

Rosa Parks Sparked Bus Boycott 60 Years Ago

While Rosa Parks became a symbol of the U.S. civil rights movement when she refused to give up her seat on a segregated Alabama bus, the 60th anniversary of her arrest is also highlighting lesser-known pioneers of the bus boycott she sparked.

Parks made history by taking a stand alongside other desegregation pioneers like Claudette Colvin, a black teenager arrested nine months earlier in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger, said Fred Gray, a lawyer who represented both women.

“If there had not been a Claudette Colvin, who did what she did, a lot of other events would not have occurred,” Gray said. “It was a matter of each one building upon each other, and the rest is history.”

The Montgomery bus boycott, launched in protest of Parks’ arrest on Dec. 1, 1955, modeled the nonviolent protests that defined the era and brought to prominence a lead organizer, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

Bus tours, lectures and youth-oriented summits this week to commemorate the boycott’s 60th anniversary include efforts to spotlight less prominent players who worked alongside the famed leaders of the protest.

Gray will speak at a two-day event organized by the National Bar Association to mark the occasion, which will be headlined by a visit to Montgomery on Tuesday from Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

“We are going to be recognizing these older foot soldiers and the people’s shoulders that we all stand on today,” said

Montgomery Mayor Todd Strange. "We want to make sure that as many as possible get their moment."

This anniversary may be the last major one featuring those who participated in the yearlong boycott, said Howard Robinson, an archivist and instructor at Alabama State University, which will host a discussion titled "I Was There."

Parks died in 2005 at age 92 and many other key activists are advanced in age.

"We lionize Rosa Parks, but to put her in perspective she is a symbol for something larger than just Rosa Parks," said Robinson of all those who took part in the boycott. "They represent a larger group of people that are faceless and nameless, who animated this movement and made it possible."

Recognizing Parks' central legacy, officials will unveil a historical marker dedicated to her. It replaces a dual-sided sign that she had shared with country music star Hank Williams.

Other events will explore the significance of lawyers in the civil rights movement and the legacy of activist E.D. Nixon as an "unsung hero" of the boycott.

The anniversary bookends a year of civil rights milestones in the United States, including the 50th anniversary of a historic march in Alabama from Selma to Montgomery.

In Selma, authorities attacked demonstrators who were practicing the peaceful approach laid out a decade earlier in the bus boycott. The incident galvanized support to pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act and helped advance civil rights in the U.S. South.

Sixty years later, engaging the next generation of leaders is crucial to the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was formed to orchestrate the bus boycott and continues to

champion civil rights issues.

“It’s very important that we have new leadership,” said Loyd Howard, president of the MIA Foundation, “to make sure that civil rights stay a major part of our lives.” {eoa}

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