February 2016

ZOOM in on america

By the U.S. Missions of Austria and Poland

Volume VII. Issue 2

ROSA PARKS - A WOMAN OF COURAGE

Sheriff's Department booking photo of Rosa Parks taken February 22, 1956, after she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus for a white passenger on December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. Photo AP/Montgomery County Sheriff's Office

In this issue: Rosa Parks and Montgomery Bus Boycott

Zoom in on America

SYMBOL OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

February 4, 2016 marked what would have been Rosa Parks' 103rd birthday. Three years ago, on Parks' centennial, President Barack Obama unveiled a statue in Rosa Park's honor in the Capitol. On this occasion he said: "In a single moment, with the simplest of gestures, she helped change America and change the world."

This simple gesture ignited a year-long, non-violent protest of the black community in Montgomery in 1955 that led to ending segregation throughout the Unites States. It is no wonder then that Rosa Parks became a symbol of resistance to segregation laws, defender of the right to human dignity and a symbol of the civil rights movement.

Ms. Parks was born Rosa Louise McCauley in February 1913. Several states commemorate her brave act each year on her birthday, February 4 (California and Missouri) or on December 1 (Ohio and Oregon).

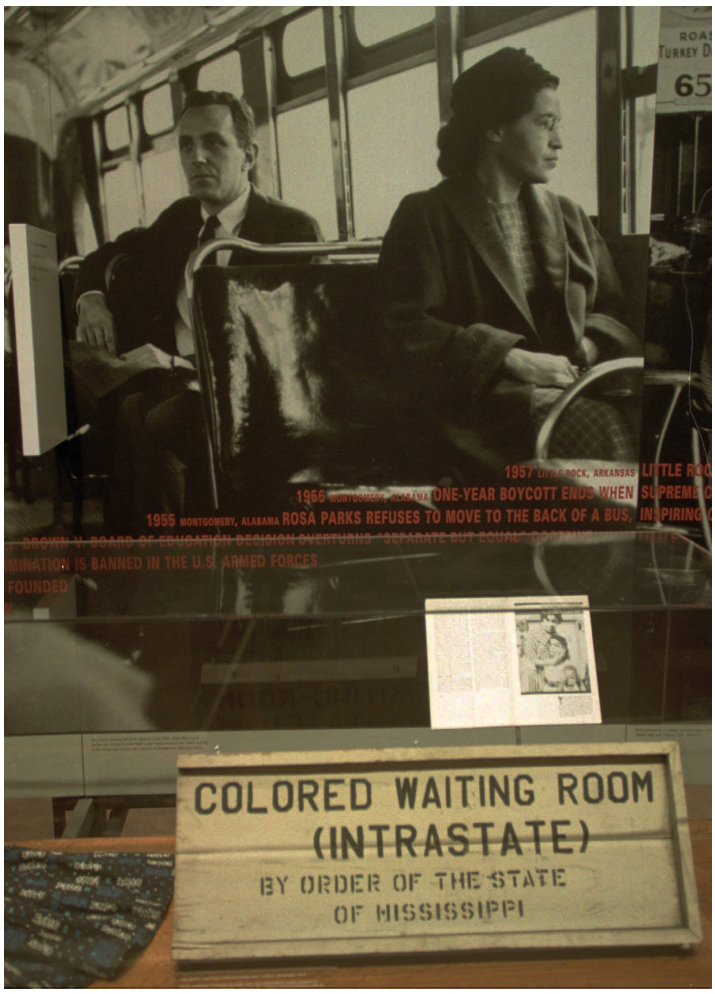
The historic bus that she was riding - bus no. 2857 - was restored in 2003 and placed on display in the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, alongside John F. Kennedy's presidential limousine, Abraham Lincoln's chair from Ford's Theatre and the Wright Brothers' bicycle shop.

