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Headline: Rosa Parks: Modest hero, civil rights icon

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Rosa Parks, who died Monday in Detroit, symbolized the unsung heroines who kick-started the Southern civil rights movement. Ever quiet and unassuming, Mrs. Parks passed decades in near-anonymity before her single act of civil disobedience on a segregated city bus in 1955 Montgomery, Ala., came to be widely celebrated by American society.

Now, of course, her tale is recounted in grammar-school history books. But back then, when she instigated a citywide bus boycott by Montgomery's African-Americans, the prospect that black and white students would sit side-by-side to read of her exploits was not even an option.

Parks was a middle-age department store seamstress when she refused to give up her seat on a crowded bus one Thursday evening in December 1955 on her way home from work. Montgomery's etiquette of racial superiority allowed bus drivers to order black riders from their seats if white passengers were standing. It also prohibited blacks from sitting parallel to whites, so four passengers, including Parks, were ordered to get up to accommodate one new white rider. The others obeyed, but Parks quietly refused. The driver called police, who arrested Parks and took her to jail.

For Rosa Lee McCauley Parks, who was born in Tuskegee, Ala., on Feb. 4, 1913, her polite resistance to racial convention did not begin by happenstance. For well over a decade she had been a core member of Montgomery's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She worked closely with Edgar Daniel Nixon, a railroad porter who was black Montgomery's most energetic working-class activist. She also invited new residents to get involved, including a young Martin Luther King Jr., who in 1954 became pastor of one of black Montgomery's leading churches.

She was known, too, to the Women's Political Council (WPC), a group of black middle-class women who had complained to officials for years about the treatment of black bus patrons.

When Parks, with no particular pre-thought, refused to give up her seat, Montgomery's black activists reacted with alacrity to the arrest of a woman whom they knew and respected.

Nixon, Parks's NAACP colleague, reached out to a liberal white couple, the Durrs, for whom Parks had done sewing. Clifford Durr, a lawyer, obtained her release, and before the evening was out, WPC members were mimeographing leaflets urging blacks to stay off the buses. On the next Monday, the buses were devoid of black riders.

Parks's solitary act continued to snow-ball. In court on Monday, she was found guilty and fined \$10. That afternoon, black civic leaders founded the Montgomery Improvement Association and chose Reverend King

as president. Monday night thousands of black citizens gathered at the community's largest church to laud Parks and vow to remain off the buses. The Montgomery Bus Boycott had begun.

Montgomery's black leadership envisioned a protest of a few days or weeks, but white obstinacy prolonged it. Parks was fired by the department store. In late 1956 US courts struck down segregated seating, and the boycott celebrated a victory after enduring for more than a year.

By that time, King had become a front-page symbol of Southern black activism, but Rosa Parks was largely forgotten. She and her husband, Raymond, moved to Detroit in 1957, and she later worked for US Rep. John Conyers Jr.

Not until the 1970s did scholars and the media rediscover Parks. Ambivalent about her fame, Parks accepted honors that came her way, but emphasized that she was one of thousands of often unheralded people who helped bring about the transformation of the American South.

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