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Bus restoration became labour of love

Rosa Parks' seat open to visitors

Bus left in field to rust for 30 years



Jil McIntosh

DEARBORN, MICH.—It's the aisle seat in the second row in the middle section on the right-hand side.

It's not actually the same seat — it came from another bus — and the upholstery is new.

But when you sit on it, you're overwhelmed with emotion and the realization that a single gesture, made right here, ultimately changed the world.

In this otherwise ordinary 1948 GM bus now housed in the Henry Ford Museum here, Rosa Parks, a black seamstress in her 40s, refused to relinquish her seat to a white man.

That act of defiance started a chain of events that led to the end of legal segregation in the southern United States.

Parks died Monday at her home in Detroit at 92.

On Dec. 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Ala., Parks boarded the bus and sat down just behind the 10 seats reserved for whites. The bus filled and when a white man boarded, the driver insisted that four black riders move.

Three did, but Parks did not. She was arrested and fined \$14 for violating segregation laws. It might have ended there, but Parks was involved in the civil rights movement, and with her lawyer, Fred Gray, appealed the decision.

Her actions also sparked a 381-day boycott, led by Martin Lu-



AP FILE PHOTO

ther King Jr., then a 26-year-old pastor of a Baptist church in town, which crippled Montgomery's bus system, since 75 per cent of its riders were black.

The appeal led to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation was unconstitutional, and the buses were integrated.

The bus on which Parks made history remained in use for another 16 years before being retired and sold to Roy Summerford of Montgomery. At the time, bus company employees told him it was the Parks bus, but he left it in a field and used it to store lumber.

"It was in terrible physical shape when we got it," says Bill Pretzer, curator of political history at the Henry Ford Museum.

'Now that we can't touch Mrs. Parks, the bus becomes the closest we can come to her spirit and her goals'

"It sat outside for 30 years. We acquired it in October of 2001." His museum outbid the Smithsonian at an auction, buying the bus for \$427,919 (U.S.). The restoration cost an additional \$300,000 (U.S.).

Following Summerford's death, his daughter tried to sell the bus, but had no documenta-

tion. She contacted an Internet auction house, which began to search for clues.

The auction house found the bus station manager's widow, who had her husband's scrapbook.

He had kept newspaper clippings of the event and had written "Blake/2857" beside one. James Blake had been the bus driver who told Parks to move.

Most of the interior had been ripped out, but above the driver's seat was the number 2857, written in gold paint.

"The number is the documentation," says Pretzer. "That's the evidence that this is the original bus, because that's the number that was kept in the scrapbook."

Further research showed that the bus had been put into service in Montgomery in 1954.

To board the bus, as I did this summer at the museum, is a moving experience.

It has been painstakingly restored, with the gold number and driver's seat left as they were. Visitors can sit in Parks's seat.

It's hard to comprehend the inhumanity of Jim Crow — the name comes from a black character in a 19th-century song — and its laws.

I was born in Florida, in the segregated South; my birth cer-



PHOTO COURTESY HENRY FORD MUSEUM

The bus that Rosa Parks rode into history is restored and now on display at the Henry Ford Museum. In 1995, above left, Parks sat in a similar bus to mark the 40th anniversary of her refusal to stand.

tificate reads "Color or race: White." I am of the privileged.

"We were not," says Jesse Daniels, 70, a monitor and part-time substitute teacher at Henry Ford Academy high school. "I was one who walked the 381 days, when we didn't ride the bus."

"I was happy to do it, because I wanted to be part of it. We paid the same fare, and we had everyone against us. Then along came Rosa Parks. We didn't realize it would go so far, but it was a big relief that we would finally have rights."

Some 75 per cent of the bus is original.

"About 15 per cent is from other 1948 buses, and then about 10 per cent is new material — the glass, the upholstery and the paint," says Pretzer. "The most difficult thing was making sure we got the colour right."

The rusty bus had been over-painted, and a paint chip analysis yielded an expected colour.

Currently, the bus is displayed alongside a copy of the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the chair in which Lincoln was assassinated.

It will become part of a larger display, called With Liberty and Justice For All, to open on Martin Luther King Day, Jan. 16, 2006.

"I see three major reactions from visitors," Pretzer says. "Senior citizens are grateful that we saved the bus, because it speaks to the change that happened. Baby boomers who grew up in that era take the bus as part of their life story."

But visitors under 30, with no experience of segregation, don't seem to believe that it ever existed, he adds ruefully, noting that citizens of a democracy should

know its history.

"Now that we can't touch Mrs. Parks, the bus becomes the closest we can come to her spirit and her goals."

Some 600,000 visitors see the bus each year, whose significance is explained by a museum guide stationed beside it.

"I never met (Parks) personally, but I was in the same church," Daniels says. "She sat up at the front, and I sat at the back. She was so mild-mannered and disciplined."

"Along with Martin Luther King, she was part of the turning point, where we could be non-violent and still win. She was a champion when she sat down. She lost her job, she lost a lot, but she would not give up."

"She held true, and I'm glad she did."

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