

Which One is Rosa Parks?

An Activity to Expand Understanding of the Montgomery Bus Boycott

Content Background

Every school child knows about the arrest of Rosa Parks in December of 1955. Most know that there was a boycott of the city buses in Montgomery, Alabama after her arrest. Few are aware of the court case that gave the boycott the legal victory that led to the end of segregated buses in the Alabama capitol and fewer still know who the plaintiffs were in that court case.

The federal court case that decided the Montgomery Bus Boycott had four plaintiffs, none of which was Rosa Parks. Three of the four, like Rosa Parks, had been arrested for refusing to give up their seat on a city bus to a white person. All three arrests had occurred in 1955 BEFORE Rosa Park's arrest.

Aurelia Browder at age 36 was the oldest of the three at the time of her arrest on April 19. The other two were teenagers. Mary Louise Smith was 18 on October 21 when she was arrested. Claudette Colvin was 15 for refusing to give up her seat on March 2.

Two months after the boycott began the three, along with Suzie McDonald who at age 76 had been forced to move from her seat in October, brought suit against city officials and the Montgomery City Lines, Inc. (the bus company) on February 1, 1956 in the federal district court of the United States for the Middle District of Alabama, Northern District. The case became known as Browder v. Gayle. The district court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs on June 13 and its decision was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court on December 17. The boycott ended on December 20.

Activity:

This activity is a simple but “dramatic” way for students to learn of these three young ladies. In the link entitled *Browder Transcripts* is an excerpt from the original court transcripts from the Browder v. Gayle trial. There has been some deleting of unimportant lines and the names of the three young girls have been changed to Witness A, Witness B, and Witness C otherwise the text is as recorded by the clerk of the court. [The historically correct term “Negro” is used throughout the text instead of “Black” or “African American.” Those terms did not come into use until the late 1960s. The more derogatory terms are not found within this text.]

The transcript is to be read as if it were a play script with the following roles:

- Judge Rives
- Plaintiff's Attorney (both Mr. Gray and Mr. Langford are combined into this one role)

- Defense Attorney (Mr. Knabe)
- Witness A
- Witness B
- Witness C

Judge Rives will read not only where the name Judge Rives appears but will also read the introduction of each witness. For example the Judge is the first to speak and states “Witness A Called as a witness first being duly sworn, testified as follows:”

Plaintiff’s Attorney will read when ever Mr. Gray or Mr. Langford’s names are mention and will ask all the questions (Q) until the Defense Attorney’s name, Mr. Knabe is mentioned.

Defense Attorney, Mr. Knabe, will read all the questions (Q) until one of the Plaintiff’s attorneys is mentioned.

Witness A will read all the answers (A) until Witness B is introduced.

Witness B will read all the answers (A) until Witness C is introduced.

Witness C will read all the answers (A) until the end of the “play.”

Dramatic effects are not necessary but below are some “acting” tips for each role.

Judge Rives – is to remain neutral but have a quiet authority.

Plaintiff’s Attorney – is positive and wants to get the most and the best out of the witnesses.

Defense Attorney – is on the attack and wants to make the witnesses look as if they are unimportant, insincere, and being used and manipulated by others.

Witnesses – They are aware that the defense attorney is trying to make them look bad. They will answer him cautiously or a little bit (don’t overdo it) defensively and surly. When their attorney asks questions they will answer them in a less guarded fashion.

Either ask for volunteers or select 6 of your students to read the parts. It is recommended that the witnesses be read by female students while the other roles can be read by either gender.

Have 7 hard copies of the transcripts printed out; one for each student actor and one for the teacher.

The rest of the class will be the audience.

Before the “trial” begins, explain the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Start with Rosa Parks’ arrest, and then tell them of the organizing of the boycott and how the Montgomery black community refused to ride the buses until something changed. Explain how they walked or car pooled but did not get on the buses. Tell them that in February of 1956, two months after the boycott started a trial was brought by the black community against the city and that this trial would be what brought victory to the boycott. Now explain that 6 of the students will act out part of the trial and there will be 3 witnesses. The class is to decide which one of the witnesses was Rosa Parks.

After the reading is over, ask the question “which witness was Rosa Parks?”

Of course, none of the witnesses were. Rosa Parks was not a plaintiff in this federal court case. Her case was tried in an Alabama state court and had no effect on the outcome of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Tell them who the witnesses were.

Witness A was Aurelia Browder, age 36, widow and mother of six.

Witness B was Mary Louise Smith, age 18 at the time of her arrest.

Witness C was Claudette Colvin, age 15 at the time of her arrest.

Conclusion:

Rosa Parks arrest was the rallying cry that organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a seminal event in the Civil Rights Movement. Nonetheless, these three women, women who had also been arrested for not giving up their bus seat to a white person, played a decisive role in the legal victory that decided the boycott and propelled the Civil Rights Movement to even greater successes.