



Black Belt Press



Mrs. Jo Ann Gibson Robinson



Mrs. T. M. Glass



Mrs. Z. J. Pierce



Mrs. Irene West

# *The* **MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT** *and the* **WOMEN WHO STARTED IT**

## *The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*

Black women in Montgomery, Alabama, unlocked a remarkable spirit in their city in late 1955. Sick of segregated public transportation, these women decided to wield their financial power against the city bus system and, led by Jo Ann Gibson Robinson (1912-1992), convinced Montgomery's African Americans to stop using public transportation. Robinson was born in Georgia and attended the segregated schools of Macon. After graduating from Fort Valley State College, she taught school in Macon and eventually went on to earn an M.A. in English at Atlanta University. In 1949 she took a faculty position at Alabama State College in Montgomery. There she joined the Women's Political Council. When a Montgomery bus driver insulted her, she vowed to end racial seating on the city's buses. Using her position as president of the Council, she mounted a boycott. She remained active in the civil rights movement in Montgomery until she left that city in 1960. Her story illustrates how the desire on the part of individuals to resist oppression — once it is organized, led, and aimed at a specific goal — can be transformed into a mass movement.

### *Ch. 2: The Boycott Begins*

On Friday morning, December 2, 1955, a goodly number of Montgomery's black clergymen happened to be meeting at the Hilliard Chapel A. M. E. Zion Church on Highland Avenue. When the Women's Political Council officers learned that the ministers were assembled in that meeting, we felt that God was on our side. It was easy for my two students and me to leave a handful of our circulars at the church, and those disciples of God could not truthfully have told where the notices came from if their very lives had depended on it. Many of the ministers received their notices of the boycott at the same time, in the same place. They all felt equal, included, appreciated, needed. It seemed predestined that this should be so.

One minister read the circular, inquired about the announcements, and found that all the city's black congregations were quite intelligent on the matter and were planning to support the one-day boycott with or without their ministers' leadership. It was then that the ministers decided that it was time for them, the leaders, to catch up with the masses. If the people were really determined to stage this one-day protest, then they would need moral support and Christian leadership. The churches could serve as channels of communication, as well as altars where people could come for prayer and spiritual guidance. Since the ministers were servants of the people and of God, and believed in the gospel of social justice, and since the churches

We received a call upon arrival the bus operator said he had a colored female sitting in the white section of the bus, and would not move back.

We (Day & Mixon) also saw her.

The bus operator signed a warrant for her. Rosa Parks, (cf) 634 Cleveland Court.

Rosa Parks (cf) was charged with chapter 6 section 11 of the Montgomery City Code.

Warrant #114254

Police report on the arrest of Rosa Parks, 1 December 1955 (detail)

were institutions supported by the people, the clerics could serve as channels through which all: the necessary benefits could flow. Thus, for the first time in the history of Montgomery, black ministers united to lead action for civic improvement. There was no thought of denomination. Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Congregationalists, and others joined together and became one band of ministerial brothers, offering their leadership to the masses. Had they not done so, they might have alienated themselves from their congregations and indeed lost members, for the masses were ready, and they were united!

The black ministers and their churches made the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 the success that it was. Had it not been for the ministers and the support they received from their wonderful congregations, the outcome of the boycott might have been different. The ministers gave themselves, their time, their contributions, their minds, their prayers, and their leadership, all of which set examples for the laymen to follow. They gave us confidence, faith in ourselves, faith in them and their leadership, that helped the congregations to support the movement every foot of the way.

Under the aegis of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance a meeting was called for that Friday evening at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, of which the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was pastor. To this meeting were invited all the ministers, all club presidents and officers, all church organization heads, and any interested persons.

In the meantime, domestic workers who worked late into the day toyed with the slips of paper carrying the important information of the protest. Most of them destroyed the evidence, buried the information in their memories, and went merrily on their way to work. However, one lone black woman, a domestic loyal to her "white lady," in spite of her concern over the plight of her black peers and without any sense of obligation to her people, carried the handbill to her job and did not stop until the precious paper was safe in her "white lady's" hands. It was only a matter of minutes before the bus company, the City Commission, the chief of police, and the press knew its contents. The *Alabama Journal*, Montgomery's afternoon newspaper, ran a story on Saturday. Another article appeared in the *Montgomery Advertiser* on Sunday. The two local television stations and the four radio stations completed the coverage. The secret was out.

In recalling this particular incident later; the leaders of the boycott wondered if that woman's action had been providential, part of a divine plan to make the boycott succeed. If this was the case, she was not disloyal to her people, but rather was following the dictates of a higher authority!

The original intention had been that the whole affair would come as a complete surprise to whites. Then if all the darker set did not cooperate, no one would be the wiser. But now the news was out, and some misgivings and fear among blacks followed. Southern blacks, who had never been known to stick together as a group, to follow leadership, or to keep their mouths shut from exposing secrets, were on the spot!

One good thing, however, came from the revelation: the few black citizens in remote corners of the city who might not have gotten the news of the boycott, knew it now. The news that circulated through the newspapers, radio, television, and other channels of communication covered every possible isolated place not reached by the leaflets.

Publicity given the Monday boycott probably accounted, too, for the very large attendance which turned out for the Friday night meeting at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. More than one hundred leaders were present.