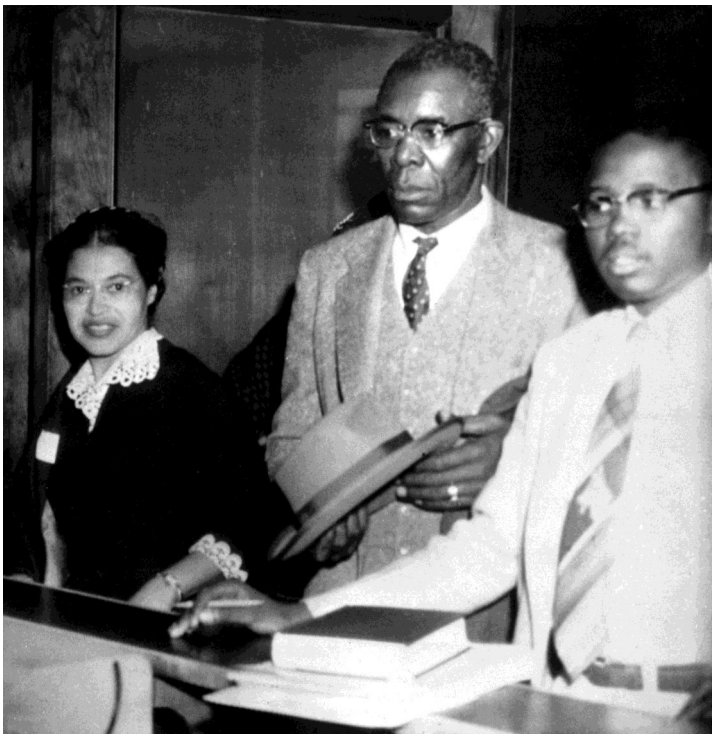
Rosa Parks was asked about her act dozens of times during her lifetime. Dispelling the myth that her refusal to give up her seat was caused by tiredness, she said:
People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than 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.

Parks' arrest caused a citywide bus boycott by African Americans. The attention it received increased national awareness of racial segregation and discrimination.

Rosa Park's story is a proof that an average person who stands bravely for their ideals can play an important role in history.

As a child Rosa moved with her mother to Pine Level in Alabama and lived with her grandparents who were both advocates for racial equality. Rosa attended a segregated school and at the age of 11 the city's Industrial School for Girls Later, she had to quit a laboratory school for





(left); A close-up of a display at the Museum of African American History on April 3, 1997, in Detroit highlights Rosa Parks; (above): Rosa Parks, left, who was fined $10 and court costs for violating Montgomery's segregation ordinance for city buses, makes bond for appeal to Circuit Court, December 5, 1955. Signing the bond were E.D. Nixon, center, former state president of the NAACP, and attorney Fred Gray. Gray hinted that the ordinance requiring segregation would be attacked as unconstitutional. Photos AP

secondary education to help her sick mother and grandmother. She got a job at a shirt factory in Montgomery. In 1932 she married Raymond Parks, a barber and a member of the NAACP - the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Raymond supported Rosa to graduate from high school and through him she joined the NAACP and worked as its secretary. She later worked as a seamstress at a department store in Montgomery, but lost this job after the incident on the bus. Raymond was fired from his job too, and the couple along with Rosa's mother moved to Detroit, Michigan. There Rosa worked as a secretary in U.S. Representative John Coney's congressional office and also served on the board of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. In her later life, Rosa Parks was likewise engaged in community matters, founding the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. She published an autobiography *Rosa Parks: My Story.*

In 1979 she was awarded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Spingarn Medal in 1979, a medal which has been awarded annually since 1915 for outstanding achievement by an African American. In 1996 she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Clinton, and three years later, in 1999, she received the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest award given by the U.S. legislative branch. She was also named one of the 20 most influential and iconic figures of the 20th century by *Time* magazine. Upon her death in 2005, she was the first woman and third non-U.S. government official to lie in honor at the Capitol Rotunda. Parks became the first African American woman to have her likeness depicted in National Statuary Hall. The monument, created by sculptor Eugene Daub, is a part of the Capitol Art Collection among nine other females featured in the National Statuary Hall Collection.

