THE WALKING CITY, A HISTORY OF THE MONTGOMERY BOYCOTT

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Source: *Negro History Bulletin*, OCTOBER, 1956, Vol. 20, No. 1 (OCTOBER, 1956), pp. 17-21

Published by: Association for the Study of African American Life and History

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44215205

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By Norman W. Walton

PART I

Introduction

Montgomery, Alabama is an agrarian city nestled in the middle of the cotton kingdom. It is the capital city of Alabama proud of its heritage and its Civil War contributions. Most of the people are proud too, proud of their southern way of life. Here, the historical Huntingdon College and the Alabama State College play an important role in the development of an enriched community life. Just a few miles east of Montgomery is the famed Tuskegee Institute which stands as a monument of the work of Booker T. Washington.

There is a strange silence about the city, no major factories or industries. The usual sound of whistles, clanging of bells and the hustle and bustle which often are a part of a city with a population of 100,000 are missing here. But this is it, the heart of Dixie, the cradle of the Confederacy, THE WALKING CITY.

Today Montgomery is one of the sore spots of race relations in the world. One can almost feel the under current of tension in the air as he travels upon its streets. The city has indicted twenty-four Negro ministers of the Gospel and sixty-six other persons. To arrest a Negro minister in the south where the hardships and tribulations have made many Negroes become deeply religious is a crime, but to arrest twenty-four is almost an unforgivable act against God. These wenty-four "Holy Men," as they were called by their constituents, have added new fuel to the doctrine which is destined to become a rallying cry in the South's struggle over segregation. It is the doctrine of "passive resistance."

Henry D. Thoreau originated the idea in his church in Masachusetts about 110 years ago. When Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax, he was thrown in jail. His famous essay on "Civil Disobedience" presents the theme that if the government is wrong the least a man can do is refuse to cooperate with it. He wrote "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course to devote himself to the eradication of anything even the most enormous wrong. He may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty at least to wash his hands of it."

In the past 100 years or more the idea has traveled around the world. It worked to topple the British in India as it went and today it has come to America. Mahatma Ghandi, the great leader of India, without an army or political alliance, used the theory of Thoreau, which he called "passive resistance" and gained political independence for India. The doctrine based on spiritual and moral principles declares that love is the force that holds people together. As a leader of the Congress Party in India, he fought for the dignity and equality of man. He led a successful boycott against the English salt regulations.

Today "passive resistance" has become the cry of Montgomery's 50,000 Negroes in their struggle for the dignity of man. Negroes throughout the nation, and oppressed people all over the world are watching Montgomery, watching and waiting with great anticipation for what they hope will become a universal weapon to champion the cause of down trodden and degraded people in their struggle for the dignity of man on earth.

What mysterious phenomenon of the "winds of nature" swept this doctrine to the heart of the South, or why Montgomery has become the testing ground for this weapon in America cannot be answered. Nevertheless these are some of the facts about the movement as they have unfolded here in the deep South.

The Beginning

On December 1, 1955, a tall light-skin Negro seamstress, employed by a downtown department store, was making a routine trip to work on a city bus. The bus, being filled with passengers, carried fourteen whites and twenty-four Negroes seated in the accustomed areas on the thirty-six seat vehicle.[1] It was reported that the bus operator sought to equalize the seating by asking some of the Negroes to move to the rear. Mrs. Rosa Parks argued she was not in the White section since the bus was filled from the back to the front. It is interesting to note that the Montgomery City code states:

Section 10, Chapter 6 Code of the City of Montgomery 1952

Every person operating a bus line in the city shall provide equal but separate accommodations for white people and Negroes on his buses by requiring the employees in charge thereof to assign passengers seats on the vehicles under their charge in such a manner as to separate the white people from the Negroes, where there are both white and Negro passengers on the same car; provided, however, that Negro nurses having charge of white children, sick or infirm white persons, may be assigned seats among white people.

Nothing in this section shall be constructed prohibiting the operators of such bus lines from separating the races by means of separate vehicles if they see fit.