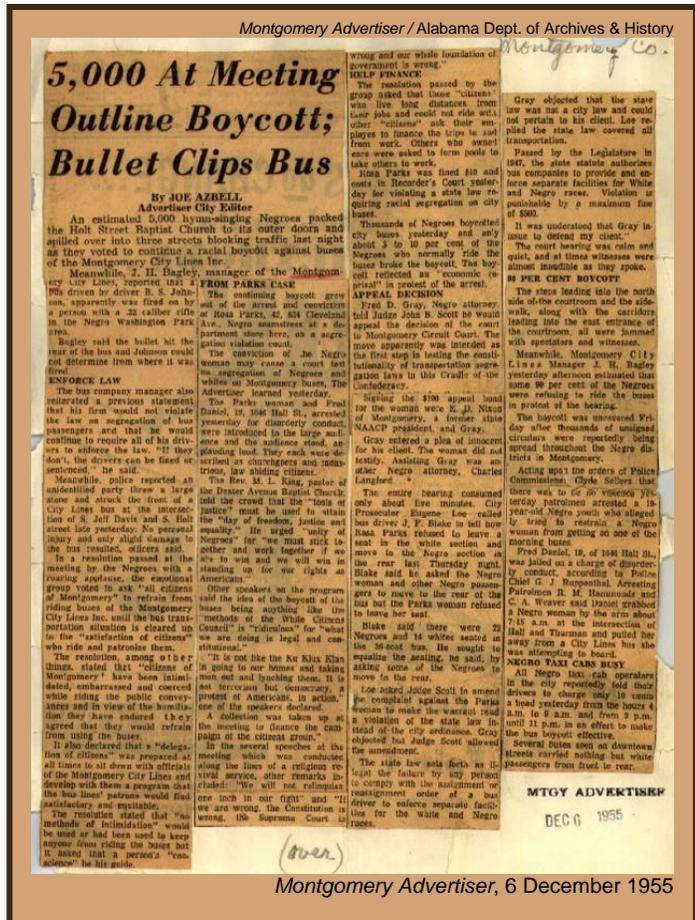
There the organization of the boycott began. Special committees were set up. The main one focused on transportation. To help the walking public, volunteer cars had to be pooled, taxis had to be contacted, and donations had to be determined through cooperative means. Routes had to be mapped out to get workers to all parts of the city. Regular bus routes had to be followed so that workers who "walked along" the streets could be picked up. This committee, headed by Alfonso Campbell and staffed by volunteer workers, worked all night Friday to complete this phase of the program. The pickup system was so effectively planned that many writers described it as comparable in precision to a military operation.

What the ministers failed to do at that meeting was to select one person who would head the boycott. Those present discussed it, pointing out the leadership preparation of various individuals, but no definite decision was made. That had to wait until Monday afternoon, when the ministers realized that the one-day boycott was going to be successful. Then they met again, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., agreed to accept the leadership post.

On Friday night the group at Dexter Avenue did decide to arrange a mass meeting for Monday night following the one-day boycott. Holt Street Baptist Church, of which Reverend A. W. Wilson was pastor, was chosen as the place for the Monday night meeting because it was the most spacious of all Montgomery's Negro churches. It had a large basement that accommodated hundreds, an even larger main auditorium, and an upstairs area as well. In addition, various smaller rooms were equipped with loudspeakers. Thus, thousands could fit within this one building. And around the building was a huge outdoor space which seemed to cover several acres. Outside loudspeakers would be able to carry the message to those who could not squeeze into the church.

The Monday evening rally was planned in an effort to calm emotions and to keep the infuriated masses under control. Every citizen knew that, as tense as people were over the situation, violence could break out among those individuals, white or black, whose emotions were not well-disciplined. From this standpoint it was good, too, that the ministers had agreed to take over the boycott's leadership, to direct an emotional appeal for passive resistance.

A second purpose of the Monday night meeting was to get a clear report of the effectiveness of the boycott that day, for decisions would have to be made. The meeting could help determine whether the boycott should continue and establish definite plans if it were to continue.



The WPC prepared notices of this Monday night meeting, which were carried by diligent community workers from door to door, as the first ones had been, until they were circulated over the city. One of these flyers, too, fell into the hands of the press. Unknowingly, the journalists helped our group considerably by publicizing the mass meeting for Monday night, and, by playing up the expression “further instructions,” they aroused the interest of blacks and whites alike and heightened concern at the Montgomery City Lines.

As was customary, on the dot of the hour Monday morning, December 5, 1955, empty buses lumbered out of the Montgomery City Lines car shed, and drove off in all directions to begin their daily rounds. Trailing each bus were two motorcycle policemen, who had been assigned to follow each bus into predominantly black population areas to “protect Negro riders” who would want to patronize the city transportation lines. Rumors had spread that hundreds of black domestics had telephoned their “white folks” that they would not be at

work on Monday because they were “afraid to ride the bus.” This was interpreted to mean that other Negroes would try to keep them from boarding the public conveyances by doing them bodily harm. So local authorities increased the police force with extras, and posted two officers on the tail of every bus that went into neighborhoods inhabited mainly by the minority group. This extra protection presumably would enable maids and cooks to go to work without fear of their own boycotting people.

The headlines in the city’s morning newspapers were bold and glaring. The *Montgomery Advertiser* carried the caption: “Extra Police Set for Patrol Work in Trolley Boycott.” The article stated that “Negro goon squads” reportedly had been organized to intimidate other Negroes who rode buses on Monday, and that the threat was being met by city authorities with the promise to “call out every city policeman and every reserve policeman, if necessary, to maintain law and order.” Officials had referred to the boycott as a “most serious matter,” which would be dealt with accordingly. Further, the article stated, black domestics had telephoned their employers that they would not show up for work that day unless the employers came for them in their automobiles or paid their taxi fares.

