Parks and Haskins 1992: p. 185). Known as the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement," she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996, and the Congressional Gold Medal, Congress's highest honor, in 1999. She died in October 2005. Her casket was placed in honor in the Rotunda of the Capitol, the first woman to be so honored. Rosa Parks will be remembered as the spark that lit a fire that became one of the largest Civil Rights movements in history.

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