

“There Had to Be a Stopping Place”



*Rosa Parks being fingerprinted after 1956 boycott arrest,
one year after refusing to give up her bus seat*

FOR SOJOURNER TRUTH, IT HAD been a streetcar. For Ida Wells, a train. For the black women of Montgomery, Alabama, it was the city buses.

Throughout the Jim Crow South, riding on public transportation was regarded by African-American women as a particular torment, whether they were pushed to the back of a bus or streetcar or to the smoking car of a train. Their shame was all the more acute when it occurred, as it often did, in the presence of white passengers, most of whom seemed to look on with approval or, at best, indifference.

The racial rules on Montgomery's buses in the 1950s were appallingly detailed, obviously designed to inflict as much humiliation as possible on

black riders, most of them female domestic workers. Blacks had to pay their fare in the front of the bus, then get out and reboard through the rear door. The first ten rows of each bus were reserved for whites. The last ten were supposedly for blacks. The middle seats were considered "no-man's-land." If a black was sitting in one of the middle rows, she could be ordered by the driver to get up and give her seat to a white. If the front and middle sections were filled, any seated blacks would have to yield their places to boarding whites, although there were *no* exceptions to the whites-only rule for the first ten rows. Thus, when a bus reached the black area of the city at the end of a workday, the seats in the front were usually empty while the rest of the bus was filled with blacks, including a line of exhausted maids, cooks, and other workers who clutched the overhead bars, swaying and falling as the bus jolted down the street. "Buses weren't something optional, like restaurants," said Fred Gray, a black Montgomery lawyer. "Every day, the bus situation put the issue of what it meant to be black squarely before you."

The bus drivers, all of them white, were, in the words of a white city commissioner, "mean as rattlesnakës." It was not unusual for them to drive past a stop where blacks were waiting, or to engage in the sport of driving off just as a black passenger, having paid her fare, was about to board through the back door. Some especially perverse drivers would accelerate or slam on their brakes to knock standing black passengers off balance, or open the windows on winter days if a black asked for more heat. Drivers heaped obscenities and curses on blacks, calling them "black bitches," "heifers," "apes," "whores," among other things. Any African-American who complained or answered back risked being thrown off the bus, assaulted, or arrested.

By the 1950s, however, the black women of Montgomery had had enough. Like Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells, and others before them, they decided to fight back. This time, however, they would not act alone. They would join forces—and when they were done, Montgomery, and the rest of the country, would never be the same.

Montgomery's mayor in those days was a man named Tacky Gayle, who blithely ignored the first indication that the racial status quo of his city was about to be altered forever. Less than a week after the *Brown* decision was handed down in May 1954, Gayle received a letter demanding that Montgomery's bus drivers stop humiliating and insulting their black passengers. If the city didn't put an end to the constant abuse, blacks, who made up three-quarters of the ridership, might decide to stay off the buses

altogether. Gayle impatiently brushed the warning aside. He figured that the author, Jo Ann Robinson, and the group of black women she headed were just trying to stir up trouble again. Nothing would come of the threat, he was convinced, just as nothing had come of the women's earlier complaints about the mistreatment of blacks on buses.

Mayor Gayle, whose political success was largely attributed to his marriage into an old Montgomery family, was not, to put it charitably, regarded by the rest of the white establishment as an especially bright light in the municipal firmament. On this issue, however, the establishment and the mayor were as one. A black bus boycott in the cradle of the Confederacy? The idea was ludicrous. Montgomery, the capital of the great state of Alabama, was a civilized, genteel place. It was, claimed Joe Azbell, the city editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, "one of the most liberal cities in the South," a place where "race relations were better than in any other city I know of." Warming to his theme, Azbell said: "The white people here did everything for the Negro—they gave them their schools, their hospitals—everything." The female agitators who sent that regrettable letter to Mayor Gayle would never rouse Montgomery's blacks from their torpor. If Gayle and the rest of the city fathers were sure of anything, they were sure of that.

In short, the white male leaders of Montgomery were blind to the rage bubbling beneath the seemingly placid surface of the black community. They also underestimated the Women's Political Council; its current president, Jo Ann Robinson; and its founder, Mary Fair Burks. Professors at the all-black Alabama State College, Robinson and Burks did not like taking a back seat to anyone.

By her own account, Robinson had been angry ever since she boarded her first—and last—bus in Montgomery a few days before Christmas in 1949. School had just let out for the holidays. Robinson had reservations on a flight to Cleveland, where she was going to spend two weeks with friends. She decided to leave her car at home and take a bus to the airport.

When she stepped on the bus that December day, Robinson was "as happy as I had ever been in my life." Having joined the Alabama State faculty just three months before, she was proud of how much she had achieved in her thirty-three years. Born on a farm near Macon, Georgia, the youngest of twelve children, she had been valedictorian of her high school class and, later, the only one of her family to go to college. She had earned a master's degree, then taught at a black college in Texas before coming to Montgomery. She fit in well at Alabama State. She liked her colleagues and her students. Life was wonderful. Until she boarded that bus.

When she struggled through the door with her suitcase, there were only two other passengers, a white woman in the third row and a black man in a seat near the back. Robinson took a seat in the fifth row, so lost in thought about her upcoming vacation that she paid no attention to the bus driver yelling at her. Finally, he slammed on the brakes, turned around, and shouted, "If you can sit in the fifth row from the front of other buses in Montgomery, suppose you get off and ride in one of *them*!" Shocked, Robinson didn't respond until the driver jumped out of his seat and raised his hand as if to strike her, screaming, "Get up from there!" The terrified Robinson, tears streaming down her face, stood and stumbled to the closed front door, then realized that she was supposed to get off at the back. But she couldn't make herself move. At last, the driver grudgingly opened the front door, and Robinson lurched off. She walked back to the college, "[t]ears blind[ing] my vision, waves of humiliation inundat[ing] me." The degradation she suffered—"I felt like a dog," she later said—seared her for the rest of her life. When she talked to historian David Garrow about the incident almost forty years later, her voice trembled and her eyes filled with tears. "In all these years," she once wrote, "I have never forgotten the shame, the hurt of that experience. The memory will not go away."