Boycotters had not heard of any “goon squads.” Since they knew that the boycott was a purely voluntary gesture which thousands of blacks heartily approved of and encouraged, they failed to believe the report. The news was ignored or scoffed at.

The news did one thing, however. If there were any timid souls who would have ridden the bus despite the boycott, they were really frightened now. Hence the media assisted the boycott’s leaders in preventing would-be-riders from boarding buses.

Early Monday the first buses went out for the regular morning’s pickup. Usually at this time people pushed on or scrambled for seats. But today no passengers awaited the buses’ arrival. It was reported that at the very beginning a few riders were spotted on several of the buses. There were in fact a few blacks who had threatened to ignore requests to stay off buses that day. These had been well-indoctrinated into believing that white people were superior, and that blacks had “their place” and should stay in it. But fate seemed to play into the hands of the boycotters. When these faint-hearted few saw the two motorcycle



police escorts accompanying the buses, they became really frightened that they might be arrested if they rode the bus. So they took a cab for a dime instead. (The cabs were provided by black citizens cooperating with the group.) Soon, on most of the public carriers, there was “nary a colored soul to pay a single fare.” Instead, hundreds of people were walking or boarding taxis or private cars.

There were no black late-risers on this particular morning, for those who lived on bus lines telephoned those who did not, to say that the boycott was effective, that black passengers were not riding, and that very few whites were riding. In those early morning hours the voice of the liberty-seeking colonists of 1776, the Minutemen of Lexington, seemed to make itself heard in the hearts of Montgomery Negroes, joyously exclaiming, “O, what a glorious morning this is!”

All day long empty buses passed, trailed by white-capped city cops. Very few white passengers rode on that Monday. Of course, 75 to 80 percent of bus riders normally were black. But many of the 20 to 25 percent white riders respected the one-day boycott of black citizens and stayed off the bus, too, to support it. Many whites hauled their maids, cooks, and nurses that day. One bus driver confessed that during a six-hour run he took in only \$6.30.

Downtown merchants counted the day’s receipts and came up short, too, especially compared to the preceding Christmas shopping days. Negroes, who as a group had a reputation for spending their earnings without much thought of saving for tomorrow, just “were not in town” to spend money and in any case had no way to carry purchases home. But, then, boycotters were in no mood to go shopping. Christmas was not on their minds. One woman had walked to town to shop for Christmas. She said that while she was in one large department store, the realization came upon her that she was the only black customer in the store, and she hurried out. She stopped in another store and found a similar condition. Deciding that there were no black people in town, she left and went home without purchasing anything.

Only one arrest was reported during the day in connection with the boycott. As one bus approached a bus stop, followed by the “white caps,” a small group of curiosity seekers stood near, laughing at the sight. The bus driver stopped at the sign and opened the door, expecting the crowd to get on. Instead, a nineteen-year-old college student, Fred Daniel, full of joy, pranks, and frivolity, took hold of the arm of his friend, Mrs. Percival, and playfully “helped her across the street.”

The motorcycle police were upon him in a flash. They accused him of hindering the passenger from getting on the bus and held him until a patrol car came to take him to jail, where he was booked for disorderly conduct. When proof was established that Mrs. Percival was not being hindered from boarding the bus, the young man was released and freed, feeling that “the experience had only helped him to do more for the cause.”

That day was rough on the bus drivers. They complained to the police department that they were being “persecuted and molested” in various places by colored children who ridiculed them and stuck out their tongues at them as they passed by.

In response to the complaints, officials asked Negro school principals to “stop the children from gathering on corners and poking out their tongues at the embarrassed motormen.” Teachers dutifully instructed the children to go about their business and not bother the bus drivers. The children obeyed, but, when tiny tots saw no one looking, especially their teachers, they stuck out their tongues at the “yellow monsters,” then looked angelically ahead of them as if they had not done a thing!

In windows, doorways, and yards, people peered at the huge, empty yellow motor vehicles. The empty buses, each with its pair of white-capped motorcycle policemen trailing behind, evoked countless memories of bitter past experiences. Suddenly, all the emotions that had been held in for so long were released in heartless taunts, laughter, and hand-waving.

“You wanted your buses, now you got ’em!”

“It’s dey buses, let dem keep ’em!”

“Who will you kick now?”

No obscenity was employed. But though the taunts were mild, harmless, they did the persecuted, oppressed people worlds of good.

The *Advertiser* later (January 10, 1956) quoted a report that one seventy-two-year-old man who had ridden the bus for thirty or forty years sat on his front porch and laughed heartily every time a bus drove

by. A woman reported gleefully that the buses were driving by her house “as naked as can be.”

Yet another woman “who had walked halfway across town” was given a ride by a minister who asked if she was tired. She replied, “Well, my body may be a bit tired, but for many years now my soul has been tired. Now my soul is resting. So I don’t mind if my body is tired, because my soul is free.” All during the first day of the boycott, black drivers during off hours gave walking boycotters rides. Preachers, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, and ordinary folks picked up people walking; it was said that Ph.D.’s and no d’s got together and knew each other as brothers, all members of one race, sticking together for one common cause. A close bond of fellowship and friendship was created. Thus, the race became united. Each person bore his part of the burden, The car owners drove Cadillacs or jalopies, whatever the case was; the bus riders walked if they were not picked up. And the boycotters loved it! They stopped talking so much and so loud on the job and kept many things, to themselves. Petty jealousies disappeared, and they manifested a new trust for leadership. In “sticking with the race,” they astounded themselves, as well as the white population, which did not know what had “come over the darkies!”

