

Post Daily Magazine

Martin Luther King Jr.

HIS LIFE AND TIMES

ARTICLE II: *Black Boy, White South.*

By JERRY TALLMER

ON A "CLEAR wintry Saturday afternoon" in January, 1954, four months before the United States Supreme Court was to give great thrust to the civil-rights movement by outlawing segregation in the schools, Martin Luther King Jr. drove unhurriedly down from Atlanta, Ga., to Montgomery, Ala., with the car radio playing "Lucia di Lammermoor" and his head full of music and jumbled thoughts.

Married six months, out of graduate school three months—he had yet to complete the thesis for his PhD in systematic theology at Boston University—King was headed toward Montgomery to deliver a trial sermon there at the Dexter Av. Baptist Church, a church in need of a new pastor.

He and his young wife Coretta had not particularly wanted to return to the South just then. Children would be coming along, and King was not happy about raising them in the South. Coretta had a budding career as a soprano and was a regular choir member of the Old South Church, Boston, the city where they'd met.

But with the call from Dexter Av. Baptist Church, he and Coretta "talked and thought and prayed" over what to do.

"The South, after all, was our home," King would later write in "Stride Toward Freedom (Harper & Row), his account of the Montgomery bus boycott. "Finally we agreed that, in spite of the disadvantages and inevitable sacrifices, our greatest service could be rendered in our native South. We came to the conclusion that we had something of a moral obligation to return—at least for a few years."

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IT TOOK A JAMES BALDWIN TO POINT OUT, years later, to white America, that "it is of the utmost importance to realize that [Martin Luther] King loves the South. Many Negroes do."

On a TV interview in 1961, Mike Wallace asked King why he loved the South.

WALLACE: What's there to love, from your point of view?

KING: Well, it's like a parent who loves a prodigal child, a child who strays away. Here is a section of the country that has some beauty, that has been made ugly by segregation. There is an intimacy



With his father (l) and his wife at his side, Dr. King holds a press conference on the steps of Montgomery County courthouse before going on trial for violation of the state's anti-boycott law—March 19, 1956.

the Atlanta city buses; he had led the fight to equalize black and white teachers' salaries; he had successfully campaigned against Jim Crow elevators in the Atlanta courthouse. In all this, he had, said his son, "perhaps won the grudging respect of the whites." And even of at least one white cop.

It happened on a day when Martin Luther Jr. was riding with his father, and Martin Luther Sr. accidentally drove past a stop sign. A policeman came alongside and said:

"All right, boy, pull over and let me see your license."

Martin Luther Sr. forcefully replied: "I'm no boy." He pointed to his son. "This is a boy," he said. "I'm a man, and until you call me one, I will not listen to you." According to Martin Luther Jr., the policeman nervously wrote out a ticket "and left the scene as quickly as possible."

The heritage of courage came from both sides of the family. Maternal grandfather Daniel Williams, pastor for 37 years at Ebenezer Baptist, had been one of the first NAACP officials in Georgia and had, through yet another and earlier boycott, put out of business a racist paper called *The Georgian*.

Perhaps the final straw came when Martin Luther Jr. was 14 and returning with a teacher from an oratorical contest in Valdosta, Ga., 250 miles to the south. Ninety miles south, at Macon, they had to change buses, and when the bus filled up with whites the driver told the two Negroes to get up and stand. They were slow to do so.

The driver "started cursing us out and calling us black sons of bitches. I decided not to move at all, but my teacher pointed out that we must obey the law. So we got up and stood in the aisle the whole 90 miles to Atlanta. I don't think I have ever been so deeply angry in my life."

Or so deeply prepared for a bus boycott a decade later in Montgomery.

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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. ACCEPTED THE PASTORATE of the Dexter Av. Baptist Church, on the condition that he would be given a few months of part-time service, commuting from Boston, to enable him to complete work on his doctoral thesis. On Sept. 1, 1954, he and Coretta moved into the Dexter Av. parsonage and he began his full-time pastorate. He was 25 years old.

Soon after he got his bearings in "a new house, a new job, a new city," King began to move himself and the church forward in fresh directions. Within the church he set up a Social and Political Action Com-

mittee which in turn launched a biweekly SAPAC newsletter; as an individual he joined the local branch of NAACP and then the interracial Alabama Council on Human Relations, an affiliate of the Southern Regional Council. The Montgomery chapter was the only truly interracial group in the city. For King, it "served to keep the desperately needed channels of communication open between the races."

