

Montgomery: Where the movement and MLK emerged

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By Sam Heys

E.D. Nixon was so excited when he called Martin Luther King Jr. on Dec. 2, 1955, that he didn't even greet the scholarly young preacher. He immediately blurted out the story of Rosa Parks' arrest the previous evening and said it was time for Montgomery's blacks to boycott the city's buses. In his gravelly voice, the longtime Montgomery civil rights leader asked King if he would support the boycott.

"Rev. King said to me, 'Brother Nixon, let me think about it a while and then call me back,'" says Nixon.

King was sitting in his office in the aging, red-brick Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery. Diagonally across the street was the state capitol, where, in 1861, Jefferson Davis had been sworn in as president of the Confederacy.

The 26-year-old King had moved to Montgomery 16 months earlier, after completing his course work for a Ph.D. in theology from Boston University. A native of Atlanta, he had found Montgomery's black leaders to be divided and its black masses apathetic. Only a month earlier he had turned down the presidency of the local branch of the NAACP to concentrate on his church work. King decided to call his friend, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery. Abernathy had recommended Nixon call King that morning.

When Nixon called King back, "he (King) said, 'Brother Nixon, I've decided I'm going to go along with you,'" says Nixon. "I said, 'Good, because I've called 18 people and told them to meet at your church at 3 o'clock.'"

The more than 40 religious and civic leaders who gathered at King's church that afternoon decided that blacks would boycott city buses Monday, Dec. 5, and a mass meeting would be held Monday evening to decide how long the boycott should last. King sensed a heretofore unseen commitment by Montgomery's blacks, weary of Jim Crow and white man's justice. The black community was still hoping for justice for Jeremiah Reeves, a drummer in a black Montgomery high school band who had been accused of rape by a white woman in 1952, found guilty and sentenced to hang. (A five-year legal battle eventually ended with his execution.)

Simultaneously, blacks were seeing whites go unpunished when charged with raping blacks. A white policeman had allegedly forced a black girl into his patrol car and raped her at a cemetery. Two other white policemen were charged with raping a black woman in a railroad yard, but a grand jury dismissed the charges. A white father had allegedly raped his 15-year-old black babysitter, who died of shock from the assault.

Montgomery's 50,000 blacks were reminded of their inferior status daily. While shopping, they could hold clothes up to them but not try them on. "We had to face black and white water fountains, having no place to go to the rest room when you were in town shopping unless you

went around and found a black cafe or some hole in the wall," says Johnnie R. Carr, a close friend of Mrs. Parks and a fellow NAACP officer.

A fateful day, Dec. 1, 1955

Mrs. Parks had always hated riding the bus. If at all possible, she would walk or catch a ride to and from work. Blacks could not sit in the first four rows of seats, even if there were no white riders and blacks were having to stand. And if the first four rows were filled with whites and more whites boarded the bus, the blacks sitting immediately behind the white section had to give up their seats.

White drivers wore pistols to enforce the city segregation law and enjoyed verbally abusing their black riders, particularly women, calling them "black cows." Most drivers forced blacks to pay their dime fare at the front door, then exit and re-enter the bus at the back door, often speeding off before the would-be rider reached the back door.

The 42-year-old Mrs. Parks had grown up in an outlying farming community terrorized by the Ku Klux Klan. As the longtime secretary of the Montgomery NAACP, she heard the grievances of her people first-hand. She had previously irritated bus drivers with her personal form of protest: refusing to use the back door. As far back as 1943, driver J.F. Blake had evicted her from a bus for not going to the back door. "I was just trying to let them know how I felt about being treated as a human being," says Mrs. Parks, now 72. "There were some drivers who wouldn't even permit me to get on the bus if they could shut the door before I could get on."

On Thursday, Dec. 1, Mrs. Parks was headed home from her job as a tailor's assistant at Montgomery Fair, a leading downtown department store, when she boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus. Blake was driving.