Even though she never rode another bus in Montgomery, Jo Ann Robinson became a woman with a mission—to force the city to treat the black riders on its buses as human beings. She was joined in that crusade by the Women's Political Council, an organization of middle-class black women, most of whom, like Robinson, rarely or never rode the buses. Among them was the equally ladylike, equally militant Mary Fair Burks.

Born and raised in Montgomery, Mary Burks rebelled, even as a child, against being treated like a "nigger." She launched her own "private guerilla warfare," invading rest rooms with signs FOR WHITE LADIES ONLY and strolling through whites-only parks. When Burks went to the University of Michigan to study for a master's degree, she thought Ann Arbor was "almost Eden" because "for the first time I knew what it meant to feel and live like a whole human being."

In 1946, three years ahead of Robinson, she joined the faculty of Alabama State as a professor of English. Finding herself immersed again in Montgomery's unrelenting racism was a shattering experience for Burks, made that much worse when, driving in the city one day, she found herself involved in a right-of-way dispute with a white woman. The woman pressed vague charges against Burks, who was promptly arrested and jailed. Although the charges were dropped a few hours later, her brief stay in jail convinced Burks to do something more about segregation than

just wage a personal war. The following week, Burks contacted fifty women and sounded them out about forming an organization to protest the city's treatment of blacks. Forty signed up immediately. The Women's Political Council was born.

The women who joined were the core of Montgomery's black middle class—public school teachers and principals, Alabama State professors, social workers, nurses. In the beginning, the council's main goals were to increase voter registration, to teach black high school students about the possibilities of political action, and to protest various forms of discrimination. Over the next nine years, as some two hundred fifty more women joined, the council's members all became registered voters themselves (a daunting achievement, even for Ph.D.'s, in light of the arcane literacy test), and then set up registration schools in churches to help others register as well. Mock elections were held and mock government sessions staged by black Montgomery teenagers, some of whom later became lawyers, judges, and state legislators. But little headway was made in the fight against discrimination.

Not until the energetic Jo Ann Robinson became WPC president in 1950 did the council turn its attention almost exclusively to the abuse of blacks on city buses. Robinson's anger at her own mistreatment flared into several confrontations with city and bus company officials over the next five years, as she and Burks helped shape the council into the best-organized, boldest, most aggressive black community organization in Montgomery. As they sharpened their attack, the women worked closely with E. D. Nixon and Rufus Lewis, the city's two leading black male civic activists. Nixon, the president of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, was particularly noted for his fearless challenge of the white establishment over repeated instances of racial violence and injustice, including police brutality and white men's rape of black women. Since the early 1940s, Nixon had also worked hard to persuade the city's blacks to register and vote. Rufus Lewis, a funeral home owner, was head of a group of black businessmen who had made voter registration a priority as well.

Sometimes joined by Nixon and Lewis, the women of the WPC met with the City Commission again and again to present their grievances over the buses. Invariably, the commission treated them politely, listened carefully, then ignored them. After one unproductive session, Mayor Gayle reported later, a furious Robinson called him and "said they would just show me: they were going in the front door [of the bus] and sit wherever they pleased." But despite that threat, and Robinson's warning of a possible boycott in May 1954, she and the other WPC members knew that the

city's blacks were loath to band together and confront the white power structure.

Part of the problem was the rivalry and friction among various groups in the black community, as well as among their leaders. E. D. Nixon, who vied for influence with Rufus Lewis, told Virginia Durr that "the Negroes were all split up and jealous of each other and divided in cliques and you couldn't get them to stick together on anything." With the prominent exception of the Women's Political Council, most members of Montgomery's upwardly striving black middle class were unwilling to align themselves with domestic workers and laborers, who were the majority of the city's black population. Many in the middle class, particularly the public school teachers and college professors, were afraid of losing their jobs and did everything they could to stay out of controversy. Although Alabama State College was a black institution, it was funded by the state legislature, which could be counted on to take a very dim view of any challenge to the racial status quo.

Those who stood to gain the most—workers who rode the buses—also were fearful of being fired by their white employers. Whenever the possibility of a boycott was raised, people would generally shy away from the subject. Long before her own galvanizing action, Rosa Parks, later the living symbol of the boycott, tried to talk to friends and acquaintances about how a boycott would "really hurt the bus company in its pocketbook." But when she asked them if they would be willing to stay off the buses, they told her they couldn't because "they had too far to go to work." Said Mary Fair Burks: "Everyone would look the other way."

Then came the arrest of Claudette Colvin.

She was fifteen years old, a slender, pretty, loquacious junior at Booker T. Washington High School who wanted to be a lawyer when she grew up. Her mother thought her choice was perfect. Claudette, she said, could "outtalk forty lawyers."

For as long as she could remember, Claudette Colvin had hated the segregation that confronted her at every turn. When she was about nine years old, she wanted more than anything to go to a rodeo that had come to town. In response to her pleading, her father bought her a cowboy hat. "That's as much of the rodeo as we got," she recalled. "The show was at the Coliseum and it was only for white kids." As a freshman in high school, prompted by a history teacher who had "pricked my mind" about the injustice of discrimination, she wrote an essay denouncing the humiliation that black teenagers like herself had to endure.

By her junior year, Colvin saw herself on a mission of change. She had that on her mind when she boarded a crowded bus on her way home from school on March 2, 1955. She sat down in the middle, a place usually secure from a driver's harassment. But several whites got on, and the driver stopped the bus and ordered the teenager and the woman sitting next to her to give two of the whites their seats. Both refused. When the driver jumped off the bus to find a policeman, the older woman found another seat. Colvin stayed put. When two policemen arrived and told her to move or they would arrest her, she still would not budge. "No," she said, "I do not have to get up. I paid my fare, so I do not have to get up. It's my constitutional right to sit here just as much as that [white] lady. It's my constitutional right!" The cops called her a "black bitch" and a "black whore" and dragged her off the bus. In the melee, they hit her at least once with a nightstick, and she kicked and scratched them. She was handcuffed and taken to the city jail, where she was charged with violating the state segregation law, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest.

