

Profiles in American History

The Life and Times of

ROSA PARKS

Kathleen Tracy





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CHAPTER
1

Tired

City officials in Montgomery, Alabama, were desperate. In the aftermath of Rosa Parks's arrest and conviction for not giving up her bus seat for white passengers, the city's black community began a boycott of city buses. What was supposed to be a one-day protest had turned into an ongoing battle of wills that was threatening to bankrupt the transportation system.

Mrs. Parks was deeply involved in the boycott. While church leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy negotiated with the mayor and other officials, Parks and others worked behind the scenes coordinating car pools and rides for black commuters. At first, black-owned cab companies offered rides for just ten cents, until the Montgomery police commissioner invoked an old statute requiring a minimum fare of forty-five cents. When that didn't work, police officers began a campaign of harassment. People waiting for their car-pool ride were arrested for loitering. Car-pool drivers were ticketed for driving too slow or for having old windshield wipers or for going one mile an hour over the posted speed limit. Martin Luther King himself was arrested and taken to the city jail for allegedly going 30 mph in a 25 mph zone. Still, the boycott continued.

Using an antiquated Montgomery law that prohibited boycotts without just cause, a grand jury indicted Dr. King and eighty-nine


others, including Rosa Parks and prominent community leader E.D. Nixon, for conspiring to conduct the bus boycott and interfering with private enterprise. They were arrested on February 22, 1956, booked and released. The news of Parks's second arrest brought increased national attention to the situation in Montgomery and strengthened the resolve of the protesters. On March 19, Dr. King was the first to be tried. After a four-day trial, the presiding judge found King guilty of conducting an illegal boycott against Montgomery City Lines. He was fined \$500 plus court costs, but the judge later suspended the sentence and postponed the remaining boycott cases while King's lawyers appealed the judgment.

Through it all, the boycott dragged on. Looking back, it is clear that city officials underestimated the resolve of Montgomery's black community, which was fueled in part by ongoing anger over the 1955 murder of a young man named Emmett Till, in the neighboring state of Mississippi.

It was a brutal crime that shocked many. It also brought the fundamental issues of the civil rights movement to the forefront of the American consciousness. Well into the 1950s, segregation in the Deep South was still rampant, as was resentment over the federal government's efforts to racially integrate their communities. Each small victory in the fight for racial equality stoked that bitterness into a simmering rage that frequently exploded into deadly violence. But what made the Till case so riveting—and polarizing—was the murderers' lack of remorse and the white community's apathy over two of their neighbors literally getting away with murder.

In August 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old from Chicago, was visiting his uncle Moses "Preacher" Wright in the Mississippi Delta. A sharecropper, Moses lived in an isolated rural area where blacks and whites lived separate and unequal lives. The dusty town was called Money. It consisted of a gas station, a post office, a school, and a handful of stores clustered together in the middle of the surrounding cotton fields.

One of those businesses was Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, operated by white owners Roy and Carolyn Bryant. Carolyn, a petite twenty-one-year-old who stood just five feet tall and weighed 103 pounds, had dropped out of high school when she was seventeen and married Roy, who was in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division.



After he was discharged, Roy's brothers helped him set up the grocery store that sold goods mostly to the local black field hands. By 1955, Roy and Carolyn had two young sons, aged three and two, and were struggling financially. They lived in the back of their store, unable to afford a television, much less a car. On the evenings they were able to borrow a car, Carolyn and Roy went to the local drive-in to see a movie, their toddlers asleep in the backseat. They blamed much of their money woes on a government program that provided food to blacks, negating the need to buy from the Bryants' store.

It was a difficult life but they relied on their faith, and family, to get by. Roy's mom had been married twice. With her first husband she had five sons, known as the Milam children. She had six more children, three boys and three girls, with her next husband. These were the Bryant children. All eleven children were boisterous and tight-knit. And they all resented blacks challenging white superiority, and resisted any movement that promoted civil rights.

To earn extra money, Roy frequently drove a truck for his brother, leaving Carolyn to run the store in his absence. The family made sure Carolyn was never alone when Roy was away by having one of her sisters-in-law at the store with her. Since Carolyn was not allowed to sleep in the store alone overnight—nor were the women allowed to travel after dark unless accompanied by a man—one of Roy's brothers would pick up Carolyn and whoever was keeping her company and take them to his house.

On Wednesday, August 24, 1955, Roy was away on a run. That night, Carolyn's sister-in-law Juanita Milam, along with her two young sons, was at the store. Juanita's husband, J.W. Milam, was scheduled to pick them up after the store closed at nine o'clock.

