

The American Yawp Reader



Rosa Parks on Life in Montgomery, Alabama (1956-1958)

In this unfinished correspondence and undated personal notes, Rosa Parks recounted living under segregation in Montgomery, Alabama, explained why she refused to surrender her seat on a city bus, and lamented the psychological toll exacted by Jim Crow.

City Bus lines. Front section reserved for white passengers ... seating space for 10 persons left vacant whether or not they board the bus enroute to town. The bus driver often passes colored passengers, with these empty seats, when he thinks enough are standing in the aisles. This means a larger number will be waiting for the next bus. The next bus driver may also not stop for colored passengers. Sometimes colored passengers have to pay their fare at the front of the bus and then go to the rear door for entrance, which is already overcrowded. It is not uncommon for a bus driver to order a colored woman to vacate a seat for a white man to be seated in the same space. Such practices and many other unjust things are regular routine.

On reaching my job, which is at Montg's largest Dept. Store, Montgy Fair, there are the drinking fountains throughout the store, plainly marked. Whites Only – on one and Colored on the other. The Women employee restroom is for white. The ladies lounge for public is known to be for white only without the sign. The white and Colored women employees and colored women shoppers use the same lounge. The Colored women employees eat their lunch in a little room next to the restroom. The doors between the toilet and the dining area can not be closed tightly enough to stay shut.

There is a luncheonette counter where some colored help is employed as cooks, dishwashers, etc., but Colored people are not served at the counter. They may buy the food and take it away and eat it.

Colored people are employed at this store as maids, porters, elevator operators, truck drivers except that I work in the tailor shop doing men's clothing alterations as a helper of the tailor who is colored.

One colored man is the window dresser. I don't know what else he does.

There is a large number of Negroes shopping in this store most of the time. This thing called segregation here is a complete and solid pattern as a way of life. We are conditioned to it and make the best of a bad situation.

At the Public Library, located near the downtown shopping section, a Colored person will not be permitted to come in and read a book or be given one to take out. The requested book will be sent to the colored branch library on the east side of town, if it is not already available there. Last year some NAACP Youth Council Members who are students went to this downtown library for reference books to use in school. They were told the books were there but they would be sent to the branch library to be issued to them there, even though the young people lived on the west side of town.

So you see my dear, it seems endless. I could go on and on and there would still be some more to tell.

The schools are all segregated and of course unequal. The churches are also segregated. White people sometimes visit the colored churches but I don't know if any colored people go to white churches except as nurses to look after small children. I don't know of any going as guests.

I don't know how helpful this is to you, but I hope it may enlighten you a little about the way of life in the South.

You may write again and let me know of something in particular that you want to do research work on. Employment, housing, voting, education and social aspects are all fertile fields for research based on racial discrimination.

I am sure you read of the lynch-murder of young Emmett Till of Chicago. This case could be multiplied many times in the South, not only Miss., but Ala., Georgia, Fla.

In my lifetime, I have known Negroes who were killed by whites without any arrests or investigations and with little or no publicity. It is the custom to keep such things covered up in order not to disturb what is called [letter left incomplete.]

...

I had been pushed around all my life and felt at this moment [her refusal to surrender her seat on a Montgomery City Bus] that I couldn't take it anymore. When I asked the policeman why we had to be pushed around? He said he didn't know. "The law is the law. You are under arrest." I didn't resist.

...

I want to feel the nearness of something secure. It is such a lonely feeling that I am cut off from life. I am nothing, I belong nowhere and to no one.

There is just so much hurt, disappointment and oppression one can take. The bubble of life grows larger. The line between reason and madness grows thinner. The reopening of old wounds are unthinkably painful. Time begins the healing process of wounds cut deeply by oppression. We soothe ourselves with the salve of attempted indifference, accepting the false pattern set up by the horrible restrictions of Jim Crow laws.

Let us look at Jim Crow for the criminal he is and what he had done to one life multiplied millions of times over these United States and the world.

He walks us on a tight rope from birth to the end of life's span, whether it be long or of brief duration. Little children are so conditioned early to learn their places in the segregated pattern as they take their first toddling steps and are weened from their mother's breast.

Source: Rosa Parks. Writings, Notes, and Statements, 1956 to 1998; Drafts of early writings; Accounts of her arrest and the subsequent boycott, as well as general reflections on race relations in the South. Rosa Parks Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Available online via Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/item/mss859430226/>).

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