

Rosa Parks: Mother of the civil rights movement

One woman's defiance sparked a political movement

KENNETH M. HARE

ROSA McCauley Parks is known today as the "mother of the civil rights movement" because her arrest for refusing to give up her bus seat sparked the pivotal Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. She didn't set out to make history when she left her job as a seamstress to board a bus on the afternoon of December 1, 1955. She was tired, and she just wanted to go home. Still, when the bus driver asked her to move toward the back of the bus so that a white man could sit, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

"I didn't get on the bus with the intention of being arrested," she said later. "I got on the bus with the intention of going home."

While she did not know her act would set in motion a 381-day bus boycott, she

knew one thing. Her own personal bus boycott began that day.

The arrest and brief jailing of Rosa Parks, a woman highly respected in the black community, and the boycott that followed led to a U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation on city buses. The boycott also raised to national prominence a youthful, little-known minister named Martin Luther King Jr. Under his leadership, the boycott set a pattern for nonviolent, community-based protest that became a successful strategy in the civil rights movement.

There were many forces in Rosa Parks's early life that helped forge her quiet activism. She was born Rosa Louise McCauley on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. Her childhood revolved around a small church

where her uncle was the pastor. There she developed both a strong faith and a sense of racial pride. She also was strongly influenced by her grandparents, especially her grandfather. He responded to the family's fears of the violent, racist, secret society known as the Ku Klux Klan by keeping a loaded double-barreled shotgun nearby. While the very real possibility of Klan violence never materialized for her immediate family, her grandfather's defiant attitude helped mold her thinking.

When she turned 11, Rosa was sent to a school for girls in Montgomery that had an all-black student body and an all-white teaching staff. At the school, Parks learned "to believe we could do what we wanted in life." She also learned from the teachers that not all white people

were bigots. It was there she met Johnnie Carr, and the two girls started a friendship that would last a lifetime. Carr said of her friend's childhood: "I was noisy and talkative, but she was very quiet, and always stayed out of trouble. But whatever she did, she always put herself completely into it. But she was so quiet you would never have believed she would get to the point of being arrested."

Parks wanted to be a teacher, but had to drop out of school to care for her ailing mother. When she was 18, she fell in love with barber Raymond Parks and they later married. During part of the Second World War, she worked at the racially desegregated Maxwell Field (now Maxwell Air Force Base) in Montgomery. She later attributed her indignation



After the Supreme Court ruled in her favor, Rosa Parks sat at the front of the bus.

toward the segregated Montgomery transportation system to the contrast with the integrated on-

base transportation she had experienced.

After the bus boycott ended successfully in 1956, Parks continued working for civil rights. On several occasions she joined King to support his efforts. The following year, Parks moved north, to Detroit, Michigan, where she worked for Congressman John Conyers, who often joked that he had more people visit his office to meet his staff assistant than to meet him.

Parks was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993. She was presented the Medal of Freedom Award by President Bill Clinton in 1996 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 1999. The Southern Christian Leadership Council established an annual Rosa Parks Freedom Award.

After her death on

October 24, 2005, Congress approved a resolution allowing her body to lie in honor in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. She was the 31st person, the first woman, and only the second black person to be accorded that honor since the practice began in 1852.

Rosa Parks was always modest about her role in the civil rights movement, giving credit to a higher power for her decision not to give up her seat. "I was fortunate God provided me with the strength I needed at the precise time conditions were ripe for change. I am thankful to him every day that he gave me the strength not to move."

This article is excerpted from the book *Free At Last: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement*, published by the Bureau of International Information Programs. View the entire book (PDF, 3.6 MB).

American identity: Ideas, not ethnicity



Immigrants sworn in as citizens in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2007 (© AP Images)

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English stock in his home colony of Pennsylvania. The newcomers were perceived as industrious and law-abiding. Skillful farmers, they improved

the land and stimulated economic growth. In 1790, when Congress set the first national standard for naturalized citizenship, it required no ethnic

or religious test, no literacy test, no property requirement just two years residence, good character, and an oath to uphold the Constitution.

