**Life Before Civil Rights**

**How do you feel about the way black Americans used to be treated?**

I always felt badly because our people were not treated fairly. We should have been free and given the same opportunities others had.

**How did it feel not to have civil rights?**

Of course it felt like we should all be free people and we should have the same rights as other people. In the South, at that time, there was legally enforced segregation. There were places black people couldn't go, and rights we did not have. This was not acceptable to me. A lot of other people didn't disobey the rules because they didn't want to get into trouble. I was willing to get arrested — it was worth the consequences.

**When you were little, did you understand that black people weren't treated fairly?**

When I was a young child I couldn't understand why black people weren't treated fairly. But when I did learn about it, I didn't feel very good about it.

**How do you feel about the people who treated you so unfairly?**

I don't think well of people who are prejudiced against people because of race. The only way for prejudiced people to change is for them to decide for themselves that all human beings should be treated fairly. We can't force them to think that way.

**Were you allowed to learn to read when you were little?**

Well, yes. I was born 50 years after slavery, in 1913. I was allowed to read. My mother, who was a teacher, taught me when I was a very young child.

The first school I attended was a small building that went from first to sixth grade. There was one teacher for all of the students. There could be anywhere from 50 to 60 students of all different ages. From 5 or 6 years old to in their teens. We went to school five months out of the year. The rest of the time young people would be available to work on the farm. The parents had to buy whatever the student used. Often, if your family couldn't afford it, you had no access to books, pencils, whatever. However, often the children would share. I liked to read all sorts of stories, like fairy tales — Little Red Riding Hood, Mother Goose. I read very often.

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**Rosa Parks' Role in Civil Rights**

**What made you decide on December 1, 1955, not to get up from your seat?**

That particular day that I decided was not the first time I had trouble with that particular driver. He evicted me before, because I would not go around to the back door after I was already onto the bus. The evening that I boarded the bus, and noticed that he was the same driver, I decided to get on anyway. I did not sit at the very front of the bus; I took a seat with a man who was next to the window -- the first seat that was allowed for "colored" people to sit in. We were not disturbed until we reached the third stop after I boarded the bus. At this point a few white people boarded the bus, and one white man was left standing. When the driver noticed him standing, he spoke to us (the man and two women across the aisle) and told us to let the man have the seat. The other three all stood up. But the driver saw me still sitting there. He said would I stand up, and I said, "No, I will not." Then he said, "I'll have you arrested." And I told him he could do that. So he didn't move the bus any further. Several black people left the bus.

Two policemen got on the bus in a couple of minutes. The driver told the police that I would not stand up. The policeman walked down and asked me why I didn't stand up, and I said I didn't think I should stand up. "Why do you push us around?" I asked him. And he said, "I don't know. But the law is the law and you are under arrest." As soon as he said that I stood up, the three of us left the bus together.

One of them picked up my purse, the other picked up my shopping bag. And we left the bus together. It was the first time I'd had that particular thing happen. I was determined that I let it be known that I did not want to be treated in this manner. The policemen had their squad car waiting, they gave me my purse and bag, and they opened the back door of the police car for me to enter.

**Did you think your actions would have such a far-reaching effect on the Civil Rights movement?**

I didn't have any idea just what my actions would bring about. At the time I was arrested I didn't know how the community would react. I was glad that they did take the action that they did by staying off the bus.

**What was it like walking all those miles when the bus boycott was going on?**

We were fortunate enough to have a carpool organized to pick people up and give them rides. Of course, many people walked and sometimes I did too. I was willing to walk rather than go back to the buses under those unfair conditions.

Very shortly after the boycott began, I was dismissed from my job as a seamstress at a department store. I worked at home doing sewing and typing. I don't know why I was dismissed from the job, but I think it was because I was arrested.

**What did your family think about what happened?**

After I was in jail I had the opportunity to call home and speak to my mother. The first thing she asked me was if they had attacked me, beat me. That's what they used to do to people. I said no, that I hadn't been hurt, but I was in jail. She gave the phone to my husband and he said he would be there shortly and would get me out of jail.

There was a man who had come to my house who knew I had been arrested. He told my husband he'd give him a ride to the jail. Meantime, Mr. E.D. Nixon, one of the leaders of the NAACP, had heard about my being arrested from a friend of mine. He called to see if I was at the jail. The people at the jail wouldn't tell him I was there. So Mr. Nixon got in touch with a white lawyer named Clifford Durr. Mr. Durr called the jail, and they told him that I was there. Mr. Nixon had to pick up Mr. Durr before he could come get me. Mr. Durr's wife insisted on going too, because she and I were good friends. Mr. Nixon helped release me from jail.

