

February 4 is the birthday of Rosa Parks, born in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1913. In the 1940s and 50s, she served as secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, working as a civil rights organizer and activist.

In August of 1955, black teenager Emmett Till, visiting relatives in Mississippi, was brutally murdered after allegedly flirting with a white woman. Parks attended a mass meeting at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery on November 27, 1955; the meeting's speakers addressed the Emmett Till case at length, including the news that Till's two murderers had just been acquitted. Parks was deeply disturbed and angered by the verdict, not least because Till's case had received such widespread public attention, far more than other cases she and the Montgomery NAACP had worked on over the years. Just four days later, she took her famous stand on that fateful Montgomery bus ride. She later said that when the driver ordered her to move, "I thought of Emmett Till and I just couldn't go back."

It wasn't the first time Parks had taken a stand: "My resisting being mistreated on the bus did not begin with that particular arrest. I did a lot of walking in Montgomery." Indeed, one day in 1943, Parks boarded a bus and paid the fare — but the bus driver, a tall, blond man named James F. Blake, demanded she follow city rules and re-enter the bus again through the back door. Parks exited the bus — and Blake promptly drove off without her. As she waited for the next bus to come, Parks vowed never again to ride with Blake.

Nearly a decade later, on December 1, 1955, four days after hearing that Emmett Till's murderers had been acquitted, Parks found herself on a bus driven by none other than James F. Blake. She sat in the black section, but when the white section filled up, Blake demanded that the four black passengers nearest the white section give up their seats. The other three black passengers reluctantly moved, but Parks did not. She recounted the scene: "When he saw me still sitting, he asked if I was going to stand up, and I said, 'No, I'm not.' And he said, 'Well, if you don't stand up, I'm going to have to call the police and have you arrested.' I said, 'You may do that.'"

Even today, many picture Parks on that bus as an old woman tired after a long day of work. In her autobiography, *My Story*, Parks writes, "People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in." You can listen to Park's own account of these events here, recorded just four months after her arrest.

Rallying around Parks' case, the Montgomery bus boycott began the next day — and after more than a year, it was successful; the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregated transportation was unconstitutional. But Parks endured significant hardships along the way, both during and after the boycott. She was unjustly fired from her department store job. She received an almost constant stream of death threats, so many that she eventually left Montgomery to seek work elsewhere, ultimately moving to Detroit. There she served as secretary and receptionist for Representative John Conyers, befriended Malcolm X, and became active in the Black Power movement.

In 1995, she published her memoir, *Quiet Strength*, focusing on her Christian faith. She insisted that her abilities to love her enemies and stand up for her convictions were gifts from God: "God has always given me the strength to say what is right." A devoted member of St. Paul AME Church in Montgomery, Parks taught Sunday School and regularly helped prepare the Lord's Supper. "I had the strength of God," she said, "and my ancestors."

When she died in 2005 at the age of 92, she became the 31st person, the first woman, the second African American, and the second private citizen to lie in honor in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C. More than 50,000 people came through to pay their respects. Her birthday is celebrated as Rosa Parks Day in California and Missouri; Ohio and Oregon celebrate the day on December 1, the anniversary of her arrest.

One last story: In 1994, the Ku Klux Klan applied to sponsor a section of Interstate 55 near St. Louis, Missouri, which would mean the Klan's name would appear on roadside signs announcing the sponsorship. Since by law the state could not reject the application, the Missouri legislature came up with a novel solution: they voted to name that same section of road, "Rosa Parks Highway." Asked for her thoughts on this honor, Parks is said to have replied, with a gleam of mischief in her eyes, "It is always nice to be thought of."

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