One white woman fired her maid because the “sullen girl” refused to divulge any information concerning the boycott. Many white women disguised their voices to “sound like voices of black people” and telephoned different ministers to find out where the “pick-up station was,” and “if there was any new information that they should know.” When the ministers would direct them to a certain church for all the information they would need, the callers would ask “where the churches were and how to get there.” Then the ministers would know who the callers were and hang up.

Before Monday was half gone, Negroes had made history. Never before had they united in such a manner. There was open respect and admiration in the eyes of many whites who had looked on before, dubious and amused. Even clerks in dime stores, all white, were more cordial. They were heard to add, after a purchase by a black customer, “Y’all come back to see us,” which was a very unusual occurrence. The black customers held their heads higher. They felt reborn, important for the first time. A greater degree of race pride was exhibited. Many were themselves surprised at the response of the masses, and could not explain, if they had wanted to, what had changed them overnight into fearless, courageous, proud people, standing together for human dignity, civil rights, and, yes, self-respect! There was a stick-togetherness that drew them like a magnet. They showed a genuine fondness for one another. They were really free — free inside! They felt it! Acted it! Manifested it in their entire beings! They took great pride in being black.

### ***The Monday Night Meeting at Holt Street Church***

Six thousand black people, along with local reporters, packed Holt Street Baptist Church that night, December 5, 1955, for the first mass meeting of the bus boycott. In the main auditorium, the balcony, the basement, the aisles, steps, the front, side, and back yards, and for three blocks up and down Holt Street, people crowded near to hear what was said. Loudspeakers were set up so that crowds who sat in parked cars two blocks away could hear. Police cars patrolling the area warned those inside the church to turn down the volume, which was disturbing the people outside, but no one paid any attention. The volume stayed loud.

White journalists from Montgomery and other nearby places were on hand to report the news of the boycott. Cameras flashed repeatedly, taking pictures of the thousands gathered in the church. So intent were the people on what was being said that the photographers went unnoticed.

The pulpit was jammed with Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, Catholic, and other ministers, and with organization officials. They conducted a spirited devotion of prayer and hymns. Prayers were offered for “endurance, tolerance, faith in God.” There were prayers for the city commissioners; for “misguided whites”; for the weak; and for all races and nations. People felt the spirit. Their enthusiasm inundated them, and they overflowed with “powerful emotion.”

Reverend Ralph Abernathy, presiding, said the boycott was not a one-man show, nor a preacher’s show, but the show of 45,000 black Montgomeries. It was also a show of black Americans all over America and all over the world and of freedom-loving people everywhere. When one ministerial

spokesman after another told of the tremendous success of the one-day boycott, cries of joy and thunderous applause pealed forth and “ascended the heavens to God Almighty,” as one present was heard to say.

The leaders reiterated that the protest had been and would be kept Christian, non-violent, legal. Even Joe Azbell, city editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, seemed impressed, for in his article on Wednesday, December 7, he confessed that “there was discipline among Negroes which whites were not aware of.”

When the question was posed as to whether the people would end the one-day bus boycott, thousands of voices shouted the same word, “No! No!” One lone voice cried out in clear tones, “This is just the beginning!” Thunderous applause was the response.

Those on the podium agreed, without one dissenting vote, that the protest must continue. Ministers pledged themselves and their congregations to remain off the buses until legal steps were taken that would insure fair, unbiased, equal treatment of all bus passengers. Mr. E. D. Nixon received an ovation when he observed that “Negroes stopped riding the bus because they were arrested, and now they are being arrested for not riding them.”

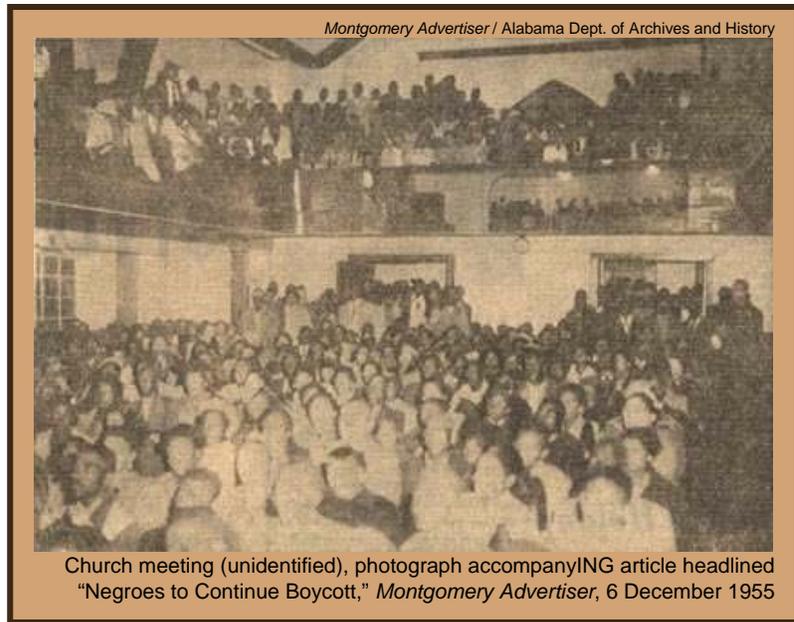
As the *Alabama Journal* reported the next day, the Negroes passed a four-part resolution urging:

1. All citizens of Montgomery “regardless of race, color, or creed” to refrain from riding buses owned and operated by the City Lines Bus Company “until some arrangement has been worked out between said citizens and the bus company.”
2. That every person owning or who has access to automobiles will use them in assisting other persons to get to work “without charge.”
3. That employers of persons who live a great distance from their work, “as much as possible” provide transportation for them.
4. That the Negro citizens of Montgomery are ready and willing to send a delegation to the bus company to discuss their grievances and to work out a solution for the same.

