



Jo Ann Robinson

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A Boycott in the Fight for Justice

by Victoria McAfee

Jo Ann Robinson was a leader of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott that brought national attention to the Civil Rights Movement.

Born April 17, 1912, in Culloden, Georgia, Robinson earned a bachelor's degree from Georgia State College, taught in the Macon public school system, and later earned a master's degree in English and literature at Atlanta University. After teaching in Texas, she moved to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1949 to teach at Alabama State College.

In her memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, Robinson described a December 1949 incident that changed her life. When leaving Montgomery to spend Christmas with her family, Robinson boarded an almost empty bus, and sat in the fifth row from the front. (African Americans weren't allowed to sit in the first 10 rows.) The driver stopped the bus and demanded that she move to the back as he yelled repeatedly, "Get up from there!" Robinson departed the bus, filled with shame, hurt, and humiliation.

Shortly after that, Robinson joined the Women's Political Council (WPC) in Montgomery, a group dedicated to inspiring African Americans "to live above mediocrity, elevate their thinking, fight delinquency, register to vote, and generally improve their status as a group." They tried to work with the mayor and city council assisting people who had discrimination complaints—especially against the bus company. But by 1955, nothing had changed these injustices, so Robinson suggested boycotting the buses.

The catalyst came December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to vacate her bus seat for a white man. Tired from work, Rosa sat in a row designated for blacks. The bus filled and black riders were supposed to move back or stand if white riders got on the bus and needed a seat. Mrs. Parks refused. She was arrested and jailed.

Robinson suggested the WPC distribute thousands

of flyers calling for all riders to stay off the buses on the day of Mrs. Parks's trial. Several of Montgomery's black clergymen offered moral support, opened their altars for prayer, and gave spiritual guidance. For the first time in history, Montgomery's black ministers of several denominations united to act for civic improvement.

After the success of the one-day boycott, it was decided to continue the boycott with pastors such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., providing leadership. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was formed with Dr. King, Robinson's pastor, as president. Robinson edited the monthly newsletter and served on major MIA committees as requested by Dr. King. Eventually, most of the MIA leaders, including Robinson, were arrested for their boycott involvement.

Robinson believed the involved pastors "kept the Christian spirit in the midst" of the movement. Eventually released, the jailed protestors spent time in worship. Their singing and praying in church lifted spirits and gave strength to continue the boycott: "People asked God for courage...continued unity...overcoming faith...guidance and direction."

The boycott continued for a year with the MIA providing transportation for African Americans in Montgomery. The city's case against the boycott went to the U.S. Supreme Court which ruled on December 20, 1956, that segregation laws on the buses were unconstitutional.

Robinson said, "I felt the need...to offer prayers of thanks...Rejoicing publicly was not in my thoughts... We had come too far, suffered too much, for laughter. Those of us who were together seemed almost simultaneously to grow quiet, prayerful...and still."

Discriminatory backlash caused Robinson to move to Louisiana in 1960 to teach. Later, she taught in Los Angeles public schools until her retirement in 1976. She died in Los Angeles on August 29, 1992.

Robinson's last words in her memoir challenge continuing discrimination: "The demons of racial hatred are much alive and are, seemingly, everywhere." You should not judge a person "by the color of his skin or the texture of his hair but, to quote Dr. King, 'by the quality of their character.'" If we all tried "to recognize the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God... this would be a better world."



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