



MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT: 1955

BACKGROUND ESSAY

Place: Montgomery, Alabama

Time: December 1955

This activator will involve you in the civil rights struggle in the mid 1950s. Your class will re-create the historic 1955 bus ride that brought a determined black woman, Rosa Parks, to history's center stage. Her city's ordinance required that she give her seat to a white man and move to the back of the crowded bus. She refused. Her action and what followed in Montgomery dramatically "kick-started" a national crusade seeking equality and justice for all African-Americans.

Jim Crow laws For nearly a century since the Civil War, 1861-1865, mostly white Southern legislators had kept black people in their place with discriminatory Jim Crow laws. These laws segregated the races in parks, restaurants, restrooms, on taxis and buses. "Coloreds" were even forced to drink from separate water fountains and swear courtroom oaths on separate Bibles. Such laws were allowed because in 1896 the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* that such discrimination is constitutional as long as the separate facilities are "equal." No aspect of Southern life was untouched by these laws.



"The Southern Way" Jim Crow laws and a traditional way of social behavior became known as "the Southern Way"—an entrenched system of racial segregation that went unchallenged until the mid 1950s. Even the majority of blacks, not knowing any other social system, accepted a way of life that put them in a social and economic position of inferiority. This code required that black men accept being addressed as "boy," that they never be "uppity" with whites, and that they never stare at a white woman or speak of her except in a subservient manner. Those black men who broke such rules could be punished by beatings or, on occasion, lynchings.

BACKGROUND ESSAY - 2

BROWN VS. TOPEKA (1954)

Emmet Till Such was the fate of 14-year-old Emmet Till, who came from Chicago in 1955 to visit his relatives in Greenwood, Mississippi. For Till, the contrast of Illinois and Mississippi must have seemed like Earth and Mars. He didn't know how "niggers" behaved in the South; he either spoke to or whistled at a white girl. Soon after, Till was dragged from his bed, killed, and flung into the Tallahatchie River. A heavy cotton gin fan had been tied to his neck with barbed wire. Reaction to the Till case varied with the community. To Southern whites, the fuss over the dead boy was puzzling. Said one Mississippi white, "That river's full of 'niggers.'" In due time, Till's funeral (with an open casket) and the acquittal of the three accused killers resulted in indignation and rage among African-Americans. The stage was set, the mood was right, and a spark would soon ignite a revolution in the civil rights struggle for equality and justice.

Montgomery buses In 1954 in the *Brown vs. Topeka* decision the Supreme Court ruled 9-0 against desegregated public schools. With this decision the court overturned the precedent set in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. As a result, it seemed logical that the next appropriate focus for the integration movement was the South's bus lines. Few aspects of antiquated Jim Crow laws frustrated blacks in Montgomery, Alabama, more than the city's law governing buses. Working blacks in this Dixie city had to contend with several "traditions" on the city's bus lines:

- The first four rows were reserved *permanently* for whites, even on buses that had routes in black sections of the city.
- Bus drivers—always white—often were hostile and discourteous. They would use insulting language when communicating with black passengers.
- Black passengers, after paying their 10¢ bus fare upon entering the front door, had to exit the bus and reenter through a rear door—so they would not pass through the white section.
- On occasion, while blacks made their way from the front door to the rear door, drivers would slam both doors and drive off, leaving blacks on the curb, minus the dime they had paid.

Claudette Colvin Interestingly, Rosa Parks's simple act of defiance had some antecedents. Similar incidents before had failed to awaken Montgomery's black community of 50,000. One case in March 1955 involved a 15-year-old girl, Claudette Colvin, who was arrested and even handcuffed as she was forced off a bus. The hope, however, to legally challenge the city's segregated buses went unfulfilled when her parents refused to let their daughter appear in court. Besides, her lack of standing in the community hurt any attempt to initiate action.

Acting Tip →

Read with a clear voice. Do not muddy your sounds.