A committee was appointed to draw up resolutions and to make proposals to be presented to the bus company. For a task of this nature, the regular leaders of the boycott movement tried to distribute leadership opportunities among all the educated members — ministers who wanted to participate, men of Montgomery, even women who were deeply involved and knew what was going on. Thus, a mixed group of this nature, along with a few of the regulars, made up this contingent.

During the afternoon, several clergymen and organization leaders had anticipated this step and were now prepared to present verbal and written resolutions. Since these resolutions expressed the sentiments of the masses present on Monday night, it took only minutes to adopt the measures and to announce that the boycott was continuing indefinitely — until satisfactory replies were received and accepted. One of the ministers summed up the verdict when, at the close of this Monday night meeting, he reiterated that the protest would continue, the car pool would continue, and black Americans, like Enoch, would continue to “walk with God.”

The stand which the ministers took on the resolutions proved that they were finally catching up with their congregations. They had definitely decided to assume leadership, so as to give Christian guidance to



a rebellious people, and to keep the masses under control. Had the ministers not assumed leadership, disorganized, irresponsible persons might have resorted to shameful violence or individual retaliation upon certain bus drivers. Sparks of potentially undisciplined emotions were in evidence at this first mass meeting, as individuals kept telling and retelling awful experiences they had encountered at the bus drivers' hands. They grew more angry at each telling, and any little provocation could have triggered an uprising. Then a minister would walk up and quietly speak a word of caution.

### ***The Montgomery Improvement Association***

Before the meeting adjourned, the masses organized themselves into a new association. It was, without one dissenting vote, given the name "The Montgomery Improvement Association" (MIA). The MIA was pledged to protect, defend, encourage, enlighten, and assist the members of the black community against unfair treatment, prejudice, and unacceptable subordination. To keep down violence, to make the movement Christian-like, and to follow the "passive resistance doctrine" of non-violence, the ministers accepted official positions in the new association as leaders of the boycott. The following slate of officers was elected:

President	Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
First Vice President	Reverend L. Roy Bennett
Second Vice President	Dr. Moses W. Jones, M.D.
Financial Secretary	Mrs. Erna Dungee
Corresponding Secretary	Reverend E. N. French
Treasurer	Mr. E. D. Nixon
Assistant Treasurer	Mr. C. W. Lee
Parliamentarian	Reverend A. W. Wilson

Thus, the permanent MIA was organized and six months later incorporated. All officers were named for one year, but most held their positions throughout the duration of the boycott. After six months, Reverend Bennett left town and was replaced by Reverend Ralph D. Abernathy, because Reverend Fields could not attend as regularly as he desired, and also because he was at odds with certain aspects of the MIA plans, he was replaced by Reverend W. J. Powell.

For such a tremendous city-wide undertaking, the newly elected MIA officers requested a large executive board of able leaders who could assist in appointing suitable persons to indispensable committees. The MIA Executive Board, consisting of about thirty-five men and women, was appointed by the people. These were persons the MIA members felt would speak out without fear and speak with authority as representatives of the black protesters. They included men such as Mr. E. D. Nixon, known for years to fight discrimination. From the WPC, Mrs. A. W. West, Sr., and I were named.

Although the MIA had regular Monday night meetings at Holt Street Church to sing and pray, it did not always meet for that purpose. Its officers met when important business had to be taken care of. The MIA Executive Board met regularly each week on Wednesday, and if necessary more often. There were often "called" meetings when the board had to cope with emergencies and the next day would have been too late. Nobody complained, tired though we all were. No hour was too early or too late for the members to meet to solve a problem, and no previous commitment except our jobs took precedence over the board's urgent needs. Our time was given freely, for the great cause of justice, and members' personal desires were lost in the total framework of the whole. Nobody thought of what would benefit *him* individually, but of what would contribute to all as a group. There was never a large group of people more dedicated, more consecrated to a cause than these people. Through the tireless, self-sacrificing efforts of the members of the Executive Board, the MIA functioned smoothly.

The drafting of a constitution for the new organization required days and days of thought, discussion, wrangling, and prayerful meditation on the part of the Executive Board, for this framework would influence the lives and welfare of all Montgomery's black citizens.

The leaders of the organization, and the officers who handled the funds, were hardworking, honest, dedicated people who gave their time freely. The MIA had only four paid employees. Mrs. Erna Dungee,

who was the financial secretary, worked full-time after the first six months of the boycott. She was a sophisticated, socially involved woman who was married to a professional man and was part of the elite group. She was excellently trained and remained active in community affairs for many years.

Mrs. Maude Ballou was Dr. King's personal secretary; her husband was a college professor. She was a very fair-complexioned young woman, quiet, dedicated to her work and her family. She worked faithfully with Dr. King, and he trusted her completely. She *never remembered* any of Dr. King's business!

Mrs. Martha Johnson was the MIA's secretary-clerk. She worked for all the other leaders of the MIA and took care of their roles in the organization. She never got two persons' business mixed up.

Mrs. Hazel Gregory was the MIA's general overseer. She knew where everything was, never got anything mixed up, and could get what was needed immediately. She had the big responsibility of managing the business, taking care of the building where the MIA was housed, and seeing that it was locked securely at night.

These young ladies worked beautifully together all day, every day, and managed flawlessly. They were also members of the WPC, and assisted the group in many ways. All these ladies were well trained and the most responsible of people. Each one had her own skills and were assets to the MIA. I may add here that these four ladies helped me so much. When I would go to the MIA for any purpose, one of them would stop and help me find what I needed. I loved them all! Hundreds of volunteers assisted, and when they were called to help out, they came immediately.

