

"Our Leaders Is Just We Ourselves"



Mass meeting at First Baptist Church during Montgomery boycott. Most of those present are women.

"OH, ROSA, ROSA, DON'T DO IT, don't do it!" Raymond Parks begged his wife. "The white folks will kill you!" Once, he himself had challenged their cruelty and injustice, but it was like challenging a bulldozer: They had crushed him, just as they would crush her. Couldn't she see that?

But Rosa Parks refused to back down. Yes, she told E. D. Nixon and the Durrs after her release from jail Thursday night, she would stand and fight. Nixon was as gleeful as a child on Christmas morning. "My God," he exclaimed, "look what segregation has put in my hands." Central casting couldn't have done better: a perfect lady, who had to work for a living and ride the bus every day, but who had the proper manners and speech of the middle-class women with whom she had gone to school.

When Nixon got home later that night, he made dozens of phone calls, one of them to Johnnie Carr. "Mrs. Carr, they have arrested the wrong woman," he declared, scarcely able to contain his delight. Puzzled, Carr asked, "Who have they arrested?" "Rosa Parks," he replied. Carr couldn't believe it. "You're kidding," she told Nixon. He chuckled. "No, they arrested Rosa Parks. They arrested the wrong woman."

Thus began the transformation of Rosa Parks the person into Rosa Parks the icon. When she commented later on being chosen as the central figure in what was to follow, one could detect a touch of asperity in how she came to be selected over other brave women like Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith: "I had no police record, I'd worked all my life, I wasn't pregnant with an illegitimate child. The white people couldn't point to me and say that there was anything I had done to deserve such treatment except to be born black."

As news of Rosa Parks's arrest reverberated through black Montgomery that night, the lawyer who would represent her in court, Fred Gray, got in touch with Jo Ann Robinson. Gray had a personal interest in the case, as well as a political one. In the year he had been back in town, he had developed a close friendship with Mrs. Parks, who often joined him for brown-bag lunches in his bare little office above an auto shop. They would talk about the mistreatment of blacks in Montgomery and what could be done about it. When Gray worried about his lack of clients and his ability to do anything to end segregation, she "gave me the feeling that I was the Moses that God had sent to Pharaoh and commanded him to 'Let my people go.'"

The young attorney was also close to Robinson—they had worked together on the Claudette Colvin case—and when he contacted her about Parks's arrest, she told him of her plan. The Women's Political Council was going to call for a boycott the following Monday, the day of Parks's trial, and this time no one was going to stand in the way. "Are you ready?" Gray asked. She said she was. After they talked, she scribbled some notes on the back of an envelope outlining her plan of attack: "The Women's Political Council will not wait for Mrs. Parks's consent to call for a boycott of city buses. On Friday, Dec. 2, 1955, the women of Montgomery will call for a boycott to take place on Monday, Dec. 5."

It was close to midnight Thursday, and time was short. After her conversation with Gray, Robinson called Mary Fair Burks and the other officers of the WPC, as well as the principals of the black schools in Montgomery, most of whom were WPC members. Finally, she said, the time had come to implement the detailed plan they had worked out so long

ago. She would produce the boycott leaflets, while the rest of the women contacted other council members around the city, who would help distribute them.

Then she sat down to draft the women's call to arms: "Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown into jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down. . . . If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter or mother. This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses on Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday."

When she was finished, she drove in the midnight darkness to Alabama State College, where, along with a male colleague and two of her students, she slipped like a thief into the mimeograph room in the basement of the administration building. Here she was—a state employee about to use the resources of a state institution to plot a revolt against segregation laws to which the state was fiercely committed. Shrugging off the possible consequences, Robinson and her accomplices worked through the night, duplicating, folding, and bundling some thirty-five thousand fliers. About two in the morning, she had taken time out to call E. D. Nixon and let him know what she and the other women were doing. This time, there was no hesitation from Nixon, who had been up all night himself on the Parks case. He heartily agreed with the boycott plan, telling Robinson he had come up with a similar idea, although he had not done anything about it. He also said he was summoning Montgomery's black ministers and other leaders of the black community to a meeting later that day to organize Mrs. Parks's defense. They would discuss the boycott as well.

By seven Friday morning, the leaflets were stacked in neat piles, the distribution routes mapped out. After loading the fliers in her car, Robinson and her students made it to the eight o'clock class she was scheduled to teach, with just moments to spare. Later, she called her WPC allies. Get the women ready, she said; we're on our way. For hours on that dark, rainy day, Robinson and the two students crisscrossed Montgomery, handing bundles of leaflets through her car windows to women standing on residential street corners, to women waiting in front of schools, beauty parlors, stores, barbershops, and pool halls.

After handing out her stacks of fliers Robinson rushed back to Alabama State in time for her 2 P.M. class, only to find a message from H. Councill Trenholm, the college's president, ordering her to come to his office immediately. When she was ushered in, he stared at her in cold fury,

a copy of the flier in his hand. A colleague of hers had found the flier and identified her as the person probably responsible. What was going on here? What was she doing, putting the school in jeopardy like this? She couldn't stay on the faculty after this! He would have to fire her!

As Trenholm shouted, Robinson realized she didn't care if she was dismissed or not. Struggling to remain calm, she told the ASC president about Rosa Parks's arrest and reminded him of the outrageous way that black Montgomery residents had been treated on the buses. A member of the city's black elite, Trenholm had had little personal experience with such humiliations, and Robinson could see that her passionate outburst had affected him. His voice softened, the anger slowly drained from his face. Besides, she assured him, no one but her closest allies would ever know of her role in starting the boycott. Alabama State would never be dragged into the picture. Somewhat reassured, Trenholm dropped his threat to fire her. Whatever her future role in the boycott, he warned, she must not do anything to focus attention on the college nor must she neglect her teaching duties. Oh, and another thing. She must pay for all the paper she'd used.