Use enough volume so that everyone can hear you.

When necessary, become more dramatic.

Above all, do not read in a monotone voice that puts listeners to sleep.

Note: Before this narration is slowly read, make sure all roles have been filled, all preparation has taken place, and students are in their place. Refer to the SCHEMATIC on page 7.

It was late in the afternoon of Thursday, December 1, 1955. A middle-aged black woman named Rosa Parks had just left her job as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair Department Store and prepared to board her regular bus to go home. After a particularly rough day, Rosa was dog-tired and her feet hurt. She dropped her dime into the fare box just inside the front door. Then, as was custom for “coloreds” in Montgomery, she exited the bus, walked along the curb, and reentered through the rear door.

Once inside the bus, Rosa saw only one vacant seat. It was in the fifth row, just back of the first four rows, the reserved white section. It was an aisle seat in the first row of the black section. She sat down and noticed that a black man sat next to her and two women of her race sat across the aisle from her. Her observations also told her that there were a few empty seats at the very front of the bus in the permanent white section.

After two more stops, Rosa was aware of the bus getting more crowded, with many blacks standing in the back, behind her. Now all of the 36 bus seats were occupied.

Next a white man entered the bus, paid his fare, and made his way down the aisle. Seeing that no seats were available and the white man was going to have to stand in the aisle, bus driver J.P. Blake turned around and said, “Niggers, move back,” a typical request to blacks in the first row of their section to get up and move to the rear.

As if the driver had never spoken, none of the four in Rosa’s row reacted. Seconds later, Blake mumbled to himself, stopped the bus along the curb, rose, faced the passengers and spoke again, “You’d better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats.” The noise of the traffic outside heightened the dramatic silence inside the bus. Most of the passengers—white and black—looked toward the area to see who was “making trouble.” The white man, still standing in the aisle, said nothing. While the other three blacks in Rosa’s aisle got up and moved into the aisle, she remained still and stared out the window.

Acting Tip →

Note that different people are speaking. If you are one person reading more than one part, make your voice sound different for each person.

Upon seeing Mrs. Parks's stubbornness, the driver walked up to her.

Bus driver: "Are you going to stand up?"

Rosa: "No, I'm not."

Bus driver: "Well, if you don't stand up and vacate the seat for this man, I'm going to have you arrested. City laws give me the authority to arrest you. *(There was a dramatic pause.)* All right. You wait here until I get a policeman."

The bus passengers remained curious as tension filled the air. Angrily, Blake got off the bus and within a few minutes returned with two police officers. They walked to where Rosa remained seated.

First officer: "Did the driver here ask you to stand up?"

Rosa: "Yes, he did."

Other officer: "Well, why didn't you give up your seat?"

Rosa: "I paid my fare and occupied a seat. I don't think I should have to stand up and vacate my seat."

At this point, the policemen politely took her by the arm to start her standing up. He told her she was "under arrest." They walked her down the aisle and through the front door to the street where they put her into a police car. Once in the back seat, she was asked again by the policeman why she didn't move to the back of the bus.

Rosa: "I'm bone-weary, and I'm fed up with being imposed on."

At the police station, Rosa was booked, fingerprinted, and briefly incarcerated. She was given one phone call home and her mother's voice groaned, "Did they beat you?" Almost immediately Rosa's mother called E.D. Nixon, a prominent leader in Montgomery's black community. Within an hour or so, Nixon and Clifford Durr, a lawyer, came to the jail and found out that Mrs. Parks had been charged with violating the Alabama bus segregation laws. They paid the \$50 bond and took Rosa home. Soon Nixon and Durr would discuss the question on the minds of black leaders all over the South: *Would this be the case that would challenge public transportation segregation laws?*

As for Rosa Parks, her brief but historic role was nearly over although she would be visible over the next few days at key rallies. Other more charismatic individuals would take over now and make decisions to advance the Negroes' cause to end discrimination in the South.