He also came in contact with the Progressive Democrats, headed by a Negro named E. D. Nixon, an extremely tough and knowing man, Pullman porter, organizer, past president of the state NAACP, prime mover in voter registration.

The Nixons of Montgomery had for some months been up in arms about the case of Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old Negro high-school girl who shortly after King's installation at Dexter Av. had been pulled off a bus and taken to jail in handcuffs when she'd refused to give up her seat to a white passenger.

A citizens committee was formed with King as one of its members, and was granted an audience by the police chief and the manager of the city bus lines.

King and his committee "left the meeting hopeful; but nothing happened. The same old patterns of humiliation continued." These patterns included bus drivers referring to their Negro passengers as "niggers," "black cows," "black apes"; a system where Negroes paid their fares at the front entrance, then had to get off and reboard at the rear, often with the bus pulling away with the Negro still on the street and his dime in the fare box up front; and, of course, the rule that Negroes were prohibited from the first four rows of seats and must stand if whites needed any black seats.

Claudette Colvin was convicted with a suspended sentence. The incident petered out, unsatisfactorily. But a mood was building. A *Zeitgeist*, Martin Luther King would call it—the spirit of the time.

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AND THEN, IN MONTGOMERY, ALA., LATE IN the day of Dec. 1, 1955, an attractive Negro seamstress named Mrs. Rosa Parks who was returning home from her stretch of work at Montgomery Fair, a department store, was ordered with three other Negroes to turn her seat over to whites.

She refused.

"I don't really know why," she said later. "I was just tired. My feet hurt."

She was taken off the bus and arrested.

Early the next morning, Friday, Dec. 2, E. D. Nixon, his voice trembling, telephoned Martin Luther King Jr., the new young pastor of Dexter Av. Baptist Church.

Nixon didn't know what he was bargaining for. We were just looking for an agreeable figurehead, he much later confessed—"and we got *Moses*."

TOMORROW: 381 Days in Montgomery.

of life that can be beautiful if it is transformed in race relations from a sort of lord-servant relationship to a person-to-person relationship. And I think there are other things about the South that will make it one of the finest sections of our country once we solve this problem of segregation.

Or, as he saw it with Coretta, "something remarkable was unfolding in the South, and we wanted to be on hand to witness it." It had the potential for "a moral, political and economic boom hardly paralleled by any other section of the country."

Yet in the same interview with Wallace, King acknowledged that he had had to come through a transition of his own in regard to the South and the white man generally:

"I went through the experience as I came to the point of adolescence of developing a resentment. I experienced segregation in all its dimensions living in the South, and I did develop this feeling of resentment. I don't think it ever went to the point of being an extreme bitterness, but it was certainly a resentment where I for a period just felt like all white people were bad."

He had had good cause.

As a little boy Martin Luther King Jr., dubbed "M. L.," had been inseparable companions with two little white boys across the street in Atlanta, sons of a neighborhood grocer. Then, when he was 5 or 6, "something began to happen."

When he would go across the street to get them, they just weren't available. "Their parents would say that they couldn't play." There was no overt hostility — "they just made excuses." Finally he went to his mother and asked her why. She took him on her lap and explained the facts of life, up from slavery and the Civil War.

"Then she said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: 'You are as good as anyone.'"

The incident went deep; others would go sharp.

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WHILE HE WAS STILL QUITE SMALL HE WENT

downtown to a shoestore one day with his father. A young white clerk politely informed them that he'd be happy to wait on them "if you'll just move to those seats in the rear." Martin Luther King Sr., the son of a sharecropper and a "robust, dynamic" man of "fearless honesty," replied: "We'll either buy shoes sitting here or we won't buy shoes at all." The clerk stood fast; father and son left the store.

"This was the first time," Martin Luther King Jr. would later write, "that I had ever seen my father so angry. I still remember walking down the street beside him as he muttered: 'I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it.' And he never has."

The elder King, who this week was crushed by the death of the son into which he had poured that life, was a scrapper long before Martin Luther King Jr. came along. As pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta he presided over a congregation of 4,000 and had strong influence in the Negro community.

Years before the Montgomery boycott he conducted and always maintained his one-man boycott against

In last Saturday's reprint of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech during the 1963 March on Washington the date was listed in error as June 15, 1963. Dr. King made the speech on Aug. 28.
