

Montgomery: Testing Ground: The K.K.K., the White Council and the ...

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Montgomery: Testing Ground

The K. K. K., the White Council and the 'new Negro'—all are involved in a test arising from the Supreme Court order on bus desegregation.

By GEORGE BARRETT

MONTGOMERY, ALA. THREE white-robed, white-hooded figures, their feet moving slowly and out of step, appeared suddenly on a main street here three Saturdays ago. The cloaked trio kept eyes straight ahead, walked in silence past the A. & P. Supermarket, past Perry's Sandwiches, past "War and Peace" at the Paramount.

There had been rumors that the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan were coming to town to hold a council of race-war, to set wooden crosses ablaze in Negro neighborhoods in protest against the Supreme Court's Nov. 13 decree barring segregation in buses. That decree was directed at Montgomery, specifically at the local bus system, which, the high tribunal ruled, must end its Jim Crow practices. The K. K. K. that Saturday had decided the "niggers" needed an old-style Southern reminder not to start taking the Supreme Court seriously, here in Montgomery.

A Negro mother and her 8-year-old son were about to enter Montgomery Fair, the city's big department store on Court Square, when they spotted the three hooded Kluxers; the Negroes stopped short in the doorway and stared. A Negro couple had just come out of Liggett's drug store; they, too, halted and stared. Two teenage Negro boys had stepped off the curb at the green "Walk" sign to cross Dexter; they stood rooted at the curb. And stared.

A moment of suspended movement, a moment of puzzlement and disbelief. Then all of them looked unflinchingly at the robed men—and began to smile, then to laugh.

There were whites, too, on the corners of Court Square, and grins of amused incredulity were on most of their faces. One of them scratched his chin as he watched the hooded Klansmen, and said: "Looks like they been lost outa one of them old movies."

One man, a white man, did not laugh. He was an airman in town on pass from Maxwell Air Base. He walked up to the three cloaked Kluxers, stood in their path and spat on their shoes. His hands clenched into fists. The Klansmen gave way, moved around him, and walked swiftly up the street.

THAT recent incident on Montgomery's main square captures in a way the many-faceted story of this Deep South community as it takes up the challenge of the Supreme Court's ruling ordering the end of segregation on the local bus system.

Montgomery's 50,000 Negroes have just passed the first anniversary of their year-long and phenomenally suc-

cessful bus boycott, a boycott that "kind of just burst out," as one woman puts it.

The Negroes here decided suddenly last December to stand up against Southern Jim Crow—against paying fares at the front door but having to enter the bus by the rear door to avoid contact with white passengers, of walking along the outside of the bus—after paying their fares—and being deliberately abandoned by grinning white drivers, of suffering in silent humiliation epithets from the drivers like "black ape," "black cow" and "dirty nigger."

SO, on Dec. 5, 1955, Montgomery's Negroes, who make up 40 per cent of the town's population but about 70 per cent of the paying bus traffic, simply decided to stop riding the buses. Four days before that decision, a 42-year-old seamstress, Mrs. Rosa Parks, had been arrested under city and state segregation laws for refusing a bus driver's



K. K. K.—When Kluxers recently walked Montgomery streets, Negroes, and many whites, did not take them seriously.

order to give up her seat and move back in the bus. For all the community's Negroes, Mrs. Parks' arrest was the determining blow.

Resentments in the making for more than one hundred years crystallized into collective action. Most of the white community pooh-poohed the Negro boycott, and predicted that "them shiftless, no-account niggers" would not last the week out before they would start climbing back into the buses—at the back end.

Ironically, the Negroes of Montgomery had not asked originally for non-segregated buses; they were ready to accept segregation, in the Southern tradition, but wanted only assurances of courtesy from drivers and a "first come, first served" policy, with themselves sitting to the rear of the bus as they entered. It was the resistance of the white community to these requests that eventually brought on the court action leading to desegregation.

For most of this past year Montgomery Negroes operated their own transit service with "pool" cars and station wagons, maintaining better

schedules than the city system had established. Before an injunction was issued ordering the Negroes to discontinue their own system—the injunction was issued on the same day as the Supreme Court ruling—the fleet totaled 300 private cars and twenty station wagons, many of them lent to the Negroes by churches and organizations throughout the country.

