

What was the Montgomery Bus Boycott?

In Montgomery, Alabama segregation was a part of everyday life. Blacks who lived there faced segregation in places such as parks, schools, restrooms, theaters and buses. The laws of the country made it hard for blacks to register and participate in elections. The justice system often proved discriminatory towards them, unjustly jailing and executing many, while banning them from holding public office.

One particular area of resentment amongst Montgomery blacks of that era was the segregation law of the bus system. Blacks were the majority of the clientele of the buses accounting for 60% of the riders. Yet, they often were forced to adhere to oppressive conditions on buses. The bus drivers, all of who were white, treated blacks with racist and abusive attitudes, often calling their passengers derogatory names such as "nigger", "black cow", and "black ape". They often required blacks to pay their fares in the front of the bus, and then walk to the back door to board the bus. Sometimes though, bus drivers would take off before the passenger could get on leaving their passenger behind. While, this practice often angered blacks, the practices of "white-only" seating outrage them even more.

The [law](#) stated that blacks could not sit in the front of the bus, regardless of whether the seats were empty or not. They were only allowed to sit in the unreserved seating in the back of the bus. Even then, if the bus was full and a white person wanted to sit the black person would have to give up their seat on the bus. Since the 1900's, on streetcars there had been segregation on public transportation in Montgomery. But, by the late 1940's blacks were fed up with the embarrassment and anger that they felt every time they rode the bus. "It was very humiliating having to suffer the indignity of riding segregated buses twice a day, five days a week, to go downtown and work for white people", said activist Rosa Parks.



Though the years of segregation of the bus was the object of discontentment in many black lives, the group failed to unite and protest these laws because of many factors. Martin Luther King jr. cited issues within the community, such as a strong lack of leadership, and uninterested educated elite that contributed to lack of protest. Starting in the early 1950's a few individuals and groups had begun to try to protest the law but were not making much headway in the community. However, when fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger the black

community's resentment of the status quo increased. Within the next couple of months, Mary Louise Smith an eighteen-year-old student refused to give up her seat on the bus and was arrested on the spot. Both of these young women were tried and fined, adding to the anger of the black citizens of Montgomery.

The fuel that lit the fire came on the evening of December 1, 1955, when a seamstress and former NAACP secretary named Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus in downtown Montgomery. When the white bus driver asked the blacks that were sitting in the segregated part

to move to accommodate more whites, everyone complied except for Parks. Parks took a stand and refused to get up. Minutes later she was arrested and sent to a Montgomery jail.

After hearing of the arrest of Parks, members of the black community decided that a boycott of the bus system was long overdue. JoAnn Robinson of the Women's Political Committee began to organize a one day protest. When the word spread about the protest several other black leaders wanted to convene. Under the leadership of E.D. Nixon, former chair of the NAACP of Alabama, Martin Luther King jr., Ralph Abernathy, H.H. Hubbard, and Ms. A.W. West an organized movement was finally underway. A meeting was held the day after Parks arrest and many Montgomery activists attended the session. The group ranged from students, to church groups, to prominent community elites; from there it was decided that in order to combat the racism of the segregation laws a boycott was vital.

In order, to efficiently carry out this Montgomery Improvement Association was formed, with King as their MIA adopted a plan of action for that was officially to begin on 5. The resolution basically stated demands:

- 1.) Blacks would not ride the buses until polite treatment by bus drivers were guaranteed to them
- 2.) Segregation must be abolished and a first come first served policy on buses adapted and drivers.
- 3.) The employment of black bus drivers.

From day one, the bus boycott immediately successful. Leaders anticipated about 60% of blacks to participate in the movement, but at the end of day one it was predicted that there was nearly 100% cooperation. People had utilized other ways of transportation such as walking, using cabs, getting rides in private cars and some even rode mules to work.

On the fourth day boycotters met with the bus company and other various government leaders to try to find a happy compromise. However, the leaders were unrelenting and the city created a law that would make it harder for blacks to use cabs. Before, black cab companies would charge 10 cents a ride, the same as the bus, but now city law stated that cabs had to charge a minimum of 45 cents a passenger. This was a big blow to the moment because over 17, 500 blacks utilized the bus system at least twice a day. So, the MIA's first mission was to come up with a organized system of transportation for blacks. They worked it out a "private taxi", where people with cars picked up other boycotters and took them to work. This system mainly consisted of ministers, educators, laborers, businessmen, and even white men from the airforce. White households also refused to be without their servants, and many picked them up and drove them home on a daily basis.

Later on as the boycott began to grow longer and whites began to tire of the unrelenting blacks, they tried to use several methods to end the boycott. These included, leaking false reports that the boycott was over, violence, and eventually arresting blacks for several misdemeanor offenses. [\(To read more about the tactics that white opposition used in the boycott click here\).](#) But these methods failed to disunify the protesters and the movement went on.

