



Section 1

AMERICAN LIVES Rosa Parks

Taking a Historic Stand by Sitting

"I didn't have any special fear. It was more of a relief to know . . . that I wasn't alone. If I was going to be fearful, it would have been as far back as I can remember, not just that separate incident."—Rosa Parks, recalling her emotions during the Montgomery bus boycott, 1988

Rosa Parks (b. 1913) has been called the mother of the civil rights movement. Her quiet act of defiance against segregation on the buses of Montgomery, Alabama, started a wave of protest in the 1950s—and launched the career of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rosa McCauley had a difficult early life, as her parents separated and her small family struggled to live. She juggled school with work to help her family. At age 19, she married Raymond Parks, who had been active in efforts to register African Americans to vote. For the next 20 years, she worked a variety of jobs. Beginning in 1943, she was a secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When she could, Parks protested segregation laws. She refused to use drinking fountains or elevators set aside for African Americans. She often walked home from work rather than take segregated buses.

However, on December 1, 1955, she was tired and took the bus. A white man got on the bus that day after the section reserved for whites was full. Parks and three other African Americans were told by the bus driver to give up their seats. Parks refused. "I don't think I should have to," she said. "Why do you push us around so?" The bus driver summoned police, and Parks was arrested.

Edgar Daniel Nixon—head of the local NAACP—and two lawyers paid a bond to secure Parks's release. Then Nixon asked if she would agree to appeal the case in order to challenge the segregation law. Her mother and husband feared for her safety, but she agreed to go ahead—if it will "do some good." Meanwhile, other activists in Montgomery seized on Parks's act of defiance. The Women's Political Council had been ready for months to call for a boycott of the city bus line for its segregation and rude treatment of African-American passengers. Notified of Parks's arrest, Jo Ann Robinson of the WPC issued thousands of fliers calling for the city's blacks to boycott the bus

line on December 5—the day of Parks's trial.

The boycott worked, and that night African Americans met to discuss whether to continue it. At the meeting, a newly arrived minister—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—spoke and energized the crowd. The people decided to continue the boycott and named King as their leader. The boycott lasted more than a year. It ended when the Supreme Court ruled that the segregated city buses violated the rights of African Americans. With this success, King had begun his brilliant career as America's chief civil rights leader.

Life for Parks became difficult, however. She lost her job, and her husband was unable to work after suffering a nervous breakdown. They were plagued by threatening phone calls. Even after the boycott ended, no one would hire Parks. A year after the boycott ended, the Parks family moved to Detroit, where they had family. Rosa Parks made a living as a seamstress and also helped the local office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1965 she joined the staff of a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Detroit.

Over the years Parks has delivered speeches to raise money for the NAACP. In 1969 a street was named for her in Detroit. She has received many awards—most notably the 1984 Eleanor Roosevelt Women of Courage Award. In 1989 she attended the White House ceremony for the 25th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, where she was acknowledged by President Bush.

Questions

1. Why is Parks called the "mother of the civil rights movement"?
2. Jo Ann Robinson recalled later that Parks was "dignified" and had "strong morals and high character." Why did that make her a good symbol to promote the bus boycott?
3. Explain in your own words what Parks's action meant to American history.