BUT during much of the year, and particularly during the last few weeks, many of the Negroes walked to work, some of them six miles each way, getting up at 3 A. M. to do it. The whites now express amazement at—and a reluctant admiration for—the year-long campaign.

The boycott has been very close to 100 per cent effective. Buses with one occupant, the driver, or with only two or three white passengers, have been traveling through town like ghost stages, and the company has lost more than \$750,000. Downtown white merchants report substantial losses, while Negro storekeepers and white proprietors located a distance from downtown Montgomery have doubled and tripled their business.

Today, after a year of boycott, many of the 75,000 white residents of Montgomery confide—usually in private, however—that they are giving agonizing reappraisals to their Dixie-conditioned concepts of the black man.

Nothing more vividly illustrates the change in basic race attitudes in this "Cradle of the Confederacy"—where Jefferson Davis took command of the secessionist cause for the entire South—than the disregard and amused contempt that the Negroes and, it must be emphasized, most of the whites now express openly for the K. K. K. This attitude, incidentally, is shared by most members of the White Citizens' Council, which has mobilized much of the South's officialdom to defend Jim Crow. (Not so incidentally, the white supremacy group here frankly confesses it has lost 1,000 of its members in the past year.)

ON that Saturday three weeks ago, when the pictures the photographers were snapping of hooded "Montgomery" Klansmen shocked much of the nation, Montgomery was, in fact, giving the K. K. K. the bum's rush. The Klan was told to get out of town if it wanted to hold a rally and was expressly forbidden to hold a parade within city limits. And, in spite of the year-long struggle over desegregation, the white community this year cooperated with the Negroes as usual on their annual parade here marking the Tuskegee-Alabama College football game on Thanksgiving Day.

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BUS RIDERS—Whites board a Montgomery bus. Normally, Negroes accounted for 70 per



MONTGOMERY—A downtown view of Alabama's capital city. A year after the boycott of local buses was begun by Negroes, the two races mingle on the city's crowded sidewalks. Now

that bus segregation has been ended by the Supreme Court, "there is a tacit agreement by the bulk of both the Negro and white communities that violence must not erupt."



cent of the paying bus traffic; their boycott has cost the bus company \$750,000.



TAXI RIDERS—Negroes board a taxi to go to their jobs. Most of them, however, depended on their own transit service of more than 300 "pool" cars and station wagons. Many walked.



BOYCOTT LEADER—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who combined practical Christianity, Hegelian philosophy and passive resistance in the struggle for equal rights on buses.

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to-the Kluxers underlines one of the most significant developments in Montgomery; there is a tacit agreement by the bulk of both the Negro and white communities that violence must not erupt, that at all costs the campaign for and against Jim Crow must be confined to the propaganda forums, to the courts, to any peaceful channel.

THIS accent on peace will get its first real test during the next few weeks. They will be crucial weeks for Montgomery, as it moves to follow up the formal order of the Supreme Court.

Some uncertainty remains. The big fear right now is the presence of "goons" of both races, particularly the bigots and malcontents who whip up emotions and prejudices and frighten the majority of law-abiders anywhere. It takes only a few men to plunge a peaceful community into a racial war, though 98 per cent of the population want no part of it.

Nevertheless, this writer failed to find a single person in Montgomery — Governor, kitchen maid, minister, cabbie, lawyer, bootblack, State Senator, housewife, or merchant—who believes that violence will take any form but the isolated, occasional clash that is certain to happen. As the new test period now unfolds, the mood of Montgomery, the mood of the emerging Southern Negro here who has seen the Supreme Court back up his right, the mood of the white Southerner here who still bitterly resents and opposes the Supreme Court stand on desegregation, can all be put into two words—watching, waiting.

BUT beyond these words, and beyond the determination of most of those here to keep violence from exploding, there are forces at work indicating that this "hard-core" Deep South community may already be well on the way toward a form of desegregation that its residents, black and white, would have considered impossible a year ago.