When Rosa Parks awoke that Friday morning, with the rain streaming down outside her window, her first thought was one of tremendous relief. No matter what happened in the future, she would never ride a segregated bus again. She called a cab and went to work.

At the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, meanwhile, its twenty-six-year-old pastor was trying to resist the pleas of his best friend to get involved in planning for the boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been at Dexter Avenue a little over a year, and he wasn't ready to take on such a commitment, he told Ralph Abernathy, the pastor of the First Baptist Church. King and his wife, Coretta, had just had their first baby, and he was struggling to finish his doctoral dissertation, as well as meet all the responsibilities of his first pastoral post. He had enough to do to prove himself to his well-educated congregation, which included Jo Ann Robinson and Mary Fair Burks. (When she first saw the small, boyish-looking King, Burks commented to a friend: "You mean that little boy is my pastor? He looks like he ought to be home with his mama.")

He was dedicated to preaching the social gospel—his eloquent sermons on the need for racial justice had already impressed Burks and others in his congregation—and he had accompanied Robinson, Abernathy, and other black leaders to meetings with city officials after the Claudette Colvin incident. But he told Abernathy when he first came to Mont-

gomery that he needed time to get to know the city and its leaders before joining any crusades. How much time? Abernathy asked. "At least several years," King replied. "We must move slowly and carefully, so that when the time does come, we'll be sufficiently prepared."

Now, ready or not, the time had come. Here, Abernathy told King, was an opportunity for leadership that could not be ignored. Until now, with a few exceptions, the black ministers of Montgomery had shied away from any attempt to fight segregation and discrimination. They were far more interested, according to Jo Ann Robinson, in "preaching God and raising their salaries." If they didn't respond this time, who knew what would happen to their credibility, not to mention their authority? The people might just go ahead without them. King finally agreed. As long as he did not have to do any of the work of organizing the boycott, he would publicly support it, as well as turn over his church's basement meeting room for the planning meeting.

When some seventy ministers and other black leaders gathered at the Dexter Avenue Church that evening, they were met with a fait accompli. Realizing, as Jo Ann Robinson wryly put it, that their congregations "were planning to support the one-day boycott with or without their . . . leadership," the ministers "decided that it was time for them, the leaders, to catch up with the masses." Actually, as the women were well aware, the ministers' support was crucial. For one thing, blacks had no access to Montgomery's white-controlled newspapers or radio and television stations, and had no press of their own. Other than word of mouth, churches were the main medium of communication within the black community. The ministers at the meeting promised to lobby for the boycott from their pulpits on Sunday, and all the leaders agreed that a mass meeting should be held Monday night to decide whether the boycott would be limited to one day or continued indefinitely.

Left unspoken was the nagging question on everyone's mind: Would the blacks of Montgomery, so long divided, answer the call?

Monday morning dawned damp and chill. A restless Johnnie Carr couldn't stand the suspense: What was going on out there? She got in her car and drove behind buses all over town to see how many black passengers were riding. She was amazed by what she saw—or, rather, what she did not see: The buses "didn't pick up a single soul. They were just moving on down the street empty." The sidewalks, meanwhile, were crowded with black women—every single one of them walking to work. "The maids, the cooks, they were the ones that really and truly kept the bus running," said

Georgia Gilmore, a cook herself. "And after the maids and the cooks stopped riding the bus, well, the bus didn't have any need to run."

For the first time ever, the blacks of Montgomery had banded together to challenge those who mistreated them. As they marched to their jobs Monday morning, it seemed to Rosa Parks that a tremendous weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "I could feel that whatever my individual desires were to be free, I was not alone," she said later. "There were many others who felt the same way." When she went downtown for her trial that morning, she found hundreds of black supporters milling in front of the courthouse and in the corridor outside the courtroom. Several members of her NAACP Youth Council had played hooky to be there, and one, a girl named Mary Frances, shouted when she saw Mrs. Parks: "They've messed with the wrong one now."

Parks's trial lasted all of five minutes: She was found guilty of violating the state segregation statute and fined ten dollars, a verdict that Fred Gray said he would immediately appeal. When it was over, Parks, wearing a white-collared black dress, white gloves, and a black velvet hat, went to Gray's office to help out, answering a stream of phone calls from people who wanted to know the outcome. She never told the callers who she was.

That afternoon, Montgomery's black leaders formed a new group called the Montgomery Improvement Association to organize any future activity, and elected as president the Reverend Martin Luther King. Abernathy, sure that King would turn the post down, was astonished when the young minister accepted it. For their part, many of the other ministers, who still had their doubts about the wisdom of confronting the white establishment, were happy to let this newcomer to Montgomery take the hot seat. Most were also reluctant to volunteer as speakers at that night's mass meeting, knowing that white reporters and news photographers would be there. Wouldn't it be possible, some asked, to keep their names out of this altogether? At this point, an already seething E. D. Nixon exploded in disgust and anger. "What the hell you people *talkin'* about?" he shouted. "How you gonna have a mass meeting, gonna boycott a city bus line without the white folks knowing it? You guys have . . . lived off these poor washwomen all your lives and ain't never done nothing for 'em. And now you got a chance to *do* something for 'em, you talking about you don't want the white folks to know it." Unless they cooperated, Nixon thundered, he would take the microphone at the church that evening and "tell 'em the reason we don't have a program is 'cause you all are too scared to stand on your feet and be counted." Black men had been cowed long enough, he said. "We've worn aprons all our lives. It's time to take the

aprons off. . . . If we're gonna be mens, now's the time to be mens." Jumping in to second what Nixon said, King made clear to the furious older man that he, for one, was "not a coward."

