

but I was being held in jail, and I wanted my husband to come and get me out. . . . He didn't have a car at that time, so he had to get someone to bring him down. At the time when he got down, Mr. Nixon and the Durrs had just made bond for me, so we all met at the jail and we went home.

E.D. NIXON

Then we went on up to the house and I said to Mrs. Parks, "Mrs. Parks"—her mother had some coffee made—I said, "Mrs. Parks, this is the case we've been looking for. We can break this situation on the bus with your case."

She said, "Well, I haven't thought of it just like that." So we talked to her mother and her husband, and finally they came 'round, said they'd go along with it.

She said, "All right." She said, "You know, Mr. Nixon, if you say so, I'll go along with it."

I said, "Okay, we can do it."

What was there about Mrs. Parks that made her the right litigant as opposed to these others?

Mrs. Parks was a married woman. She had worked for me for twelve years, and I knew her. She was morally clean, and she had a fairly good academic training. Now, she wasn't afraid and she didn't get excited about anything. If there ever was a person that we woulda been able to break the situation that existed on the Montgomery city line, Rosa L. Parks was the woman to use. And I knew that. I probably woulda examined a dozen more before I got there if Mrs. Parks hadn't come along before I found the right 'un. 'Cause, you see, it's hard for you to see it, it's hard for the average person—it's hard for the black people here in

Montgomery to see. It's hard for a whole lot of people far away from here to see it. But when you have set 'cross the table and talked with black people in investigations as long as I have over a period of years, you just know it. . . . Well, I spent years in it and I knew it . . . when I selected Mrs. Parks, that was the person.

E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks first met when he was president of Montgomery's struggling NAACP chapter. Nixon: "Mrs. Parks came to a NAACP meetin'. When she joined the NAACP, she got to the place she never missed, and I selected her secretary. I ran her for secretary; she was elected. And one year, she didn't run, they elected somebody else, and then I hired her." As Nixon's employee, she ran the office from which he operated as state NAACP president and as a regional officer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Nixon recalls that on one occasion, without consulting him, Mrs. Parks drafted a letter over his signature protesting an Alabama politician's statement that passage of a federal antilynching law would "destroy the peaceful relations between the two races."

Despite this background, Mrs. Parks has been inaccurately characterized in many accounts as a simple drudge who, though temporarily emboldened by the bus driver's abuse, had no concept of the larger struggle for racial justice. Such characterizations are based on her much-quoted remark that she refused to stand because "my feet hurt."

Actually, "I had almost a life history of being rebellious against being mistreated because of my color," and although no one could have predicted that moment on the bus, Rosa Parks' "life history" had prepared her for it. Only a few months before, in the summer of 1955, she had received through her work in the NAACP an invitation to visit Highlander Folk School, an integrated retreat in the Tennessee hills. (See also Roy Harris and Myles Horton.) "That was the first time in my life I had lived in an atmosphere of complete equality with the members of the other race, and I did enjoy going up there, and I felt it could be done without the signs that said 'White' and 'Colored'—well, without any artificial barriers of racial segregation."

And so after we agreed, oh, I guess we spent a couple of hours discussing this thing. Then I went home and I took a sheet of paper and I drew right in the center of the paper. I used that for the square and then I used Hunter Station, Washington Park, Pickett Springs, all the different areas in Montgomery, and I used a slide rule to get a estimate. I discovered nowhere in Montgomery at that time a man couldn't walk to work if he wanted to. I said, "We can beat this thing."

I told my wife about it and I said, "You know what?"

She said, "What?"

I said, "We're going to boycott the buses."

She said, "Cold as it is?"

I said, "Yeah."

She said, "I doubt it."

I said, "Well, I'll tell you one thing. If you keep 'em off when it cold, you won't have no trouble keeping 'em off when it get hot."