Rosa Parks has become a female archetype denoting a heroine, a woman of distinguished courage, admired for her brave deeds and noble qualities. Her act has become a symbol of fighting for one's right to dignity and respect.

President Bill Clinton mentioned Rosa Parks in his State of the Union address in 1999, when he referred to bringing people together across racial lines. He said:

We know it's been a long journey. For some it goes back to before the beginning of our republic. For others, back since the Civil War; for others, throughout the 20th century. But for most of us alive today, in a very real sense this journey began 43 years ago, when a woman named Rosa Parks sat down on a bus in Alabama and wouldn't get up. She's sitting down with the first lady tonight, and she may get up or not as she chooses."

In this April 26, 1956 photo, a bus driver is all alone as his empty bus moves through downtown Montgomery, Alabama, as a boycott continues even though the bus company has ordered an end to segregation. The 60th anniversary of the Montgomery bus boycott is widely credited with helping spark the modern civil rights movement. Photo AP

MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

Segregation on Montgomery Buses

A city ordinance to segregate passengers by race was passed in Montgomery in 1900. Bus conductors were given the power to assign seats accordingly. Even though according to the law, no passenger would be required to move or give up his seat and stand if the bus was crowded and no other seats were available, it had become customary for bus drivers to require black passengers to move when there were no white-only seats left.

The front on each bus in Montgomery was reserved for whites, while black people had “colored” sections in the back of the bus, even though blacks accounted for more than 75% of the passengers. The sections for white and black people were not fixed, but the driver marked them by placing a movable sign. Black people were allowed to sit in the middle rows until the white section filled. If more white passengers boarded the bus, colored passengers were to move to seats in the back, stand, or, if there was no room, leave the bus. It was in the driver’s power to move the “colored” section sign. If white people were already sitting in the front, black people had to board at the front to pay the fare, then disembark and reenter through the rear door.

Black bus passengers complained about this situation for years and before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, there had been others that did the same thing. But the day Rosa Parks got arrested for not standing up and giving her seat to a white man was the last straw. The black community united and decided to put an end to segregation and the mistreatment of their people.

Bus Boycott Starts

The Montgomery bus boycott lasted 13 months. It began on Monday, December 5, 1955, the day of Rosa Parks’ trial at court. At first the boycott was planned to last just one day. To spread the word about the planned protest it was announced by black ministers in church on Sunday, December 4. The message to the African Americans was simple: “Don’t ride the bus!” The planned boycott was also announced in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, a general-interest newspaper. A front-page article gave information on the planned action. The next day, on Monday, December 5, approximately 40,000 African-American bus riders did not use buses.

Civil Rights worker Rosa Parks, left and Dr. Martin Luther King, second from left, present the Rosa Parks Outstanding Freedom Award to Reverend James Bevel and his wife Diane Bevel in a ceremony at the annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Birmingham, Alabama, August 13, 1965. Photo AP

D. Nixon of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The result of the boycott? The buses ran empty on December 5.

Decision to Continue the Protest

The success of this one-day protest and the excitement and enthusiasm of the black community led to creating the Montgomery Improvement Association that unanimously elected Reverend M.L. King as its president. At the time the 26-year-old pastor of Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was a new leader in the black community of Montgomery. During a stormy debate the leaders discussed whether or not to continue the protest. In his autobiography, Martin Luther King recalls his misgivings before the evening service at which he had to speak to the congregation. It was a decisive moment to all the action:

[...] The minutes were passing fast. I had only twenty minutes to prepare the most decisive speech of my life. I became possessed by fear. Now I was faced with the inescapable task of preparing, in almost no time at all, a speech that was expected to give a sense of direction to a people imbued with a new and still unplumbed passion for justice. I was also conscious that reporters and television men would be there with their pencils and sound cameras poised to record my words and send them across the nation.
And a few lines later he says:

In the midst of this, however, I faced a new and sobering dilemma: how could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds?