Section 11, Chapter 6 of the Code of the City of Montgomery 1952

Any employee in charge of a bus operated in the city shall have the power of a police officer of the city while in actual charge of any bus, for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of the preceding section.

Under these circumstances Rosa

Parks was arrested by J. P. Blake, the bus driver in charge when she refused to move from her seat which Blake said was in the white section of the bus. As stated above in the City Code of Montgomery 1952, the bus driver has special police power to make arrests on the bus he operates. Policemen who arrived later confirmed Blake's charges that the woman was seated in the white section of the bus, and refused to move to the rear.

The arrest of Rosa Parks, who was secretary to the local chapter of the NAACP, was resented by the Negro population in general. The resentment seemed not to have been because of this one incident, but this was the "straw that broke the camel's back."

On Friday when the Negroes of Montgomery heard of Mrs. Parks' arrest, thousands of circulars were distributed urging Negroes not to ride the city buses on the following Monday in protest to the arrest. On Monday night about 5,000 Negroes met at the Holt Street Baptist Church and adopted a resolution which asked the citizens of Montgomery not to ride the bus until a satisfactory seating condition had been worked out. The resolution stated that no method of intimidations would be used to prevent anyone from riding the buses. A car pool was organized to aid in getting the people to and from work. It was reported that all Negro cab operators in the city told their drivers to charge only 10 cents a head for certain hours during the day in an effort to make the boycott effective.[2]

In the meantime, more than a dozen motorcycle police were assigned to trail the buses. Hundreds of Negroes lined the streets to cheer when the emptied buses passed followed by two motorcycle police. It was reported that the "old unlearned Negroes" were confused. It seemed that they could not figure out if the police would arrest them or protect them if they attempted to ride the buses. Rumors were spread that they would be arrested instead of protected. The few Negroes who boarded the buses were more confused. They found it difficult to get off without being embarrassed by other Negroes who waited at the bus stops throughout the city. Some were seen ducking in the aisles as the buses passed various stops in order not to be seen.

Anti-Bus Sentiment Crystallized

Although many Negroes expressed openly their sentiment against the bus company, others were less vocal and others still would rather suffer while evil were sufferable than go through the hardships of righting them. Thus in the beginning much of the sentiment against the bus company was promoted by a minority of the Negroes who devoted time and service to molding public opinion. They presented a long line of abuses which were easily obtained from those who rode the buses. In the streets, over the telephone, in the cabs and in the schools and churches they related their varied unpleasant experiences with the bus company.

On December 8 a group of Negro leaders met for four hours with representatives of the bus company and the city to discuss the issue. Rev. M. L. King who was later branded as the "boycott boss" was selected as spokesman for the Negro delegation. Rev. King is the 27 year old pastor of the historical Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery. He holds a degree from Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University where he earned his doctorate.[3]

The Rev. M. L. King, speaking for the Negroes, proposed that patrons be seated on a first come first served basis with no section reserved for either race. Negroes would continue to seat from the rear to the front and the whites from the front. He suggested that there would be no reassignment of seats once the bus was loaded. He laid down two other conditions sought by Negroes: more courteous service by the bus drivers to Negroes and the hiring of Negro bus drivers on predominantly Negro routes.

The boycott conference failed to find a solution to the problem. Many Negroes felt that one more day of rain might send the Negroes back on the buses. Some Negroes were unhappy about walking in the rain while others rode in big cars. One irritated college student who walked into a campus building quite wet, stomped her feet at the door and yelled, "boycott or no boycott if it rains tomorrow, I am going to ride a bus." After the second day the novelty of the movement had worn off. This was serious business. Thus it appears that the decision to slash bus runs in Negro sections did more to crystallize the movement than any act thus far. The Negro could not ride if he desired to. There were no buses to ride.

