

## Rosa Parks, 1913-2005: Mother of the American Civil Rights Movement

She was a black woman who refused to give her seat on a bus in Alabama to a white passenger. Her act of bravery launched the movement to end unequal treatment of African-Americans. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*  
07 March 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Pat Bodnar.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English. Today, we tell about Rosa Parks, who has been called the mother of the American civil rights movement.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Until the nineteen sixties, black people in many parts of the United States did not have the same civil rights as white people. Laws in the American South kept the two races separate. These laws forced black people to attend separate schools, live in separate areas of a city and sit in separate areas on a bus.

On December first, nineteen fifty-five, in the southern city of Montgomery, Alabama, a forty-two year old black woman got on a city bus. The law at that time required black people seated in one area of the bus to give up their seats to white people who wanted them. The woman refused to do this and was arrested.

Rosa Parks

This act of peaceful disobedience started protests in Montgomery that led to legal changes in minority rights in the United States. The woman who started it was Rosa Parks. Today, we tell her story.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

She was born Rosa Louise McCauley in nineteen-thirteen in Tuskegee, Alabama. She attended local schools until she was eleven years old. Then she was sent to school in Montgomery. She left high school early to care for her sick grandmother, then to care for her mother. She did not finish high school until she was twenty-one.

Rosa married Raymond Parks in nineteen thirty-two. He was a barber who cut men's hair. He was also a civil rights activist. Together, they worked for the local group of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In nineteen forty-three, Missus Parks became an officer in the group and later its youth leader.

Rosa Parks was a seamstress in Montgomery. She worked sewing clothes from the nineteen thirties until nineteen fifty-five. Then she became a representation of freedom for millions of African-Americans.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In much of the American South in the nineteen fifties, the first rows of seats on city buses were for white people only. Black people sat in the back of the bus. Both groups could sit in a middle area. However, black people sitting in that part of the bus were expected to leave their seats if a white person wanted to sit there.

Rosa Parks and three other black people were seated in the middle area of the bus when a white person got on the bus and wanted a seat. The bus driver demanded that all four black people leave their seats so the white person would not have to sit next to any of them. The three other blacks got up, but Missus Parks refused. She was arrested.



**Rosa Parks is fingerprinted after refusing to move to the back of a bus.**

Some popular stories about that incident include the statement that Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat because her feet were tired. But she herself said in later years that this was false. What she was really tired of, she said, was accepting unequal treatment. She explained later that this seemed to be the place for her to stop being pushed around and to find out what human rights she had, if any.

VOICE TWO:

A group of black activist women in Montgomery was known as the Women's Political Council. The group was working to oppose the mistreatment of black bus passengers. Blacks had been arrested and even killed for violating orders from bus drivers. Rosa Parks was not the first black person to refuse to give up a seat on the bus for a white person. But black groups in Montgomery considered her to be the right citizen around whom to build a protest because she was one of the finest citizens of the city.

The women's group immediately called for all blacks in the city to refuse to ride on city buses on the day of Missus Parks's trial, Monday, December fifth. The result was that forty thousand people walked and used other transportation on that day.

That night, at meetings throughout the city, blacks in Montgomery agreed to continue to boycott the city buses until their mistreatment stopped.

They also demanded that the city hire black bus drivers and that anyone be permitted to sit in the middle of the bus and not have to get up for anyone else.

VOICE ONE:



**Martin Luther King Jr.**

The Montgomery bus boycott continued for three hundred eighty-one days. It was led by local black leader E.D. Nixon and a young black minister, Martin Luther King, Junior. Similar protests were held in other southern cities. Finally, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled on Missus Parks's case. It made racial separation illegal on city buses. That decision came on November thirteenth, nineteen fifty-six, almost a year after Missus Parks's arrest. The boycott in Montgomery ended the day after the court order arrived, December twentieth.

Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Junior had started a movement of non-violent protest in the South. That movement changed civil rights in the United States forever. Martin Luther King became its famous spokesman, but he did not live to see many of the results of his work. Rosa Parks did.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Life became increasingly difficult for Rosa Parks and her family after the bus boycott.

She was dismissed from her job and could not find another. So the Parks family left Montgomery. They moved first to Virginia, then to Detroit, Michigan. Missus Parks worked as a seamstress until nineteen sixty-five. Then, Michigan Representative John Conyers gave her a job working in his congressional office in Detroit. She retired from that job in nineteen eighty-eight.

Through the years, Rosa Parks continued to work for the NAACP and appeared at civil rights events. She was a quiet woman and often seemed uneasy with her fame. But she said that she wanted to help people, especially young people, to make useful lives for themselves and to help others. In nineteen eighty-seven, she founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development to improve the lives of black children.



**Rosa Parks and President Clinton after he presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996**

Rosa Parks received two of the nation's highest honors for her civil rights activism. In nineteen ninety-six, President Clinton honored her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. And in nineteen ninety-nine, she received the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In her later years, Rosa Parks was often asked how much relations between the races had improved since the civil rights laws were passed in the nineteen sixties. She thought there was still a long way to go. Yet she remained the face of the movement for racial equality in the United States.

Rosa Parks died on October twenty-fourth, two thousand five. She was ninety-two years old. Her body lay in honor in the United States Capitol building in Washington. She was the first American woman to be so honored. Thirty thousand people walked silently past her body to show their respect.

Representative Conyers spoke about what this woman of quiet strength meant to the nation. He said: "There are very few people who can say their actions and conduct changed the face of the nation. Rosa Parks is one of those individuals."

VOICE TWO:

Rosa Parks meant a lot to many Americans. Four thousand people attended her funeral in Detroit, Michigan. Among them were former President Bill Clinton, his wife Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan.

President Clinton spoke about remembering the separation of the races on buses in the South when he was a boy. He said that Rosa Parks helped to set all Americans free. He said the world knows of her because of a single act of bravery that struck a deadly blow to racial hatred.

Earlier, the religious official of the United States Senate spoke about her at a memorial service in Washington. He said Rosa Parks's bravery serves as an example of the power of small acts. And the Reverend Jesse Jackson commented in a statement about what her small act of bravery meant for African-American people. He said that on that bus in nineteen fifty-five, "She sat down in order that we might stand up... and she opened the doors on the long journey to freedom."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

This program was written by Nancy Steinbach. It was produced by Lawan Davis. I'm Pat Bodnar.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember. Join us again next week for another People in America program on the Voice of America.