For one thing, it is a common fallacy to assume that places as Deep South as Montgomery must be Deep South in all measurements.

"It's the stock images—what we call the mildew-and-magnolia approach—that depress us," a native of the city says. The reality is that outside of a few trees with hanging moss, the "Heart of Dixie" tourist slogans on the license plates and the brass star imbedded on the front portico of the Capitol to mark the spot where Mr. Davis became the First Confederate President, Montgomery, Ala., could just as easily be Hartford, Conn., or Des Moines, Iowa.



ON FOOT—These Negroes walk to work in the bus boycott. Behind them is the State Capitol, first Capitol of the Confederacy.

Car jams and parking battles around plants and shipping points tell the story of Montgomery's gradual emergence from a rural economy to an industrial-agricultural way of making a dollar. In the last nine years the state led all southeastern states in the percentage of industrial employment increases, and in the last ten years manufactured products showed an 80 per cent rise.

BUT even cotton and cattle and manufacturing are minor economies compared with the United States Air Force. The biggest "industry" in Montgomery is Maxwell Air Base, Gunter Air Base and the Air University; somebody counted thirty-three full colonels clustered one day at the local depot.

"That means a chunk of spending money in our town," a storekeeper says. That also means quite a number of visits to town of men in blue from all parts of the country, men who march in non-segregated ranks, black men and white men who share the same barracks.

There is a general belief here that the buses will keep running, only now on a non-Jim Crow basis. And perhaps the most revealing sign that Jim Crow may not ride on Montgomery buses is a remark that one hears privately all over the town—a remark expressed by officials like Mayor W. A. Gayle who are

still making public pronouncements about maintaining segregation but in private say: "Look, I'm not fixin' to go to Atlanta" [that part of Atlanta, Ga., where the Federal penitentiary is situated].

The Federal court is the real key to what will probably happen here in Montgomery. Nobody is fixin' to go to the Federal "pen."

This is the kind of town where open-and-shut cases of peonage—where a Negro has been in effect sold to an employer who takes over the Negro's debts—have been thrown out of court because of the local jury system. But the feeling in Montgomery is that contempt of a Federal court is something else, and there are few who feel deeply enough about desegregation to go to jail over it.

It is almost as though a master button had been pushed to hear the same phrases come from every lip:

"Well, you know, my wife and I don't use the buses anyhow, so this whole thing doesn't affect us personally."

"Frankly, I'll tell you, I figure the 'niggers' will just get right back into them buses like they always done before this trouble and they'll move right to them back seats like always."

"Shoot! The whites will just stay off the buses, that's all."

"Now this school mixing stuff, that'll be coming next, and I'm telling you, mister, that's sure where we're gonna draw our line."

SIGNIFICANTLY, the symbol of resistance to racial integration has been transferred, by the whites, to the schools. "Let's admit it, we're just resigned on the bus question," a gray-haired lawyer says.

The fact is that school desegregation has not even been brought up by the Negroes here. A year ago nobody ever mentioned schools here; the talk was all of the buses, and it was the bus desegregation

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issue that was the symbol of white resistance.

Of all the forces subtly or obviously at work breaking down old racial patterns, clearly the most dramatic and most far-reaching is the force represented by the "new Negro," the Negro that the Old South never knew.

At the Sunday church services, in the club rooms and the ranch houses and the dilapidated shacks in Washington Park, Mobile Heights and North Montgomery, the Negroes discuss the future with evangelical faith, making plans to demonstrate that the

CHANGE

In Montgomery, as in many other Southern communities, it has long been the custom for merchants, in sending bills to Negroes, to use a Christian-name form of address—such as "Mary Jones" of such-and-such street. This was to make it clear that Negro customers were not to get notions of equality just because they were permitted to make purchases. Now, this is being changed. Under quiet, steady pressure from Negro patrons, more and more Montgomery stores are addressing their bills to "Mrs. Walter Jones."

buses can be run on a non-segregated basis from now on, safely and harmoniously. They have pledged themselves to display no attitude, commit no act to give the whites offense over the integration victory. "Victory," incidentally, is a word the Negroes are prudently avoiding.

