

Post Daily Magazine

Martin Luther King Jr.

HIS LIFE AND TIMES

ARTICLE III: 381 Days in Montgomery

By JERRY TALLMER

BEFORE TOUGH-MINDED Pullman porter and organizer E. D. Nixon called Martin Luther King on the early morning of Dec. 2, 1955, the day after Rosa Parks had refused to give up her bus seat because she was tired and her feet hurt, Nixon had already talked with another young Montgomery, Ala., minister, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy of the First Baptist Church.

Both Nixon and Abernathy were ready to suggest a one-day bus boycott by the Negroes of Montgomery. The phone lines now burned for 40 minutes between Nixon and the two ministers, and King, going along with the idea of a boycott, offered his Dexter Av. Baptist Church as a meeting place that same Friday evening.

The phone lines were kept humming, word went out throughout the black community, and a few thousand mimeographed handbills on Rosa Parks and the proposed boycott were distributed among local Negroes, some of whom could not read.

One such was a maid who turned the handbill over to her white employer. This lady promptly passed it along to the Montgomery Advertiser, which promptly featured it on its front page on Saturday morning. "They gave us publicity we couldn't have bought," Nixon was to say to this newspaper's Murray Kempton, one of the first Northern journalists to go down to see for himself what was happening in Montgomery. The white press had achieved what the black mimeograph machine could never have achieved overnight: every Negro in the area had the boycott brought to his attention.

The first white fumbles did not stop there. Montgomery's police commissioner went on TV and promised protection to any Negro who continued to ride the buses.

"I knew our people," said Nixon, "and I thought 60 per cent of them would join the boycott. Then this fellow put a motorcycle cop behind every bus, and the neutral Negroes saw that and figured there'd be trouble and stayed off. That way, he gave us 100 per cent."



Dec. 22, 1956: Negroes ride in the front of the bus in Montgomery, Ala.

persons at King's church was both apprehensive and exciting. It was finally "the unanimous sense of the group" to call for a one-day boycott Monday with a rally Monday night to decide on further action. New leaflets went out:

Don't ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday, Dec. 5 . . .
If you work, take a cab, or share a ride, or walk.
Come to a mass meeting, Monday at 7:00 p.m., at the Holt St. Baptist Church for further instructions.

Before adjourning, the group in the church set up a committee on transportation. It would ask the city's 13 Negro taxi companies (210 cabs) to transport boy-



cotters for the price of bus fares.

"With these responsibilities before us the meeting closed," King would remember.

"We left with our hearts caught up in a great idea . . .

"The clock on the wall read almost midnight, but the clock in our souls revealed that it was daybreak."

He went home, his mind awl with elation and other emotions; he did not get much sleep that night, or on most of the nights of the rest of his life. Would the boycott be Christian and nonviolent? What were his duties to his wife Coretta and their brand-new two-week-old daughter Yolanda Denise, called "Yoki"? And then, midway in the next day, he began to think about Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience," and he knew what he had to do.

A call came through from the transportation committee. Every Negro taxi company in Montgomery would service the boycotters at bus rates.

At 5 o'clock on Monday morning King was in his

kitchen drinking coffee when his wife, in the front room, cried: "Martin, Martin, come quickly!" There was a bus stop five feet from their front window. An empty bus was passing by; usually at this hour it would be crammed with domestic workers heading for their jobs. Another bus passed by. Empty. Another. Empty, except for two white passengers.

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AT 9:30 THAT MORNING ROSA PARKS WAS

tried and convicted of violating the segregation ordinance. She was fined \$10 plus \$4 in court costs. And that afternoon Martin Luther King Jr. was chosen president of the *ad hoc* boycott organization, mostly because he was too new in the Negro community to have any enemies, and thus far too inconspicuous for the whites to have any ammunition against him.

Each week King required 15 hours to prepare his Sunday sermon. Now, early Monday evening, he had 15 minutes to prepare his speech for the mass rally.

"By the time I had sketched an outline . . . my time was up. Without stopping to eat supper (I had not eaten since morning) I said goodby to Coretta and drove to the Holt St. Church."

Cars were lined up in a jam five blocks ahead of the church. Three or four thousand people stood outside, listening to loudspeakers, while police cars slowly circled the area.

King's speech was the culmination. Never had he aroused such a response.

"If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love," he told them, "when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say: 'There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.' This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility."

Abernathy presented a resolution. The 50,000 Negroes of Montgomery would not resume riding the buses until:

(1) Courteous treatment by the bus drivers was guaranteed.

