

## REVISITING THE PAST

### Rosa Parks: A life in a day

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It was 70 years ago, on December 1st, 1955, when a seamstress returning home from work, decided to change the world. Rosa Parks – or Rosa Louise McCauley Parks, as was her full name, an African American seamstress, refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, as was then required by law in Montgomery, Alabama. This act marked the beginning of a major mobilization within the Black community of the area against the policy of racial segregation.

Once the bus taking her home from work filled up – with black passengers seated and white passengers left standing – Parks was expected to comply with the driver's instruction and give up her seat to a white person, in accordance with segregation laws. Rosa Parks refused. The driver subsequently called the police, who arrested her. A few days later she was sentenced to pay a fine, which she never did. This event led to the founding of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) on December 5th, 1955, by Black ministers and community members, with Martin Luther King Jr. as its leader – who would later become the symbol of the civil rights movement. The MIA decided to organize a bus boycott – a campaign that lasted nearly a year, until the Supreme Court ruled segregation laws unconstitutional. On December 20th, 1956, by court order, bus seating was integrated.

Rosa Parks' contribution is considered profoundly significant, and today she stands as a symbol of the civil rights movement. Bus no. 2857 is preserved at the Henry Ford Museum, with the fifth seat on the left side permanently commemorating that pivotal moment in the struggle for equality for Black citizens in the U.S. The rest, as they say, is history – but a history that ties the civil rights movement to adult education. As she later stated: "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... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

The connection to adult education comes through the Highlander Folk School. As later became known, Rosa Parks – following the encouragement of civil rights advocate Virginia Durr – had attended, just a few months earlier, in August 1955, a two-week workshop on civil and labor rights at the Highlander Folk School. Highlander is part of a broader legacy on both sides of the Atlantic – through which adult education theorists and activists have sought to promote civic learning and contribute to people's empowerment. This wider movement can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when universities began to open themselves to society primarily through extension courses and extramural activities. A little later, activists – often with a theological background – such as Albert Mansbridge (co-founder in 1903 of the Workers' Educational Association - WEA), Basil Yeaxlee, and other key figures of the *Great Tradition* in the UK, alongside Eduard Lindeman and Myles Horton in the U.S., carved out pathways linking theology to labor and social rights. In subsequent decades, political movements would ground their action on civic education – particularly for those who had not had the opportunity to be educated at the socially prescribed age. Adult education became the channel for citizen empowerment. Education, in this sense, is the understanding of society and its structures – the development of critical consciousness about the forces that have shaped people to settle for less than what human dignity demands – and, ultimately, the empowerment that leads to informed and reflective action. This is exactly what a seamstress in Montgomery did when she claimed her rights.

The Highlander Folk School was founded in 1932 by activist Myles Horton, educator Don West, and Methodist minister James Dombrowski. Myles Horton is considered one of the most iconic figures in adult education. He is widely known for his dialogical book with Paulo Freire,

*We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, as well as his autobiographical book with Judith and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*. It's worth noting that Horton was deeply influenced by his studies at the Union Theological Seminary in New York and by the Scandinavian tradition of adult education, following his visit to Denmark with Don West to study the Folk High Schools model.

It is also worth noting that, in 1961, the Highlander Folk School was shut down by the State of Tennessee due to its strong involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. It was immediately re-established and continues to operate today as the Highlander Research and Education Center. To this day, it is regarded as one of the most emblematic adult education institutions globally – an institution that has brought to life the words often attributed to Paulo Freire: "Education does not change the world. Education changes people. People change the world."

And when people choose to take responsibility for transforming their own lives – and the lives of those around them – perhaps the troubled and turbulent times we are living through may, in time, be left behind.