

Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks was an African-American woman who made history with her comparatively small action of sitting still on a bus, which went on to spark major changes in American society.

Early Life

Rosa Parks was born Rosa Louise McCauley on 4th February, 1913. After her parents separated, she grew up on a farm with her mother, brother and grandparents in Montgomery, Alabama, USA. She grew up in a time when America was segregated before the Civil Rights Act was enforced. African-American people and other people of colour were treated as second-class citizens. They did not have the same rights as white people.

Segregation in America

When Rosa Parks was growing up, black and white people were separated by law in many ways. This was called 'segregation'. The laws in many American states enforced segregation between white people and black people in public places such as schools, transport, toilets and restaurants. It was also clearly apparent that black facilities were of a poorer standard than white facilities. The laws at the time also made it difficult for black people to vote. So not only were black and white people segregated, but black people were treated very badly in society.

The Bus Ride That Changed History

On 1st December, 1955, Rosa Parks was travelling home from work on a bus and sitting – as rules required – in the black section to the rear of the bus. Bus companies prioritised seating for white people and moved black people further back, or made them stand if the white section was full and a white person needed a seat. This happened to Rosa and she was told to move further back to give her seat to a white person...but she refused to move. She was threatened with police action but she stayed sat still, adamant that she would not follow the 'rules'. Eventually, the police arrested, charged and fined her for breaking the law.

What Happened Next?

Amazingly, Rosa's defiance unleashed a wave of protest. Around 40 000 black citizens (and some white citizens) supported the 'Montgomery Bus Boycott'. The profits of the bus companies fell and the sheer size of the movement could not be ignored. The press reported it all over America and the boycott went on for 381 days. It gained the attention of the USA government and just over a year later, in December 1956, the unfair segregation on buses was lifted. Rosa's small actions made history as they acted as a catalyst for the Civil Rights movement, which eventually succeeded. Even though it wasn't the end of segregation and civil rights still had a long way to go, it was a victory for the rights of black people within society.

"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 than 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 forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

Parks, Rosa; James Haskins (1992). Rosa Parks: My Story. Dial Books. p. 116

