

# From back of bus to forefront of freedom

By George Curry  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Lost in all of the cross-country funerals and memorial services for Rosa Parks — in Montgomery, Ala., the site of the famous 1955 bus boycott and launch pad for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s career as a civil rights leader; in Washington, D.C. where Rosa Parks became their first woman to lie in state beneath the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol and, finally, in Detroit, her adopted hometown — was the depth of indignity caused by being forced to sit in the back of the bus.

Without a doubt, Rosa Parks was a courageous lady. But to understand fully why she did what she did, you would have had to walk in her footsteps and sit where she sat — in the back of the bus.

I know because I, too, am an Alabama native. And of all of my childhood memories of segregation, one of the most painful involved bypassing empty seats up front and either sitting or standing behind a white line in the rear of the bus.

The scars are deep; I couldn't have been more than 4 when I recognized, even at that innocent age, something was amiss. I couldn't articulate exactly what it was, but I knew it wasn't right. African-Americans, no matter how educated or well-dressed, had to, by

custom and by law, scramble to the back of the bus while the most ignorant and useless White person could sit up front.

I had a part-time job in high school in the early 1960s washing dishes at the University of Alabama. One afternoon, en route to work, Clarence "Boot" Hurst, a schoolmate who also worked in the dishroom, said, "Let's sit in the front." I agreed and that's exactly what we did. The driver said, "You boys know you're not supposed to sit up here." We didn't say a word, and the driver kept going. When we got ready to get off at our stop, a White man drew a knife and told us we couldn't exit through the front door. We hesitated and then left through the back door, content that we had proven our point. We were scared during the whole ride, but on that particular day, we were going to take our chances.

That's why I can relate to Rosa Parks' decision on that cold December day in 1955 not to give up her seat to a White man. I am not suggesting for a moment that our one-day protest was on par with the contributions of Rosa Parks. But I am stating that, as they



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like to say in sports, on any given day, African-Americans found ways to challenge the system.

That challenge was formalized several years later when Rev. T.Y. Rogers, president of the local Southern Christian Leadership Conference chapter, organized a boycott of the city bus system. SCLC organized car pools that mirrored

the city's bus routes and drivers picked up passengers along the way and took them to their destination — for free. By not charging, no one could accuse us of operating a taxi service without a license. My family didn't own a car at the time, but I borrowed my Uncle Percy's car so that I could be part of the action. At the end of the day, Miss Dot and other women had cooked us a pot of food at the First African Baptist Church, our rallying point. We would hold mass meetings there and get re-energized for our boycott campaign.

Unable to withstand the pressure, officials were forced out of business. When service was eventually resumed by another company, seating was on a desegregated basis.

Segregated seating on city buses was just

one aspect of America's version of apartheid.

Another vivid memory of that era also revolved around transportation. Before, during, and after the bus boycott, my mother did domestic work across town. She was considered good enough to cook for a prominent White family and care for their kids. Yet, when it was time to bring my mother home, she had to ride in the back seat.

The sight of my mother riding in the back seat caused me to vow at a very early age that neither I nor my three younger sisters would be subjected to that kind of humiliation. We were going to go to college — I didn't know how at the time — and education would be our ticket out. We were determined to break the chains — and we did. Now, if you see one of us sitting in the back seat, it's because we're being chauffeured.

Rosa Parks is being described in various news accounts as a seamstress. As Jesse Jackson observed in Montgomery, she didn't get arrested for sewing. Rosa Parks was arrested for taking a stand by sitting down.

And for those who had to sit in the back of those buses, she gave us a better view of the world.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service and BlackPressUSA.com.

## Parks deserves praise for depth of courage

By James Clingman  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

"...I was tired of giving in." Those were the words of the little lady we call the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement, Rosa Parks. Those words should be the mantra of Black people today as we celebrate the accomplishments of Rosa Parks and others like her.

Most of us know the story of Rosa Parks, but too few of us reflect on what she did and even fewer of us are willing to mimic her actions today. Her defiance in the face of overwhelming odds should suggest to us that we can overcome anything in our way. Her willingness to "do the right thing" and take a stand for her beliefs in 1955 should indicate to us quite graphically what our posture must be 50 years later. Her solitary disobedience, shrouded from the public eye, without stage presence, and devoid of photo ops, are a beacon that can lead us to true freedom.

In our current world of selfish, self-centered, what's-in-it-for-me brothers and sisters, the Rosa Parks story should be plastered on

every wall in every office and in every home. We should be forced to take a good hard look at what it means to take a position simply because we're tired of taking the inequity, the lack of reciprocity, the lack of respect, and the general unfairness doled out to Black people in this country.