When the ministers arrived, one by one, for the mass meeting that night at the Holt Street Baptist Church, they found no timidity. To make their way into the church, they had to push through a crowd that had massed in front and for several blocks beyond—"more people than I had ever seen in my life," Ralph Abernathy later remarked. These were the thousands who had arrived too late to join the lucky ones inside, those packed in the sanctuary, balcony, basement, aisles, and on the steps. As Abernathy and King approached the church to preside over the meeting, the massive crowd broke into wild applause and cheering, and in the church itself, the thousand or so present leaped to their feet and did the same for at least fifteen minutes, tears streaming down the faces of many in the pews. They were crying, Abernathy said, "out of a sense of new-found freedom, not cheering us so much as cheering themselves for what they had done that day, what we had all done." With dignity and courage, they had done what Mayor Tacky Gayle and the rest of the whites had said was impossible. And they would continue to do it. When Abernathy asked whether they wanted to end the one-day boycott, the crowd in the church joined the loudspeaker-listening army outside in shouting as one: "No!" They vowed to continue the boycott until their demands were met.

As the leaders realized the depth and breadth of support for the boycott, their fear melted away as fast as an April snowfall. "Once we got in there, everybody wanted to preside because this thing was hot," Abernathy recalled. The pulpit and platform were jammed with ministers and others anxious to speak. Rosa Parks, also on the platform, had asked before the meeting if she should talk, too. "Why?" one of the leaders said. "You've said enough." So she sat there, mute, as King introduced and praised her, and the audience gave her a standing ovation.

That Monday, the people had spoken, but the woman who had shown them the way was denied a voice of her own.

For the next 381 days, the fifty thousand blacks of Montgomery stunned their city, the South, and the rest of the country by staying off the buses. Never before in American history had there been such a massive, prolonged defiance of racial discrimination, putting the lie in the most dramatic way possible to white Southerners' arguments that blacks were content to live under Jim Crow. In its attempts to explain these confounding events, the national press focused on the inspiring oratory and leader-

ship of Martin Luther King. But important as King was, most journalists missed the real key to the boycott's success: the black population's newfound sense of community. Riven for so long by class differences and personal rivalries, African-American residents of Montgomery were able to put those divisions aside and, for more than a year, come together in glorious unity. And the way was led by women.

Women like Irene West, the regal, haughty grande dame of black Montgomery, who lived in an imposing home filled with antiques, where she and her guests dined at a mahogany table covered with a damask cloth, replete with crystal, china, and monogrammed silver napkin rings. This woman, who had grown up in affluence, who'd never worked a day in her life, was close to eighty and bent with arthritis. But every morning during the boycott, she would back her green Cadillac out of the garage and drive through town for several hours, picking up people needing a ride. Friends were stunned when they found out what she was doing, not least because she'd hardly ever driven before. She had always had a chauffeur to take her around.

Yet as much as middle- and upper-class black women contributed to the boycott, the true heroines were the ones doing the walking. During the first days of the boycott, whites in Montgomery predicted that blacks would be back on the buses with the first heavy rain. When that downpour came, Johnnie Carr stopped her car alongside a group of women walking down Decatur Street and offered to take as many as could fit in the car. "No, no, Mrs. Carr," one replied, "just let us walk in the rain." As she watched them go, "rain just dripping off of 'em," Carr sat in her car and cried—"because people were willing to do these things, to sacrifice."

No matter the weather—rain, cold, scorching heat—they walked by the thousands, traversing distances that sometimes took hours. Virginia Durr, who often drove for the MIA car pool, once stopped for an elderly woman who had already covered seven miles of a twelve-mile journey to apply for a job. "Well, I appreciate it very much," she told Durr as she got in the car, "but if nobody picked me up, I was going to walk. . . . [I]f my walking is going to help my people get justice, I will walk."

At the weekly mass meetings, attended predominantly by women, the maids were "the soldiers who rallied and prodded the leaders," recalled the Reverend Robert Graetz, one of the few white Montgomery ministers to support the boycott. Maids and cooks and cleaning ladies would stand up and tell about losing their jobs because of their support of the boycott, about defying their employers and other whites, about besting whites in arguments over what was going on. After all the tensions and hardships of

the previous week, the meetings, held at various churches, were a needed balm, giving those who attended a renewed sense of community and purpose. They were always jammed, and people would arrive at the church three hours early in order to be sure of a seat. Teachers would go straight from school, maids and cooks from their jobs, and beauty parlor operators wouldn't accept any customers after four o'clock. Once inside, they took any seat available, doctors sitting next to maids, college professors side by side with janitors, lawyers next to yardmen. "Everybody would . . . clap and hold hands in the meeting," Jo Ann Robinson recalled. "Oh, you just loved everybody."

For women who had spent all of their lives being told they were inferior because of their race, sex, and social status, challenging the authority of those who had forced them into submission was a heady, if frightening, experience. In the tradition of slave ancestors who concealed their militance from their owners, some of the boycotters told their white employers what they wanted to hear, that they were not involved in "that mess." When Virginia Durr overheard her mother-in-law's maid say that she and her family had nothing to do with the boycott, Durr was incredulous. Pulling the woman aside, she whispered, "You're the biggest storyteller in the world. You know very well you're supporting the boycott, and all of your family are." The maid laughed. "Well, I tell you," she replied, "I learned one thing in my life and that is, when your hand's in the lion's mouth, it's just better to pat it on the head."

Others were emboldened to stick their hand in the lion's mouth and dare the beast to bite. After the boycott began, the white employer of a maid named Dealy Cooksey had given her rides home. But when the white woman denigrated Martin Luther King, the normally reticent Cooksey exploded in rage. "Don't you say *nothing* about Dr. King!" she exclaimed. "Y'all white folks done kept us blind long enough. We got our eyes open now and we *sure* ain't gonna let you close 'em back. I don't mean to be sassy, but when you talk [about] Dr. King, I get mad. Y'all white folks work us to death and don't pay nothing."