Because American identity is, as Franklin understood, grounded in actions and attitudes rather than racial, religious, or ethnic identity. Membership in the national community, as cultural scholar Marc Pachter has written, "demands only the decision to become American."

This communal American identity embraces a pluralism that spans racial, religious, and ethnic divides. It also encompasses a strong civic commitment to individual freedom and to a representative government of limited and clearly defined powers that respects that freedom.

Melting Pot or Salad Bowl?

The American self-image has always harnessed a creative tension between pluralism and assimilation. On the one hand, immigrants traditionally have been expected to immerse themselves in the American "melting pot," a metaphor popularized by the playwright Israel Zangwill's 1908 drama *The Melting Pot*, in which one character declares:

Understand that America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.

Nor were Zangwill's sentiments new ones. As far back as 1782, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a French immigrant and keen observer of American life, described his new compatriots as:

... a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes ... What, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither an European nor the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American... leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners....

The melting pot, how-

ever, has always existed alongside a competing model, in which each successive immigrant group retains a measure of its distinctiveness and enriches the American whole.

Individualism and Tolerance

If American identity embraces all kinds of people, it also affords them a vast menu of opportunities to make and remake themselves. Americans historically have scorned efforts to trade on "accidents of birth," such as great inherited wealth or social status. Article I of the U.S. Constitution bars the government from granting any title of nobility, and those who cultivate an air of superiority toward their fellow Americans are commonly disparaged for "putting on airs," or worse.

Americans instead respect the "self-made" man or woman, especially where he or she has overcome great obstacles to success.

In the United States, individuals craft their own definitions of success.

Americans hold differing political beliefs, embrace divergent lifestyles, and insist upon broad individual freedoms, but they do so with a remarkable degree of mutual tolerance.

Another key is the powerful guarantees that protect the rights of all Americans from government overreaching. No sooner was the U.S. Constitution ratified than Americans demanded and received the Bill of Rights: 10 constitutional amendments that safeguard basic rights.

There simply is no picture of a "typical" American. From the powdered-wigged Founding Fathers to the multiracial golf champion Tiger Woods, Americans share a common identity grounded in the freedom consistent always with respecting the freedom of others to live as they choose. The results can bemuse, intrigue, and inspire. Walt Whitman wrote of his nation, "I am large... I contain multitudes." Abridged

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Fourth of July facts

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our adversary in 1776, our sixth-leading trading partner today.

Fourth of July cookouts

More than 1 in 4: The chance that the hot dogs and pork sausages consumed on the Fourth of July originated in Iowa. The Hawkeye State was home to 19.0 million hogs and pigs on March 1, 2011. This estimate represents more than one-fourth of the nation's estimated total.

6.8 billion pounds: Total production of cattle and calves in Texas in 2010. Chances are good that the beef hot dogs, steaks and burgers on Americans' backyard grills came from the Lone Star State, which accounted for about one-sixth of the nation's total production. And if the beef did not come from Texas, it very well may have come from Nebraska (4.6 billion pounds) or Kansas (4.1 billion pounds).

Please pass the potato: Potato salad and potato chips are popular food items at Fourth of July barbecues. Approximately half of the nation's spuds were produced in Idaho or Washington State in 2010.

More than three-fourths: Amount of the nation's head lettuce production in 2010 that came from California. This lettuce may end up in a salad or on a burger this Fourth of July.



July 4th has been recognized as Independence Day in the States ever since the country's Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. To mark the occasion, Americans celebrate with parades, fireworks, concerts and other festive activities.

7 in 10: The chances that the fresh tomatoes in this holiday's salad came from Florida or California, which combined accounted for 71 percent of U.S. fresh market tomato production last year.

81 million: Number of Americans who said they have taken part in a barbecue during the previous year. It's probably safe to assume a lot of these events took place on Independence Day.

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