She shook her head. She said, "My husband! If headaches were selling for a dollar a dozen, my husband would be just the man to walk in the drugstore and say, 'Give me a dozen headaches.'" [Laughs]

So anyhow, I recorded quite a few names, starting off with Rev. Abernathy, Rev. Hubbard, Rev. King, and on down the line, and I called some of the people who represent peoples so that they could get the word out. The first man I called was Reverend Ralph Abernathy. He said, "Yes, Brother Nixon, I'll go along. I think it's a good thing."

The second person I called was the late Reverend H.H. Hubbard. He said, "Yes, I'll go along with you."

And I called Rev. King, was number three, and he said, "Brother Nixon, let me think about it awhile, and call me back."

When I called him back, he was number nineteen, and of course, he agreed to go along. I said, "I'm glad you agreed because I already set the meeting up to meet at your church." 'Course, he didn't even know Mrs. Parks at that time. I couldn't attend the meeting,* and I asked another man, another minister, Methodist minister, to chair the meeting with the understanding that no permanent officers be elected until I come back, and there wasn't any elected.

Why did you make that stipulation?

I wanted to be shore the right people was in office, and I felt that I was, with my work in the community, better prepared to know who the right person would be than anybody else. So nobody was elected. They set up a temporary meeting for Monday evening. So I came back Sunday morning and my wife met me at the station. I got in about nine o'clock. She give me the morning paper. They had an article, a two-column spread wrote by Joe Azbell,** on the front page of the *Advertiser*, talking about the bus boycott, a favorable article. The kind of article I'm almost sure that that's what got him fired. But anyhow, he wrote a good article, kept his promise.

Had you tipped him off?

*He was out of town because of his job as a passenger-train porter.

**Joe Azbell, whose reporting so pleased E.D. Nixon, later went to work for Alabama Governor George Wallace. Azbell was publicity director in Wallace's 1976 presidential campaign.

Oh, yes, I knew him personally.

How did you handle that?

I just called him and told him I had a hot lead, a story. I said, "Now, if you promise me you would write a good story, I would fill you in on it. I'll be at the station at two o'clock."* He met me down there and we talked about it and I made him promise he'd write a good story, and knowing him like I did, I felt he'd tell me the truth about it. He did write a good story. He wrote a heck of a good story. . . .

The Advertiser ran its story as an exposé, quoting from a leaflet Nixon had circulated in the black neighborhoods: ". . . don't ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or anyplace, Monday, December 5 Another Negro woman has been arrested and put in jail because she refused to give up her bus seat. . . . Come to a mass meeting Monday at 7 P.M. at the Holt Street Baptist Church for further instructions." By reprinting the leaflet for the titillation of white Montgomery, the Advertiser—as Nixon had anticipated when he tipped off its reporter—had in effect distributed the leaflet to most of the black households in Montgomery.

Montgomery police, adopting the pattern of overreaction that Southern police were to follow for a decade, announced that there would be "two police behind every bus in the city" to prevent black "goon squads" from enforcing the boycott against those of either race who wished to ride. Of course, the police failed to consider what the presence of police escorts signified to black bus riders. "Monday morning, the black folks come out there and saw two police . . . behind every bus. They just went the other way, see. Ended up at eight o'clock that morning, the buses ain't hauled nobody, hadn't hauled nobody, didn't haul nobody else for the next 381 days."

Then Mrs. Parks was tried that morning and she was found guilty. . . . I'd been in court off and on for twenty years, hearing different peoples, and very seldom, if ever, there was another black man unless he was being tried. But that particular morning, the morning of December the fifth, 1955, the black man was reborn again. I couldn't believe it when they found her guilty and I had to go through the vestibule down the hall to the clerk's office to sign her appeal bond. . . . People came in that other door, and that door was about ten feet wide, and they was just that crowded in there, people wanting to know what happened. I said, "Well,

*On Friday afternoon, before E.D. Nixon left on his regular weekend run as a porter.

they found her guilty. Now, I'm gon' have to make another bond for her. As soon as we can get her bond signed, we'll bring her right out." They said, "If you don't hurry and come out, we're coming in there and getcha." I couldn't believe it. When we got outside, police were standing outside with sawed-off shotguns, and the people all up and down the streets was from sidewalk to sidewalk out there. I looked around there, and I bet you there was over a thousand black people—black men—on the streets out there.