"But, Dealy, I pay you," said her startled employer.

"What do you? Just tell me. I'm ashamed to tell folks what I work for."

"Dealy, I didn't mean to make you mad. I was just talking."

"I walked to work the first day and I can walk now. If you don't want to bring me I ain't begging and I sure ain't getting back on the bus and don't you never say nothing about Reverend King."

Recalling her outburst later, Cooksey said with satisfaction: "We got these white folks where we want 'em and there ain't nothing they can do

but try to scare us. But we ain't rabbits no more, we done turned coon. My daddy use to tell me 'bout coon huntin'. If he's in a tree and you shake him down, he'll kill three dogs, and if he's in the water, he'll drown every dog that come in the water. It's just as many of us as the white folks and they better watch out what they do."

It was a complicated dance between the black women and white women of Montgomery, whose ties with each other were much more personal and intimate than those between black and white men. Black women worked as maids and cooks for white women, taking care of their children, fixing their meals, cleaning their homes. While the relationship was clearly unequal, while many whites demeaned and exploited their black employees, others developed a close bond with those who worked for them. Regardless of the relationship, white women considered black women essential to the running of their households, and when the boycott began, many white women, even those who opposed the action, gave rides or taxi fare to their maids, to the great displeasure of city officials and sometimes of their husbands. A number of white women backed the boycott, if only secretly, giving extra money to their employees for the MIA, calling to support the few white women who dared to write letters to the *Montgomery Advertiser* endorsing the boycott.

In one of the letters, Clara Rutledge, a prominent civic activist and friend of Virginia Durr's, told of riding a bus when she was the only person in the first ten rows, while in the back, blacks were jammed together, many standing in the aisles. "'Why,' I asked the driver, 'can't you let these people sit down?' 'I don't mind,' he said, 'but I'm afraid someone will criticize me.' In the years since this incident, in which I have talked about the bus situation, I have yet to find one white person who feels that it is right that a Negro be made to stand that a white person may sit . . ."

After her letter appeared in the paper, Rutledge was deluged with phone calls. One man asked her if her husband were "the big buck nigger Rutledge" whom he knew, adding that she would "be the next one on the end of a rope." Most of the male callers wanted to know if her husband was a "nigger" and did he satisfy her sexually. "I came to the conclusion years ago, along with Lillian Smith and some of the others, that guilt feelings on the part of white men and fears that Negro men are more virile play a large part," Rutledge said during the boycott. "Sex is the basis of a lot of fears."

For Mayor Gayle and the rest of Montgomery's white male establishment, the fact that white women were collaborating with their black employees, giving them rides and money for taxis, was both an embar-

rassment and a major affront to white supremacy. In a stinging rebuke, Gayle demanded that whites stop such subversive practices and, rather than helping blacks who supported the boycott, fire them. The blacks, he declared, "are fighting to destroy our social fabric just as much as the Negro radicals who are leading them." The women's response was hardly what Gayle had in mind. As Virginia Durr described it: "[T]he white women got so furious at the mayor that they kept . . . writing letters to the paper saying, 'If the mayor wants to do my wash and wants to cook for me and clean up after my children let him come and do it. But as long as he won't do it, I'm certainly not going to get rid of this wonderful woman I've had for 15 years.'" And they kept on driving.

Still, the white male leadership of Montgomery was not about to stand for such defiance, either from their women or from black boycotters. In January 1956, little more than a month after the boycott began, Gayle, Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers, and other city commissioners announced they had joined the White Citizens Council. A month after that, more than ten thousand people jammed the Coliseum for a WCC rally, complete with the waving of Confederate flags and the playing of "Dixie." The audience cheered and whooped rebel yells as the rally's main speaker, Senator James Eastland, entered the Coliseum in a state highway patrol car, sirens screaming, lights flashing. "There is only one course open for the South to take," Eastland declared, "and that is stern resistance . . ."

As the White Citizens Council gained strength in Montgomery, whites who had demonstrated any support at all for the boycott found themselves the targets of a vicious campaign of fear, hate, and social ostracism. Virginia Durr reported that for a time she was getting more than a dozen obscene, threatening phone calls a day. Women who drove their maids to and from work got similar intimidating calls, many of them in the middle of the night. WCC members and sympathizers received letters like the following: "Dear Friend: Listed below are a few of the white people who are still hauling their Negro maids. This must be stopped. These people would appreciate a call from you, day or night. Let's let them know how we feel about them hauling Negroes."

No one felt the venom of the antiboycotters more keenly than Juliette Morgan, a member of a respected, prominent Montgomery family, who had the pale red-gold hair, delicate features, and ethereal air of a model for a pre-Raphaelite painting. A city librarian, Morgan graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Alabama, marking the fifth generation of women in her family to attend college. Although Morgan never considered herself a social activist, in previous years she had been one of a small

group of white women, led by Clara Rutledge, who worked with E. D. Nixon to guard against abuse and discrimination of blacks in the courts. At Nixon's request, Rutledge and the other women would fill the courtroom for trials, putting the judge and lawyers on notice that they were being watched. "Sometimes, I'd walk in the courtroom," Nixon recalled, "and I'd look over there, and Mrs. Rutledge would have [those] women sitting there, and it had its effect on the judge, just to see them."

But the shy, retiring Juliette Morgan was best known as a letter writer. Identifying closely with the views of Lillian Smith, she deplored the way her fellow whites treated blacks, and she made her feelings public and clear over the years in a succession of letters to the editor of the *Advertiser* and other Alabama newspapers. She had once lost a job at a city bookstore after writing a letter to the *Advertiser* criticizing segregation. Retaliation never seemed to faze her, but until the boycott she had not realized how fearsome retaliation could be.