With blacks already standing in the rear, Mrs. Parks sat down on the fifth row, in the only vacant seat available to blacks. Within three stops, the "whites only" section was filled and a white man needed a seat. Blake told the four blacks on the fifth row to get up. The other three got up. Blake asked Mrs. Parks if she was going to get up.

"No," she said.

"I'm going to have you arrested then," he replied.

"Go ahead."

Blake got off the bus and returned shortly with two policemen, who took Mrs. Parks to the police station and charged her with violating the city's segregation ordinance. She called her former boss, Nixon, a tall, coal-black man who had learned civil rights from early activist A. Phillip Randolph. Nixon had been president of the Montgomery NAACP for a dozen years, head of the state NAACP and a regional leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. He came at once to bail Mrs. Parks out and was ecstatic when he learned the charge. This was the case he hoped would have bus segregation declared unconstitutional.

Nixon had been talking about a bus boycott all year. Three times in 1955 already black women had been arrested for defying the bus segregation ordinance, but each time the charge had been dropped or changed to disorderly conduct.

Almost all refused to ride

On Monday, Dec. 5, King arose, as usual, at 5:30 a.m. at his oak-shrouded, white-frame South Jackson Street parsonage, seven blocks southwest of his church and near the campus of all-black Alabama State College. The day's first bus passed his house at 6:10. There were no blacks on it. Ten minutes later, another bus passed the house. Still no black riders. After the third empty bus went by, King jumped in his car and drove around town to further gauge the boycott's success. He and the other leaders had hoped 60 percent of the black riders would boycott, but it appeared 98 percent were refusing to ride.

Later that morning Mrs. Parks went on trial, was found guilty and fined \$10 and court costs. Nixon paid her appeal bond.

"I was dumbfounded when I came outside," says Nixon, now 86. "I had been going into court like that, often alone, for 20 years. But when I walked out that morning with Rosa Parks, there were over 500 black men in and around that courthouse.

"After that, I went down the street and caught up with Rev. Abernathy and Rev. E.N. French. and they told me a 3 p.m. meeting was planned to talk about boycott before the mass meeting that night."

The three discussed the need to create an organization to run the boycott. "The NAACP had been very ineffective in drawing crowds," says Abernathy, who came up with a name for the organization: Montgomery Improvement Association.

Nixon says Abernathy then asked him, "Brother Nixon, you're going to serve as president, aren't you?" "I said, 'No, not unless you all don't accept the man I've got in mind.' He (Abernathy) said, 'Who is your man?' I said, 'Martin Luther King.' "

Nixon had heard King speak briefly at an NAACP meeting four months earlier. "Afterward, I said to a young man named J.E. Pearce, who was sitting next to me that day, 'Pearce, you know that guy made a heckuva talk?' He said, 'He sure did.' I said, 'I don't know how I'm going to do it, but some day I'm going to hang him to a star,'" says Nixon, who, as a Pullman porter, realized he would have to go out of town during the boycott.

At the 3 p.m. organizational meeting, held in the balcony of the Mount Zion AME Church, King was nominated for president of the Montgomery Improvement Association by funeral director Rufus Lewis, a member of his congregation.

"Dr. King and I had disagreed on who should be president," says Abernathy. "Dr. King wanted Mr. Lewis because Mr. Lewis would get his verbs right most of the time. But Mr. Nixon would get anybody told. He wouldn't take any mess. He was fearless, and I admired him for his courage."

After King was chosen president, an executive committee was appointed, but some of the ministers wanted their names kept out of the press. "I sat there and listened to them a while," says Nixon, who had been appointed treasurer, "and it made me so mad I jumped up and cussed. I said, 'Ya'll ought to make up your mind whether you're going to be grown men or admit to the

world you're scared boys.' Then Rev. King jumped up and hollered that he wasn't scared. He said nobody was going to call him a coward."

Growing up, King had abhorred segregation. After winning a state oratorical contest in Dublin, Ga., he and his teacher had been forced to stand for 90 miles on the bus trip back to Atlanta -- so whites could sit. He later said it the angriest he had ever been.