About an hour and a half before closing time, eight young black youths—one girl and seven boys—pulled up outside the store in a 1946 Ford. The boys, aged thirteen to nineteen, were all related to Moses "Preacher" Wright. Four of the young men lived in the area; the others, including Emmett "Bobo" Till, were visiting the Delta from Chicago. Although Till was just five feet five inches tall, he was stocky and muscular, weighing about 160 pounds. According to Preacher Wright, Bobo "looked like a man."¹


The kids from the Ford joined another group of black youths who were already hanging out in front of the store. Roy Bryant

had installed checkerboards, and several of the teens were playing checkers while others talked or just fooled around. At some point, the boys began teasing each other about girls. Bobo boasted that he had a white girlfriend back in Chicago. To prove it, he showed everyone the picture of her he carried in his wallet. He also bragged that he and the girl were physically intimate.

One of the boys dared Bobo to show them just how good he was with white women by going into the store and asking Carolyn out on a date. At first, Bobo thought better of it. But when another one of the boys accused him of being afraid, he sauntered into the store by



Before her son left for Mississippi, Mamie Bradley tried to warn him that race relations in the South were different than they were in Chicago—since the end of the Civil War more than 500 lynchings of African Americans had occurred. Mamie would later refer to her son as the sacrificial lamb of the American Civil Rights Movement.



himself, stopped near the candy display, and asked Carolyn for two cents' worth of bubble gum. When she held it out, Bobo squeezed her hand and reportedly asked her for a date.

When she yanked her hand away and started moving back, he allegedly stepped in front of her and said: "You needn't be afraid o' me, Baby. I been with white girls before."²

Those raised in the Delta quickly realized Bobo had gone way too far. A cousin ran inside the store and dragged Bobo out. Carolyn followed, running to Juanita's car—where she knew a gun was hidden under the front seat. As she ran past, Bobo gave her a "wolf whistle" before being pushed into a car and driven away.

Although frightened and upset, Carolyn agreed with Juanita that it was best they not tell their husbands what had happened. When J.W. came to pick them up, they did not mention the incident. However, the black youths weren't nearly so discreet. When Roy got back home on Friday and came to the store, one of his black customers mentioned that word was going around about a Chicago boy who had disrespected Carolyn. Roy confronted her, and she told him what had happened.

Some people would later claim that Roy had no choice but to confront Bobo; otherwise he would look like a coward to all his white neighbors. So, when J.W. stopped by on Saturday night, Roy explained the situation, and J.W. agreed to pick him up early Sunday morning to drive out to Preacher Wright's place.

At six feet two and 235 pounds, J.W., also called Big Milam, was an imposing figure. Although he only had a ninth-grade education, he had excelled in the Army during World War II. He was a platoon leader and an expert in hand-to-hand combat. He survived several injuries, including shrapnel and being shot in the chest. When discharged, he kept his Army .45 Colt automatic pistol.

Rather than waiting until morning to confront Bobo, J.W., an imposing World War II veteran, woke Roy up at 2 a.m. They headed to Preacher's, which was a few miles outside of Money.

All of Bobo's cockiness was gone. He was terrified. He had wanted to go home to Chicago on Thursday, but Preacher's wife thought those people saying that Roy would kill Bobo were just being dramatic. Likewise, Preacher wasn't especially worried, and brought Bobo out to confront Roy and J.W. However, when the two



It took the all white jury just an hour of deliberation to acquit Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam of Till's murder. The two would later admit in a magazine interview of killing the teen after he refused to acknowledge they were better because they were white.

men ordered Bobo to lie in the back of the truck and drove off, the Wrights became fearful and contacted the sheriff.

Later, J.W. would say they intended only to pistol-whip Bobo and frighten him, but Bobo refused to be intimidated. No matter how many times Milam struck him with his Colt pistol, Bobo kept repeating that he was not afraid; he was as good as they were; and yes, he had been with white women.

“Well, what else could we do?” J.W. asked later. “I’m no bully; I never hurt a n***** in my life. I like n*****s—in their place. . . . N*****s ain’t gonna vote where I live. . . . They ain’t gonna go to school with my kids. And when a n***** gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he’s tired o’ living. . . .”³

They drove Bobo to the Tallahatchie River, made him strip, and shot him. They tied a gin fan around his neck and threw his body into the river. Three days later, it was discovered by some young boys fishing.

J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant admitted in a *Look* magazine interview that they killed Emmett Till. But a jury in Sumner, Mississippi, after one hour of deliberation, found them not guilty of murder. Two months later, a grand jury declined to indict them for kidnapping.

The murder of Emmett Till became a rallying cry for the then-struggling civil rights movement. It inspired more blacks to become politically and socially active—including Rosa Parks.

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