Morgan sent a long letter in praise of the boycott to the *Advertiser* a little more than a week after it began. "One feels that history is being made in Montgomery these days," she wrote. ". . . It is hard to imagine a soul so dead, a heart so hard, a vision so blinded and provincial as not to be moved with admiration at the quiet dignity, discipline, and dedication with which the Negroes have conducted their boycott." The city's blacks, she observed, seemed to have taken a lesson from Gandhi and his famous "Salt March" in India boycotting the British government's salt monopoly.

"It is interesting to read editorials on the legality of this boycott," Morgan added. "They make me think of that famous one that turned America from a tea to a coffee drinking nation. Come to think of it, one might say that this nation was founded upon a boycott. . . . Instead of acting like sullen adolescents whose attitude is 'Make me,' we ought to be working out plans to span the gap between segregation and integration, to extend public services—schools, libraries, parks—and transportation to Negro citizens."

From the day her letter appeared, Morgan received a flood of obscene calls and letters. Her doorbell rang late at night, rocks were hurled through her windows. She endured taunts, insults, and threats from strangers, and old friends and family acquaintances turned their backs on her. Tacky Gayle, once a close family friend, publicly called for her to be fired. The library board declined to do so, but warned her not to write any more letters. For a while, Morgan complied, but in the end she couldn't bear to remain silent. Months after the boycott ended, her final speaking out would exact a terrible price.

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As much as whites who supported the boycott were vilified by the WCC's hate campaign, those who bore the major brunt were the boycotters themselves. Occupants of speeding cars showered black pedestrians with water balloons and containers of urine, pelted them with rotten eggs, potatoes, and apples. Martin Luther King's house was bombed. Crosses were burned on boycotters' lawns; many were fired from their jobs. Rosa Parks, who lost her seamstress position two weeks after the boycott began, was besieged by threatening phone calls. "You're the cause of all this," callers would tell Parks. "You should be killed."

One night, as Jo Ann Robinson was chatting with Fred Gray and his wife in her living room, a policeman got out of a squad car in front of her house and hurled a stone through the picture window. As the Grays and Robinson dove to the floor, the officer got back in the car and, with his partner, drove slowly away. Two weeks later, Robinson came outside one morning to find that holes had been eaten through the body of her car by acid. Two men in police uniforms had done it, neighbors told her later.

In late January 1956, Montgomery police launched a campaign of harassment against drivers, both white and black, who gave rides to boycotters. The drivers were stopped, searched, and questioned, then given tickets for infractions that ranged from minor to nonexistent. Robinson, who prided herself on obeying traffic laws to the letter, received seventeen tickets over the next couple of months, "for all kinds of trumped-up charges."

At a January 30 MIA board meeting, several ministers expressed frustration and discouragement that city and bus line officials remained so intransigent over the boycott's three mild demands: that whites be seated in buses from the front toward the back and blacks from the back toward the front, until all the seats were taken; that discourteous drivers be disciplined; and that some black drivers be hired. Wasn't it time, several ministers asked, to consider calling off the boycott, to come to terms somehow with the white establishment? In his response, Martin Luther King made it clear who was in charge: "[I]f we went tonight and asked the people to get back on the bus, we would be ostracized. They wouldn't get back. . . . I believe to the bottom of my heart that the majority of Negroes would ostracize us. They are willing to walk." Trapped by grassroots determination and support, the leaders had no choice but to vote to persevere.

During that same meeting, they came under still greater pressure. Fred Gray had been after them for weeks to authorize the filing of a suit in federal court that would go far beyond the modest demands they were

making of city officials. Gray wanted to challenge the whole idea of segregated seating on public transportation, branding it unconstitutional in light of *Brown v. Board of Education*. That had been his and Jo Ann Robinson's goal from the beginning, despite King's declaration to journalists that "blacks were not seeking integration." "Certainly [King] was not demanding integration," Robinson recalled more than forty years later. "However, the women of the WPC had started the boycott, and we did it for the specific purpose of finally integrating those buses."

Gray had been encouraged to file a federal lawsuit by Virginia Durr's husband, Clifford, who acted as the young lawyer's behind-the-scenes mentor and who "more than any other person," Gray said, "taught me how to practice law." If Montgomery's blacks were serious about a legal challenge to segregation on city buses, Clifford Durr told Gray, they should not bother with an appeal of Mrs. Parks's conviction in state court, since the state would make sure that the case was not heard for years, if ever. Far better, said Durr, to find four or five new plaintiffs and file suit directly in federal court, knowing that whatever the outcome, the decision would be quickly appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Taking Durr's advice, Gray, who consulted every day with Jo Ann Robinson as well, set out to find black Montgomery residents who had been discriminated against on the buses and who were not afraid to expose themselves to public intimidation. No black men were willing to volunteer as potential plaintiffs, but Gray managed to find four women, among them Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith. At the MIA board meeting on January 30, Gray asked that at least one minister join the women as plaintiffs. King, whom Gray had ruled out as a possible plaintiff, because "he's too much in the limelight," seconded Gray's appeal. Which of the twenty-five clergymen present would volunteer? They had dragged their feet on filing the federal suit in the first place, and now they looked at the floor and each other. Ten minutes went by. No one accepted the challenge.

The next day, Fred Gray filed suit in federal court on behalf of the four women, disputing the constitutionality of Alabama's public transportation segregation ordinance. The dry-as-dust name of the case, *Browder v. Gayle*, gave no hint of the unprecedented personal drama it signified: a midwife and mother of twenty-one children named Aurelia Browder, along with three other black women, was taking on the white mayor of Montgomery, Tacky Gayle.