The act of taking the buses off the lines in Negro areas united the feet but the minds were left to the press. Perhaps the most influential organ in Montgomery for molding public opinion was the daily newspaper, The *Montgomery Advertiser*. On the editorial page of this paper is a section commonly known as "Tell It To Old Grandma." Here the opinions and expressions of the people of the area could be found. These expressions did much to classify the people of the area as pro-boycott or anti-boycott.

As Montgomery approached the Yuletide season, there was indeed a oneness among Negroes that had never existed before. The so-called "big Negroes" were carrying maids to work in their new cars and they talked together and laughed together. The Negro who remarked to the college professor, after hearing the word boycott, boycott, boycott, "I don't see what the boyscout has to do with the buses anyway," had something in common with the professor. Maybe not a spirit of Christmas but an "esprit de corps" which brought them together. This spirit of unity was expressed in the attitude of a maid when she declared, "I'll walk until my feet fall off before I ride the bus again."

One Negro, obviously from the country, said "this is where I was bred and born." Another was sure that walking had cured her illness and most of the maids walking claimed to feel the school girl figure returning. A Negro bandleader wrote the boycott song:

Ain't gonna ride them busses no more

Ain't gonna ride no more
Why in the hell don't the white folk know
That I ain't gonna ride no more.

The Negro had come to realize that there was something religious and noble about this movement. To them it promoted the brotherhood of men. The non-violence doctrine which had come to dominate the thinking of its leaders gave the movement a Christian attachment. It was their religious duty now not only to go to church, visit the sick, and to pray, but they must attend the mass meetings. To the Negro of Montgomery, Christianity and boycott went hand in hand. Later, Adam Clayton Powell, Negro Congressman of New York, declared "the movement in Montgomery is religious not political, politicians come and go, but faith and God march forward."

Whites Aid Boycotters

It is not unsual to find members of the white race giving aid to such movements, and there are evidences to show that many white people were in sympathy with the movement in Montgomery, but the climate of opinion at the time was not favorable to express their feelings. One might be branded as a "Nigger lover" for even the smallest overt act of sympathy with the movement. Disregarding these conditions, however, many whites gave "lip service" to the cause and many gave money and their time and service to aid the protest. The lip service ranged from the emotional expression of individuals like those of an ex-bus driver who declared that "as long as the bus boycott is on, it will be a dreary rainy day, when I have sprained my ankle and less than 45 cents cab fare, before I board one of those yellow rolling cell blocks again," to the very scholarly letters like the one of Mrs. J. Morgan.[4] Perhaps one of the most energetic white workers in the movement was Rev. Robert S. Graetz, pastor of the all Negro Lutheran Church in Montgomery. His activities with the boycott caused him to receive many threatening calls. As reported in the Montgomery Advertiser some of the calls ran afoul to the state's profanity law. One irritated fellow called to say, "Pastor if I were you I wouldn't call myself a pastor. You are a no good S.O.B." Another hoped that he would have a son-in-law as black as the blackest Negro that ever originated from the wilds of Africa.[5]

Appeal to the People

On December 25, the Montgomery Advertiser carried the Negroes declaration of grievances against the bus company. The document brought forth many of the bitter experiences of the Negroes who had at various times been pushed around on the buses. The document accused the operators of discourtesy, and unfairness in seating of passengers. The doctrine stated that in many instances the operators have passed up passengers standing at the stop to board the bus. They have also collected fares at the front door and after commanding Negro passengers to enter by the rear door, have pulled off and left them standing there. It told of a Negro mother, with two small children in her arms, who put them on the front seat while she opened her purse for the fare. The driver ordered her to take them off, and without giving her a chance to place the children elsewhere, lunged the vehicle forward, causing the small children to be thrown into the aisle of the bus. In this document the movement was officially crowned as "non-violence" a movement of "passive resistance" depending on moral and spiritual forces. It further expressed the willingness of the Negroes to arbitrate and felt that this could be done with men of goodwill, but it was difficult to arbitrate with those whose public pronouncements were anti-Negro. This document was a great victory for the Negroes of Montgomery and for the cause in general.