A social ministry

Instead of returning to the South, King could have accepted calls from churches in the North or East or academic or administrative positions from several colleges. Having been reared in the South, though, King and his bride, the former Coretta Scott, had felt an obligation to the region. "We had the feeling something remarkable was unfolding in the South and we wanted to be on hand to witness it," he later wrote.

He had quickly instituted a social action ministry at the 300-member Dexter Avenue church and found a good friend in Abernathy. "We would stay up until 1 and 2 o'clock, talking about the social gospel, the social ministry," says Abernathy. "We were not ever ordinary preachers, who just talked about saving souls. We wanted to be involved in the social gospel. We wanted to change the whole South, the whole country and the whole world."

They didn't envision the opportunity coming soon, but when King arrived at the Holt Street Baptist Church for the boycott's mass meeting Monday night, Dec. 5, he saw more than 7,000 blacks had already gathered. The several thousand who could not get inside listened on loudspeakers to the numerous speakers, mostly preachers.

Former *Montgomery Advertiser* city editor Joe Azbell says the fervor of the crowd inside "drove cold chills over me." "It was almost a fervor of patriotism, a fervor of their own morality," he says. "They were going to make this voice heard across America, that this was something bigger than Montgomery, bigger than a bus."

King spoke last and closed by saying: "If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, 'There lived a great people -- a black people -- who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.' "

While receiving a thunderous ovation, King realized he had had only 20 minutes to prepare the speech. He suddenly saw what older preachers had meant when they said, "Open your mouth and God will speak for you."

In "Let the Trumpet Sound," King's biographer, Stephen B. Oates, wrote: "King felt he had been chosen as an instrument of God's will to inspire his people and help effect this transformation. How else could he explain his speech this night?"

To keep the boycotters informed and united, mass meetings were held twice a week for the next eight months and once a week thereafter, always at churches. "People would start gathering when they got off of work in the afternoon," says Mrs. Carr, 75, president of the MIA for the past 18 years. "They would always start those mass meetings with hymn-singing and praying. And

that was one of the keys to the success of it. I believe the people really trusted God and God led us at that time."

"These preachers," says Azbell, "kept saying, 'You are walking with Jesus,' that this was not a boycott of buses but something Jesus would have them do."

'My soul is rested'

King was awed by the determination of the walkers. When he once told an elderly boycotter, "Old Mother Pollard," that she could return to the buses, that she was too old to be walking, she told him she would keep walking. King asked her if her feet weren't tired.

"Yes," she said, "my feet is tired but my soul is rested."

Nixon initially had persuaded Montgomery's eight black taxicab companies to charge patrons only the dime bus fare, but the city government quickly began enforcing its minimum 45-cent fare, prompting the MIA to improvise a sophisticated carpool system, complete with regular drivers and designated pickup points.

By January (1956), the boycott was attracting national attention, as the nation's media had been alerted to the story unfolding in the South. Following the Supreme Court's 1954 decision on school desegregation, the outspoken opposition of Southern politicians and the rise of white citizens councils all over the South to oppose integration was widely reported.

Then in the summer of 1955, the press had converged on Mississippi to report the trial of two white men accused of killing 14-year-old Emmett Till, a Chicago black who had been visiting relatives when he was rumored to have whistled at a white woman. His body was found in the Tallahatchie River, with a 70-pound cotton-gin fan tied to his neck with barbed wire. The two men accused of killing him were found not guilty.

The reporters who came to Montgomery found an eloquent young spokesman in King, who had developed a large, devoted following. Little old ladies wanted to mother him and often referred to him as "Little Lord Jesus."

"He gave them hope," says Rufus Lewis. "That's what changed the whole situation, his convincing them that they must do something for themselves."

King was already advocating non-violence and speaking of Gandhi at the mass meetings. Juliette Morgan, a young, white Montgomery librarian, first drew the parallel between the Gandhi-led movement for India independence and the bus boycott in a series of letters published in December in the *Montgomery Advertiser*. (Ostracized and harassed by whites, she committed suicide two years later.)