Did they understand that the guilty verdict was what you were after?

. . . No, they didn't understand that. I didn't tell anybody that. But I know if they'da found her not guilty, we'da had the same thing again. They really did the thing that was best for us when they found her guilty.

*He sensed that Montgomery's segregationists had committed a historic tactical blunder. By prosecuting Mrs. Parks under a segregation ordinance rather than on some subterfuge such as disobeying an officer, they were inviting a federal court test of the Jim Crow laws upon which segregation throughout the Deep South depended. Within a few weeks four Montgomery women, spurred by Mrs. Parks' conviction, filed in federal district court in Montgomery what would prove to be a successful challenge of both city and state bus segregation laws.**

However, he was more concerned with the immediate future of the boycott than with the long grind of litigation as he left City Hall that day, December 5, 1955. He fell into step with Rev. Abernathy and Rev. E.N. French, who had also attended the trial. From them, he learned that prior to the rally that night, there was to be a meeting of the city's ministers. In that preliminary meeting the ministers would decide on basic policies for the boycott and pick its leaders. He told Abernathy, "Well, what we need to do, me and you and Rev. French . . . right now, is agree on a recommendation, agree on a resolution and agree on a name." With such preparation, he sensed, they could dominate the meeting.

I had wrote three mild recommendations. . . . I know one was "Seatin' on the bus, first come, first served," and "Negro bus drivers in predominant Negro neighborhoods." I forgot what the other one was. "More courtesy to Negro patrons," I believe. But anyhow, they agreed on it. Then he and Rev. French wrote the resolution and they read it and I agreed with them. Then we came up with a name for the organization, and

*For an analysis of the importance of this case, see Judge Elbert P. Tuttle.

I said, "What about the Citizens' Committee?" Rev. Abernathy said, "No, I don't want no Citizens' Committee. Too close to the white Citizens Council." Then he came up and said, "What about the Montgomery Improvement Association?" I said, "I'll go along with it," so we agreed on it.

And Abernathy was sittin' as close as me, in here to you, and he leant over. He said, "Brother Nixon, now you gon' serve as president, ain't chya?" I said, "Naw, not unless'n you all don't accept my man." He said, "Who is your man?" I said, "Martin Luther King." He said, "I'll go along with it." French said, "I'll go along with it." So then we had not only our recommendation, our resolution, our name, we had our president.

Why did you put your finger on King?

In August of 1955 he was the guest speaker for the NAACP, and a professor over at the State Teachers College and I were sitting in the back. His name was J.E. Pierce. When King got through talking, I said, "Pierce, you know that guy made a heck of a speech."

He said, "I agree with you. He sho' did."

I said, "I don't know how I'm going to do it yet, but someday I'm gon' hang him to the stars."

Then the next thing, he had not been here long enough for the city fathers to put their hand on him. Usually, you come to town and you start wantin' to do this and do that, and the city fathers get their hand on you probably and give you a suit of clothes or somethin' of that kind, and it ends up you're on their side. He wasn't the kind ever to accept it, even if they'da tried it.

In that meetin', that evening, everybody was still—all the ministers was still afraid—and if you read Rev. King's book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, you'll see my quotation in there.* They would talk about tryin' to do it so the white people wouldn't know about it, and one of 'em said, "... well, we'll mimeograph some little pamphlets. Everybody come in the meetin' that night we'll pass 'em one, and nobody will know how it happened."

Well, I was sittin' there boiling over, so mad I didn't know what to do,

*In *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), an account of the bus boycott, King quotes Nixon as accusing the ministers of "acting like little boys." Angered by the remark, King resolved to prove the older man wrong.

so I jumped up, and I forgot about we was up in the balcony of the church. I said, "What the hell you people talkin' 'bout?" Just like that, see, and I cussed. I said, "How you gonna have a mass meeting, gonna boycott a city bus line without the white folks knowing it?" [Voice rising] I said, "You guys have went around here and lived off these poor wash-women all your lives and ain't never done nothing for 'em. And now you got a chance to do something for 'em, you talkin' about you don't want the white folks to know it."