The New Year came in with little hope to ease the crippled transportation system of Montgomery. By this time the ministers of the city had been branded as the leaders of the protest. Perhaps the assumption stems from the overt activities of the ministers in the movement. It was being suggested in the community that the Montgomery Improvement Association should be checked to see if they were violating any laws of the state. On December 13, the Montgomery Advertiser carried an editorial entitled, "Action and Reaction, a Two Edge Sword," in which the editor declared that Negroes should reckon with the facts of life. First the white man's economic artillery is far superior, and commanded by more experienced gunners; second, the white man holds all offices of government machinery. There would be white rule as far as the eye can see.[6] The Negroes were beginning to feel the sting of this whip. On January 9, a Montgomery Attorney called attention to the press to the state law against boycott. He stated that Title 14, Section 54 of the Alabama Code, provided that when two or more persons unlawfully enter into an understanding for the purpose of preventing the operation of lawful business, they shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.

Perhaps the best summary expression of the situation in Montgomery by January 1956 was given by Rev. Thomas P. Thrasher, Director of an Episcopal Church in the City, when he declared "the only universal thing about our community is fear . . . "

Get Tough Policy

On January 22, the City Commissioners shocked the Negro population of Montgomery by stating that it had met with a group of prominent Negro ministers and had reached a solution to the problem. When it was learned that these problems of transportation had been solved the Negro leaders were confused, they knew nothing about the meeting. Later it was revealed that three Negro ministers had been called to the Commissioners' office to discuss "another issue about some type of insurance" and that they had been "hoodwinked into it." Negro ministers mobilized their forces to spread the news that the boycott was not over. By the next morning, the news had been circulated and almost everyone was aware of the Commissioners' act. Even the newsboys who delivered the morning's paper rapped on the doors to warn the readers "don't believe that stuff about the boycott on the front page."

Such an attack on the City Commissioners which virtually called

them a lie could not be stomached. This was the last straw. Perhaps the concept of "southern honor" is a figment of the imagination, but to most white southerners it is a very real and cherished thing to protect at all cost.

The Commissioners instituted their "get tough policy" by declaring that it was time to be frank and that the vast majority of the whites in Montgomery "do not care whether a Negro ever rides a bus again if it means that the fabric of our community is to be destroyed, and that the Commission would stop pussy footing around with the boycott." They further declared that "the Negroes have made their beds let them sleep in them."[7]

Jitney Service Denied

Faced with this intransigent attitude on the part of the Commissioners and convinced that the difficulties in the transportation among Negroes were becoming more serious, it became evident, by then, that the system could not continue on a "share a ride" policy. Complaints were more numerous than before because it was becoming more difficult to catch a ride. Perhaps it was this situation coupled with a pressing need for a more organized system that provoked the proposal of the Montgomery Transit Lines. On January 2, 1956, a Negro group asked for permission to set up special transportation service owned and operated by Negroes, however, the Commissioner denied the request on the grounds that there was plenty transportation available in the city. On April 2, the Negroes asked again to be granted a bus franchise, but were denied.

King Arrested for Speeding

By now it seemed, to the Negroes, that this action of the City Commission was a part of an organized conspiracy to harass and intimidate them with the police department leading the attack. In this atmosphere, Rev. M. L. King was arrested for speeding. Negroes gathered at the scene of the arrest and were upset over the customary procedure of frisking a person, being arrested, for weapons. As the officer searched Rev. King, one of the bystanders remarked "That's a shame a'fore God they is searching the preacher." Another Negro borrowed one of the Governor's expressions to answer a statement made by one of the arresting officers at the trial, that the car left before he could get the license number, the Negro declared "Hogwash, I ain't never seen a car yet that can outrun a motorcycle in a crowded city, it's just hogwash."