Throughout the course of the boycott, the city's white leaders, who had predicted that blacks would get on the buses with the first hard rain, were

bewildered as much by the boycotters' talent for organization as by their determination and resolve. "I'll tell you this, it's the best-organized group anywhere . . .," said the president of the bus drivers' local union. "They have mass meetings every week, and all of 'em go, by the thousands. I guess they've got a world of confidence or something. . . . What puzzles me is how they got organized so good."

The intricate structure of the boycott—from the mass meetings and car pools to welfare services for boycotters who had lost their jobs—was assembled and kept in place by a network of men and women from a wide array of black organizations and institutions. But while men like E. D. Nixon and Rufus Lewis made significant contributions, it was women who did most of the day-to-day organizing, who provided much of the boycott's direction. At the center of the action, then as before, was Jo Ann Robinson.

Robinson, it seemed, did everything. She conferred with Fred Gray on legal strategy, helped make policy as a member of the MIA's executive board, was part of the MIA delegation that negotiated with city officials, and edited the organization's newsletter. For six hours a day, she drove for the car pool, starting at 6 A.M. and sandwiching time in between her classes. "More than any other person," wrote Martin Luther King, she "was active on every level of the protest."

Why, then, after the boycott, did Robinson fade into almost total obscurity? For that matter, why—*during* the boycott—did she and the other women organizers remain so quietly in the background, ceding center stage to King and the other male leaders, never talking publicly about their crucial roles until many years later? The most obvious reason is that the women in many cases had much more to lose than the men. While most of the male leaders were ministers, professionals, or entrepreneurs, and thus not beholden to local white employers, many of the women were public school employees or Alabama State professors, who would have been fired if their involvement in the boycott had been publicized. Robinson, in particular, was in jeopardy, and her fellow boycott leaders took great pains to shield her from public scrutiny, particularly after Montgomery's White Citizens Council asked the state legislature to investigate state-supported colleges and universities for possible subversive activities.

As much as they tried, city officials never were able to find out who was responsible for the December 2 leafleting of the city. When the protest's leaders were asked who had initiated the boycott, they would respond in the vein of Irene West, who coyly told one interviewer: "Well, really, no one knows. It was an instantaneous combustion." Yet there were some who were not fooled. After several weeks of interviewing participants in

the boycott, a researcher from Nashville's Fisk University wrote his superior: "I sense that in addition to Reverend King, there is another leader, tho[ugh] unknown to the public, of perhaps equal significance. The public recognizes Reverend King as THE leader, but I wonder if Mrs. Robinson may be of equal importance. The organizational process is being kept secret, as well as the organizers. Superficially it appears to be a spontaneous move, but listening and talking with different leaders, after a time you receive an altogether different impression." In another letter, the researcher was even more emphatic: "Mrs. Jo Ann Robinson seems to have been the key organizer for the protest. She is the backbone of this collective effort."

But while Robinson and the other women were protecting their jobs, they were also conforming to the then-current norms of American society, black and white, that men should be the leaders, women (no matter how much work they did) the followers. For more than a century, black women's organizations had been in the forefront of the battle against racial injustice. But when women joined forces with men, they tended to slip into the background. "Women listened to men," said one female boycott leader. "They passed the ideas to men to a great extent. Mary Fair Burks and Jo Ann Robinson were very vocal and articulate, especially in committee meetings. But when it came to the big meetings, they let the men have the ideas and carry the ball. They were kind of like the power behind the throne." Another female boycott activist mused many years later: "[S]omehow the male comes up and gets the attention. Others seem to just respect male leadership more. I think the men have always had the edge."

The relationship between male and female leaders of the Montgomery bus boycott would set a pattern that would continue into the civil rights movement of the 1960s: Women would operate behind the scenes, acting as organizers, strategists, fund-raisers, and foot soldiers, while the men would be in the public eye, dealing with the white power structure and the press. Women might occasionally bridle at the sexism of male colleagues, but most, in those prefeminist days, spent little time worrying about being shortchanged personally. Nothing, they believed, was more important than the cause.

When the boycott finally ended in December 1956, Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy boarded a bus outside King's home and, in Rosa Parks's words, "made a great show of riding the first integrated bus in Montgomery." The day before, U.S. marshals had formally served city officials with a Supreme Court order striking down Alabama segregation

laws as unconstitutional. Celebrating the boycott's success, King and Abernathy sat in what had once been the reserved whites-only section, as a mob of news photographers jostled each other to take pictures. Parks was not with them. The woman who launched the boycott was at home, taking care of her mother.

Whether she was even invited to accompany King and Abernathy is uncertain, but she clearly was not averse to riding an integrated bus herself on that historic morning. When a reporter and photographer from *Look* came to her door and asked her if they could take pictures of her on the buses, she accompanied them downtown, where she got on and off several buses as the photographer snapped away. To Parks's dismay, one of the drivers was James Blake, the very man who had thrown her off the bus in 1948 and had had her arrested in 1955. Blake stared straight ahead as he wheeled the bus into traffic. "He didn't want to take any honors," Parks observed. Later, Irene West mischievously speculated that "if the man who had called the cop had known it would come to this, he would have let [Mrs. Parks] sit in his lap."