While no one can do everything, everyone can do something. Rosa Parks was one person who knew what was right and took her stand based on principle. Each of us can do the same if we choose the Rosa Parks' way.

The actions of this one lady turned the tide for civil rights for Black people. What can each of us do today to have that same impact? Yes, times have certainly changed; our battle is no longer on the civil rights front. As Martin Luther King said, "The emergency we face now is economic." So, how can one person in 2005 make the same kind of contribution Rosa Parks made in 1955? Well, you can simply decide that you will no longer accept disparate treatment, especially in return for the half-trillion dollar windfall Black people dump into this country's economy each year.

You can defy the odds by making your own personal commitment to withhold your dollars from those who disrespect you. Without fanfare or hoopla, you can refuse to give up your money, just like Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. Like her, you can resolve to make a personal sacrifice for your people and for your own economic justice. You can "do your thing" in the marketplace and, guess what, you will not be arrested for your actions.

Rosa Parks was well aware of the rules of her day, but she was tired of the nonsense. We are aware of what is happening to our people economically. Are we tired enough to stop it? Rosa Parks was tired enough to say I will sit where I want on this bus. Are we tired enough to say, we will now own bus compa-



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nies? That's what being tired in 2005 is all about. And, economically, we should be exhausted.

Now that she has made her transition, we will again celebrate the strength and bravery of Rosa Parks. We will revel in her willingness to get out front and lay it on the line for her people. We will pay due homage to her for being

the role model and icon of "The Struggle." But what will we do to truly honor her?

I think it would be appropriate for us to emulate her. I think Rosa Parks would have beamed with pride if she had seen us working together to finish what she started — and it was simply a start, despite what some of our "leaders" would have us believe. I can see her beautiful smile now as she watched us on television cutting the ribbon to that new bus company. I can hear her laughing with joy when she heard on the radio that her people had opened a nationwide chain of hotels or restaurants.

Oh yes, I can see Rosa Parks as she drifted off to sleep, comforted by the knowledge that her actions moved us beyond merely being able to sit in a certain seat on a bus or eat in a certain restaurant. I can see her patting us on our collective head and saying in her soothing reassuring voice, "I'm proud of you."

Wouldn't that have been wonderful? So what's it going to be? Will you, just one person, as in Ms. Parks' reference to herself, "...just an average citizen," commit to doing whatever you can to move our people forward? Will you make just one defiant move, one radical gesture, one individual act that will let others know that you are just tired of giving in?

If each of us would do our part to resolve this "emergency we now face" there would be thousands of Rosa Parks in our midst. And like her, we would not only pay our fare, we would demand reciprocity — and settle for nothing less, regardless of the cost. The thou-

sands of Rosa Parks would be the new economic army we desperately need to put an end, once and for all, to the economic exploitation we accept every day.

The Rosa Parks' army would answer its call to arms at the drop of a hat. It would marshal its forces and wage war on the robber barons of our time. It would not accept anything less than a plan for economic survival for Black people; and it would be more than willing to fight for it, to sacrifice for it, and to build it into the economic power we can be in this country.

Let's make our "Mother" proud. She deserves no less.

James E. Clingman is an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati's African-American Studies Department.

## NAACP

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both propositions address a serious problem in California and both have certain details that need to be fixed by the Legislature. But he said he supports Proposition 79 over 78 because he finds the drug companies' measure voluntary nature unsatisfactory.

"The concept of universal health care is a valuable one and we need to address it," Horton said. "America is going the other way on human resources. America is divesting in human capital, while the rest of the world is investing in people. In America, we have too many profiteers who are more concerned about making money and not about our greatest asset — our people and their health and welfare. These two propositions just touch the surface of the problem."

Assemblyman Mark Ridley-Thomas, D-South Los Angeles, and head of the Democratic Caucus, said, "I believe the pharmaceutical industry has a right to make a profit under the free enterprise system, but there ought to be some limits, particularly when it comes to the health and welfare of senior citizens, children and persons on fixed incomes."

Betsy Pleasant writes for WAVE Newspapers.

## LaGrande

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nee. I am still trying to weigh the good against the bad. There are some other issues that really concern me more than his stance on abortion. The Bible says when you are a child you think as a child, but when you become an adult you put away childish things. There was a time that I was a child and I believed in abortion, but as a mature Christian, I do not. I know that every person deserves an equal and fair chance; they deserve to have the truth told about their record and then let the chips fall where they may. For those of us who care so much and are truly concerned about this appointment, as we all should be, Senator Reid's and Senator Ensign's offices are just a phone call away.