King's Home Bombed

On January 30, Rev. King's home was bombed. This convinced the Negro that this was indeed serious business. Immediately a crowd gathered outside the house which was the parsonage of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. They refused to leave when police attempted to disperse the crowd. King came out later to address the crowd, and told them to go home "I am all right and my wife is all right." Someone from the crowd called "let us see her" and Mrs. King came out and stood with her husband. King continued to inoculate the Negroes with the serum of passive resistance, "We believe in law and order, don't go get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword." He assured the crowd that if he stopped the movement would not stop because God was with the movement. As he finished, the crowd cheered him shouting "Amen" and "God bless you," "We are with you all the way, Reverend."

The Police Commissioner attempted to address the group, immediately a roar of disapproval was heard throughout the crowd. Police officers sought to get the attention of the Negroes by yelling "Be quiet the Commissioner is talking" but the Negroes seemed not to have heard them. Shortly Rev. King turned to the crowd, raised his hand and said "hear the Commissioner" and immediately there was quietness throughout the group. Like Ghandi of India, King had become the Mahatma, a great soul, and for the Negroes of Montgomery he was "Bapo," the father. Later when E. D. Nixon's home was bombed, the Negroes were more convinced that "we ain't gonna ride dem buses no more."

Negroes Filed Anti-Segregation Suit

It appears that this get tough policy of the Commissioners and the recent bombings caused the Negroes to seek an additional method of adjusting their grievances. Thus, on February 1, 1956, five Montgomery Negro women filed suit in the U.S. District Court asking the courts to declare Alabama and Montgomery's transportation laws unconstitutional.

This bill of complaint charged that Negroes have been deprived of their rights, privileges and immunities under the 14th Amendment in seeking "to compel the plaintiffs and other Negro citizens to use the bus facilities" under threats and harassment. It specifically accused the defendants of a conspiracy to interfere with the civil and constitutional rights of the Negro citizen. However, less than two days after the suit, Jeanette Reese, one of the five women who filed the complaint, told the Mayor that she didn't know what she was signing and that she didn't want anything to do with the "mess." Thus on March 8, Attorney Fred Gray withdrew the name of Jeanette Reese from the anti-segregation suit.[8]

Boycott Attorney Under Pressure

In the meantime, Attorney Fred Gray was having trouble with the local draft board. It seems that Gray had been exempted from military service since 1948 because he was classified by the draft board as a practicing minister. If Gray was not a practicing minister, he was subject to disciplinary action. Attorney Gray was also indicted by the Grand Jury for unlawful practice because of the suit filed in the U.S. District Court seeking to overthrow Montgomery and Alabama's transportation laws. The case did not materialize because the unlawful practice charge against Fred Gray was tossed out of court.

Grand Jury Reports

By now the situation in Montgomery had reached the breaking point. And though there were many appeals for peace, they seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. The fat was in the fire. Already the Montgomery County Grand Jury had been selected to determine whether Negroes who were boycotting the buses were violating the law. This jury including 1 Negro and 17 whites found that the boycott was illegal and the violaters should be punished.[9]

1 Montgomery Advertiser, December 6, 1955.
2 Montgomery Advertiser, December 6, 1955.
3 Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (Unpublished).
4 Montgomery Advertiser, December 12, 1955.
5 Alabama Journal, January 4, 1956.
6 Montgomery Advertiser, December 13, 1955.
7 Montgomery Advertiser, January 24, 1956.
8 Montgomery Advertiser, March 8, 1956.
9 Alabama Journal, February 22, 1956.

The White Citizens' Councils---

(Continued from Page 2)

fending the same thing as when the slaves were first unloaded in Virginia: a preferred economic position. South is not defending dominant White culture: the two cultures are merged already and there would be very little change if the South were to be desegregated. It is evident too that neither can the South be defending racial purity, because there is too much mixed relationship. Perhaps the White Southerners oppose socio-economic equality for the Negro because they fear that this will lead primarily to social relationships. One thing remains clear. The South is in *dead earnest.* If desegregation is pressed, a day of violence may come.

