

More than a seat on the bus - Danielle McGuire



Excellent account of the Montgomery bus boycott, a key moment in the civil rights movement. In particular it demolishes the popular myth narrative of the events, and points out the importance of women's resistance to sexual violence to the boycott. Trigger warning for mention of sexual violence.

Today marks the 60th anniversary of the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama. We all know the popular story of what happened on that cold December day in 1955. Indeed, it has become an American myth. A soft-spoken seamstress with tired feet refused to move to the back of the bus to make room for a white man. Her spontaneous action and subsequent arrest sparked a yearlong boycott of the city's buses that brought down Jim Crow in the cradle of the Confederacy. And the path to black equality was cleared.

But that story, of Rosa Parks tiptoeing into history, both oversimplifies the deep roots of the boycott and disregards the bold actions of the many black women who made the Montgomery movement about more than a seat on a bus. In truth, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was a protest against racial and sexual violence, and Rosa Parks's arrest on December 1, 1955 was but one act in a life devoted to the protection and defense of black people generally, and black women specifically. Indeed, the bus boycott was, in many ways, the precursor to the #SayHerName twitter campaigns designed to remind us that the lives of black women matter.

In 1997, an interviewer asked Joe Azbell, former city editor of the Montgomery Advertiser, who was the most important person in the bus boycott. Surprisingly, he did not say Rosa Parks. "Gertrude Perkins," he said, "is not even mentioned in the history books, but she had as much to do with the bus boycott as anyone on earth." On March 27, 1949, Perkins was on her way home from a party when two white Montgomery police officers arrested her for "public drunkenness." They pushed her into the backseat of their patrol car, drove to a railroad embankment, dragged her behind a building, and raped her at gunpoint.

Left alone on the roadside, Perkins somehow mustered the courage to report the crime. She went directly to the Holt Street Baptist Church parsonage and woke Reverend Solomon A. Seay Sr., an outspoken minister in Montgomery. "We didn't go to bed that morning," he recalled. "I kept her at my house, carefully wrote down what she said and later had it notarized." The next day, Seay escorted Perkins to the police station. City authorities called Perkins's claim "completely false" and refused to hold a line-up or issue any warrants since, according to the mayor, it would "violate the Constitutional rights" of the police. Besides, he said, "my policemen would not do a thing like that."

But African Americans knew better. What happened to Gertrude Perkins was no isolated incident. Montgomery's police force had a reputation for racist and sexist brutality that went back years, and black leaders in the city were tired of it. When the authorities made clear that they would not respond to Perkins's claims, local NAACP activists, labor leaders, and ministers formed an umbrella organization called the "Citizens Committee for Gertrude Perkins." Rosa Parks was one of the local activists who demanded an investigation and trial, and helped maintain public protests that lasted for two months.

By 1949 Rosa Parks was an experienced anti-rape activist. The campaign on behalf of Perkins, for example, was modeled on a protest Parks helped launch several years earlier for Recy Taylor, a young black mother kidnapped and brutally raped in 1944 in the town of Abbeville, Alabama, by a group of white men who threatened to kill her if she told anyone. Taylor reported the crime anyway and the Montgomery NAACP sent Parks to Abbeville to investigate. After gathering Taylor's testimony, Parks carried it back to Montgomery, where she and other activists launched "The Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor," a nationwide campaign that demanded protection for black womanhood and accountability for Taylor's assailants.

Two years after the protest on behalf of Gertrude Perkins, meanwhile, black activists rallied to defend yet another victim of white sexual violence in Montgomery. In February 1951, a white grocer named Sam Green raped a black teenager named Flossie Hardman whom he employed as a babysitter. After Hardman told her parents about the attack, they decided to press charges, and when an all-white jury returned a not-guilty verdict after five minutes of deliberation, the family reached out to community activists for help. Together, individuals such as Rufus Lewis, who organized voter registration campaigns, Rosa Parks, who was still serving as secretary of the Montgomery NAACP chapter, and members of the newly formed Women's Political Council, launched a boycott of Green's grocery store. After only a few weeks, African Americans delivered their own guilty verdict by driving Green's business into the red.

By the early 1950s, then, a history of sexual assaults on black women and of the use of the boycott as a powerful weapon for justice had laid the groundwork for what was to come. Given that history, it made sense that city buses served as the flashpoint for mass protest. Other than police officers, few were as guilty of committing acts of racist violence and sexual harassment of black women as Montgomery's bus operators, who bullied and brutalized black passengers daily. Worse, bus drivers had police power. They carried blackjacks and guns, and they assaulted and sometimes even killed African Americans who refused to abide by the racial order of Jim Crow.

In 1953 alone, African Americans filed over thirty formal complaints of abuse and mistreatment on the buses. Most came from working-class black women, mainly domestics,

who made up nearly 70% of the bus ridership. They said drivers hurled nasty, sexualized insults at them, touched them inappropriately, and physically abused them. In May 1954, JoAnn Robinson, leader of the Women's Political Council, threatened a boycott of Montgomery's city buses, and only after months of futile efforts to get city officials to address the problem did the boycott finally come into being. Women walked rather than ride the buses, Rosa Parks said in 1956, not in support of her, but because she "was not the only person who had been mistreated and humiliated." Other women, she said, "had gone through similarly shameful experiences, most worse than mine."

These experiences propelled African American women into every conceivable aspect of the boycott. Women were the chief strategists and negotiators of the boycott and ran its day-to-day operation. Women helped staff the elaborate car pool system, raised most of the local money for the movement, and filled the majority of the pews at the mass meetings, where they testified publicly about physical and sexual abuse on the buses. And of course, by walking hundreds of miles to protest their humiliation, African American women reclaimed their bodies and demanded the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

Rooted in the struggle to protect and defend black womanhood from racial and sexual violence, the Montgomery Bus Boycott is impossible to understand and situate in its proper historical context without understanding the stories and saying the names of Gertrude Perkins, Flossie Hardman, Recy Taylor, and all the black women who were mistreated in Montgomery.

Today, as we celebrate the anniversary of Rosa Parks's arrest, witness the growth of the #BlackLivesMatter movement on city streets and campus quads across the country, and #SayHerName to demand an end to police violence against women of color, we should look to the past – and remember it correctly. Parks and the women who started the Montgomery bus boycott fought for more than a seat on the bus. They demanded the right to move through the world without being molested, fought against police brutality and racial and sexual violence, and insisted on the right to ownership and control of their own bodies.

Taken from <http://werehistory.org/rosa-parks/>