By nightfall, news of Claudette Colvin's arrest had electrified Montgomery's black community. The women expressed particular shock and outrage. Other riders had been arrested in previous years, but this was different. This was just a child! *She could be my daughter, or your grandbaby, and here were these white cops, manhandling her and dragging her off to jail!* Mixed with the anger, however, was pride in the fifteen-year-old girl who had stood up for her rights. "Bless her heart, she fought like a little tigress," said Irene West, the affluent widow of a prominent black dentist.

For the blacks of Montgomery, the Colvin arrest was like the opening of a sluice gate. As all the pent-up rage and resentment spilled out, there was intense talk in every black neighborhood of boycotts and court battles. Virginia Durr wrote to her close friend Jessica Mitford that the teenager's case had "created tremendous interest in the Negro community and made them all fighting mad and may help give them the courage to put up a real fight on the bus segregation issue." Jo Ann Robinson and Mary Fair Burks were exultant: Finally, they thought, the time had come. They and the other women of the WPC did everything they could to stir up debate, to fan the flames of outrage. They composed a notice calling for Montgomery blacks to boycott the buses and were ready to turn out thousands of copies. All they needed to add was the date on which the boycott would start.

On the legal front, Fred Gray, one of only two black lawyers in Montgomery, was poised to file the biggest civil suit of his neophyte career—a suit on behalf of Colvin, challenging the city's and state's segregation

laws. A Montgomery native and a graduate of Alabama State, the boyish-looking, bespectacled Gray was only twenty-five years old and just one year out of Cleveland's Case Western Reserve Law School. His inexperience, though, was more than matched by his passion for this case. He had told friends in law school that once he had his degree, he planned to return to Montgomery and "destroy everything segregated that I could find." Now he was preparing to take a giant step in that direction, while Jo Ann Robinson, Rosa Parks, and other black women joined with Virginia Durr to start raising money for what was expected to be a long and difficult battle in the courts.

Then everything fell apart. E. D. Nixon announced that Claudette Colvin would not do as the focus of a test case. Colvin was pregnant, he said. The black community could not risk using a girl of less than sterling character in a role as important as this. The whites of Montgomery would destroy her and the entire effort. Some WPC members agreed. Others were furious. It wasn't Colvin's character that was the issue, they argued; it was the injustice done to her on that bus! Still, without Nixon's support, a bus boycott might fail, so plans for the boycott and preparation of the lawsuit were canceled. Claudette Colvin, represented by Fred Gray, was found guilty in state court of the charges against her and placed on indefinite probation. After the verdict, dozens of blacks stayed off the buses for a few days, but nothing ever came of the spontaneous demonstration.

Throughout the summer and early fall of 1955, the distress of many WPC members over the failure to unite behind Colvin was exacerbated by the steadfast refusal of city officials to respond in any substantive way to blacks' complaints about the buses. On October 21, the flames were fanned again when another black teenage girl was arrested for refusing to obey the rules for black bus riders. Ordered by a white woman to relinquish her seat, eighteen-year-old Mary Louise Smith said no. She explained to the driver, "I am not going to move anywhere. I got the privilege to sit here like anybody else." Once again, there was talk of a boycott and lawsuit, and once again, E. D. Nixon scotched the plans. Mary Louise Smith was not suitable either: according to Nixon, she lived in a tar-paper shack on the edge of town. Besides, her father was a drunk.

Many years afterward, both Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith would challenge Nixon's version of why they were rejected. Colvin said that she was *not* pregnant at the time of her arrest, that she became pregnant later that year. Nixon didn't want to use her, she suspected, because she came from King Hill, a poor neighborhood once described as "the forgotten back yard of Montgomery among the railroad, stockyards, junk-

yards." Her mother was a maid; her father mowed lawns for a living. "We weren't in the inner circle," Colvin said. "The middle-class blacks didn't want us as a role model." Likewise, Smith and others denied Nixon's characterization of her living conditions and her father. She grew up, she said, in a two-story, three-bedroom frame home; a former neighbor of the Smith family claimed that Mary Louise's father was sober and "rock solid."

Whatever the truth, Jo Ann Robinson, Mary Fair Burks, and the other WPC members were tired of searching for the perfect symbol for their cause. No longer would they consult with male leaders about whether to stay off the buses. Their plans for a boycott were ready, and, at the very first opportunity, they would be put into effect, no matter what the men said. The black women of Montgomery, Robinson said later, "were ready to explode."

The woman who would provide the fuse was a light-skinned, forty-two-year-old seamstress who wore rimless glasses and pulled her gray-ing hair back into a neatly braided coil. Quiet, unassuming, polite—the perfect lady, so everyone said who knew her. Soon, she would stun them all, revealing some of the tortured complexity that lay beneath the prim facade. There was so much that was hidden about Rosa Parks. Even her appearance was deceptive. The coil at the nape of her neck, for example, concealed the fact that her hair was long, straight, and silky—a legacy, she said, from her Indian ancestors. When she pulled out the pins at home, her hair spilled down her back in luxuriant waves. "I never cut my hair because my husband liked it this way," she told a friend years later.

Just as few people ever saw Rosa McCauley Parks with her hair down, few knew about her Indian and white heritage, her deep racial pride, her smoldering anger, her lifelong rebellion against being pushed around by whites. Three of her four great-grandfathers were white. Her maternal grandfather, in whose home she was raised, was the son of a white plantation owner and light enough to pass for white himself. Sylvester Edwards loved to use his appearance to embarrass and upset whites, shaking hands and speaking familiarly with those who didn't know him, then laughing when they found out the truth. He delighted in calling whites by their first names and made jokes about them behind their backs. When the Ku Klux Klan rampaged through their small community outside Montgomery, Rosa McCauley's grandfather kept a double-barreled shotgun by his side at all times. "I don't know how long I would last if they came breaking in here," he told her, "but I'm getting the first one who comes through the door."

