Correcting 5 myths about Rosa Parks and her stand on a Montgomery bus

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.03.16

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Shortly after 5 p.m., on a cool Alabama evening 60 years ago, a 42-year-old woman named Rosa Parks clocked out from her job as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair Department Store, and walked along Montgomery Street to board the Cleveland Avenue bus.

Around 6 p.m., as she boarded bus No. 2857 to make the 5-mile trek to her apartment, Rosa Parks was about to change the course of the 20th century.

Here are five myths about what happened that first evening of December in 1955.

**Not The Whites-Only Section**

1. Rosa Parks sat in the whites-only section of the bus.

Montgomery, Alabama, municipal buses each had 36 seats. The first 10 were reserved for whites only and the last 10 seats were supposed to be reserved for blacks. The middle 16 seats were first-come, first-served, with the bus driver retaining the authority to rearrange seats so that whites could be given preference.
Parks was sitting in an aisle seat in the front row of this middle section.

2. If Rosa Parks had not moved, a white passenger would not have had a place to sit.

A few minutes later, several white passengers boarded, and driver James E. Blake, 43, noticed a white man standing near the front. He asked the four black passengers in Parks' row to move to the back.

When they did not respond, Blake got out of his seat and yelled: "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." Three of the black passengers moved to the back of the bus, but Parks refused to get up. She moved from the aisle to the window seat, making room for the white passenger to sit in any of the three seats in her row.

**Confrontational Bus Driver**

The bus driver asked: "Are you going to stand up?" and Parks looked him in the eye and responded with a quiet but firm "No." She explained that she had gotten on board first, that she paid the same fare as the others, and that she wasn't sitting in the white section.

She did not think it was fair that she had to stand for someone else who had arrived after her to sit and said that she was not violating the city law.

"Well," Blake responded, "I'm going to have you arrested," and Parks said, in a firm, quiet voice, "You may do that."

Blake then radioed the police, who sent officers F.B. Day and D.W. Mixon, who peacefully arrested Parks. They drove her to the city jail, booked her and held her in a dank and airless cell.

**NAACP Leader To The Rescue**

Parks's boss and friend, E.D. Nixon, bailed her out that evening. He was the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a group fighting for black people to be treated fairly.

3. This was Rosa Parks's first conflict with that bus driver.

If Parks had been paying attention, she never would have entered the bus driven by the tall, blond, 43-year-old Blake. He had a reputation for insulting blacks, especially black women. A dozen years earlier, Blake had tried to make Parks exit and re-enter his bus through the crowded rear entrance, after she had already boarded his bus in the front. When Parks refused, Blake grabbed her sleeve to push her off the bus. As she dropped her purse on purpose and sat down in the white section to get it, she warned him: "I will get off. ... You better not hit me."

For the next 12 years Parks avoided riding on Blake's bus on purpose, walking whenever she could, despite her long-term joint pain. But on Dec. 1, 1955, she absentmindedly boarded the bus driven by Blake. It proved to be a mistake that catapulted her into the history books.
Do Not Blame It On Fatigue

4. Rosa Parks refused to stand up because she was tired.

Parks sought to set the record straight: "People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I was at the end of a working day. ... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in." She later said she couldn't have lived with herself if she had given in and stood up.

5. Rosa Parks was the first black woman to exercise civil disobedience on a Montgomery bus.

Nearly nine months before Rosa Parks' famous arrest, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin was arrested on a Montgomery bus for refusing to yield her seat to a white passenger. Parks served as an activist and secretary with the Montgomery NAACP, which sought to challenge Jim Crow laws whenever they could, and Colvin's actions inspired Parks. When a Christian woman of Parks' stature and modesty was unjustly treated, the leaders, including a 26-year-old Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., saw an opportunity and made their move.

Pushing Back Against Oppression

"There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression," King explained at the mass meeting held at Holt Street Baptist Church on the first day of the bus ban.

Dec. 1, 1955, more than 60 years ago, Rosa Parks determined that there did indeed come a time. The rest, as they say, is history.
1. Read the paragraph from the section "Not The Whites-Only Section."

Montgomery, Alabama, municipal buses each had 36 seats. The first 10 were reserved for whites only and the last 10 seats were supposed to be reserved for blacks. The middle 16 seats were first-come, first-served, with the bus driver retaining the authority to rearrange seats so that whites could be given preference.

Parks was sitting in an aisle seat in the front row of this middle section.

Why does the author include these details about the seating arrangement?

(A) to show that Parks was in an appropriate seat based on the rules of the bus

(B) to illustrate the unfairness of segregated seating, and show the preference of the bus driver

(C) to show how the seating arrangement was flexible, and depended on the number of riders

(D) to explain the problem faced by the bus driver, and show that he was following the rules

2. Read the sentence from the section "Confrontational Bus Driver."

The bus driver asked: "Are you going to stand up?" and Parks looked him in the eye and responded with a quiet but firm "No."

Which of the following words BEST describes Parks' response?

(A) bellicose

(B) reluctant

(C) frail

(D) resolute
But on Dec. 1, 1955, she absentmindedly boarded the bus driven by Blake. It proved to be a mistake that catapulted her into the history books.

The author used the word "catapulted" to suggest that:
(A) she was treated badly
(B) it was a military action
(C) she was quickly recognized
(D) it was a risky move

What effect does the author achieve through the use of short, numbered statements in the article?
(A) It provides a quick way to show the truth of the moment.
(B) It highlights the myths that are then followed by facts.
(C) It provides a sequential account of what happened.
(D) It captures the tone of Parks' actions that night.
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