The School Integration Issue

In its decision the Supreme Court stated that the idea of "separate but equal" in the South first appeared in the Court in 1896 and involved transportation, not education. The case was Plessy v. Ferguson.[7] More recent cases have been on graduate schools. The Supreme Court maintains now that separate facilities are inherently unequal and that schools must be integrated. There are several other things to consider in school integration: numerical pressures, cultural lag, and established folkways. Some experts believe that the Negroes are gradually migrating to the North and that the problem will resolve itself. If all these factors are not considered in dealing with the present situation, the Citizens' Councils will flourish and prevent eventual integration.

Rise of the Councils

The first White Citizens' Council was formed in July, 1954 in Indianola, Mississippi by 14 men "who met and counselled together on the terrible crisis precipitated by the United States Supreme Court in its Black Monday decision of May 17, 1954."[8] By the end of 1954 the movement had spread to include four Alabama counties as well as Mississippi. A White Citizens' Council was formed in Claredon County, South Carolina in August 1955. The constitution of this Council is in favor of anything working toward separate and equal facilities. All the men on the Council are "honorable, lawful men." Throughout the country the Councils are estimated today to have a membership of 300,000.[9] A few have a pro-fascist tinge; the majority are composed of locally respected middle class White Southerners who believe "there can be no compromise on segregation."[10]

Members call the Councils "a modern version of the old time town meeting to meet any crisis by expressing the will of the people."[11] Let us see if it does not go a little further than this.

The *New Republic* gives three purposes for the Councils:

1. To take the Southern story North as the NAACP takes the Northern story South.
2. The members feel that they must fight fire with fire, that the NAACP is rich and has many members.
3. Council members need legal advise. They must find constitutional grounds to fight the threat of integration.[12]

Lawyer Alston Keith, chairman of the Council in Dallas County, Alabama, says that this group must "make it difficult, if not impossible, for any Negro who advocates desegregation to find and hold a job, get credit, or renew a mortgage."[13]

The Southerner, a magazine published by the Citizens' Council in Birmingham, Alabama, gives heavy emphasis to the threat of intermarriage as a result of integration, and warns the members to protect themselves against it.

Mississippi's Senator Eastland is a kind of patron saint of the Councils, giving them a philosophy and a voice. He maintains that anti-segregation decisions represent a violation of the Constitution; he advocates "authentic acts of interposition," inferring that the Supreme Court has no right to interfere with the states until the Constitution is so amended. He says that we are about to start on a great crusade to restore Americanism and our government to the people, fighting to preserve an untainted racial heritage, culture, and the institutions of the Anglo-Saxon race.[14] The Citizens' Councils offer more unnerving effects than the Ku Klux Klan, although the latter is coming back, too.[15]

State Senator from Alabama, Walter C. Givhan, states that the real purpose of the NAACP is "to open the bedroom doors of our White women to Negro men." *Time* Magazine[16] says that the NAACP is as radical on its side as Senator Eastland is on his. By hurrying too fast it can violate the spirit, if not the word, of the Supreme Court decision just as Eastland is trying to defeat it. The NAACP is contributing nothing to a calm and rational working out of a very difficult situation according to such views.

Membership Of Councils

"To join a Citizens' Council you have to pay $3 a year dues, be white, be a segregationist, be a loyal American, and believe in the divinty of Jesus Christ."[17] A hint was given above concerning the types of people who join the Councils. Continuing, they are "respectable" ladies and gentlemen who are dedicated to depriving the Negro of his civil rights by means of the latest, most up-to-date methods. They may be attorneys, bankers, planters, mayors, or school officials. A person can join a Council by going to the nearest local bank.

The local offices of the Citizens' Councils are autonomous. The state office has no control over them nor assumes any liability for their actions: chiefly economic sanctions against persons who disagree with the Councils. At the local level there is a director, empowered to oust members or dissolve the Council, and four governing committees:

1. Membership and finance.
2. Legal advisory.
3. Political and elections.
4. Information and education.

County chairmen combine to form a committee for each congressional district. The districts appoint members to a state committee, which meets monthly and governs the state association. This has no connection with any other state.