Now that the boycott was over, there was some carping, particularly by whites who opposed it, that the protest, in fact, had accomplished nothing, that the Supreme Court, not the boycott, had ended Jim Crow on the city's buses. "What could they possibly gain from the boycott that they can't gain from the federal courts?" Joe Azbell, city editor of the *Advertiser*, had grumbled early in the protest. What could they gain? A sense of dignity, self-respect, and power; a feeling of community; a determination to claim basic rights; a loss of fear—victories that were nothing short of revolutionary for blacks in the Deep South in the 1950s. The Ku Klux Klan of Montgomery discovered for itself what blacks had achieved when, on the night after the Supreme Court ruling, some forty cars loaded with white-hooded thugs cruised slowly through black neighborhoods. There was no panic, no dread; instead, blacks jeered and laughed and shook their fists as the Klan drove by. Disconcerted by their failure to terrorize, the Klansmen drove away.

The courage, passion, and unity of Montgomery's boycotters would ignite a flame in thousands of young blacks throughout the South, inspiring them to follow their elders' example and to launch their own mass campaign for civil rights a little more than four years later. Future movement activists were particularly mesmerized by the sight of black maids and cooks, women who might have been their mothers or grandmothers, willing to sacrifice everything for freedom. "I'll never forget the pictures of old black women walking in the sun," said Charles Jones, one of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's early strategists. "When you

see an old black woman in her seventies walking with her shoes in her hand, you know that there is something very profound about that. . . . The system had no defenses for black folks walking with their bodies into the system, talking about its contradictions, but prepared to put their bodies there rather than guns or bullets or violence."

For many others around the country, however, it was not the boycotters who were the stars of the protest but rather their charismatic young spokesman, Martin Luther King. The MIA president never pretended to be more than he was: He acknowledged he hadn't begun or organized the boycott, and he never wanted to be its leader. "If anybody had asked me a year ago to lead this movement, I tell you very honestly, I would have run a mile to get away from it," he said in 1956. But once involved, however reluctantly, King was brilliant in fostering the black community's sense of purpose, in making the blacks of Montgomery feel they were on a historical mission, that they truly were God's chosen people. Exhorting, persuading, encouraging, the youthful minister was unparalleled in his eloquence. "King has captured the imagination and the devotion of the masses of the Negroes here and has united them—no doubt about it," Virginia Durr wrote a friend.

King was masterful, too, in dealing with the national press, which focused on him as the key figure of the boycott. A *Time* cover story about the protest was written as a profile of King, and a major story in *The New York Times* on the boycott's history focused on him as well. As months, then years passed, King became firmly fixed in the minds of most Americans as the person chiefly responsible for the Montgomery boycott. But many of those who were with him then, as much as they revered him, would gently disagree. They would echo Claudette Colvin, who, when asked at the federal trial who the boycott's leader was, responded: "Our leaders is just we ourself."

As Martin Luther King was being catapulted into prominence by the Montgomery boycott, many of the women involved suffered retribution, and later were all but forgotten.

Shortly after the boycott's end, Juliette Morgan wrote a letter to the publisher of the *Tuscaloosa News*, praising a speech he had given criticizing the White Citizens Council. "You help redeem Alabama's very bad behavior in the eyes of the nation and the world," Morgan said. "I had begun to wonder if there were any men in the state—any white men—with any sane evaluation of our situation, with any good will, and most especially any moral courage to express it." The publisher asked if he

could print her letter in his paper, and, disregarding the earlier warning of her employers to stay out of the public eye, Morgan agreed.

Violent as the reaction was to her letter in the *Advertiser* praising the boycott, it did not compare with the uproar over this one. In Virginia Durr's view, most of the rage stemmed from Morgan's depiction of Southern white men as "cowardly," which "really made them determined to get her at all costs, thereby proving her words." Morgan was harassed and hounded wherever she went. "The WCC has given her the full treatment, telephone calls, threats, letters, and the demand that she be fired . . .," Durr wrote a friend. In July 1957, distraught by the harm she felt she was doing to the library, Morgan resigned from her job. A week later, she was found dead, an empty bottle of sleeping pills by her side, along with a note that said in part, "I can't go on."

An angry, bitter Virginia Durr laid the blame for Morgan's suicide squarely at the feet of white Southern men. "This," she declared, "is Southern chivalry in all its glory." Durr, who did not have Morgan's emotional fragility, reacted to her own continuing persecution by white supremacists with the same finely honed sense of outrage. Yet she was also deeply anguished over the fact that she, her husband, and their daughters had been so thoroughly repudiated by the world in which they lived. The price that the Durr girls paid for their parents' and uncle's beliefs was a source of special pain, with even the baby of the family, Lulah, suffering from the fallout. Once, after getting Lulah ready for a friend's sixth birthday party, Durr called the child's house to get the address. After she identified herself, there was a pause. "Mrs. Durr," said the child's father, "there will be no party this afternoon as far as your daughter is concerned because I wouldn't have a child of yours in the house." In the end, Virginia and Clifford Durr sent their two younger daughters to Northern boarding schools to remove them from the hate.

Clifford Durr's law practice, already shrunken after the Eastland committee hearing in 1954, diminished further, to the point where the family had to rely on loans and handouts from affluent Northern friends to keep going. Virginia repeatedly urged Clifford to leave Alabama but he refused: This was their home, and no matter what, this is where they would stay. Since Clifford Durr was not a particularly social man, the snubbing didn't bother him nearly as much as it did his outgoing wife, for whom talking and socializing were very nearly as important as life itself. "I am not a lonely martyr and want lots of other martyrs around," she once wrote, adding: "[I]t is the isolation that I mind, and I mean the lack of any group to belong to, the lack of any feeling of being a part of the community."

Virginia Durr remained close to Rosa Parks, whose own life had also become much more difficult. During the boycott, Parks had devoted herself to the cause, traveling, making speeches, raising money. She served on the MIA's executive board, worked as a car pool dispatcher, handed out clothes and food to people who had been fired because of their civil rights involvement. After the boycott was over, she tried to get another job in Montgomery, but no one would hire her. She had little income except the money she made from sewing at home and from funds that Virginia Durr had raised for her in appeals to the Highlander Folk School and to some of the Durrs' more affluent Northern friends. "To be a heroine is fine, but it does not pay off," Durr tartly observed.