In January, King was arrested for going 30 miles per hour in a 25-miles-per-hour speed zone. By then, King was receiving 30 to 40 hate letters and up to two dozen threatening and obscene phone calls a day. Having been told repeatedly by friends that white men were plotting to kill him, King spoke of his possible death at a mass meeting and later confided to Abernathy that he was overcome by fear. On a sleepless late-January night, he sat in his kitchen ready to resign as MIA president when he heard an inner voice saying: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for

truth; and God will be at your side forever.” “Almost at once my fears began to go,” King recalled. “... I was ready to face anything.”

King's home bombed

Three nights later King's home was bombed while he spoke at a mass meeting. The bomb exploded on the porch and Coretta and 2-month-old Yolanda were not hurt.

Two nights after that, a bomb went off in Nixon's driveway, but he was out of town. His wife told him of the incident over the phone. "She said, `You know what they're trying to do don't you? They're trying to make you quit,' " says Nixon. "She said, `You want my advice. Don't quit.' "

King's father -- Martin Luther King Sr., pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta -- was ready for his son to quit in February. Citing an old, anti-unionization state law forbidding two or more people from conspiring to prevent the operation of a lawful business, a Montgomery grand jury indicted more than 100 boycott leaders. Speaking in Nashville, Tenn., at the time, King flew to Atlanta the following day to pick up Coretta and Yolanda. His father could barely speak of the boycott without tears coming to his eyes and his mother had been sick with worry ever since the bombing.

"King Sr. wanted King Jr. to move back to Atlanta," says former Atlanta police chief Herbert Jenkins, who had received inquiries about King's background from Alabama law enforcement officials. "He brought Jr. in and I told him what I had heard from time to time. King Jr. said he recognized that was a problem but he had a job to do. If it took his life to do it, he was sorry. That's when he convinced me he was perhaps the most dedicated man I had ever run across."

Daddy King gathered a group of friends -- A.T. Walden, Benjamin E. Mays, Dan Duke, Rufus E. Clement, T.M. Alexander, C.R. Yates, C.A. Scott and Bishop Sherman L. Green -- to urge King not to return to Montgomery. King listened respectfully but said he had to return.

Early the next morning King drove with Coretta and Daddy King to Montgomery to be arrested. King was convicted in March after a four-day trial that drew international coverage. Funding poured in from across America, but so did hate mail. King was hitting a responsive note with racists.

On Nov. 13 -- just when it seemed the city would be successful in getting an injunction against the carpool system, seriously threatening the boycott -- the U.S. Supreme Court ruled Montgomery's bus segregation ordinance unconstitutional. (The suit had been filed by four black Montgomery women in February.)

First desegregated ride

At 6 a.m. Dec. 21 -- the day after the court order finally arrived in Montgomery and 381 days after the boycott began -- King, Abernathy, Nixon and a white preacher named Glenn Smiley boarded a bus in front of King's house to make Montgomery's first desegregated bus ride.

The first week passed without serious incident, but on Dec. 28 buses were fired upon throughout the city. Night runs were suspended and many blacks and whites stopped riding the buses.

Then, on Jan. 9, 1957, while King and Abernathy were in Atlanta for the formative meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Abernathy's home and church were bombed, as were three other black churches and the parsonage of another boycott leader. Total damage was put at \$700,000 and bus service was stopped entirely in fear of further violence.

On Jan. 28, a black service station and a black home were bombed and 12 sticks of dynamite were found smoldering on King's front porch. Afraid Montgomery was being reduced to anarchy, the city offered rewards for the arrest of those responsible for the bombings. Seven men were arrested, and although they were not convicted, the violence promptly stopped and the desegregation of the busses proceeded.

The first successful instance of major mass action by Southern blacks was over. Non-violence had been introduced to the civil rights struggle and both a new leader and a new group of leaders had been found. Black ministers, through the SCLC, would lead the fight through the coming decade and they, in turn, would be led by the intellectual, young preacher from Montgomery.