I said, "Unless'n this program is accepted and brought into the church like a decent, respectable organization, . . . I'll take the microphone and tell 'em the reason we don't have a program is 'cause you all are too scared to stand on your feet and be counted. You oughta make up your mind right now that you gon' either admit you are a grown man or concede to the fact that you are a bunch of scared boys." And King hollered that he wasn't no coward, that nobody called him a coward.

Once prodded into defending his courage, King, who was then twenty-six years old, had no choice but to accept the presidency of the Montgomery Improvement Association and to make the main address at the MIA's first rally that night. "I said, 'When he's through, I'm gon' come behind him.'"

Rev. King made a masterpiece that evenin'. So when he did, then I came behind him, and I never shall forget, I said, "Good evenin', my friends." I said, "I'm so happy to see all of you out here tonight, but I wanna tell you somethin'. If you're scared, you better get your hat and coat and go home. It's gon' be a long drawn-out affair and before it's over with somebody gon' die." I said, "May be me, I don't know. . . . The only request I have is if I'm the one that dies, don't let me die in vain. For twenty-some-odd years I been fighting and saying to myself that I didn't want the children to come along and have to suffer all the insults that I've suffered. Well, hell, I changed my mind tonight." Just like that. "I decided that I wanted to enjoy some of this freedom myself." And everybody hollered when I said that.

And anyhow then we took up a collection after that. I served as treasurer for the first three years. We took up a collection, took up \$785 there that night. And I ribbed . . . the commissioner of police that night. He was in the meetin', with two or three police and everything, two of the black police were there. I had my car there and went by there and I told him at the door, I said, "Say, I cain't go home with all this money in the street myself. You got to send me home in the police car." And he turned around and told a policeman named Worthy . . . "You all take Nixon

home." He carried me home, 'cause nobody thought the thing gon' last over a week or ten days, then everybody be back on the bus. He carried me home; my wife had to drive my car home by herself. [Laughs]

I'm called an Uncle Tom now because I can deal with the power structure. For instance, I don't mind telling you, I had an appointment with Governor Wallace day before yesterday evenin'. All the mayor, the commissioners, I can deal with 'em. . . .

You see, I figure now if I'm what you call an Uncle Tom . . . you need ten thousand of 'em here. . . .

I figure it was the best thing that ever happened in Montgomery, and I'm proud that I was part of it, even though . . . so many people got famous out of it and I was still left here. And I'm still here servin' the people and the rest of 'em gone. So I'm gettin' more joy out of it now, knowing that I can touch a telephone or walk into an office and get things done, I'm gettin' more joy out of it now than I imagine them guys did who got in it for a name. And I haven't ever looked for a name. . . .

What do you think the history books ought to say about your role and Mrs. Parks' role?

I certainly think history books ought to, if you're gonna talk about the boycott, they oughta start from the day Rosa L. Parks was arrested and not just December the fifth when Rev. King was elected president. . . .

I haven't seen anybody yet that wanted to believe anything about the Movement except something what the Reverend King said. I ain't seen nobody yet. Now I've had peoples interviewed me. I betcha I've had a thousand people interview me. Everybody, they'll set and listen at me talk, then they go away and write. Even in the foreign country, they want to start off with December the fifth. Well, we was doing things before Rev. King had ever finished school, come out of school. We's doing things in this town here. The Movement didn't spring up overnight. It came up that particular night because we found the right person.

'Course, even today, people don't wanna hear the truth about MIA. If you gonna say somethin' that Rev. King didn't do, you're almost spittin' in folks' face. I was on an airplane coming down from New York some time ago, sittin' beside a lady, and she asked me who I was and I told her. She said, 'Oh, you're down in Montgomery, Alabama.' She said, "Lord,

I don't know what 'ud happened to the black people if Rev. King hadn't went to town."

I said, "If Mrs. Parks had got up and given that white man her seat, you'd never aheard of Rev. King."

When I said that, man, I as well as spit in her face.