

The Legacy of Rosa Parks

Before Reading the Summary

The story of Rosa Parks is a well-known part of the civil rights movement. She stood against the bus segregation laws and was arrested for it. However, there are many parts of her story missing with all she contributed to this movement. What did Parks do before her arrest? What did she do afterward?

Activity: Mark the options as true or false. Do not worry about being correct, just rely on your past knowledge.

1. Rosa Parks was over 55 at the time of her arrest.
2. She had never been involved with the civil rights movement previously.
3. She was in the whites-only section of the bus.
4. She did not leave her seat because she was tired after a long day at work.
5. When she was arrested, it was the first time she had quarreled with a bus driver.
6. After being arrested, Parks did not become involved in the boycott.
7. She was very quiet but became well-known in Montgomery after her arrest.



Did you guess all of these as false? If not, don't worry - these are some of the most common myths about Rosa Parks and they are all incorrect. She is often portrayed as a weak, tired, old woman who accidentally became the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, rather than the strong, outspoken activist she was.

Background

Parks moved around a lot as a kid. She was born in Tuskegee, Alabama as Rosa Louise McCauley. When she was two, she moved to Pine Level, Alabama. Finally, at 11, her parents sent her to live with her aunt in Montgomery, where she would remain. After her first two years of high school, she left to take care of her sick mother and grandmother. She returned to Montgomery and took a job at a shirt factory. Then, she married her husband Raymond Parks, and finished her high school education. Raymond had been an activist and a part of the **NAACP**, which Rosa joined soon after she got her diploma in 1943. She became the youth leader and secretary to the Montgomery NAACP President. She became well-known around the community for her kindness and efforts to engage the community with young reading groups or voter registration events.

Recy Taylor

Recy Taylor was a young, Black mother who was gang-raped by 6 white men in 1944 in a rural Alabama town. Despite their awful threats to keep her quiet, Taylor refused to ignore it. She and her father reported the assault to the police. One of the men confessed and named the other criminals, but the police would not arrest them. When the NAACP heard of this, they sent Rosa Parks - their best investigator at just age 31 - to interview Taylor and try to get an arrest. Parks was able to talk to Taylor but the sheriff demanded she leave, threatening to arrest her. Although Parks returned to Montgomery, it was far from over. With other civil rights activists, she created the Alabama Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor. They spread the word about Taylor's experience and soon made



nationwide news. As a result, a grand jury was convened but they did not charge the men. Parks organized a letter-writing campaign to the Alabama governor and succeeded in pressuring him to order another grand jury. This court also would not charge the men and they were never prosecuted. This was a great loss for Rosa Parks and Remy Taylor, but neither of them gave up. Both kept fighting against racial injustice, and Taylor in particular for an end to sexual violence against Black women, for the rest of their lives.

Montgomery Bus Boycott

The bus system in Alabama had supposedly “separate but equal” seats for Black and white passengers. Black people had to pay at the front, get off the bus, and go through the back door to sit down in the back row of seats. If the white section was full, bus drivers would often tell Black passengers to give up their seats or even leave the bus. Of course, this was anything but equal.



Rosa Parks had been kicked off a bus before her arrest. 12 years prior, she had refused to get off the front and re-enter through the back. The bus driver threatened her, and she avoided him for years, purposefully not getting on his bus. However, on December 1, 1955, she did not notice it was his bus. Parks was 42 years old and she was riding home from work. When the bus driver told her and 3 other Black passengers to give their seats up to white riders, the other 3 complied. Parks would not leave, telling the driver “I don’t think I should have to stand up” even when he called the police. Her simple words gave her the reputation of “Quiet strength”. Her act required

incredible bravery, as simply spending a night in jail could be dangerous for an African-American woman. She was arrested and charged with violation of the Montgomery City Code but was released on bail that night.

Since Rosa was a well-known member within the Black community of Montgomery, they were more invested in fighting for her cause. Previously, many believed it was best to comply with the laws, and they looked down upon resisters such as Claudette Colvin. But they trusted Park's judgment, thanks to her history of generosity, and they supported her by staying off the buses on the day of Park's trial, December 5. After a day of success, with 40,000 African-Americans walking or carpooling, the organizers decided to turn it into a long boycott until the city changed the law. Rosa acted as a dispatcher as well as a director on the executive board for the boycott. She was arrested again and charged on February 21, 1956, along with 114 others who had organized carpool rides among protesters. The photo on the right shows her being arrested this second time.



After the Boycott

Both Rosa and Raymond had lost their jobs, and they were being harassed and receiving death threats. They moved to Detroit, Michigan, and Rosa continued to use her nationwide platform to advocate for civil rights, and she traveled across the country to give speeches. She also continued women's rights activism, sitting on the board of Planned Parenthood, a non-profit organization that provides reproductive healthcare. She worked as a receptionist to John Conyers, U.S. Representative, until retirement in 1988. She co-founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, which aims to motivate youth to fight for social change. She enjoyed speaking to students and loved that they were curious about her life.

She received the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor in 1999 with nearly unanimous approval from Congress. In 2000, she met with the Pope to discuss how to approach and heal racial issues. She also wrote four books - a biography, *Quiet Strength*, discussing her philosophy and religiousness, a children's book, and *Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue With Today's Youth*. *Dear Mrs. Parks* is a collection of letters between her and American children for over 40 years. She received hundreds of letters and included many of them in the book, writing in her answer to their questions. By the time of her death in 2005, she was recognized as one of the most influential people of the 1900s.

Key Term

1. NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
 - a. A civil rights organization founded in 1909 by African American leaders including W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells.
 - b. Very important and involved on the national stage in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Discussion Questions

1. How much of this came as a surprise to you?
2. How was Parks involved in the civil rights movement before her arrest?
3. Why do you think Rosa Parks' story has been changed?
4. What is the difference between not moving because she is tired and not moving to take a stand?
5. How did Parks continue to be an activist for the rest of her life?

Teacher Suggestions

For discussion

- Students could contribute to a [Google Jamboard](#) with things from the reading that surprised them/that they were not aware of
- Then, have students discuss what they talked about on Jamboard together as a class. Discussion will start as what surprised them; then shift topic to WHY they think there is a misunderstanding of Rosa Parks in general. Can continue to discuss how she was an activist her whole life.

Classroom Activity

- After discussion, have students write a short letter to Rosa Parks, asking questions or simply commenting on her life and reflecting on the activity and class discussion.

Sources:

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