

MOVE TO THE BACK, ROSA PARKS

By Lynn Rymarz

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IT WAS A COLD winter's evening Thursday, 1 December 1955, when Rosa Parks stood on a crowded Montgomery, Alabama, street corner waiting for the bus to take her home. As soon as the white, green, and yellow Cleveland Avenue bus arrived, Rosa walked up the stairs, not paying attention to who was behind the wheel. After dropping ten cents into the farebox, Mrs. Parks recognized the face of James Blake, a gun-carrying, white bus driver she had encountered twelve years earlier, when he forced her to pay her fare, then walk around to the back door, where he insisted that black passengers board.

Even though bus operators were required to “provide equal but separate accommodations” for white people and black people according to Section 10 of the Montgomery City Code, it had become customary for blacks to be required to sit in the back of the bus, while whites sat in reserved seats up front. Some meanspirited bus drivers enjoyed humiliating their black passengers by making them step back down the stairs to reboard the buses from the rear door, and then they'd drive off before the black people could enter the bus.

This time, though, Rosa found an empty seat in the first row of the “colored section,” behind the reserved white section, and sat down. A black man sat beside her, and two black women sat across the aisle. The bus started rolling. At the next stop, the “whites only” seats filled up, and a white man was left standing. The bus driver turned and looked at Rosa and the others in the row.

“Let me have those front seats,” he called out.

Rosa and the others sat silently. Heads turned and stared.

The bus driver called out a second time, “Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats.”

The man next to Rosa got up and moved to the back of the bus. Then the two ladies across the aisle also got up and moved to the back. Rosa sat there and thought about how unfair the segregation laws were. Something needed to be done to change them.

At that moment Rosa made up her mind. No! She would not get up. She would not move to the back of the bus. She was “tired of being pushed around. Tired of seeing the bad treatment and disrespect of children, women, and men just because of the color of their skin. Tired of the Jim Crow laws.” Whatever happened to her on this day, she decided it was time to stand up and do something.

It all began with the birth of Rosa Louise McCauley, on 4 February 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. As a young girl, she lived with her mother and younger brother at the home of her grandparents, who had been born slaves. They shared their life stories with Rosa. She heard how her grandfather had endured beatings and starvation and how her grandmother, Rose, was five years old when the Civil War ended, bringing freedom and the hope of equality for African Americans.

But hopes for equality had never been realized in the South where Rosa grew up. “I was glad that I did not live in slavery times,” Rosa stated, “but I knew that conditions of life for my family and me were in some ways not much better than during slavery.”

At an early age, Rosa learned about violence and hatred through the acts of the Ku Klux Klan, white-robed men hiding behind cone-shaped hoods, who rode through black communities burning churches, beating up people and killing them. There were nights when Rosa sat in fear beside her grandfather as Klansmen rode over the gravel road outside. She slept in her clothes, ready to run, in case someone tried to break into their home. “By the time I was six,” Rosa recalled, “I was old enough to realize that we were actually not free.”

When Rosa turned eleven, she had finished the sixth grade. But in order to continue her education, Rosa’s mother had to send her to the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, known as “Miss White’s School” for its principal and cofounder, Alice L. White. All the teachers were white women from the North who had risked their lives opening a vocational training school for black girls. In fact, disapproving

whites in the community set fire to the school several times. But each time it was rebuilt, and the doors remained open.

There Rosa learned more than what was in her textbooks. Besides sewing, Rosa said, “What I learned best at Miss White’s school was that I was a person with dignity and self-respect, and I should not set my sights lower than anybody else just because I was black.”

While in Montgomery, Rosa experienced the Jim Crow laws, which were enforced to keep blacks and whites separated. There were separate schools, churches, libraries, restaurants, water fountains, elevators, and separate sections on buses and trains. But Rosa said, “I refused to go along with the unfair rules.” She’d walk the stairs, instead of ride in the “colored only” elevator. She’d go thirsty, instead of drink from the “colored only” water fountains. And she’d walk, oftentimes from home to work, instead of sit in the “colored only” back of the bus.

Even after Rosa grew up and married, the laws remained unchanged. She and her husband, Raymond Parks, made Montgomery their home. They both wanted to help change the segregation laws. Raymond was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which was founded in 1909 to fight racial injustice. Like her husband, Rosa joined the NAACP, where she served as secretary and the group’s youth leader.

As secretary, Mrs. Parks recorded accounts of violence and hatred against blacks. “The more I learned about these incidents, the more I felt I could no longer passively sit by and accept the Jim Crow laws,” Rosa said. “A better day had to come.”

That day came on a cold December evening in 1955. After a long day of work as an assistant tailor at a Montgomery department store, Rosa Parks was sitting in the middle row of a bus when she suddenly made up her mind to do something.

“Are you going to stand up?” the angry bus driver demanded.

“No!” Rosa answered in a firm voice.

“Well, I’m going to have you arrested,” he announced loudly.

“You may do that,” Rosa replied.

The Cleveland Avenue bus waited that day for the police to arrive. Some people got off. Others stayed on—all of them staring at Rosa.

Two policemen entered the bus and walked over to her. “Why didn’t you stand up?” one of them asked.

Mrs. Parks looked up and said, “Why do you all push us around?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “but the law is the law, and you’re under arrest.”

The policemen took Rosa to jail. Inside, she was fingerprinted and locked in a cell. Allowed one phone call, she dialed her husband. “Parks,” she asked, “will you come get me out of jail?”

When Rosa Parks was released, word of her arrest and Monday trial date spread like wildfire. Rosa was not the first black to be arrested for breaking a segregation law; however, she was willing to use her case to fight for change. Although she knew it would be difficult, Rosa and Raymond decided together that it was a battle worth fighting.

In support of Rosa, blacks in Montgomery decided to boycott the buses. Notices were distributed by the thousands: “We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest.... Don’t ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday.”

On Monday, buses rode through town nearly empty. That evening, after Rosa had been found guilty and fined for breaking the segregation law, supporters flocked to Holt Street Baptist Church for a meeting. From her seat on stage, Mrs. Parks looked out at the huge crowd. Then a hush came over the audience. Montgomery’s new minister, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke: “My friends, I want it to be known that we’re going to work with grim and firm determination to gain justice on the buses in this city.... And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality....”

Energized by Rosa Parks and Reverend King, blacks throughout Montgomery stayed off the buses. They either walked or carpooled. Many whites in the community did not approve. Mrs. Parks and her husband both lost their jobs and received death threats. The home of Martin Luther King, Jr., was bombed. Still the African American community remained firm.

The Montgomery bus protest lasted 381 days, until the United States Supreme Court finally ruled that segregation on buses was unconstitutional. That decision provided the legal foundation of the civil rights movement. Blacks in other cities

found the courage to stand up, like Rosa, for equal rights. It would take many more years of protests for other laws to change. Mrs. Parks was there every step of the way.

Since then, Rosa Parks has been honored for her courage. City streets and parks have been named after her, and she has been given hundreds of awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

What started as a bus ride home turned into a history making event. When she refused to give up her seat, Mrs. Parks had no idea what would happen. “I simply did it...,” Rosa said. “I was grateful that the act inspired others to unify in the pursuit of justice.”