**Were you scared to do such a brave thing?**

No, actually I had no fear at that particular time. I was very determined to let it be known how it felt to be treated in that manner — discriminated against. I was thinking mostly about how inconvenienced I was — stopping me from going home and doing my work — something I had not expected. When I did realize, I faced it, and it was quite a challenge to be arrested. I did not really know what would happen. I didn't feel especially frightened. I felt more annoyed than frightened.

**Did you know that you were going to jail if you didn't give up your seat?**

Well, I knew I was going to jail when the driver said he was going to have me arrested. I didn't feel good about going to jail, but I was willing to go to let it be known that under this type of segregation, black people had endured too much for too long.

**How did you feel when you were asked to give up your seat?**

I didn't feel very good about being told to stand up and not have a seat. I felt I had a right to stay where I was. That was why I told the driver I was not going to stand. I believed that he would arrest me. I did it because I wanted this particular driver to know that we were being treated unfairly as individuals and as a people.

**What were your feelings when you were able to sit in the front of the bus for the first time?**

I was glad that the type of treatment — legally enforced segregation — on the buses was over...had come to an end. It was something rather special. However, when I knew the boycott was over, and that we didn't have to be mistreated on the bus anymore, that was a much better feeling than I had when we were being mistreated.

**How do you feel about being called the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement"?**

I accept the title quite well. I appreciate the fact that people feel that way about me. I don't know who started calling me that.

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**Civil Rights Today**

**What one lesson would you like to leave with students?**

I always encourage children to stay in school, get good grades, and to believe in themselves. Of course they should take care of their health and keep themselves from certain things that would be detrimental to them either physically or mentally. They should be sure to get the best education that they can and choose careers that they can be progressive in as they go into their adulthood. In our Pathways to Freedom Institute and our Institute for Self Development, we take young people on trips and give them opportunities to meet many civil rights leaders. We teach them to be good citizens and do what they can do to help other people as they become successful themselves. I urge children to have a spiritual awareness in their lives. If children work towards a positive goal in life, it will help them be successful when they become adults.

**What do you think still needs to be done in regards to civil rights?**

People need to free their minds of racial prejudice and believe in equality for all and freedom regardless of race. We need much more education — especially those who are narrow-minded. We need as much financial security as we can get. I think it would be a good thing if all people were treated equally and justly and not be discriminated against because of race or religion or anything that makes them different from others.

**Do you think the relationships between the different races are where they should be today?**

There is still as much racism among some people. It still exists, but we are not under the legally enforced segregation that we used to be. There are still people who are prejudiced because of race. The Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute accepts people of any race. We don't discriminate against anyone. We teach people to reach their highest potential. I set examples by the way I lead my life.

**What is your life like now? Are you still fighting for civil rights?**

I am still a supporter of civil and human rights. I attend programs and I participate in the organization that I developed, the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. Raymond Parks is my late husband. He was interested in civil rights himself.

**Are there still people who treat you unfairly?**

Yes. In 1994 a man entered my home and beat and robbed me. I was badly hurt and felt sad. It wasn't racial. He just broke into my house. He was on drugs and alcohol. He was arrested and is serving a sentence. I was not the only person he robbed and attacked. He robbed and mistreated older people and women. I recovered from the attack and went on with what I have to do.

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**Other Questions**

**Have you ever faced something that you thought you couldn't stand up to?**

I can't think of anything. Usually, if I have to face something, I do so no matter what the consequences might be. I never had any desire to give up. I did not feel that giving up would be a way to become a free person. That's the way I still feel. By standing up to something we still don't always affect change right away. Even when we are brave and have courage, change still doesn't come about for a long time.

**Would you have continued school if you didn't have to take care of your mom and grandmom?**

Yes. My grandmother was ill and I had to stop school to look after her. After she died my mother became ill and I did have to stay out of school. I finished high school after I was married and living in the city.

**Did you ever see the Ku Klux Klan?**

No, I never saw the Klansmen. But I did know that they had gone through the community and mistreated people and drove them from their homes. I saw the results of what had happened. I do remember a young man who was found lying dead in the woods and nobody saw who had done it.

**How did you feel when Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed?**

It was a very devastating feeling. I felt very badly that he had been assassinated. I grieved very much about his death.