His standing up to whites made a deep impression on his small, slight granddaughter, who received a further dose of racial pride when, at the age of eleven, she enrolled in Miss White's school in Montgomery. Officially known as the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, Miss White's was founded by white teachers from New England to teach domestic skills, as well as academic subjects, to black girls. The teachers at Miss White's were shunned by the rest of the city's white population, and the school twice was set afire. The white community's fear that the school's curriculum included racial equality as well as cooking and sewing was not misplaced. It was no accident that several of the women most active in the Montgomery bus boycott had attended Miss White's. "What I learned best" at the school, Parks wrote, "was that I was a person with dignity and self-respect, and I should not set my sights lower than anybody else just because I was black."

More than once as a child, she put those lessons into practice. When she was ten, a white boy threatened to hit her. She responded by threatening to smash his head in with a brick. Another time, a white boy on roller skates, careening behind her on the sidewalk, tried to push her aside. She turned and pushed back. His mother, standing nearby, told the little girl that "she could put me so far in jail that I never would get out again for pushing her child."

In the tenth and eleventh grades, Rosa McCauley attended the laboratory high school on the Alabama State College campus, where one of her classmates was Mary Fair Burks. Her principal memory of Rosa was of a girl with a gentle, quiet demeanor. "Rosa's schoolmates did not impose themselves on her," Burks recalled. "Instead, we respected her and admired her from a distance."

When her grandmother became ill after her junior year, McCauley had to drop out of school. As intelligent as she was, there was no hope of college, and she wasn't even able to finish high school until a few years later. She got a job in a shirt factory, did some domestic work, and took care of the family farm until, at the age of nineteen, she married a barber named Raymond Parks and moved to Montgomery.

When she first met her future husband, she thought he was too light-skinned—"I had an aversion to white men, with the exception of my grandfather," she later explained—but she soon discovered that Parks was as much of a race man as Sylvester Edwards. Indeed, he was the first civil rights activist she had ever met. A longtime member of the NAACP, he and several other men were clandestinely raising money for the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, nine young black men arrested in 1931 for the rape of

two white women in northeastern Alabama. Raymond Parks refused to let his young bride accompany him to his group's secret night meetings; it was far too dangerous, he said. One night, the men held their meeting at the Parkses' home, with their numerous guns spread out on the kitchen table. Rosa sat, terrified, on her back porch, her feet on the top step, her head on her knees. She didn't move for several hours. Later, two of the men in the group were killed, and she worried that Raymond would be next. "Every time he was at those meetings with those people," she recalled, "I wondered if he would come back alive . . ."

By the 1940s, the fire in Raymond Parks had dampened down. He had tried for years to register to vote but had not succeeded. Finally, he just gave up trying. Now, Rosa took up the banner. Raymond Parks had long discouraged her from joining the NAACP—too dangerous for a woman, he said. But in 1943, Rosa found that the local chapter had at least one female member—her old friend from Miss White's school, Johnnie Carr. Rosa decided to go to the December meeting to see Carr and take a look at the organization for herself. The meeting, which Carr didn't attend, turned out to be the annual election of officers. The men said they needed a woman to take the minutes, and Parks, the only woman present, agreed. "I was too timid to say no," she explained. She paid her membership dues, was elected secretary on the spot, and, from that moment on, threw herself into civil rights work with singular passion.

Despite her modern image as a simple seamstress who just happened to get on a bus one day and ignite a movement, Rosa Parks, together with E. D. Nixon, was the mainstay of the Montgomery NAACP through the 1940s and 1950s. On her lunch hours, in the evenings after work, and on weekends, Parks would be in Nixon's office, answering phones, handling correspondence, sending out press releases to newspapers, keeping track of the complaints that flooded in concerning racial violence and discrimination. As much as he depended on her, Nixon had little use for women as activists. One time he told Parks that "women don't need to be nowhere but in the kitchen." She shot back: "Well, what about me?" Realizing he had painted himself into a corner, Nixon came back with a lame reply: "... I need a secretary and you are a good one." She was much more than that. In the early 1940s, she helped organize the local NAACP Youth Council and became its adviser, encouraging its teenage members to try to integrate the local white library. Childless herself, she loved working with youngsters, who, in turn, responded to her warmth and enthusiasm.

As devoted as Rosa Parks was to the NAACP, however, her work with the organization often left her in despair. She had intimate knowledge of

Montgomery's secret injustices—the mysterious killings of black men, the unpublicized rapes of black women by white men, the beatings and burnings that went unnoticed because the victims were black. “Everything possible that was done by way of brutality and oppression was kept well under cover,” she later said. “There were several cases of people that I knew personally who met the end of their lives without even a ripple being made publicly by it.” Johnnie Carr recalled several instances of young black girls raped by whites. Nixon and the NAACP would push for prosecution, but nothing would ever happen because, Carr said, it always turned out that the assailant's “granddaddy was the judge, or his uncle was the sheriff. But if it was a black man accused of raping a white woman, you just knew that it was the electric chair! All these types of things just made us bitter, bitter!”

At times feeling “overwhelmed by all the violence and hatred,” Rosa Parks, nonetheless, refused to kowtow to white authority. Twice, she tried to register to vote, and both times was told she had failed the voter registration test. On her third try, she made a copy of all her answers, determined to use it to bring suit against the voter registration board if she were denied again. This time, she passed. But it was the constant mistreatment on the buses that bothered her the most. For Parks, the greatest indignity about the buses was being forced to pay her money in the front, then get off and go to the back door. Time after time, she'd had run-ins with drivers about the practice; on occasion, they would order her off or drive away before she could reboard. Her worst experience occurred in the winter of 1943, when, having paid her fare, she refused to obey the driver's order to get off and enter through the rear door. He grabbed her coat and yanked her to the front door, raising his arm threateningly. “I know one thing,” Parks said quietly. “You better not hit me.” Instead of striking her, he threw her off the bus. Parks had noted what the driver looked like—“tall and thickset with an intimidating posture . . . a mole near his mouth”—and from then on, she would carefully examine the face of a driver before getting on his bus. “I didn't want any more run-ins with that mean one,” she said.

