Video 20

Montgomery Bus Boycott, Part III

The People Walk Toward Justice

On Thursday, December 1, 1955, the day of Rosa Parks' arrest, 75 to 80% of the passengers on the Montgomery buses had been black. On Tuesday, December 6, following the mass meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church, that figure dropped to zero. The bus company, National City Lines, felt an immediate and severe drop in revenues. Negroes walking on the crowded sidewalks cheered and applauded as empty buses rolled past.

The white population of Montgomery thought that the disruption might last a week or two, and then the "darkies" would get tired of walking. But the Montgomery Improvement Association, the MIA, created to oversee all aspects of the boycott, organized an extensive network of carpools. People with cars drove along the bus routes, providing rides at no cost so that people could get to work. Taxis did not charge the usual 45 cents per passenger, but 10 cents, the same price as a bus ticket. When the city government asked local insurance companies to cancel the policies of cars in the carpool, the Negro drivers collectively took out new policies from Lloyd's of London.

One elderly woman named Mother Pollard preferred to walk every day rather than to accept a free ride. She explained, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."

Journalists from northern newspapers came to photograph and write about the thousands of Negroes who continued to walk, week after week. Black churches throughout America took collections to pay for expenses such as gasoline for the carpool. The MIA kept two bank accounts in Montgomery, and reported once a week —at the mass meetings which continued every Monday at various churches—on the income which had been received, and precisely how that money had been spent. Not a single dollar ever went missing.

The white response was violent. Martin Luther King's home, and the home of a fellow minister, Ralph Abernathy, were both bombed. Four black Baptist churches were also bombed.

Coretta King was with a friend in the front room of her home when they heard something heavy land on the concrete porch. The two women hurried into another room moments before a bomb exploded, filling the room where they had just been with shattered glass and smoke. Baby Yolanda, only two and a half months old, had been sleeping in the rear of the house; she was safe. Coretta phoned the Dexter Church to tell Martin that their house had been attacked.

When he returned home, he found a large group of angry Negro men, some of them armed with weapons. He told them, as he told his listeners again and again throughout his career as a civil rights leader, "We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with non-violence. Remember the words of Jesus, 'He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.'"

That call for non-violence resonated with the white community in Montgomery, some of whom began to show growing respect for their Negro neighbors. Journalists visiting the city always emphasized the peaceful nature of the movement.

Dr. King and 89 others who were active in the boycott were indicted by the City of Montgomery under a 1921 ordinance for "conspiring to interfere with a business". Dr. King served two weeks in jail, which brought national attention to the protest against segregation. He later stated, "I was proud of my crime. It was the crime of joining my people in a non-violent protest against injustice."

While the Negroes of Montgomery continued to walk, and the virtually empty buses continued to roll through the streets, Negro lawyers were busy presenting their case to a federal district court. On June 4, 1956, the court ruled in *Browder v. Gayle* that segregation on the buses of Alabama was unconstitutional. The State of Alabama appealed the decision, while the Negro community, bolstered by this victory, kept walking. The case reached the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. On November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court upheld the district court's ruling that segregation on public buses violated the Constitution.

The City of Montgomery passed an ordinance authorizing black passengers to sit on an equal basis with white passengers. Drivers were instructed to treat all passengers in a polite manner. Black drivers would be hired to drive through black neighborhoods. The three original demands had been met.

On December 20, 1956, following a successful boycott of one year and sixteen days, Montgomery's public transportation system was legally integrated.

On December 21, 1956, Rosa Parks once again rode a bus on the streets of Montgomery, able now to sit in any seat. A photograph of her shows her dressed as if on her way to work, looking pensively out the window.

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John Slade