The MIA rented a very large building, with some five rooms. Dr. King had a private office, as did his secretary, Mrs. Ballou. There was a business room, usually to take care of guests, ministers, visitors, and so on, plus several desks which various ministers could use. Mrs. Dungee had a special room; so did Mrs. Gregory.

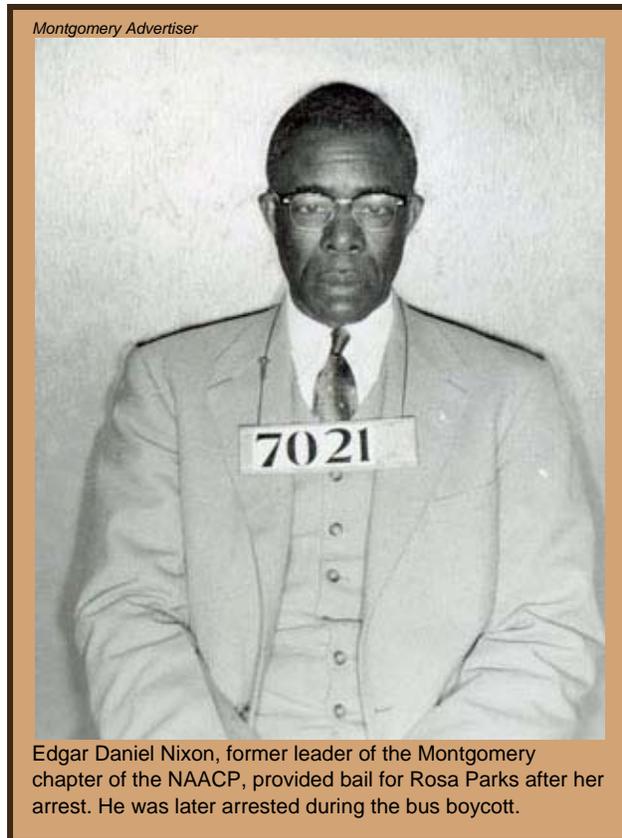
### ***The Leaders of the MIA***

Professor James E. Pierce, at the time professor of social sciences at Alabama State College, attributed the amazing success of the MIA and the boycott to good leadership. He stated that the leaders had "finally caught up with the masses." The masses, he said, "have been ready for a long time, but until now they have been without leadership." Among the many people who were essential to the success of the boycott, several individuals played key leadership roles in the boycott movement.

On that first Monday of the boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was elected president of the newly formed MIA. From 1954 to 1960, including the thirteen months of the boycott, he was pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Reverend Vernon Johns had pastored before him. The congregation of Dexter Avenue Baptist had always been made up of many of the elite — the professionals and intellectuals — of Montgomery's black communities. Most of the church's members were well educated, with good jobs and high positions because of their college and university training.

Although he was only twenty-six years old at this time, Dr. King's background had prepared him for leadership. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929, his father had succeeded his grandfather as pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church there. He was academically prepared, having graduated from Morehouse College in 1948 and received the B.D. degree from Crozer Theological Seminary in 1951. He had married Coretta Scott in 1953 and earned his doctor of philosophy degree from Boston University in 1955. He was the only minister in Montgomery with a Ph.D. degree. His brilliance was easily discernable. His vast store of knowledge and his profound intellectuality puzzled many great minds. He was familiar with every great philosophy of the ancient and modern worlds, He knew or was familiar with all the great thinkers of the various civilizations throughout the ages. He seemed to think that it was prophetic that he came to Montgomery. "Destiny decreed it!" When he came to the college to see me I did not see his small stature. I saw the man, his intellect, his profundity of thought and purpose. He could look one straight in the eye and seemingly read that person's character.

He was energetic, persuasive, and willing to take up the responsibilities at hand. He had leadership ability, patience in listening to what others had to say, and the capacity to put people at ease, when they



talked with him. His kind, humane approach with an audience of one or many inspired confidence.

In many instances Dr. King appeared meek, humble, even boyish among close friends. When he laughed, as he did often, his total personality responded in kind, and his joy was manifest. He loved life. He loved people — all people, and he was comfortable with any audience, educated and otherwise.

I recall one instance when Dr. King was as happy as I have ever seen him, and what caused that happiness is almost unbelievable. A special convention of educators from across the state of Alabama met for several days on the Alabama State College campus. Dr. King was one of the keynote speakers. At the closing of the conference a dinner dance was planned at the, only black hotel in the city, and a number of the college faculty, visitors, and community, people attended. Although they were invited, Dr. King and his wife went home after the dinner and did not attend the dance.

At the high point of the dance I was called to the telephone, which was anchored on one of the walls of the dance floor. The caller was Dr. King.

He wanted to know if many of his church members were present. My answer was in the affirmative. He wanted to know if I would do him the favor of calling a number of his members to the telephone to speak with him as they danced by. My partner and I began rounding them up, and soon a large group of Dexter Avenue Baptist churchgoers were saying hello to Dr. and Mrs. King over the telephone. He was completely happy during that time. I could hear him laughing as he talked, though I did not hold the receiver. It took only little things such as this to make him happy.

I attributed his happiness that night to camaraderie: good will and friendship. I also attributed it to the fact that he felt he had a mission there; that he had been sent for a purpose. He was “old” for his years — in depth of thought, in knowledge, and in rhetoric; he was wise, fearless, “in a hurry.” He never wanted to wait for tomorrow, if that same thing could be done today. The mass of knowledge that he had at twenty-six was perplexing — he was a genius in a hurry.