Because of Parks's own past confrontations with bus drivers and because of her fondness for young people, the arrest of Claudette Colvin, whose mother had been a childhood playmate of hers, hit her hard. She threw herself into raising money for Colvin's defense but refused to accompany Jo Ann Robinson and other local activists when they tried to wring concessions from city and bus officials. “I had decided,” Parks said, “that I would not go anywhere with a piece of paper in my hand asking white folks for any favors.” After so many years of working for racial jus-

tice without seeing tangible results, she had become profoundly bitter and depressed, feelings that were heightened when plans for a boycott and lawsuit in the Colvin case were dropped.

Not long after the Colvin incident, Virginia Durr told Parks about a workshop to be held that summer at the Highlander Folk School, an interracial meeting place and training ground for labor union and civil rights activists in the mountains of northeastern Tennessee. The workshop would focus on ways to implement *Brown v. Board of Education*, Durr said; if Parks was interested, Durr would arrange for her to attend. Parks agreed to go, not for her own benefit—"I felt that I had been destroyed too long ago"—but for the young people she worked with.

Highlander would change Rosa Parks's life forever. It is ironic that her attendance was suggested by a white person at a time when Parks had just about given up on white people. But then Virginia Durr was no ordinary white person. A reformed racist who as a freshman at Wellesley College had thrown a fit because she had to sit next to a black in the dining hall, she was now among the strongest antisegregation voices in Montgomery. She and Rosa Parks, each in her own way, one black, the other white, were on long voyages of self-discovery that intersected from time to time in dramatic ways.

Of Virginia Foster Durr, writer Studs Terkel, a close friend, observed: "The woman would not behave. She was simply non-adjustable to the fashion of the day." Durr, who from childhood had made a close study of well-brought-up Southern white women, finally decided that there were only three options available to her: become an actress and play the Southern belle; go crazy like Blanche DuBois; or become a rebel, step outside the magic circle, and challenge the Southern way of life. Durr chose the third option. She went to college, unlike most white Southern girls of the day; married a liberal Alabama lawyer and former Rhodes scholar; and then flouted virtually every tradition her native region held dear.

But for the first years of her life, Virginia Foster, who was born in 1903, was ensnared in those traditions as firmly as any other wellborn white Southern girl. Her paternal grandfather had owned slaves and a plantation in Union Springs, Alabama. Her maternal grandfather, a Confederate soldier and later a congressman from Tennessee, was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Her beautiful older sister, Josephine, married Hugo Black, a future Supreme Court justice, who at the time was himself a member of the Klan. Growing up, Virginia thought of the KKK as "something noble and grand and patriotic that had saved the white women of the

South" from rapacious black men. Noticing that some blacks had complexions almost as light, or as light, as her own, she had no trouble accepting her father's explanation: "Dear, that was all due to the Union army."

Yet from an early age, she also was keenly aware of the contradictions, deceptions, and secrets of the South, aware of the "maze of fantasy and falsehood" that Lillian Smith wrote about. "I am not so Freudian as Lillian but I do think that Sex and Sin and Race are all mingled in this somehow to an astonishing degree," Durr wrote a friend many years later.

Her seventh birthday was burned in her memory as an early indication of those contradictions. Until then, she had always celebrated her birthday at a backyard barbecue at her grandparents' Union Springs plantation, attended by the children of the plantation's black employees, who had been her playmates since infancy. But when she turned seven, her mother announced that from then on the celebration would consist of a traditional birthday party in the front yard, and the guests would be white children only. Never a docile child, Virginia threw a tantrum, and her mother compromised: a barbecue with the black children and some of her white relatives in the morning, and the party with white children in the afternoon.

At the barbecue, all was going well until Virginia's best friend, Sarah, the daughter of her black nurse, offered Virginia's cousin a piece of chicken. "I'm not going to eat any chicken that your black hand has touched, you little nigger," the white girl replied. Virginia told her cousin to go to hell. At dinner that night, when her aunt said that Virginia was the worst child she'd ever seen, Virginia threw a glass of water at her. Dismissed from the table in disgrace, Virginia ran crying to her black nurse, who had cared for and comforted her since she was born. Virginia was sitting on her nurse's lap on the back porch when she heard her aunt say from the dining room that Virginia's main problem was the woman now cuddling her. "She spoils her to death. And besides, I think it's terrible that you let her sit in her lap and sleep with her and kiss her and hug her. You know all those black women are diseased." Virginia's mother said nothing, but later that night, while saying good night to her daughter, she whispered: "I think it would be better if you didn't kiss and hug Nursie."

The next morning, the anchor of Virginia's life was gone. Her nurse, insulted, had quit and gone to Birmingham with Sarah. Virginia was devastated, and some sixty years later was still trying to sort out her pain and confusion, talking in a sort of stream of consciousness as if it had happened yesterday. "If you have . . . slept in the bed with your Negro nurse, if you have kissed and hugged and sat on [Negroes'] laps and have loved them

so much and have been so close to them, and all of a sudden you are told by your mother and your father and your aunts and your uncles and the whole white society that they are inferior people and they should not be treated like other people . . . it makes you feel that there is something wrong with *you*. I think it sets up a terrible conflict in people and I think they get to be schizophrenic . . ." Added Durr: "That's why I think so much of the literature of the South is full of conflict and madness, because you can't do that to people."

