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## ROSA PARKS: A WOMAN WHO CHANGED THE UNITED STATES

The Civil Rights Movement not only changed the United States but it also inspired similar activities in other countries, not least Australia. Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jnr was well known as its leader. But more attention is now being given to the woman who triggered his interest in the need to end racism: Rosa Parks. Until recently, she has been one of the neglected heroes of American history.

The Civil Rights Movement began on the evening of Thursday December 1 1955 on Cleveland Avenue, Montgomery, Alabama. Rosa Parks, a Black seamstress aged 42 employed by a Montgomery department store, boarded a bus and sat in the “coloured” section at the back.

Buses – like the rest of Montgomery – were segregated. Black passengers got on the bus in the front door for whites to pay their fare and then got off to walk down the back to the Black entry doorway. Occasionally drivers would accept the fare and then drive off while the Black passenger was walking alongside the bus to the Black entry.

Rosa Parks had no intention of becoming one of America’s heroes. She was simply tired of the racism and the second-class status.

A young white man boarded the crowded bus and demanded her seat. She refused. The driver, James F Blake, refused to leave while there was trouble at the back. He then called the police who arrested, fingerprinted and goaled her until she was bailed out. Four days later she was found guilty of disorderly conduct and fined US\$14.

Some Blacks met at the Baptist Church of Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jnr and formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to begin a campaign to end the local segregation – and eventually to end the institutional racism throughout the United States.

King was then aged 26 and had only begun his religious career. He became the leader of the boycott because he was the newest minister in town and had not yet made many enemies. He went on to lead the national Civil Rights Movement, win the Nobel Peace Prize, have a national holiday named after him, and become one of the greatest Americans of last century.

The Montgomery Improvement Association spearheaded a Black boycott of the bus company. About three quarters of the passengers were Blacks and so this represented a major loss of revenue for the company. Virtually all the usual Black customers kept away by walking, arranging car pools or finding other means of transportation.

Meanwhile, the legality of the bus segregation rule went through the legal system and on November 13 1956 the segregation was ruled to be unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court. The boycott ended on December 20 1956 (when King was convinced that the bus company would honour the Court's ruling). This was 381 days after the conviction of Mrs Parks. This was one of the first of King's victories.

But Rosa Parks herself disappeared from the history books. She was sacked from her seamstress job in January 1956. She and her husband Roy were constantly harassed and threatened, with the stress causing her a husband to have a nervous breakdown. In 1957 she and Roy left town for Detroit to live near her younger brother Sylvester and resume her work as a seamstress. Roy died there in 1977 from cancer. In 1965 she got a receptionist job working for a Black member of the US Congress, John Conyers, where she stayed until her retirement in September 1988.

In recent years, with the upsurge of interest in both the history of the Civil Rights Movement and the role of women generally in US history ("her-story" and not just "his-story"), we have learned a great deal more about Rosa Parks. She has had a lifetime's commitment to ending racism.

Rosa Louise McCauley was born in Tuskegee, Alabama on February 4 1913. Her father James was a carpenter and her mother Leona was a teacher. She married Ray Parks a barber in December 1932.

She was well aware right from childhood of the dangers that all Blacks had to endure. She went to sleep as a girl hearing the Ku Klux Klan ride at night to a lynching, and fearing that her own house would be burned down. She became a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (which in the pre-Civil War days was called the "Freedom Church" because of its campaign to end slavery).

In December 1943, she became one of the first women to join the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, a non-governmental organization campaigning for an end to racism in the US. Also in that year she made her first attempt to register to vote (one of the ways that Blacks were kept out of power was to find ways to stop them from registering to vote). She persisted with her attempts and was registered to vote in 1945.

The NAACP decided that the 1955 bus incident would be a good trigger for its campaign against racism. But the NAACP itself had a “radical” image because it had been encouraging Blacks to stand up for their rights. Therefore it decided to form a new body (the Montgomery Improvement Association) to be the campaign organization, with the young and unknown Dr King as its spokesperson.

The NAACP also decided that it would be better for public relations purposes for Mrs Parks to avoid publicizing her long history in the campaign for racial equality. She was to be portrayed simply as a seamstress with sore feet who resented being bullied by the young passenger and bus driver. She left the stage of history shortly after her starring role in December 1955.

The 1955 bus incident was not a set up. It was simply that an event and a person had suddenly come together just as the NAACP needed.

It is a matter of speculation as to what role Dr King would have played in the Civil Rights Movement if the incident had not taken place: if Rosa Parks had sat further back down in the bus – or if she had missed that particular bus entirely. No doubt the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement would have been built up through other causes– but it may not have included Dr King in the leading role.

In February 1987, nearing retirement from the politician’s office, she formed the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development to educate young Blacks to be inspired about the history and heritage of the Civil Rights Movement so as to work harder for their own advancement.

Then, late in life, the honours started to arrive. People were at last recognizing the “her-story” of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1996 she was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom and in 1999 the Congressional Gold Medal. Luckily she was still around to receive these recognitions.

Rosa Parks died on United Nations Day (October 24) 2005, aged 92. She was granted the honour of lying in state at the Capitol Rotunda, Washington DC – the first woman to be granted that honour.

Cleveland Avenue in Montgomery, Alabama - where Rosa Parks stood up for racial equality by remaining sitting down – is now called Rosa Parks Boulevard.

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