

Rosa Parks



Rosa Parks is fingerprinted by Deputy Sheriff D.H. Lackey in Montgomery, Ala., on Feb. 22, 1956. She was charged at the time with violating segregation laws.



Rosa Parks holds the hand of a well-wisher at a ceremony in 2001 in Dearborn, Mich., honoring the 46th anniversary of her arrest for civil disobedience.

Nearly five decades ago she took on the segregationist South. Today, hip-hop artists OutKast are being sued on her behalf. A review of this 91-year-old's life reveals a complex woman living through tumultuous times and quietly leaving her mark.

By Helen O'Neill
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Growing up in Detroit, Susan McCauley and her 12 siblings would sometimes boast about their famous aunt, proudly telling their friends that they were America's "civil rights family."

Their aunt herself rarely talked about what happened on that bleak December day in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955.

But their father recounted the details, how his sister refused to surrender her seat on a

bus to a white man, even though the segregation laws required it, even though the driver yelled at her, even though she knew she would be arrested, jailed and possibly even lynched.

Rosa Parks' simple act of courage spawned a movement, inspired a generation and changed a nation.

But it wasn't until McCauley was older that she began to put her aunt's action into perspective. At family gatherings she would ponder Auntie Rosa, with her gentle smile and braided hair, always self-deprecating, always demure. And she would marvel.

This was the woman whose arrest had inspired the yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery, when thousands of blacks walked to work rather than sit in the "colored" section of the buses. This was the woman who helped introduce the world to a dynamic young preacher named Martin Luther King Jr. This was the quiet crusader, whose life was so viciously threatened that she had to flee with her family to Detroit.

Yet these days, when McCauley talks to her own children about Parks, her three teenagers ask:

Why is she suing OutKast?

On the phone from her home in Atlanta, McCauley sighed.

"Auntie Rosa devoted her whole life to taking stands against the indignities and sufferings of her race," she said. "That is how she should be remembered, not some money-grubbing old lady who sued a rock band."

She cannot explain action

At 91, Parks has dementia and cannot explain for herself why she became embroiled in two suits involving the hip-hop duo OutKast and their record company, BMG.

At issue is a song about the entertainment industry that has no connection to Parks, though it is titled "Rosa Parks" and its chorus goes, "Ah, ha, hush that fuss, everybody move to the back of the bus."

Lawyers for Parks argue her name was wrongly used; they seek a total of \$5 billion. (*See story at right.*)

Parks has no children. Her 13 nieces and nephews, her closest relatives, argue that Parks, who lived a humble, frugal life, would never have sued for money. If she was upset, they say, she would have made a point of saying so.

They accuse her lawyer, Gregory Reed, and her caretaker, Elaine Steele, of exploiting their ailing aunt for private gain. Reed denies this; Steele declined to comment for this article.

A judge has named Dennis Archer, a former Detroit mayor, to act as Parks' guardian, asking him to "stand in her shoes."

But it is hard to imagine anyone standing in the shoes of a woman whose near mythological status has long eclipsed the reality of who she is and what she accomplished.

Parks herself has chafed at the way she has often been portrayed: A 42-year-old seamstress so exhausted after a day stitching hems at the Montgomery Fair Department Store that she simply refused to budge.

"The only tired I was," she wrote in her autobiography, "was tired of giving in."

In fact, Parks had been actively involved in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, despite the fact that, at the time, anyone who supported desegregation risked reprisals from the Ku Klux Klan.

But Parks, as a child, had been enrolled in a private school in Montgomery where, in addition to English and science, white teachers taught black students a philosophy of self-worth and equality. Later she worked at a military base where segregation was banned.

"I could ride on an integrated trolley on the base," she wrote. "But when I left the base I had to ride home on a segregated bus."

Quietly, she began to engage in small acts of resistance, such as leading youth members of the NAACP to Montgomery's main library, even though they knew they would be directed to the poorly stocked branches for blacks across town.

She married Raymond Parks, a barber, drawn to him, she wrote, by "the fact he didn't seem to have that meek attitude, what we called an Uncle Tom attitude toward white people." He was also deeply involved in the NAACP. There were secret nightly meetings and endless reports of lynchings and other acts of racial violence. As secretary of the NAACP Parks would read them all.

She found solace in the Bible and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

But she found a new way of thinking at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, where blacks and whites lived side by side, attending workshops on civil rights and civil disobedience. Parks spent 10 days there in the summer of 1955, returning to Montgomery with a new sense of resolve.

Months earlier, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin had caused a sensation by getting arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Colvin's fiery language and the fact that she was pregnant made the NAACP reluctantly decide not to press a lawsuit.

Still, as Fred Grey, a young NAACP lawyer who ate lunch with Parks nearly every day, recalled, "It was on all our minds, why shouldn't we all be taking such a stand."

Boarded bus and took stand

At dusk on Dec. 1, 1955, Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus and took that stand.

King described Parks' act as "an individual expression of a timeless longing for human dignity and freedom."

The NAACP finally had the perfect plaintiff. The civil rights movement soon found its perfect leader in King, who led the bus boycott that would paralyze the city for 381 days.

Bus segregation was ruled unconstitutional in 1956. Other triumphs followed, eventually

leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

But while King and others were catapulted to fame, Parks remained in the shadows. She continued to go to marches and rallies, but never stopped working, always juggling low-paying jobs to support her mother and husband. It was at one such job, working as a seamstress in a tiny sewing factory in Detroit, that she met 16-year-old Elaine Steele, who became Parks' constant companion and confidante.

Historian Douglas Brinkley, Parks' biographer, suggested the two women bonded partly because Parks identified with Steele's more militant view of black nationalism. By the mid-1960s, Brinkley wrote of Parks: "The gentle Christian woman had become a tough-minded freethinking feminist, who had grown impatient with gradualist approaches."

In the Detroit office of Democratic Rep. John Conyers, where Parks worked for 22 years, she would dutifully pose for pictures when visitors trooped in to see her, though she was never comfortable with the spotlight.

"I understand I am a symbol," she wrote. "But I have never gotten used to being a public person."

After retiring in 1988, Parks threw herself into the Raymond and Rosa Parks Institute for Self-Development, a nonprofit organization to help young blacks. Accompanied by Steele, she began making more appearances, traveling across the country and abroad. She met Nelson Mandela and Pope John Paul II. She accepted many honors.

Took up yoga, learned the computer

To her family, Parks was never a celebrity, just a beloved aunt, who delighted in their huge annual family reunions, who was always reading and inquiring about current affairs, always willing to look at life in a fresh way. In her 80s she became a vegetarian, took up yoga, learned the computer.

"She wasn't the mother of the civil rights movement to me," said Susan McCauley. "She was the woman I wanted to become."

In Montgomery, 93-year-old Johnnie Mae Carr ponders the legacy of her childhood friend.

It still seems like yesterday, Carr said, that they sat in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and listened to the new minister, King, speak.

It still seems like yesterday, all the meetings and marches, and the powerful sense that a force had been unleashed that nothing could turn back.

"Who knows what Rosa thinks about the lawsuit or if she ever heard the song?" Carr said of the OutKast imbroglio. "But at least, she has the right to go to court and be treated fairly.

"We didn't have those rights 50 years ago."