

Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks was an Black 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 on 4th February, 1913, and grew up on a farm with her mother, brother and grandparents in a place called Montgomery in the USA. Rosa Parks grew up at a time when Black 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 people were not allowed to use many of the same public places as White people. 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. Usually, the schools, hospitals and bathrooms that White people used were in much better condition than the ones that Black people had to use. The laws at the time also made it difficult for Black people to vote. Many White people did not respect Black people and treated them very badly.

The Bus Ride That Changed History

On 1st December, 1955, Rosa Parks was travelling home from work on a bus and sitting – as she had to – in the section allocated for Black people at the back of the bus. The bus companies always moved Black people further back or made them stand if the section allocated for White people was full and a White person needed to sit down. This happened to Rosa and she was told to move further back to give her seat to a White person...but she did not move. She was threatened with police action but she stayed put. Eventually, the police arrested, charged and fined her for breaking the law.

What Happened Next?

Amazingly, Rosa's behaviour unleashed a wave of protest and 40 000 Black people in the area (and some White people) supported a bus boycott (a refusal to use the bus services in Montgomery). The bus companies lost a lot of money and the amount of people involved could not be ignored. The newspapers reported it and the boycott went on for 381 days, before it came to the attention of the government and just over a year later, in December 1956, the segregation on buses was lifted.

Rosa's actions made history as they sparked a movement to make a change. Even though it wasn't the end of segregation and civil rights still had a long way to go, it was a victory.

"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

