

Los Angeles Times
October 27, 2005 Thursday

Part B; Pg. 13
LENGTH: 552 words

History Almost Passed Her By

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ROSA PARKS, who died Monday at 92, was the U.S. civil rights movement's most famous heroine. Her refusal to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955 initiated a successful yearlong bus boycott that marked the onset of Southern direct-action protests. A decade later, those demonstrations culminated in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Nowadays, Parks' life is widely celebrated. But she lived almost a quarter of a century in near-obscure before history finally appreciated and acknowledged the importance of her solitary act of quiet resistance.

After her arrest, she was fired from her job as a department store seamstress and could not get another. Rivalries within the Montgomery Improvement Assn., the black community group set up to pursue the boycott, blocked her from joining its staff. A close friend described Parks as "really quite bitter," and in 1957 she moved first to Virginia and then to Detroit, where she resumed work as a seamstress. Eight years later, newly elected Rep. John Conyers Jr. hired Parks as a receptionist in his Detroit office, a job she held until her retirement in 1988.

All through the 1960s and into the 1970s, Parks remained a largely forgotten figure. A few magazine articles highlighted her quietly courageous role, but Parks herself did not pursue the limelight. Then journalists and historians, starting with Howell Raines' "My Soul Is Rested" in 1977, began to delve thoroughly into the movement's history.

Television documentaries such as "Eyes on the Prize" brought little-known activists into the public eye. Increased appreciation, plus countless honors and awards, finally began to come Parks' way. Though her strength waned greatly during her final 15 years of life, Parks accepted her newfound fame with the same quiet dignity that had characterized her landmark act of refusal almost 50 years earlier.

The night Parks was hauled off to jail, another Montgomery woman was instrumental in turning Parks' individual act of defiance into a peaceful mass uprising. Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, an English professor at Alabama State College, was president of the Women's Political Council, a group of middle-class black women who politely had been complaining to city officials for several years about the treatment of black bus riders. A year earlier, on the heels of the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, Robinson had courteously threatened a bus boycott in a letter to Montgomery's mayor. Upon hearing of Parks' arrest, Robinson sprang into action, mimeographing thousands of leaflets asking black riders to stay off the buses the following Monday.

Literally overnight, the Montgomery bus boycott was on its way.

When Robinson died in 1992, her passing went unreported. Like Parks, she lost her job because of her activism and moved first to Louisiana, then to Los Angeles. She appeared in "Eyes on the Prize," and her 1987 memoir, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It," is well known among students of black women's history. But Robinson, unlike Parks, did not live quite long enough for history to fully honor her role. That's the fate that befalls most self-effacing activists, and Parks' death should remind us how she was a most unusual exception indeed.

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