Parks had much closer ties to E. D. Nixon than to Martin Luther King and his ministerial circle, and when disagreements among MIA leaders, particularly between Nixon and the ministers, boiled up after the boycott's end, Parks allied herself with Nixon. The NAACP leader, bitter about his own invisibility where the boycott was concerned, criticized King for turning the MIA into "a one-man show" and complained that ministers were siphoning off the organization's money for personal use. He also felt that King and his allies had used Parks for their own purposes and then turned their backs on her, refusing to hire her for one of the MIA's paid positions. In a letter to a friend, Virginia Durr described the "blazing row" going on within the MIA. Rosa Parks, she wrote, "has received money for the MIA and been a heroine everywhere else, [but] they have not given her a job here although she has needed one desperately. . . . She is very, very disgruntled with MLK and really quite bitter which is not like her at all."

Beset by money worries, Parks also had to cope with a mother who was often ill and a husband who had suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of the constant harassment of the Parks during and after the boycott. An intensely private woman, she often found herself on emotional edge, trying to keep her personal life together while at the same time struggling to meet the heavy demands of being the boycott's most powerful symbol. Sometimes the pressure and strain proved too much, as when a reporter from a San Francisco newspaper announced to her during an interview that he was going "to take me apart and see what made me tick." She sat there, with an empty cup and saucer in her hand, pretending to sip tea for a newspaper photographer taking pictures. Suddenly, the strain of "being as polite and nice as I possibly could" became unbearable. "I just couldn't stand [the reporter] any longer. I went into hysterics. I started screaming. . . . The reporter just walked away and went on about his business. And nobody paid me any attention. I just stood there crying." Years after-

ward, she was still trying to figure out the reason for her loss of control. "I was not accustomed to so much attention," she said. "There was a time when it bothered me that I was always identified with [not standing up on the bus]. Then I realized that this incident was what brought the masses of people together to stay off the buses in Montgomery."

In August 1957, Parks and her family moved to Detroit, where her brother lived. She would not talk much about why she was leaving the area where she had lived all her life, but a columnist for the Pittsburgh *Courier*, one of the country's leading black newspapers, speculated about a possible reason—the fact that she'd gotten lost "in the shuffle of events" after December 1, 1955. "Mrs. Parks was seldom mentioned as the real and true leader of this struggle," Chester Higgins wrote. "Others more learned—not to take a thing from Dr. King—were ushered to the leadership and hogged the show. They basked in the glory of the battle and the eventual victory thereof. Perhaps as a proud and sensitive personality, she resented standing in the wings while others received the huzzahs." Higgins noted that Parks herself refused to comment.

However she may have felt about not being given credit, there is no question that Parks moved to Detroit primarily because she needed a job. Even there, she had difficulty finding work. She finally took a position as hostess at a guest house at Hampton Institute, a black college in Virginia, but when Hampton reneged on an implied promise to provide an apartment for her, her husband, and her mother, she returned to Detroit, where she first worked for a seamstress friend and then in a clothing factory. Not until 1965, when Representative John Conyers, Jr., hired her as a receptionist in his Detroit office, was she finally able to achieve more than a hand-to-mouth existence.

Her friends, meanwhile, were appalled that she had been allowed to slip into the shadows of civil rights history. Her image, as crafted by King and the other male boycott leaders, was that of a tired seamstress who had been "tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*—the spirit of the times." When Septima Clark saw a documentary about the boycott, she noted that Parks was hardly mentioned. "We talked about it, she and I," Clark said. "She gave Dr. King the right to practice his nonviolence. . . . [I]t was Rosa Parks who started the whole thing." E. D. Nixon made the same point to a woman sitting next to him on a plane one day. When the woman found out Nixon was from Montgomery, she said she did not know what would have happened to black people if King had not been there to lead the boycott. Nixon replied: "If Mrs. Parks had got up and given that white man her seat you'd never heard of Reverend King."

* * *

For a while after the boycott, Jo Ann Robinson and Mary Fair Burks seemed to have escaped unscathed from its repercussions. But in the late 1950s, word spread on the Alabama State campus that a special state legislative committee was investigating professors thought to have been boycott leaders. Suddenly, state "evaluators" began appearing in the professors' classes, listening and taking notes, in a clear attempt at intimidation. Then, in February 1960, an investigation of a student sit-in at the state capitol—in which Robinson and Burks had *not* been involved—cost the two women their jobs. "Everybody who had been involved in either protest paid for it," Robinson later said.

Burks moved to Maryland's Eastern Shore, where she taught at a branch of the University of Maryland. Robinson went to Grambling College in Louisiana, but she never felt at home there. She keenly missed Montgomery and Alabama State, where she had spent the happiest, most exciting years of her life. After a year at Grambling, she moved to Los Angeles, where she taught English in public schools until her retirement in 1976.

In 1984, historian David Garrow, then researching his magisterial biography of Martin Luther King, was sifting through documents in Montgomery when he came across the May 1954 letter from Robinson to Mayor Tacky Gale threatening a boycott. Realizing that Robinson and the women of Montgomery were the true boycott organizers, he nonetheless found Robinson reluctant to claim credit for what she as an individual had done. "The black women did it," she told Garrow.

Looking back on the boycott, Mary Fair Burks compared the contribution made by Martin Luther King, Jr., with that of the women of Montgomery: "[A] trailblazer is a pioneer in a field of endeavor. [A] torchbearer . . . indicates one who follows the trailblazer. Rosa Parks, Jo Ann Robinson and members of the Women's Political Council were trailblazers. Martin Luther King, Junior, was a torchbearer."