Montgomery Bus Boycott

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TOP: An interior view of a Montgomery City transit bus is seen here. It's completely empty as it stops in the middle of town during the middle of the day; Courtesy of Bettman. SECOND: Mrs. Rosa Parks being fingerprinted after her refusal to move to the back of a bus to accommodate a white passenger touched off the bus boycott, Montgomery, Alabama, 1956 Photo: Underwood Archives/Getty Images

From 1955 to 1956, African-Americans refused to ride city buses in Montgomery, Alabama. This was called the Montgomery Bus Boycott. To boycott something means to refuse to use it. The boycott was a protest against an unfair law. At the time, African-Americans were forced to ride at the back of the bus. The protest was the first big demonstration against segregation in the United States. In the end, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered Montgomery to get rid of the law. One of the leaders of the protest was a young man named Martin Luther King Jr. He would become a national leader in the fight for civil rights.

Parks refuses to move

The civil rights movement began in the 1950s. At the time, there were many unfair laws targeting African-Americans. One of them said that African-Americans had to sit in the back half of city buses. They also had to give their seats to whites if there wasn't enough room. African-American seamstress Rosa Parks was returning home on the bus on

December 1, 1955. She was seated in the front row of the “colored section.” The driver asked Parks to leave after the white section filled up. Parks refused. She was arrested and fined $10.

An important black leader helped Parks get out of jail. He thought she should challenge the segregation law in court. Soon a group of black women began calling for a boycott of the bus system.

"They wanted courtesy"

African-American leaders across Montgomery began lending their support to the boycott. Black ministers announced it in church on Sunday, December 4. One newspaper published a front-page article on it. Most of the city’s black bus riders boycotted the system the next day. That was about 40,000 people. Black leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). They elected a young man named Martin Luther King Jr. as its president.

This group had several demands. They wanted courtesy, the hiring of black drivers and a new seating rule. Originally they did not ask to change the unfair law. Then five Montgomery women sued the city to get rid of the law.

The city resisted. Black leaders organized carpools. The city’s African-American taxi drivers charged only 10 cents for African-American riders. Many African Americans chose to walk. Black leaders organized regular meetings to keep African-Americans organized.

Segregated seating is unconstitutional

On June 5, 1956, a national court ruled against the law. The court said that any law requiring racially segregated seating on buses was unconstitutional. It also said that the law went against the 14th Amendment. This amendment was adopted in 1868 after the American Civil War. It gives equal rights and protection to all people, no matter the color of their skin. Montgomery’s buses were integrated on December 21, 1956. The boycott ended. It had lasted 381 days.

Many white people refused to accept integration. Snipers began firing into buses. In January 1957, four black churches and the homes of important black leaders were bombed. A few bombers were arrested. They were part of a hate group called the Ku Klux Klan.

It brought attention to civil rights struggles

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was very significant. It was the earliest mass civil rights protest in the U.S. It also helped Martin Luther King become an important national leader. King believed in nonviolent protest. This approach was very important in the 1960s. The boycott also brought national and international attention to the civil rights struggles happening in the United States.

Rosa Parks remained an esteemed figure in the history of American civil rights. In 1999, the U.S. Congress awarded her its highest honor, the Congressional Gold Medal.