

Video 18

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, Part I

A Very Determined Woman

Let us move now from India to America, a quarter of a century later, where African-Americans lived in a severely racist society that threatened them, especially in the American South, with sudden and merciless violence. Lynchings were common in the South during the 1950s. Large groups of jubilant whites would gather to watch a black man hung from a tree in a woods outside of town. Old black-and-white photographs show people smiling as if at a party.

Everything was segregated. Black children and white children went to separate schools. Black people could not eat in white restaurants, could not stay in white hotels, could not use a white drinking fountain. On city buses, white people sat in the front seats while black people sat in the back seats. If a white person wanted a seat in the middle of the bus, all of the black people in that row had to move toward the rear, or stand if there were no more seats.

Even though black soldiers had fought (in separate units from white soldiers) in World War Two against the repression of Nazi Germany, when they returned home to America, they were not thanked for their service. Instead, they were treated with the same racial repression which had persisted since their two hundred and fifty years of slavery. President Lincoln had freed their ancestors in 1863 during the Civil War, but the racial attitudes of many whites in America had never changed.

The church, often a Baptist church, was the bedrock for black communities in America. The church was their sanctuary; inside its walls, they were (usually) safe. They held services on Sunday morning, but they also had meetings in their churches on other days and evenings of the week. Ministers preaching from the pulpit spoke about Jesus in his time nearly two thousand years ago, but also about Jesus and his values in the world today.

On Thursday, December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, in the heart of the Deep South, a 42-year-old seamstress named Rosa Parks was riding the bus home after a day at work. She was sitting in the middle of the bus beside other black passengers seated in the same row. A white man boarded and wanted a seat in that

row. Although the three other black passengers stood up and moved toward the rear of the bus, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat.

The white bus driver, who had previously been rude to her on a bus, told her to move.

Rosa Parks responded, "No, I will not."

The bus driver threatened to call the police.

Rosa Parks calmly told him, "You may do that."

When two police officers arrived, one of them ordered her to move. Still sitting, Rosa Parks asked him, "Why do you push us around?"

The officer responded, "I don't know. But the law is the law and you are under arrest."

Rosa Parks immediately stood up, willing to be arrested.

The officer took Rosa Parks to the police station at city hall, where she was finger-printed and photographed, but not allowed a drink of water, for the water fountain was "for whites only". She repeatedly asked to make a phone call, and was finally allowed to call home. She spoke with her mother, who asked Rosa if she had been beaten. Rosa told her mother that she had not been beaten, then she spoke with her husband, who told her he would be at the jail as soon as possible.

A civil rights organizer in Montgomery, E.D. Nixon, arrived at the jail and paid Rosa Park's \$100 bail, so that she could be released.

Nixon accompanied Rosa Parks and her husband Raymond to their home, where they stayed up late discussing whether to use Rosa's arrest as a legal challenge to segregation on the city buses of Montgomery. Rosa and her family knew that she would be placed in great danger, for the white response could be violent.

She also wondered, Would the black community support her in this legal case? She could not stand alone against the white racists of Montgomery.

Rosa Parks had a strong background in civil rights. She and her husband were both members of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; she had been the secretary of the local NAACP in Montgomery for twelve years. Earlier in 1955, she had taken a course in *non-violent civil disobedience* at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Because of her years of civil rights work, and her training in non-violence, she was ready for that confrontation on the bus. She remained calm, even when facing the two police officers who had come to arrest her

and take her to jail. She was absolutely determined to make a stand against segregation, the sickness which crushed every black person in the South.

Eventually, both Rosa's mother and Raymond agreed with Nixon that Rosa's case should be used as a legal challenge against segregation on the buses. Rosa, who had refused to move from her seat, and who had shown not a moment of fear at the police station, now agreed to take the next step toward challenging the segregation which her people hated.

She phoned a civil rights attorney in Montgomery, Fred Gray, and asked him to represent her.

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What else was happening in America in 1955?

The American economy was booming. 7.9 million new cars were sold in 1955; seven out of ten families now owned a car.

Disneyland opened in California.

The Mickey Mouse Club began broadcasting on television.

The first McDonald's fast food restaurant opened.

Elvis Presley and rock-n-roll created a revolution in pop music.

"Gunsmoke" first appeared on television. The story of Marshall Matt Dillon, set in Dodge City, Kansas in the Old West, was so popular that it ran for twenty years.

65 million Americans watched "Peter Pan", the Broadway show, on television.

Jonas Salk's successful vaccine against polio was first available in April.

The USS Nautilus, the world first nuclear-powered submarine, was launched.

Emmitt Till, a fourteen-year-old Negro boy from Chicago who was visiting relatives in Mississippi, was brutally murdered by two white men who dumped his body into the Tallahatchie River. The body was found, and the two white men were identified. Emmitt's mother insisted that his coffin be open at his funeral in Chicago, so that people could see how severely beaten he had been.

The two white men were acquitted by an all-white jury in Mississippi.

This murder turned American—and world—attention on the reality of racial oppression in the American South.

Rosa Parks stated, following her arrest on the bus, that she had been thinking about Emmitt Till that day.

American involvement in Vietnam officially began on November 1, 1955, when an “advisory group” arrived to help train South Vietnam’s military, following the departure of the French after their defeat at Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954. The war that developed lasted until April 30, 1975, nearly twenty years.

Yes, in 1955, the American economy during the 1950s was booming. People listened to Elvis sing “Love me tender, love me true”, and ate their first McDonalds hamburgers.

But in Montgomery, Alabama on the first day of December in 1955, Rosa Parks, a very determined woman, took a bold step toward racial justice for her people.

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We will continue our discussion of the American Civil Rights movement in the following talk.

Thank you.

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John Slade

