

Mother of the Movement

This biography reveals a fiercely determined activist behind the mild-mannered lady in a hat.

BY NELL IRVIN PAINTER

Beautiful Rosa Parks sits alone in the Montgomery, Ala., city bus she desegregated, an image endlessly replicated, most recently on an American postage stamp issued in February to commemorate Black History Month and what would have been Parks's 100th birthday. By the time she died in 2005, Parks had become an American saint. President Bill Clinton gave her a Medal of Freedom in 1996; Congress awarded her a

elsewhere. President Obama voiced the familiar view that she was "just wanting to get home after a long day at work" and "may not have been planning to make history." But as Jeanne Theoharis shows in her insightful biography, *"The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks,"* this perspective obscures Parks's lifelong activism and "fierce determination." Parks was not an apolitical, middle-aged lady whose fatigue kept her seated. Both shy and militant, she was a committed activist enmeshed in racial politics — and

trumped up executions and, in Montgomery, the constant mistreatment of women on the buses — politicized Parks. But Theoharis argues that two events in the summer of 1955 proved pivotal. The first was Parks's participation in a two-week seminar at the Highlander Folk School, an interracial grass-roots leadership school for adults, where she began to study and discuss approaches to desegregation. The second was the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till a few weeks after Parks returned from Highlander.

working day.... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in." And her restraint was strategic: she knew that Claudette Colvin, another black woman arrested for not giving up her seat on a bus, had been "manhandled by the police, and others had been beaten or shot for their resistance."

THE boycott's success brought the national press to Montgomery. Parks, however, was not included in the triumphant photographs of King and other ministers sitting at the front of the bus. Nor was she permitted to make a speech (as King and other male movement leaders did) to the 15,000 people who gathered in support of the boycott. "Parks was to play a symbolic role," Theoharis writes. Like other women in the movement, she "was lauded by the crowd as their heroine but not consulted for her vision of the struggle and subsequent political strategy." Later on, *Look* magazine staged what became the iconic image of Rosa Parks on the bus. A single white man sits behind her; not a local, in fact, but a U.P.I. reporter covering the story.

Rosa Parks and her husband suffered the usual punishments for black protest: hate calls, death threats and loss of employment. Eight months after the boycott's successful end, the impoverished Parks family fled Montgomery for Detroit. They remained economically insecure un-

Parks was an organizer before and after the bus boycott, enmeshed in racial politics wherever she lived.

THE REBELLIOUS LIFE OF MRS. ROSA PARKS

By Jeanne Theoharis.

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Gold Medal in 1999 (passed nearly unanimously — only Representative Ron Paul of Texas dissented); and after her death, her body lay in the Capitol Rotunda. She was the first woman to be so honored, and the first black woman to have a statue in her likeness placed in the National Statuary Hall of the Capitol. It was unveiled this year and positioned, House Speaker John Boehner pointed out, "right in the gaze" of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy.

Parks stands for "the triumph of freedom — of democracy over dictatorship, free enterprise over state socialism, of tolerance over bigotry" (President Clinton). "Our nation was forever transformed" by her refusal to give up her seat, advancing "our journey toward justice and equality for all" (President Obama).

Quiet, lovely, light-skinned, well-dressed Mrs. Rosa Parks, in her hat and coat and eyeglasses, embodies the non-violent overthrow of racism in America. She represents the best of Southern womanhood, a genteel contrast to those angry Northern black radicals clamoring for their rights. Her composure seems to indicate the correct way to bring about real change.

In 1955, Parks defied the humiliating Jim Crow policy requiring a black person of any age or sex to defer to any white person by standing so the white person could sit. Her refusal and subsequent arrest inspired a 381-day Montgomery bus boycott that led to sit-ins, marches, campaigns and, finally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The movement and laws it prompted wrought a revolution in American conventions of race and inaugurated Martin Luther King Jr. as the conscience of America.

King carefully managed his public persona, but Parks's image escaped her control. She seems to have entered history with her mouth closed and her mind



Look magazine's staged portrait of Rosa Parks in the front of a bus, December 1956.

their class and gender complications — wherever she lived.

Parks was politically active before and long after the Montgomery bus boycott, and her family was equally engaged. Her grandfather (who had been enslaved) was a supporter of Marcus Garvey, and her husband, Raymond, participated in the Communist-led movement defending the Scottsboro Boys. Parks spent a decade working alongside E. D. Nixon, the Pullman porters' unionist, in the Montgomery branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Through the N.A.A.C.P., Parks also met the veteran organizer Ella Baker, who mentored her. Throughout her career, she never shied away from progressives, even those labeled Communist.

Racist atrocities — rapes, murders,

On Dec. 1, 1955, Parks left work — she was a seamstress in the tailoring department of the Montgomery Fair department store — and boarded a bus, sitting in the middle. When the seats in the white section filled up, the driver ordered black passengers to stand. Parks refused. The driver called the police. When officers boarded the bus asking for the miscreant, the driver pointed out Parks as "that one." She did not resist as the police arrested her and took her to city hall, asking her if she was drunk.

Her refusal was well considered and hardly motivated by mere physical exhaustion. As she noted later, "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 usually was at the end of a

til Parks finally found steady employment in 1965, working in Representative John Conyers Jr.'s Detroit office until her retirement in 1988. Only in the late 1970s did Parks's obscurity lift with her recognition as a national figure of historical import.

This first comprehensive biography rightly keeps an eye on Parks after Montgomery. Theoharis depicts Detroit's entrenched discrimination and Parks's decades of civil rights activism there. Supporting U.A.W. Local 600, calling Malcolm X her hero, visiting a Black Panther school in Oakland, opposing American involvement in Vietnam and attending the Million Man March at the invitation of Louis Farrakhan, she collaborated with left-wingers and Black Power advocates.

Richly informative, calmly passionate and much needed, *"The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks"* completes the portrait of a working-class activist who looked poverty and discrimination squarely in the face and never stopped rebelling against them, in the segregated South and in the segregated North. □

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