There were other contradictions that young Virginia noticed—the discrepancy, for example, between the ethereal, romantic ideal of Southern white womanhood and the all too often disillusioning reality. Taught at an early age that spinsterhood was the worst fate that could befall her, she intently studied the come-hither tactics of her wildly popular sister and other Alabama belles such as Zelda Sayre, who would later marry F. Scott Fitzgerald. The main requirements for popularity with men, Virginia concluded, were "beauty, lovely clothes, stupidity, and also enthusiasm, to have lots of pep and to be admiring and make the men feel good." Marriage was discussed endlessly, but never sex—except when white girls were told to be on guard against black men because they liked to rape white women. When Virginia was given that warning, she had no idea what rape was, "so I was rather confused over what to guard against."

As a child and young woman, Virginia was torn by conflicting emotions. She desperately wanted to be popular like her sister, to "be a belle and have a lot of proposals and have everybody adore me and get flowers and candy . . ." But, obstinate and opinionated, she also wanted to avoid the fate of her female relatives, including her mother, who waited hand and foot on her father and who was institutionalized more than once with what everyone called melancholia. And later when her sister married Hugo Black, the onetime Klan member who became one of the South's leading liberals, Virginia said that as much as she loved and admired her brother-in-law, she hated the way he robbed her sister of any life of her own. "He did everything in his power to make her happy, except give her her freedom," Virginia later said. "She was Mrs. Hugo Black. He expected her to subordinate herself to his life and his ambitions. . . . [A]fter she was married, I don't think Sister ever was able to have a free moment."

Following two years at Wellesley, Virginia fell in love with and married a young Birmingham lawyer named Clifford Durr, whose many virtues included giving free rein to his irrepressible wife. When Durr became one of the New Deal brain-trusters in the Roosevelt administration, Virginia finally was able to break free of the bonds of Southern belle-

dom. Aligning herself with the women's division of the Democratic National Committee, she jumped into the fight to end the poll tax—but only on behalf of white Southern women, not blacks. Still believing in white supremacy when she arrived in Washington, Virginia was incensed that white women, most of whom were not encouraged by their husbands to vote and who didn't have money of their own to pay the poll tax, were as effectively disenfranchised as blacks. As she went from one congressman's office to another, lobbying against the poll tax, she realized how deeply ingrained was the idea of women's subordination. "[T]he only time you got any attention was when they would hug and kiss you and say what a really pretty lady you were . . . but you were treated with utter contempt, really, when you were trying to get the fundamental right to vote."

Not until she encountered Mary McLeod Bethune, the most prominent African-American in the Roosevelt administration, did it occur to Durr that the interests of white women might indeed coincide with the interests of blacks. "You sweet Southern ladies are never going to get the laws changed," Mrs. Bethune told Durr and other Democratic women one day as they debated the best strategies for ending the poll tax. "Your husbands have power, but *you* don't have any power. And the only way you're going to get the right to vote is to line up with the blacks who are trying to get the right . . ."

In the ferment of the New Deal years, Durr became friends with Mrs. Bethune and with Mary Church Terrell, and later she would credit them with transforming her feelings about blacks and starting her on her own tumultuous journey toward civil rights activism. In Alabama, the only blacks she had ever encountered were servants. In Washington, she was meeting educated, influential black women who had the same warmth, vitality, and independence of spirit displayed by her childhood nurse. Her mother used to tell her that black women should never be called ladies, but when she met Mrs. Bethune and Mrs. Terrell, she decided her mother didn't know what she was talking about. "[T]hese were ladies in every sense of the word," Durr said. "I mean these were great ladies—women who commanded. . . . They took me under their wing and began to try and teach me the facts of life." Mrs. Bethune, in particular, "taught me about all the practical politics I know."

In 1938, Durr became a founding member of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, an organization of liberal Southerners who hoped to use the New Deal to eliminate poverty and racism in the South. She also spearheaded a major new assault on the poll tax, bringing together an interracial coalition of organizations, from the NAACP to the CIO, advo-

cating federal protection of voting rights in the South. The Durrs' rambling white farmhouse in Alexandria, Virginia, across the Potomac from Washington, served as a magnet for young Southerners drawn to Washington by the New Deal, from a gangling freshman congressman from Texas named Lyndon Johnson to Aubrey Williams, the controversial, left-leaning head of the administration's National Youth Administration, who had hired Mary McLeod Bethune.

In the center of the action, as always, was Virginia, whose fervor for civil rights was matched only by her enthusiasm for entertaining and gossip—she “elevates gossip to an art form,” an acquaintance once said of her—and for involving herself in the lives of others. Virginia loved Jane Austen's novels, which didn't surprise her dear friend Jessica Mitford, since Virginia, with “her insatiable appetite for meeting new people” and her penchant for saying exactly what she thought, resembled nothing so much as one of Austen's endearingly talkative, inquisitive heroines. “She was a real spellbinder . . .,” Mitford said, “whose peculiar charm lay in her enormous curiosity about people, her driving passion to find out things, to know about details and motivations, to trace big events to their small human beginnings.”

In the late 1940s, as anticommunist hysteria was sweeping through Washington, Cliff Durr, a member of the Federal Communications Commission since 1941, emerged as one of the administration's most outspoken critics of the government witch-hunt. The FBI investigated him and, even more tenaciously, Virginia. In less than two decades, this former vice president of the Birmingham Junior League had become a radical champion of racial and social justice. Besides heading the National Committee Against the Poll Tax, she was chairman of the Washington committee of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, which called for the end to all Jim Crow segregation in the South. In 1948, she supported leftist Henry Wallace for President, and, much to the dismay of her husband and Hugo Black, ran for the Senate in Virginia on Wallace's Progressive Party ticket. She even managed to win a respectable six thousand votes.

In 1951, the Durrs moved back to Alabama. Virginia Durr had come into her own in Washington, and the thought of returning to the Deep South, with what she considered its “utterly evil” social fabric, sickened and terrified her. But Cliff was determined to replant his Southern roots and to open a law practice in Montgomery. Reluctantly, Virginia went along—but with a strong sense that she was now entering alien, even enemy territory. From her first days back in Alabama, she mourned the

"lack of any sympathetic political companionship," feeling she was "out of touch with the living world." It could not get any worse, she thought. Then it did.