However, he was human, and he could also get angry, especially when human rights were violated. He was to be angry often in the days ahead.

There were other ministers of the boycott whose contributions were just as important as those whose names are often mentioned. These ministers worked in the background, doing the important things that the spokesmen had no time to do. They kept the wheels of the boycott moving. They kept the “Christ” spirit in the angry congregations. They allayed the fears and built up the faith, hopes, and dreams of the people. Many of them drove regularly in the carpool, and offered their churches as pick-up places for boycotting members. Their names are inscribed in the pages of history.

Among the hard-working members of the MIA was Mr. E. D. Nixon. As we have seen, he had been a key leader in the struggle for black people’s rights for many years. President of the Progressive Democratic Association, member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and a former president of the local and state branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, he was greatly respected by blacks and whites alike in Montgomery.

Mr. Nixon was humanitarian in that he helped so many people, and the community loved him. All the oldtimers felt that Mr. Nixon should be the president of the MIA, because he “could do anything!”

Although Montgomery respected Mr. Nixon greatly, as a railroad porter he was employed out of the city and had to be away often.

The MIA presidency demanded trained leadership and full-time work. The president and other officers had to devote much or most of their time to those tasks. Therefore, we felt it would be better if the ministers held the most visible leadership positions. The MIA president, with his committee, had to make decisions to be presented to the masses, whose confidence in him was most important. That person had to be the epitome of self-control, of sympathetic understanding of people's problems and of government policies. That is why Dr. King was considered a well-prepared man. He knew how to deal with angry people, poor people, frightened people, uneducated people. There was no doubt in the people's minds — they wanted Dr. King to lead them.

Mr. Nixon's role in the boycott was a very important one. He missed the fun of assisting the WPC in distributing the notices calling riders off the buses because he was out of the city on his job on Friday, December 2, 1955. However, he alerted his minister, Reverend H. H. Hubbard, to assist the WPC members in any way he could, and Reverend Hubbard did just that.

For the boycott itself, Mr. Nixon, like so many other black citizens of Montgomery, participated in every phase of activity. He worked with every facet of the MIA — with transportation, money-raising, and others. When the boycott ended, he, along with Dr. King, Reverend Abernathy, and all members of the MIA board, decided to ride the bus in a group in December 1956, officially approving and accepting the integrated seating arrangement the courts had decreed.

Irene West had been one of the first women to join the WPC when it was founded. Mrs. West was a wealthy lady, everyone believed, and one of the most prominent women in black Montgomery. She was the wife of Dr. A. W. West, Sr., who was a dentist. That lady spent much of her time fighting for the cause of first-class citizenship. She was a fine woman, a fighter against discrimination, against City Hall, where bigots such as Mr. Clyde Sellers reigned. She belonged to many social and benevolent clubs, and had many friends of the higher echelon. But she had many friends everywhere and on all levels. She loved her children and her family, but she also loved people. She embraced them all. Her goal was to make the world a fair, honest place where all men would be free. She thought of color as only "skin deep," and she felt that neither the white nor the black race would ever be free until all people were free. She worked toward that end for her entire life. And she valued education as the preparation agent that would, with prayer, get a person to the destination of his choice. She *wanted* to help, to contribute in any way she could, because she was humanitarian, and she loved Montgomery. She was blessed by God, and she wanted to give back to people as she had been given to — that is, her prosperity.

Mrs. West was nearly eighty years old when she and I were arrested at the same time and hauled to the police headquarters for incarceration. She lived to see her philosophy materialize, for she maintained good health and worked with the WPC for civil rights to the very end. Before she passed on, she was making inquiry as to the grounds gained for a better world. Despite her eighty years, she was a busy lady and helped every step of the way.

## ***Finances***

Continuing the protest necessitated a treasury. A collection taken that very first Monday night at Holt Street Church yielded the sum of \$2,000 in a matter of minutes. The spirit of giving was never more generous, and people gave money proudly.

But even at the very beginning, the members of the Montgomery Improvement Association knew that the cost of the boycott would be enormous. Two members decided to do something to swell the contributions presented at each Monday night meeting.

Mrs. Georgia Gilmore, who had once been arrested on a bus herself, became one of the protest's most ardent supporters. She organized a group called "The Club from Nowhere," which undertook to raise funds for presentation each Monday night. Members baked cakes and sold sweet potato pies to workers who had been buying lunch in cafeterias near their work places. Soon workers and even stores waited

eagerly for these ladies to bring their foods for sale. The club members approached anybody, and the customers for the delicious sweet potato pies, cakes, and other pastries these women prepared were not just black people, but also white people who enjoyed well-prepared foods.

At each Monday night mass meeting the club leader would present a large cash donation, and the crowd would give the group a standing ovation. The challenge was so exciting and the public attention so rewarding that another group decided to compete with Mrs. Gilmore's organization. Thus, Mrs. Inez Ricks and *her* friends organized "The Friendly Club." It too raised large sums of money, which were also reported at each Monday night meeting.

The two teams, who remained good friends, enjoyed competing to raise the money needed for the movement. They also represented a vital element of each

Monday night's entertainment, giving people another way to rid themselves of their frustrations and pent-up emotions. The congregations began to look forward to seeing which group would win each week's competition. Most people, for the fun of it, would contribute to both groups, often giving similar amounts to each in the hope of a tie. But each leader wanted her own group to win, and the two groups put everything they could, including money, energy, and strength, into each Monday night's contest. Each side presented its amount, waited for the reports, and vowed to win the next week.

