

Focus

Sometimes a single incident triggers radical and sweeping political and social change. When this occurs, usually there has been a buildup of unexpressed emotions among a segment of the population over a period of time. But one event or act of courage involving an individual or group ignites the feelings of many, and inspires thousands to unite behind a figure or a cause.

On December 1, 1955, on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat to a white man. This act of social and civil disobedience had political and cultural repercussions that surprised many. One woman's refusal, to cooperate one more time with an historically-accepted form of racial discrimination, was a watershed (turning point) in U.S. history. Rosa Parks's actions, and the ensuing boycott of Montgomery buses by African-Americans, ultimately led to the reversal by the United States Supreme Court of segregationist legislation.

The most exciting and accurate way to reconstruct this event is through the use of primary sources: actual interviews with the participants. We are fortunate to read Ms. Parks's recollections of her famous ride.

Notice

As you read "I Chose to Remain," note that Ms. Parks was aware of the magnitude of her decision. Having lived all her life in the American South—where Blacks could not eat in the same restaurants, drink from the same water fountains, or sit in the same seats on buses as Whites—she could hardly have been surprised at the local public outrage that resulted from her breaking with tradition and law. The motivation behind her courage was her lifelong awareness of the violence that had commonly been visited upon Blacks by Whites in the South for generations. Nevertheless, she persisted in keeping her seat.

Vocabulary

boycott (BOY caht) *v.*: to engage in a concerted refusal to have dealings with (as a person, store, or organization) usually to express disapproval or to force acceptance of certain conditions (p. 416)

excerpt (EK surpt) *n.*: a passage (as from a book or musical composition) selected, performed, or copied (p. 417)

segregation (SEG riH GAY shun) *n.*: the policy, often reinforced by law, of forcing a racial

group or groups to live apart from the majority, compelling them to send their children to separate schools, and demanding that they use facilities separate from those utilized by the rest of the public (p. 417)

test case (TEST KACE) *n.*: a representative case whose outcome is likely to serve as a precedent; a proceeding brought to obtain a decision as to the constitutionality of a statute (p. 418)

I Chose to Remain

By Rosa Parks

As a consequence of her refusal to vacate her seat in favor of newly arriving white passengers, Rosa Parks—a middle-aged black woman who was returning home from work on a Montgomery, Alabama bus one December evening—initiated a series of events that led to the 1956 United States Supreme Court decision forbidding segregation on local bus lines. This selection, an excerpt from her autobiography, is intriguing in that it sheds some light on her courageous actions that evening.

When I got off from work that evening of December 1, I went to Court Square as usual to catch the Cleveland Avenue bus home. I didn't look to see who was driving when I got on, and by the time I recognized him, I had already paid my fare. It was the same driver who had put me off the bus back in 1943, twelve years earlier. He was still tall and heavy, with red, rough-looking skin. And he was still mean-looking. I didn't know if he had been on that route before—they switched the drivers around sometimes. I do know that most of the time if I saw him on a bus, I wouldn't get on it.

I saw a vacant seat in the middle section of the bus and took it. I didn't even question why there was a vacant seat even though there were quite a few people standing in the back. If I had thought about it at all, I would probably have figured maybe someone saw me get on and did not take the seat but left it vacant for me. There was a man sitting next to the window and two women across the aisle.

The next stop was the Empire Theater, and some whites got on. They filled up the white seats, and one man was left standing. The driver looked back and noticed the man standing. Then he looked back at us. He said, "Let me have those front seats," because they were the front seats of the black sec-



tion. Didn't anybody move. We just sat right where we were, the four of us. Then he spoke a second time: "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats."

The man in the window seat next to me stood up, and I moved to let him pass by me, and then I looked across the aisle and saw that the two women were also standing. I moved over to the window seat. I could not see how standing up was going to "make it light" for me. The more we gave in and complied, the worse they treated us.

I thought back to the time when I used to sit up all night and didn't sleep, and my grandfather would have his gun right by the fireplace, or if he had his one-horse wagon going anywhere, he always had his gun in the back of the wagon. People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired that I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was

Rosa Parks — (1913-)The civil rights movement is sometimes dated as beginning in 1955, with Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat in the Black section of the bus to a White man. Rosa Parks was involved in the struggle for equal rights long before 1955.

Although Rosa Parks earned a degree from Tuskegee Teacher’s Institute, she supported herself as a seamstress and housekeeper. She was a working member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The incident on the bus, and the year-long boycott that ensued, resulted in the loss of her job. She subsequently moved to Detroit, Michigan, where she worked both as a seamstress and as office manager for Congressman John Conyers, Jr. She founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development in 1987.

Thinking About Nonfiction

► In the selection, Rosa Parks’s thoughts have an important literary purpose, in addition to their value as an account of this extraordinary event. Consider how much time passed between the incident on the bus and the writing of “I Chose to Remain.” Consider also how frightened she must have been.

- Given both of these factors, her words with the bus driver may not have been the exact words they spoke so many years ago. Does it matter?

- Write a paragraph about the things that get in our way, and the things that help us recall accurately, when we try to describe events that occurred in the past.


- It may be helpful to think of an event from your life and what would make it easy or difficult to recount.

Creating and Writing

- Do you think that one person alone, or that a single event, can lead to major legislative and social change?

- Did Rosa Parks alone cause the repeal of the segregation laws?

- Was it just the incident on the bus?


 Historians often ask these questions. Although the importance of a particular individual or event should not be underestimated, change is usually the culmination of a series of events. Because we try to simplify history, many individuals—who have devoted their lives to causes—never make it into the history books.

The story of Rosa Parks is especially powerful, however, because her stand was so personal, spontaneous, and courageous. On that bus, by sitting, she stood alone.

- Read the Bill of Rights, the first ten Amendments to the Constitution. If possible, discuss them with a classmate.

- Select an amendment.

- Think about what kinds of situations gave rise to its importance and enactment into law.

 Write a brief essay about the importance of the amendment you selected.

- Support your arguments and conclusions.