(2) Passengers were seated on a first-come, first-served basis, Negroes seating from the back of the bus toward the front, whites from front toward back.

(3) Negro bus drivers were employed on predominantly Negro routes.

It was carried unanimously. Every human being in the church stood up, with cheers ringing from inside and outside the building. The one-day Montgomery bus boycott would last a few more days than that.

It would last, as it turned out, 381 bitter and glorious days until, on Dec. 21, 1956, four days before Christmas, the mandate of the United States Supreme Court would at last desegregate Montgomery's buses.

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WHITE MONTGOMERY, ITS PREJUDICE AND pride stung in equal measure, struck back hard and kept on striking to the end—and beyond.

All cab companies were reminded of the law requiring them to charge at least 45 cents a ride; that ended *that* means of transportation. The Negroes immediately began to organize a pool of some 300 cars and 18 station wagons. Those who could not come by car came by horse- or mule-drawn wagon. Those who could not come by wagon, walked. There were many heroic anecdotes, some of them perhaps not apocryphal. "Jump in, Grandmother," a driver is supposed to have said to one old black woman, "you don't need to walk." She turned him down. "I'm not walking for myself," she said. "I'm walking for my children and my grandchildren."

The whites tried the technique of divide and conquer, setting up an interracial mayor's committee loaded with white supremacists and tame "house Negroes." When that failed, things really began to get nasty.

Toward the end of January the police began stopping Negro drivers throughout the city on any and every sort of excuse. King was followed by two motorcycle cops on Jan. 27, drove as carefully as he could while they trailed him for several blocks; they pulled up and arrested him on a charge of driving 30 mph in a 25-mph zone.

He began, he was since to admit, to feel the touch of fear. "I had reached the saturation point." But, head in hands, he prayed to God, and his fear began to go. Three nights later he was at a meeting when Abernathy came up and said: "Your house has been bombed." Coretta and the baby had been in the house alone with a friend. The bomb had gone off on the porch. They were unharmed.

As King reached the house a crowd of Negroes was gathered angrily in front of it. He realized that some of the crowd had guns and were ready to use them.

"Now let's not get panicky," he told them, staying off a riot. "If you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence."

Two nights later a stick of dynamite was thrown onto E. D. Nixon's lawn.

The boycott went on.

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THE NEXT WHITE TACTIC WAS TO INDICT KING

and 100 other Negroes for conspiracy to violate a 1921 statute that forbade boycott of a lawful business "without just cause or legal excuse"—a statute originally drawn as an anti-labor, not anti-Negro, measure.

Trial lasted four days. As for "just cause," one Negro woman testified how a bus driver shot her husband dead when he refused to get off the bus; another, how a driver forced a Negro off a bus at gunpoint rather than change his dollar bill. There was much such testimony. Circuit Judge Eugene W. Carter took 20 seconds after both sides had rested before he found King, the first defendant, guilty. He fined him \$500 plus \$500 in court costs; when King appealed, the sentence was converted to 386 days at hard labor.

(Ultimately he did have to pay the \$500 fine.)

It was the 109th day of the boycott.

"I was not totally surprised," King said after the verdict. "I was optimistic enough to hope for the best—and realistic enough to be prepared for the worst."

The boycott went on.

J. H. Bagley, superintendent of the bus lines, suffered a heart attack. King urged his followers to pray for Bagley's recovery.

The threats spread to the good white ladies of Montgomery who, in self-interest, were driving their maids to and from work. The ladies began getting midnight calls: "Isn't it about time you went to get your nigger maid?"



THE BOYCOTT WENT ON. THE YEAR WAS coming to a close; the bus line had lost \$750,000; suddenly, Nov. 13, almost as if out of nowhere, the Supreme Court decision came through: segregation of buses was illegal. The decision could not be implemented for another six weeks, until Dec. 21, 1956.

On that date, the boycott ended, in joy and triumph.

Three weeks later Ralph Abernathy's house was bombed; an anti-Negro reign of terror was triggered throughout Montgomery; another bomb attempt, then a shotgun attempt—both failed—against the house of Martin Luther King; arrests, harrassments, menaces.

But the buses were rolling; integrated.

"We are in the midst of a great struggle, the consequences of which will be world-shaking," King had said at the height of the boycott. "But our victory will not be a victory for Montgomery's Negroes alone. It will be a victory . . . for democracy."

TOMORROW: To the Lincoln Memorial.