One thing that had to be established in the minds of all the persons involved — the ministers, the boycotters themselves, and later the lawyers and the courts — was that the MIA was not a corporation of businessmen who profited from proceeds earned! The organization did not make money; there was no business operation on which to make money. It did not offer jobs or buy food for the poor or pay the ministers their salaries. The individual churches did that! Rather, the MIA was an assemblage of people from most of Montgomery's black churches, who came together for the specific purpose of survival! The MIA was *people!* — church people who contributed a part of their weekly earnings for themselves! The contributions were "free will offerings" given by those who wanted to give. Offerings were not compulsory. Nobody kept records of how much each individual contributed, for contributions were taken in mass meetings when thousands, put something in the collection of their own free will.

Contributions came from around the world, either directly to the MIA or through various churches whose ministers turned them over to the MIA. At the very beginning, the Finance Committee — a group of volunteers, men of means, honesty, and purpose — took charge of the collections. These "selected persons" received the money, counted it, rolled it up by amounts, and gave it to the treasurer. They accompanied the treasurer to the banking places, where the money was safe in deposits.

Accounts were maintained with the Alabama National Bank in Montgomery and the Citizens Trust Company in Atlanta. These banks were well known, with references above reproach. The MIA chose to use two banks simultaneously, in order to avoid having too much money in one. There were two different accounts, two different purposes. One bank was a community bank for quick service. It was in a good neighborhood or reputable image, not crowded, and anxious for honest business. As for the second bank,



Coretta Scott King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., near the end of the bus boycott, November 1956

the MIA was very particular in this choice, for that bank took care of the big money — the thousands of dollars in gifts that came from across the country and the world. The best minds handled this investment, for from this source new station wagons were bought for the walk-ing boycotters. Also, gasoline was bought for the many cars helping to carry workers back and forth; tires and batteries were purchased, and repairs and mechanics were paid for.

The financial secretary and the treasurer of the MIA received the checks, which had to be signed by the MIA officials. Checks written to pay for organization expenses had to be signed by both Dr. King as president and Mr. Nixon as treasurer.

Financial reports were made to the officers and Executive Board on a regular basis. A Finance Committee member checked every receipt of costs and approved the payment after investigating. When all committees' payment results had been checked, and all expenses had been approved by all committees involved, then one of the ministers, most times Dr. King, would report the expenditures to the large audience in attendance at one of the nightly meetings and that audience would approve the report and approve payment. In fact, one reason *why* the MIA had regular periodic meetings was so that the Finance Committee could deliver its reports. The Finance Committee was authorized to spend money on behalf of the organization, *after* the entire body approved. Also all incoming gift checks were announced and the amounts made known. Thus, every participant knew what the income was, how much was spent, what it was spent for, to whom it went, and how much was left. The darker children were, at last, given the respect that made them feel like human beings.

There was never any doubt whatsoever about the honesty of those leaders in charge. All the ministers were aware of procedural patterns for banking, and at no time during the entire thirteen-month period was there ever a report of theft. Those working with the collections could give account of every penny.

### ***The MIA Newsletter***

For a while, at the very beginning of the boycott, the only communication the masses of people enjoyed was what was received from the ministers at church. They had no specific way of knowing what was taking place in their community, and so were “in the dark.” Dr. King mentioned a “newsletter” to me one day, and asked if I thought I could spare the time to produce it. All I had to do was put it together, he said; the MIA would reproduce it. I consented. I never knew how to say no! And he trusted my ability. Gosh! How I hate to say that!

I attribute the whole thing to the fact that I was an English teacher. As soon as I had begun teaching my English classes at Alabama State College, the students and I started publishing a monthly college paper that covered the college, the teachers, and the city, reporting interesting news that was worthy of publication. The students took great pride in writing articles that covered the student body, the teachers, and the community, and soon other people, including parents, were asking for copies.

In any case, I was attending each Monday night's MIA meeting and serving on the MIA Executive Board, and it was no problem for me to take notes. Then, too, I served on that special “Mayor's Committee” which handled our negotiations with city and bus company officials. I kept notes anyway, according to habit, and enjoyed it. Thus, editing the MIA newspaper was nothing at all. I never got paid. Expenses were reimbursed, but there was no remuneration.

I notified the various sources to keep me informed, so that I could transmit all the happenings in the newsletter. The response was terrific. Often other leaders or members of the board gave me items to include. The news items were “jotted down” on paper, not in organized form. I even had to take some over the telephone. I put that newsletter together as the news reached me. When a month had passed, the newsletter was complete. I did it alone. No big deal! We began with four legal-sized pages. When I had put my notes into form; arranged the articles for first, second, third, or fourth page; added other facts of the boycott, and gotten the items Dr. King or other leaders of the MIA wished included, I had all the news we needed. As questions increased, we had to enlarge the publication with another sheet of two pages. Before the boycott was finally over, the publication had grown to eight pages. We called it the *MIA Newsletter*.



To continue the boycott, the determining factors would be personal human response; the effect the one-day bus boycott had upon the bus company; and the collective bargaining pressure as a result of the boycott. And as the boycott continued, the weekly Monday night meetings would serve as a communication center for conveying further instructions and for keeping up morale.

But there were groups of zealots who felt a need for meetings more than one night a week. The regular ministerial group felt that one meeting a week was enough and did not go along with the idea of more, but they did not oppose those who wanted more. A second meeting gave those ministers who did not have much chance to preach, the ones who were offering their churches for the purpose, an opportunity to take the leadership. And there were people who could not come to Holt Street Church because of the distance. Thus, a second service a week was conducted on Thursday nights. The MIA approved, for more people got the opportunity to attend two weekly services.