Tension and anger were building in the South over the Supreme Court's pending decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Durrs, as relatives of the most liberal justice on the Court, began feeling the effects. Hugo Black was considered a traitor in his native Alabama, and the Durrs' three daughters were bombarded at school with jeers and taunts about their "coon-lover" uncle. "We could hardly have come to Alabama at a worse time . . .," Virginia wrote a friend in February 1954. "[O]f course whatever Hugo does or doesn't do we are held responsible for it." She was at a loss in deciding how to cope with this "smothering atmosphere": "To adjust to it means giving up everything I ever believed in or fought for, not to adjust means no living, and to stay in conflict means stomach ulcers . . ." A month later, Senator James Eastland helped her make up her mind.

With the 1954 election in mind, Eastland used the pending *Brown* ruling as campaign fodder, roaring that a decision rejecting the "separate but equal" doctrine would prove that the Court was under the sway of Communists. There was nothing Eastland could do to Hugo Black, his *bête noire* on the Court, but, as chairman of the Senate Internal Security subcommittee, he found other targets to his liking. In March, his subcommittee announced an investigation of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and issued several subpoenas. One of them was for Virginia Foster Durr.

Durr was a woman of extravagant loves and hates, and there was probably no one she hated more than Jim Eastland. "A vicious little fat toad of a man," she called him, not to mention "the most disgusting character I have known." Once, while lobbying against the poll tax in the 1940s, Durr took a group of her allies, Methodist churchwomen from Mississippi, to meet with Eastland in his Senate office. Eastland was the quintessential Southern gentleman, all sugar talk and compliments, until the women got to the point of their visit and urged him to vote against the poll tax. At that, Eastland's face reddened and his jowls quivered. Jumping to his feet, he screamed at his shocked constituents, "I know what you women want—black men laying on you!" But while he accused white women of wanting black men and vilified black men for preying on pure white women, at home on the plantation he would invite his male weekend houseguests to pick out, as he put it, a "nigger girl and a horse," Durr said. "That was his way of showing hospitality."

Any fear that Virginia Durr felt over receiving the subpoena was overwhelmed by her scalding anger that this vulgar man, who was "just as common as pig's tracks," had dared question her patriotism. The night before her March 18 appearance before the subcommittee in New Orleans, she sat down at a typewriter and, in her fury, pounded out a statement. "This hearing is no valid exercise of the investigatory powers of the United States Congress, but a kangaroo court where people, called as witnesses, are being tried as criminals, as traitors to their country, without any of the safeguards set up around such trials by the Constitution of the United States . . . My life and my work are an open book. I have nothing to conceal and I have no apologies for anything. . . . I refuse to submit to the authority of this committee and I stand in utter and total contempt of it."

Appearing before Eastland the next day in a mahogany-paneled hearing room in New Orleans' main post office, Durr gave only her name and then, having been told that she would not be permitted to read her statement, sat mute. She occasionally took out her compact and powdered her nose in an ostentatious show of defiance, as the frustrated senator hurled one question after another at her. Afterward, she handed reporters her statement and departed.

Durr was followed to the witness stand several days later by Paul Crouch, a former Communist and key FBI informer, who had been a star witness at several celebrated previous loyalty hearings, including that of physicist Robert Oppenheimer. Asserting that Durr "had full knowledge of the Communist conspiracy and its works," Crouch spun a fanciful tale of her accepting government secrets from Eleanor Roosevelt in the White House and passing them on to a ring of Communist spies. The usually mild-mannered, taciturn Clifford Durr was so enraged by this libelous fantasy that he jumped over the jury rail and lunged at Crouch, shouting, "You goddamn son of a bitch, I'll kill you for lying about my wife like that!" After marshals pulled him out to the hall, Durr collapsed to the floor, suffering a mild heart attack.

Eastland's hearing, for which he had such high hopes, had turned into a fiasco. Its circuslike atmosphere had produced the wildest of accusations, which nobody but the most rabid right-wingers believed. Nonetheless, the Durrs felt they had been irrevocably tainted by the accusation of Communism. It was, Virginia said in her inimitable style, like being "peed on by a polecat. You know you are clean; you know you are free of all this and yet you smell bad and people don't want to be associated with you." Clifford Durr's law practice dwindled to practically nothing, and, with a few exceptions, longtime friends now cut the couple dead.

For all the losses, however, there were important gains. In New Orleans, Virginia had received a telegram of support from a group she had never heard of. "As members of the Women's Political Council of Montgomery we are with you one hundred per cent," it read. It was signed by Jo Ann Robinson. When Durr returned to Montgomery, she contacted Robinson and found out what the WPC was. "Why was it you, of all the people in Montgomery, who stood by me?" she asked Robinson, who replied, "We knew that if Jim Eastland was after you, you were our friend."

Just as Washington had changed Durr's life, so, too, had the Eastland hearing and its consequences. Thanks to the senior senator from Mississippi, she now stood outside the magic circle. Her feeling was one of exhilaration. "I didn't get over being scared of my father and scared of the Southern society I lived in . . . until I got ruined," she later explained. "Jim Eastland freed me . . . by hauling me down to New Orleans and exposing me as a nigger-loving communist, as he called me. . . . I am no longer in prison, in jail, and I am not scared to death all the time anymore."

Not long afterward, she joined the only interracial political group in the city, the Council on Human Relations, as well as a prayer group of black and white women, and she became friends with Rosa Parks, E. D. Nixon, and other black Montgomery activists. She was particularly close to Parks, who did occasional sewing for her and who often talked to Durr about the humiliations and abuses she and other blacks had to endure. Durr helped Parks raise money for the Claudette Colvin case. Even more important, she suggested to Parks that she might benefit from attending a training session for activists at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.