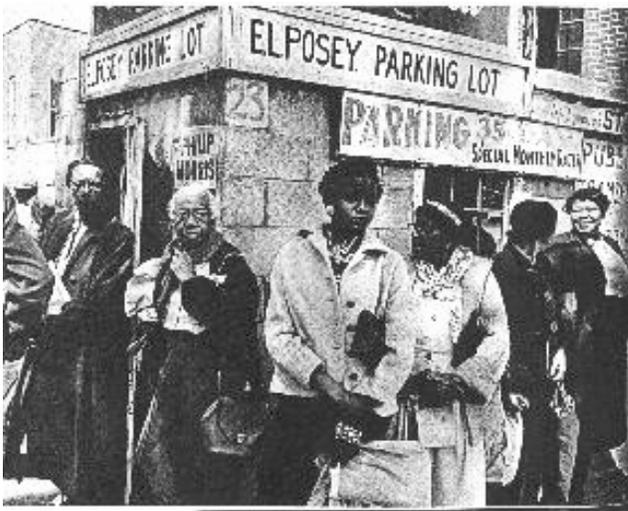


However, leaders decided that they could no longer try to fight the county of Montgomery, so they filed a federal lawsuit against Montgomery's segregation laws. because it was not in accordance with the fourteenth amendment. The fourteenth amenment stated...They also spoke against the unnecessary harassment of blacks by Montgomery government and law officials.

On May 11, 1956 the case was heard before a three panel federal court. The judges ranged from extremely radical to totally liberal. The cities' lawyers tried to argue that if segregation would end then there would be rash amounts of bloodshed and violence throughout the city. After listening to these arguements, one judge asked, "Is it fair to command one man to surrender his constitutional rights, if they are his constitutional rights, in order to prevent one man from committing a crime?". On June 4, 1956, about three weeks later in a two to one descion, it was decided that the segregation laws were indeed unconstitutional. Yet the movement was not over yet since the Montgomery county lawyers immediately stated that they were going to appeal the decision in the Supreme Court. While the boycotters were waiting for the Supreme court to rule the protest continued.

During that time, incidences continued to try to end the movement. Reverend Robert Graetz a white minister, who served a predominately black church, had his house bombed. However, the family was out of town, and no injuries occurred. The Mayor denounced the incident as a publicity stunt by blacks and reiterated the fact that whites did not care if the boycott lasted forever. Soon the harassment by cops increased and insurance policies were canceled swifter. The law was making it virtually impossible for the carpool system to occur and eventually the city sued leaders of the movement citing that the car pool was a "public nuisance" and an illegal "private enterprise". On November 13, 1956 leaders prepared to face on of the darkest days of the

movement. They knew that if the car pool system was no longer available for transportation that many people might be forced to ride the buses.



While in court awaiting the descion about the status of the carpools in Montgomery King recieved a message from the federal court. It simply stated that "the motion to affirm is granted and the judgement is affirmed". This meant that the Supreme court supported the descion that segregation on the buses was illegal. Even though the Montgomery jury ruled that carpooling was illegal, it was no longer neccessary.

The next night the official boycott was called to an end; but citizens were asked to not ride the buses until the official mandate arrived. Reverend Graetz spoke the words of the letter of Paul to the Corinthians, reiterating the non-violent principles: "Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing...Love suffereth long, and is kind..."

However, it was soon announced that the order would not reach Montgomery for about a month. Faced with the obstacle of not being able to participate in carpools, a "share a ride" system was worked out, and the buses remained empty for another month. Finally on December 20, 1956 the mandate came to Montgomery. The next day King , Abernathy, and Nixon were the first to integrate the buses. The boycott was finally over.

Eleanor Roosevelt stated this about the movement:

"I think December 5th is an important date for all of us in the U.S. to remember. The bus protest carried on by the colored people of Montgomery, Alabama, without violence, has been one of the most remarkable achievements of people fighting for their own rights but doing so without bloodshed and with the most remarkable restraint and discipline, that we have ever witnessed in this country. It is something all of us should be extremely proud of for its achievement by Americans which has rarely before been seen."

pictures courtesy of: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/3515/montg3.html>

Questions

- 1. Why do you think that Rosa Parks finally had enough? Was she tired or ready to defy the law?**
- 2. How did Martin Luther King get involved? What was his basic philosophy when it came to violence?**
- 3. What problems did the African-Americans face once the boycott started?**
- 4. How did the caucasians try to end the boycott?**
- 5. What did the lawyers think would happen if segregation on the busses ended? Is this ever a reason to rule in a court case? Explain.**
- 6. What is your reaction to the quote by Eleanor Roosevelt? Why is it significant?**
- 7. Do boycotts work? Why?**