



Montgomery Bus Boycott

The Influence of *Brown v. Board of Education* on the Boycott and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Movement

Rosa Parks wanted a guaranteed seat on the bus for her ride home after working as a seamstress in a Montgomery department store. After work, she saw a crowded bus stop. Knowing that she would not be able to sit, Parks went to a local drugstore to buy an electric heating pad. After shopping, Parks entered the less crowded Cleveland Avenue bus and was able to find an open seat in the colored section of the bus for her ride home.

Despite having segregated seating arrangements on public buses, it was routine in Montgomery for bus drivers to force African Americans out of their seats for a white passenger. There was very little African Americans could do to stop the practice because bus drivers in Montgomery had the legal ability to arrest passengers for refusing to obey their orders. After a few stops on Parks' ride home, the white seating section of the bus became full. The driver demanded that Parks give up her seat on the bus so a white passenger could sit down. Parks refused to surrender her seat and was arrested for violating the bus driver's orders.

African American community leaders held a meeting and organized for a one-day boycott of the city buses on Parks' court date, December 5. Over 70% of the city bus patrons were African American and the one-day boycott was 90% effective. Leaders of the boycott formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) a more organized group that called for a continuation of the boycott. The MIA elected as their president a new but

charismatic preacher, Martin Luther King Jr. Under his leadership, the boycott continued with astonishing success.

The MIA established a carpool for African Americans. Over 200 people volunteered their car for a car pool and roughly 100 pickup stations operated within the city. To help fund the car pool, the MIA held mass gatherings at various African American churches where donations were collected and members heard news about the success of the boycott.

Fred Gray, member and lawyer of the MIA, organized a legal challenge to the city ordinances requiring segregation on Montgomery buses. Before 1954, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision ruled that segregation was constitutional as long as it was equal. Yet, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawed segregation in public schools. Therefore, it opened the door to challenge segregation in other areas as well, such as city busing. Gray gathered Aurelia Browder, Susie McDonald, Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith to challenge the constitutionality of the city busing laws. All four of the women had been previously mistreated on the city buses because of their race. The case took the name *Browder v. Gayle*. Gray argued their 14th Amendment right to equal protection of the law was violated, the same argument made in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

On June 5, 1956, a three-judge U.S. District Court ruled 2-1 that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional. The



Rosa Park's mug shot after her arrest for refusing to give her seat up on a segregated public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Photo courtesy of the Montgomery County Sheriff's Department.

majority cited *Brown v. Board of Education* as a legal precedent for desegregation and concluded, "In fact, we think that *Plessy v. Ferguson* has been impliedly, though not explicitly, overruled...there is now no rational basis upon which the separate but equal doctrine can be validly applied to public carrier transportation..."

The city of Montgomery appealed the U.S. District Court decision to the U.S. Supreme Court and continued to practice segregation on city busing. The MIA prolonged its boycott until the city ended segregation on buses. The bus company that operated the city busing had suffered financially from the seven month long boycott and the city became desperate to end the boycott. Local police began to harass King and other MIA leaders. Car pool drivers were

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arrested and taken to court for petty traffic violations. Despite all the harassment, the boycott remained over 90% successful. African Americans took pride in the inconveniences caused by limited transportation. One elderly African American woman replied that, "My soul has been tired for a long time. Now my feet are tired, and my soul is resting." The promise of equality declared in *Brown v. Board of Education* for Montgomery African Americans helped motivate them to continue the boycott.

The pressure from the city on the MIA began to suffocate the organization. Montgomery brought a lawsuit against the organization for operating an illegal public transportation system. Just when it appeared the MIA would lose the lawsuit and would have to relinquish the car pool, the U.S. Supreme Court announced their decision on the *Browder v. Gayle* case.

On November 13, 1956, 11 months into the boycott, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the U.S. District Court's decision on *Browder v. Gayle* to outlaw segregation on public buses. The following day, King stated at a mass gathering at Holt Street Baptist Church, "This decision was simply a reaffirmation of the principle that separate facilities are inherently unequal, and that the old *Plessy* Doctrine of separate but equal is no longer valid, either sociologically or legally."

The leadership of the MIA elected to continue the boycott until a mandate from the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of city buses, under the expectation that it would take only a few days. However, the city of Montgomery appealed the decision, consequently delaying the issuing of the mandate. The boycott continued until December 20, 1956, three days after the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the city's appeal. Once the mandate was ordered to the city of Montgomery, the boycott was called off. After 381 days of walking, car pooling, and hardship, Montgomery African Americans

won the right to ride on desegregated buses.

The Montgomery bus boycott began the modern Civil Rights Movement and established Martin Luther King Jr. as its leader. King instituted the practice of massive non-violent civil disobedience to injustice, which he learned from studying Gandhi. Montgomery, Alabama became the model of massive non-violent civil disobedience that was practiced in such places as Birmingham, Selma, and Memphis. Even though the Civil Rights Movement was a social and political movement, it was influenced by the legal foundation established from *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Brown overturned the long held practice of the "separate but equal" doctrine established by *Plessy*. From then on, any legal challenge on segregation cited *Brown* as a precedent for desegregation. Without *Brown*, it is impossible to know what would have happened in Montgomery during the boycott.

The boycott would have been difficult to continue because the city would have won its challenge to shut down the car pool. Without the car pool and without any legal precedent to end segregation, the legal process could have lasted years. Those involved in the boycott might have lost hope and given up with the lack of progress. However, the precedent established by *Brown* gave boycotters hope that a legal challenge would successfully end segregation on city buses. Therefore, the influence of *Brown* on the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Civil Rights Movement is undeniable. King described *Brown's* influence as, "To all men of good will, this decision came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of human captivity. It came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of colored people throughout the world who had had a dim vision of the promised land of freedom and justice . . . this decision came as a legal and sociological deathblow to an evil that had occupied the throne of American life for several decades."

Classroom Activity: Rosa Parks

Grade Level: K-3

Objective:

Students will learn how to treat others fairly while examining how Rosa Parks helped end segregation.

Procedure:

Read one of the three recommended books to the class. After reading, have the class discuss what they learned and how they can treat others fairly. Below are discussion questions you can use with your class. After the discussion, students can draw a picture that demonstrates fairness.

Discussion Questions:

What is segregation?

Is segregation fair?

How would you feel if you could not play with other children your age?

What can you do to include everyone when you play at recess?

What is fairness?

Is making fun of other people fair?

What can you do to treat others fairly?

What did Rosa Parks do to help end segregation?

Recommend Books:

I Am Rosa Parks. By Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins. Puffin Books: New York, 1997

If A Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks. By Faith Ringgold. Simon & Schuster: New York, 1993

A Picture Book of Rosa Parks. By David Adler. Holiday House, 1993.

Kansas Standards:

Civics; Benchmark 2.

History; Benchmark 1.

Reading; Benchmark 3, 4