Parks reclaimed herself at Highlander. She had arrived "tense, nervous and . . . upset most of the time," generally hating whites but loath to confront them because of the sheer hopelessness of the effort. When she left Highlander ten days later, she had shed some of her own racial prejudice. She also had taken to heart the message hammered home by Highlander: Real social change could come only from grassroots pressure, not from "some government edict or some Messiah."

For ten days, Parks had lived on an equal basis with whites, sharing a room, eating, talking, and arguing with them. She found herself laughing, too, something she hadn't done in a very long time. "We forgot about what color anybody was," Parks later said. "I was forty-two, and it was one of the few times in my life up to that point when I did not feel any hostility from white people." One of her greatest delights, she added, was waking

up in the morning, smelling bacon frying and coffee brewing, and "knowing that white folks were doing the preparing instead of me."

Bolstered by her sense of equality with the workshop's white participants, Parks was also strengthened and soothed by the leader of the sessions, a fifty-six-year-old former South Carolina teacher named Septima Clark. Clark, who had been fired from her teaching job the year before for refusing to give up her NAACP membership, was destined, like Parks, to become one of the legendary figures of the civil rights movement. "A healing presence," writer Josephine Carson called the profoundly maternal Clark. "Somehow the world seems to land in her arms. She fondles it idly, demands little, waits, receives, inspires, endures. The world gets up, staggers, finds it can walk a little; it leaves her but it will be back."

Reluctant to talk during workshop sessions, Parks finally got up and spoke only with gentle but persistent pressure from Clark. Parks "was afraid for white people to know that she was as militant as she was," Clark recalled. "She didn't want to speak before the whites that she met up there, because she was afraid they would take it back to the whites in Montgomery." Later, responding to the question all the workshop's participants were asked—what she planned to do when she got back home—Parks said she doubted she could accomplish much. Montgomery was the cradle of the Confederacy, she reminded Clark and the others; she was sure that "nothing would happen there because blacks wouldn't stick together."

Despite her doubts, Parks had come into her own at Highlander. Leaving its exhilarating atmosphere was hard. After being treated as an equal by whites, it was hell to return to Montgomery and her job at the Montgomery Fair department store, where "you had to be smiling and polite no matter how rudely you were treated." As the weeks and months passed, the discrimination she experienced became increasingly unbearable—especially on the buses.

On December 1, 1955, less than two months after Mary Louise Smith's arrest, Rosa Parks waited for a bus to take her home from work. She was just steps away from the Winter Building, where the order had been given in 1861 to fire on Fort Sumter and ignite the Civil War. Shortly after five o'clock, a bus pulled up to the stop. Absorbed in thought about an NAACP workshop she was planning for that weekend, Mrs. Parks didn't notice the driver until after she had paid her money and boarded. As she sank into a seat in the black section's front row, she realized with a jolt that he was the same man who'd thrown her off some twelve years before. The bus lumbered down Montgomery Street and stopped in front of the Empire The-

ater, where several whites got on and sat down in the first ten rows. One man was left standing. The driver turned to Parks and the other blacks sitting in the next row. "Let me have those front seats," he said. When nobody moved, he barked, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." The man in the window seat next to Parks stood up and moved back, as did the two women across the aisle. Parks simply moved over to the window seat.

She sat there, remembering how her grandfather kept his shotgun by the fireplace or in his wagon, remembering how he refused to be terrorized by the Klan, even when everyone else was. She remembered, too, how wonderful it had been at Highlander to feel like an equal with whites. At that moment, she decided it was "time that other white people started treating me that way." Years later, she would declare: "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. . . . There had to be a stopping place, and this seemed to have been the place for me to stop being pushed around. . . . I had decided that I would have to know once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen, even in Montgomery, Alabama."

The driver asked Parks if she was going to stand up. She looked at him. "No," she replied. "Well," he said, "I'm going to have you arrested." She answered quietly: "You may do that." It was a moment of profound personal significance. For most black Southerners, the idea of agreeing to go to jail, of voluntarily submitting themselves to a dreaded legal system that had oppressed and killed so many blacks before them, was unthinkable. But doing the unthinkable, rising above the fear and shame of the jail experience, would turn out to be an exhilarating act of personal liberation—for Rosa Parks and the blacks, young and old, who followed her. "Here was an individual, virtually alone, challenging the very citadel of racial bigotry," Pauli Murray said ten years later. "Any one of us who has ever been arrested on a Southern bus for refusing to move back knows how terrifying this situation can be, particularly if it happened before the days of organized protest and we had neither anticipated nor prepared beforehand for the challenge. The fear of a lifetime . . . is intensified by the sudden commotion and the charged atmosphere in the cramped space of the bus interior."

As the driver, James Blake, got off the bus to call the police, Parks sat in her seat, trying hard not to think about what might come next, trying

not to worry about being manhandled as Claudette Colvin and countless others had been. A few minutes later, two officers boarded the bus. One of them asked Parks why she didn't stand up. She replied with a question of her own: "Why do you all push us around?" "I don't know," he said, "but the law is the law, and you're under arrest." The policemen picked up her purse and shopping bag, escorted her off the bus, and put her in a squad car for the ride to the city jail. At the jailhouse, Parks asked if she could have a drink from the water fountain and was told it was for whites only. She then was fingerprinted, booked, and put in a cell with two other black women, one of whom gave her a drink of water from a dark metal mug.

Meanwhile, word of Parks's arrest had begun to spread throughout black Montgomery. A neighbor of E. D. Nixon's saw her being escorted by the policemen off the bus and immediately notified Nixon, who, in turn, called Clifford and Virginia Durr. Nixon and the Durrs rushed down to the jail to bail out Parks. As Parks emerged from her cell, matrons on either side of her, the first person she saw was Virginia Durr. Tears in her eyes, Durr threw her arms around Parks. They hugged and kissed, Parks later recalled, as if they were sisters.