

Highlander Folk School
Monteagle, Tennessee

Mrs. Rosa Parks Reports
on Montgomery, Ala., Bus Protest

We think you would like to share with us Mrs. Rosa Parks' story of her role in the Montgomery Bus Protest. This is the story of how her quiet refusal to move to the back of a bus touched off what is being called the first Passive Resistance Movement in the South. Rosa was a student at Highlander last summer. The following was recorded here during the March 3-4, 1956 Planning Conference on a series of Public School Integration Workshops. The people as their names appear are:

- Rosa Parks
- Montgomery, Alabama
- Myles Horton
- Highlander Folk School
- George Mitchell
- Southern Regional Council, Atlanta, Ga.
- Wilson Lindsley
- Counselor, Oak Ridge High School, Tenn.
- Beulah Johnson
- Public School Teacher, Tuskegee, Ala.
- James Johnson
- Veterans Administration Hospital, Tuskegee, Ala.

Rosa Parks: Montgomery today is nothing at all like it was as you knew it last year. It's just a different place altogether since we demonstrated, which marked the time of my arrest on the city line bus for not moving out of the seat I had already occupied. For a white person to take the seat I would have had to stand. It was

not at all pre-arranged. It just happened that the driver made a demand and I just didn't feel like obeying his demand. He called a policeman and I was arrested and placed in jail, later released on a \$100 bond and brought to trial on December 5th. This was the first date that the Negroes set to not ride the bus and from December to this date they are still staying off the bus in large numbers, almost 100%. Once in a while you may see one or two but very seldom do you see any riding the city line buses. It attracted much attention all over the nation and world wide, you may say. There was attention even as far away as London. We had a correspondent at one of our meetings. There was a correspondent from even as far away as Tokyo, Japan. People all over the country have called in to see what's going on, what's being done and what is the reaction of it.

Myles Horton: What you did was a very little thing, you know, to touch off such a fire. Why did you do it; what moved you not to move? I'm interested in motivations - what makes people do things. What went on in your mind, Rosa?

Rosa Parks: Well, in the first place, I had been working all day on the job. I was quite tired after spending a full day working. I handle and work on clothing that white people wear. That didn't come in my mind but this is what I wanted to know; when and how would we ever determine our rights as human beings? The section of the bus where I was sitting was what we call the colored section, especially in this neighborhood because the bus was filled more than two-thirds with Negro passengers and a number of them were standing. And just as soon as enough white passengers got on the bus to take what we consider their seats and then a few over, that meant that we would have to move back for them even though there was no room to move back. It was an imposition as far as I was concerned.

Myles Horton: Well, had you ever moved before?

Rosa Parks: I hadn't for quite a long while. It has happened in the past and I did obey somewhat reluctantly. The times that I had to move back I think a colored man gave me his seat. Just having paid for a seat and riding for only a couple of blocks and then having to stand, was too much. These other persons had got on the bus after I did - it meant that I didn't have a right to do anything but get on the bus, give them my fare and then be pushed wherever they wanted me.

Myles Horton: You just decided that you wouldn't be moved again, is that it?

Rosa Parks: That is what I felt like.

George Mitchell: I was in Montgomery a few weeks ago and therefore I'm an expert on it! White bus drivers in the country have enforced the rules that they've made up themselves. The first ten seats on any bus at any time are held for whites whether they're there or not. That is wrong and it just tries people's patience.

Myles Horton: They have tried their patience for a long time. Why, suddenly, does somebody - who happens to be somebody we know and admire and are proud of - say, "Now - this is it." It seems to me what has happened in Montgomery is a new high in American protest, in the sense of people using passive resistance instead of the more conventional methods. Now why, in the first place, did Rosa do this instead of its just being another time when she'd move - and then, equally important, why did the fact touch off the tremendous response that it did in Montgomery? These are interesting questions. I don't know whether we can get the answers to them. You couldn't have the highest paid public relations people or the highest paid organizers in the country do this, you know, George. It's just the kind of job that you couldn't set up, plan and carry out. We had heard last summer when Rosa was here that the Negroes in Montgomery were timid and would not act. In fact some of the leaders in Montgomery wrote us to that effect. They said they couldn't get any interest stirred up there, that the Negroes wouldn't stand together. Then Rosa refused to move and as a result of her arrest something big happened. Was it an accident - how do you feel about it, Rosa?

Rosa Parks: None of us seem to know exactly ourselves unless it was because this incident had been experienced by so many others - many Negroes had been subjected to this type of humiliation. I think they responded because each person had experienced something of the same thing.

Myles Horton: And your protest made the rest of them realize that the time had come.

Wilson Lindsley: Don't you think that demonstrates the timeliness of that particular incident? Now we know a great deal more about what happened in Baltimore, what has happened in Arkansas. More and more they have had time for the real significance of the Supreme Court decision. Undoubtedly they have read that the court has ordered that the Anderson County, Tennessee, high schools admit Negroes to the schools in the fall. It seems to me that it is the timeliness of this particular situation - that it just had to happen.

