

I

THE BEGINNING

MONTGOMERY, 1955-56

E.D. NIXON

"I'm an old man now, but I'm so proud that I had a part in what happened here in Montgomery." He is, in fact, a year older than the century, and although retired from the railroad, he works every day as recreation director of a public housing project in Montgomery. From his office window he can look out over the playground he built. It is teeming with black children who attend the daycare center he founded. He leans back in his chair, props one leg atop his desk to ease an arthritic knee, and recalls the night he was invited to Madison Square Garden to tell the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

There were eighteen thousand people in the Garden that night. He sat between two of his favorite people, Eleanor Roosevelt and A. Philip Randolph, the founder of Nixon's union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. It was past midnight when he was called to speak, and as he approached the lectern, he threw away the speech he had written.

I don't know how, it just came to me all at once. I said, "I'm E.D. Nixon. I'm from Montgomery, Alabama, a city that's known as the Cradle of the Confederacy, that had stood still for more than ninety-three years until Rosa L. Parks was arrested and thrown in jail like a common criminal." [Breaks into a singsong] I said, "Fifty thousand people rose up and caught hold to the Cradle of the Confederacy and began to rock it till the Jim Crow rockers began to reel and the segregated slats began to fall out." Said, "I'm from that city." And man, people just fell out. I coulda sat down then. Right then.

I've known times for years and years I was the only person in Montgomery saying anything about the mistreatment of Negroes—to the end that it got to the place that most people looked on me as a leader, even though I wasn't never designated as such, because I could call a meeting. Say it was necessary that we have a meeting, I bet you I could call forty ministers at that time, at least thirty would be present. And I could appoint a meeting at any church. See, people think because Rev. King was selected and the meetings started at his church, that he done it, but I selected the spot. I called the people together, and I told them we was going to meet at that Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. . . . * If we'd met on the suburbs, insurance mens and doctors and things who were working downtown wouldn't leave the office to go away out. But with it right downtown in the heart there wasn't no question they could walk right around the corner to it, and that's why the meeting was set up there, but a whole lot of people don't know that. They just think Rev. King come in, organized the Montgomery Improvement Association at his church and all. That isn't true. But the question is—we're not arguing the point, I'm just giving you the facts—that the job was done and that's the important thing.

How did the bus boycott get started?

First of all, we'd talked about a bus boycott all the year. We had three other people prior to Mrs. Parks arrested who reported their incidents to us, but you couldn'ta found nobody in Montgomery would agree to have a bus boycott—and I'm not patting myself on the shoulder—unless it was approved by E. D. Nixon. The first one was a minister's daughter. Her name was Mrs. Wayne. After I talked to her I discovered that she would not make a good litigant. Now you are on the outside here. You think that anybody that got arrested would be good. Now you would think that, the average person would think that, but my training with NAACP and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters taught me different. I've handled so many cases that I know when a man would stand up and when he wouldn't. So after I talked to her, I told the group, "No use in me going to court with this case, we can't win it."

"Then we had the second case; she was a young girl, a school girl. When I got home, two or three carloads were out in front of my door waiting on me, said, 'We got the right case now.' He rejected this girl, too. The same thing happened a third time. One of the girls had personal prob-

*The church near the Alabama capitol where Martin Luther King, Jr., became pastor in 1954.

lems which he knew a clever lawyer could exploit in court. Another was vetoed when he visited her home and found her father "sitting there drunk and half-dressed" on the front porch. He believed that any black who challenged segregation had to be above reproach.

So then some of the people were getting disgusted with me, see. Some of them said they didn't know whether I was making the right approach or not. This was in October when this last case was. Then, on December one, Rosa L. Parks was arrested. When she was arrested, a friend of hers called my wife and told my wife they'd arrested Mrs. Parks and Mrs. Nixon called my office. . . .

She said, "Arrested Mrs. Parks," and I said, "For what?" She said, "I don't know. Go get her," just like I could go get her. I called down there and asked them what was the charge against her, and the desk sergeant said to me, he said, "None of your so-and-so business." Of course, no use of me arguing with him, so I called a white lawyer. Our black lawyer was out of the state at the time, Fred Gray. I called a white lawyer by the name of Clifford J. Durr.* I said, "Mr. Durr, they arrested Mrs. Parks." He said, "For what?" and I said, "Something about on the bus. What I want you to do is to call up down there and find out the charges against her." So he called up down there, in a few minutes called me back and said, "The charge is violating the Alabama segregation law."

*A Federal Communications Commission member in the New Deal, Durr had resigned from government service during the loyalty-oath probes of the Truman Administration. Until his death in 1975, he, with his wife Virginia, was among Alabama's best-known white liberals. The aristocratic Durrs were despised by segregationists as traitors to their class and admired by progressives for their political courage.