In a meeting held at the evening church service it was decided that the boycott should continue until certain demands were met. The demands of the black community included: courteous treatment by bus operators, first-come, first-served seating for all, with blacks seating from the rear and whites from the front, and black bus operators on predominantly black routes.

These demands were later broadened by a group of five Montgomery women, represented by attorney Fred D. Gray and the NAACP, which sued the city in U.S. District Court, seeking to have the busing segregation laws invalidated.

The boycott continued. People either walked to work or used carpools organized by black leaders in order to

(left): Rosa Parks speaks at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, January 15, 1969.; (above): Rosa Parks, center, is honored, December 5, 1975 at ceremonies commemorating the civil rights crusade in Montgomery. Photos AP

ensure the boycott could be sustained. The city's African-American taxi drivers charged only 10 cents, which was the same price as bus fare, for African-American commuters. In regular mass meeting black leaders spoke to African-American residents about the necessity to continue the boycott.

Attempts to Defeat the Protest

The prolonged boycott resulted in considerable financial loss to the bus company and was therefore met with resistance and attempts to defeat it. There were acts of violence including the bombing of four black churches and the homes of prominent black leaders. A bomb at Martin Luther King's house was defused. The bombers were sought for and finally arrested on January 30, 1957 by the Montgomery police. It turned out they were members of the Ku Klux Klan. After the arrests the violence was brought to an end.

End of Segregation Laws

The boycott resulted in longed for legal changes: on June 5, 1956, a Montgomery federal court ruled that any law requiring racially segregated seating on buses violated the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That amendment, which was adopted in 1868 after the American Civil War, guarantees all citizens, regardless of race, equal rights and equal protection under state and federal laws. Even though the city appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, the lower court's decision was upheld on December 20, 1956. Montgomery's buses were integrated on December 21, 1956, and the boycott ended. It had lasted 381 days.

Rosa Parks visits an exhibit illustrating her bus ride of December 1955 at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, Saturday, July 15, 1995. Parks visited the city to inaugurate her three-week "Freedom Ride" throughout the country. Photo AP

Activity Page

Exercise 1: Read the text SYMBOL OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT on pp. 2-3 and decide if the following sentences are true or false:

1. Rosa Parks refused to vacate her seat for a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955, which was a violation of the segregation law of Montgomery City code.

2. Rosa Parks had to pay a fine for not giving her seat on the bus.

3. The historic bus that she was riding does not exist any more.

4. Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat because she was tired of giving in.

5. Rosa Parks' grandparents were advocates of racial equality.

6. *Time* magazine named Rosa Parks one of the 20 most influential figures of the 20th century.

7. Rosa Parks' statue was unveiled in the Capitol on her centennial.

Exercise 2: Read the text MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT on pp. 4-6 and answer the questions below:

1. What power did Montgomery ordinance to segregate passengers by race give to bus drivers?

2. Was Rosa Parks the first person to refuse to vacate her seat?

3. How long did the Montgomery bus boycott last?

4. How did African Americans travel to work during the bus boycott?

5. Who was the leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association?

6. Why was it difficult for the African-American leaders to decide to continue the bus boycott after the first day?

7. What demands did the black community have in order to stop the bus boycott?

8. What financial consequences did the bus boycott have?

9. Were there attempts to defeat the protest?

10. What was the result of the bus boycott?

ZOOM in on america

About ZOOM

American Reference Center
U.S. Embassy Vienna
Boltzmanngasse 16
1090 Vienna

ViennaUSEmbassy@state.gov
http://austria.usembassy.gov/arc.html

President Barack Obama speaks at the unveiling of a statue of Rosa Parks at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, February 27, 2013. Photo AP