Myles Horton: I am sure that Rosa heard all the discussions up here last summer and other people from Montgomery who weren't here heard the radio and read the papers. This certainly was background preparation but there was the same background preparation for a lot of other places where this didn't happen.

Beulah Johnson: You ask what has happened to Rosa. I think I can tell you what happened to her. It is the same thing that happened to me and that man on the L&N railroad. I was tired of insults. You know that the law is on your side and you get tired of being run over. You say, "Well, let's fight it out - if it means going to jail then go to jail." That's just the whole attitude - when you get tired then you get tired of people asking you to get up and move, I'm just pretty certain that that's just one of those

days that happened to Rosa. There comes a time in your life when you just decide that you don't give a rap. Many of us have reached that point. I don't live in Montgomery but I'm in Montgomery every week and I know the situation. Now that's what happened to Rosa here. You ask the question why people fell in line.

We have had NAACP meetings and we've had the things we discussed when we were here last summer. We have been very much concerned with getting people registered in the state of Alabama. We've been talking about those things and we've been reviewing what has happened all around as far as the court decisions go.

Myles Horton: Well, that answers a lot of questions in my mind - but it still doesn't explain why it took the passive resistance form that it did.

Rosa Parks: I think I can account for that because in the organization the ministers came together and made the announcements from their pulpits and we also had these spiritual mass meetings twice weekly.

Beulah Johnson: Well, I tell you I think you are going to have to keep in mind that for the last five years we have been calling on ministers throughout the United States and we have been letting them know that it is strictly a job that the ministers should undertake. There has been beautiful support from the ministers - they are really coming out and working. I think they are simply doing what should have been done a long time ago.

Myles Horton: You agree with Rosa then that the ministers probably gave the situation a little different flavor from what it would have been if there hadn't been that kind of church leadership.

Beulah Johnson: Yes.

Myles Horton: I don't know of any other case where ministers have taken the lead and become spokesmen so spontaneously. Some of us talked about passive resistance - we talked about it in labor unions, we talked about it in India and Africa. But somehow the Montgomery movement seems to be unplanned, unpremeditated, a sort of natural movement with religious motivation - a protest movement. As far as I know nobody called it a passive resistance movement down there; they just said let's protest and as religious leaders the only way to protest is non-violently. Would that be a correct way to evaluate the situation?

Rosa Parks: Yes, I think so.

George Mitchell: One thing that all my experience has taught me in the South is that one reason that the Negro people have never been able to get anything is because they never organized together. What has happened in the last five months is that the Negro people are rapidly getting organized. And they are going to get what they're after because they have a united mind. The Citizens Councils think they can scare others but they can't because they're dealing with a united mind.

Beulah Johnson: It is not only the Negroes in Montgomery - but Negroes all over the country are sticking together. This is a new day. I think Langston Hughes wrote a poem - here's the essence:

I'm comin', I'm comin' but my head ain't bended low
'Cause this is a new Black Joe.

I think it brings out very definitely the way Negroes are feeling today.

Rosa Parks: There were some resolutions submitted by the white people for ending our protest which were brought back to our meeting but they were turned down because they didn't meet the approval of the group.

Myles Horton: You mean the boycott was hurting business and they wanted to do something about it.

Rosa Parks: Yes, they wanted to bring about an agreement.

Myles Horton: Well, why didn't they do something with the law enforcement officers there that brought all the suits?

Rosa Parks: I don't know.

Beulah Johnson: Well, then right after that, Rosa, you remember the resolution the whites adopted in their meeting pleading that both races try to break the tension and then went on to talk about the good relations which had existed? Rosa didn't tell you that you can go to Montgomery any day and find a parking space now. Not only are people not riding the buses but they are really not shopping. The people in Montgomery, particularly the Negroes, buy only what they have to have.

James Johnson: But what the white people don't seem to get through their heads is that they want good race relations and want to relieve the tension but how can they relieve the tension and keep things as they are.

Myles Horton: Rosa, your Montgomery "Walk and Pray" movement calls to mind the resistance movement led in India by Gandhi. The people of India gained their independence by passive resistance - maybe our colored citizens in the States can get justice the same way.

Your position is simple and clear-cut and you have intelligent and courageous leadership. The white position is full of contradictions. They arrested you on the bus and again for your refusal to get on a bus. You advocate love and demand justice. They use the force of a questionable law and stress hatred through their White Citizens Councils. History is with you and so are those of us who work for justice. We want you to return to Highlander and help with our workshops on integration in the public schools and we want you to bring some of the other leaders of the protest with you. What you started so quietly and courageously has grown into something big and important and we are proud to have had this passive resistance protest started in the South by a Highlander student.