THE man who led the Negro community in its first unified campaign for civil rights is a soft-spoken, 27-year-old scholar of Hegel and Kant, a doctor of divinity and a doctor of philosophy. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., pastor of the historic Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, a simple but quietly handsome structure of red brick near the Capitol, is a man who has shattered traditional concepts here as profoundly as his famous namesake shattered sixteenth-century concepts in Europe.

Dr. King's approach combines a practical application of Christ's appeal to all men to love all men, a practical application of Hegel's view that development evolves from struggle and that it is "natural and necessary" to accept the tension of change, and a practical application of Mahatma Gandhi's passive-resistance technique—a combination, in all, that has made a profound impact on the white community.

And on the Negro community.

Under constant harassment from city officials and city police during this past year, under threats of killing and expulsion, under threats of job firings (and scores of

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KLAN RALLY—A Klansman speaks at a meeting held at a racetrack near Montgomery. The Klan was forbidden to hold a meeting in town.

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actual job dismissals), the Negroes have continued to wear crosses on their lapels reading, "Father, forgive them."

When a bomb explosion early in the struggle wrecked Dr. King's porch—searchlights still blaze all night around his white bungalow—a large crowd of Negroes assembled in angry mood. Police Commissioner Clyde C. Sellers told them to disperse, that the police were on hand. Determined shouts rang out—"Who's gonna protect the pastor from you?" Dr. King appeared and told the crowd that especially those who threw the bomb needed love, that those who lived by the sword must die by the sword. His words quickly brought peace.

HIS words are also positive on the rights of all men. From the pulpit, his call for love and courage stresses the rightness of the Negro struggle. His language is Bible-belt language that both whites and blacks understand: "Segregation, brothers and sisters, is a stench in the nostrils of Almighty God."

But the Negro leaders themselves point out that the Negroes of Montgomery had reached a point where the leaders were compelled to act. A college professor helping to lead the fight recalls walking down the street one day shortly after the bus boycott started. A Negro woman approached him and declared: "We thought you'd wake up one of these days!"

Segregationists here have harsh words for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which they blame for "stirring up" the local Negroes. The N. A. A. C. P. did not enter the scene, however, until long after Montgomery Negroes rose in indignant protest against their treatment by the white community, and when it did enter the picture the N. A. A. C. P. confined its activities to the suit in court.

As the boycott campaign continued, the Negroes made some interesting discoveries. One day a white Southerner, who lives in town, drove up in

a black Cadillac to a group of Negroes waiting for a station wagon. "You people waiting for your pick-up?" he asked, scowling. The Negroes stiffened, hesitated, then one said yes, they were. "You people stay off the city buses, mind!" the white man said. "You'll never win once you get back on those buses." Then he drove off.

The Mayor made a special plea to white employers not to serve as chauffeurs to the "niggers." But many of them ignored the Mayor, and not only picked up and delivered their own employees but carried other Negroes to and from jobs. One white man docked his maid \$1 each week because she was not using the city buses; but another white family hiked their maid's wages so she could use a cab.

The Negroes made discoveries about themselves, too—about their hidden resources. Almost a legend now, in the Negro community is the woman who was picked up by a minister while she was trudging to work. He asked her if she wasn't getting tired. She looked at him and replied:

"My soul has been tired for a long time. Now my feet are tired, and my soul is resting."

MOST of the Negroes do flunky work, or domestic work around white homes, getting about \$15 a week, and when the whites started talking about firing all the colored, some fears were expressed at Sunday church gatherings. One Negro maid summed up the dominant attitude for her whole community: "Pooh! My white lady ain't going to get down and mop that kitchen floor. I know that."

The Negroes realize, of course, that the fight can continue for a long time yet, that these next few weeks particularly can be the real test. But, as one Negro mother of six put it:

"We know, now, that we're free citizens of the United States. Now we are aiming to become free citizens of Alabama. Our state motto, you know, is 'We Dare Defend Our Rights.' It says nothing about just white rights."