

The Rosa Parks Bus

by Larry Plachno



The most sought after historical bus is this TDH3610 transit bus built by General Motors in 1948. It was lucky enough to be the bus that Rosa Parks boarded in 1955 which transported her into the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. This photo was taken in 2001 at the Henry Ford Museum. HENRY FORD MUSEUM.

No one is surprised to hear that new buses are expensive. Many of the new converted coaches sell for more than a million dollars. However, as buses get older, they lose their value. Antique automobiles, particularly when restored, carry impressive values. Probably because there is less interest in historical buses than in antique cars, historical and restored buses do not carry high values. On numerous occasions we have seen people put a great deal of time and effort into restoring an older coach only to find that there are no potential buyers and the value of the coach does not reflect their investment.

Hence, several eyebrows were raised when a major museum purchased what

could only be called a derelict city transit bus aged more than 50 years for a price of nearly a half million dollars. Here is the story behind the bus. You can judge for yourself whether it was worth the price.

Yellow Coach of Pontiac, Michigan, was already a division of General Motors when it introduced a new bus numbering scheme in the fall of 1939. In May of 1940, Yellow Coach introduced its new "round corner" transit bus design which subsequently came to be called their "old look" style. The numbering scheme would last, with modifications, at least until the late 1970s. The "old look" design was replaced by the "new look" or "fishbowl" design in 1959 although

smaller versions of the "old look" design remained in production until 1969.

At one time or another, "old look" design buses were manufactured as several different models with lengths measuring from 23 1/2 long to 42 feet long. The "36" series model was first introduced in 1940 with a length of 30 feet and seven inches which grew to 30 feet and nine inches in post war versions built in 1944 or later. The "36" indicated the nominal seating capacity.

Production resumed after the war under the General Motors name. With the introduction of the "thermo-matic" vent in 1946,

BOYCOTT CALLED EFFECTIVE:

Negress Draws Fine In Segregation Case Involving Bus Ride

(From the Page 5-B)
By BUNNY HOMICKER

A Negro woman was fined \$10 and cost in police court here today for violating a state law requiring racial segregation on city buses.

Rosa Parks, 634 Cleveland Ave., a seamstress at a downtown store, did not testify.

Negro Atty. Fred B. Gray informed Recorder's Court Judge John R. Scott he would appeal the decision to Montgomery Circuit Court. A few minutes later, Gray signed a \$500 appeal bond for his client.

Also signing the woman's appeal bond was E. D. Nixon of Montgomery, a former state president of the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People.

Gray had entered a plea of "not guilty" for his client, who stood silent throughout the hearing.

BUS DRIVER TESTIFIES

City Prosecutor Eugene Lee called Montgomery City Lines bus driver J. F. Blake to the stand to open the city's case. Blake briefly told how Rosa Parks refused to move to the rear of his bus last Thursday night after he had requested her and several others to make seats for white passengers he was taking on one the Empire Theatre.

Blake said there were 22 Negroes and 14 whites seated in the front bus and that he asked several of the Negroes to move to the rear in order to equalize the seating.

CHARGE AMENDED

At the outset, Lee moved to amend the charge against Rosa Parks, making the warrant read a violation of the state law instead of the city ordinance. Gray objected by Judge Scott allowed the amendment. The state law merely sets forth as unlawful any failure by a person to comply with the assignment or re-assignment order of a bus driver.

Gray said the law was not a city law and would not apply in his case.

Lee said the state law referred to all transportation.

Gray declined to say specifically whether the state law would be attacked on constitutional appeal, but he made this suggestive comment:

"Every legal issue will be raised that I think is necessary to defend my client."

The question of constitutionality was not raised in Recorder's Court.

Before and during the hearing (See SEGREGATION CASE, 5-A)

Segregation Case

(Continued From Page 1-A) Judge Scott held showed away photographs.

25 PER CENT BOYCOTT

The steps leading to the north side of the courtroom and the sidewalk, along with the rear entrance of the courtroom, all were jammed with spectators and witnesses.

Meanwhile, Montgomery City Lines Manager J. H. Bagley this afternoon estimated that some 25 per cent of the Negroes were refusing to ride the buses in protest of today's hearing.

The boycott was unopposed far under after thousands of unopposed strikers were reportedly being spread throughout the Negro districts in Montgomery.

ONE INCIDENT

Acting upon the advice of Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers that there was to be no violence during the hearing, arrested a 13-year-old Negro youth who allegedly tried to restrain a Negro woman from getting on one of the morning buses.

Fred Daniel, 18, of 1044 Hall St., was jailed on a charge of disorderly conduct, according to Police Chief G. J. Rappaport. Arresting Detainees E. M. Ramonovich and C. A. Weaver said Daniel grabbed a Negro woman by the arm about 7:15 a.m. at the intersection of Hall and Thomson and pulled her away from a City Lines bus she was attempting to board.

NEGRO TAXI CARS BUSY

All Negro taxi cab operators in the city reportedly had their drivers to charge only to make a head today from the hours 4 a.m. to 9 a.m. and from 2 p.m. to 11 p.m. in an effort to make the best boycott effective.

Several buses were on downtown streets today carrying waiting bus passengers lined front to rear.

Several thousand Negroes use the buses on a normal day. Police cars and motorcycles followed the buses periodically to prevent trouble after Sellers and some Negroes reported they was threatened with violence if they rode buses today.

MASS MEETING TONIGHT

A mass meeting of Negroes has been scheduled tonight at the Hall Street Baptist Church to discuss "positive action" in the "momentous" campaign against the bus boycott.

But Gray told the Associated Press that "every issue will be raised that I think is necessary to defend my client."

No hearing on the appeal has been set in circuit court.

Under State Laws

The Negro woman was first charged with violating a city ordinance which gives bus drivers police powers to enforce racial segregation. But at the request of City Atty. Eugene Lee, the warrant was amended in court today to charge violation of a similar state law.

Passed by the legislature in 1951, the state statute authorizes bus companies to provide and enforce separate facilities for white and Negro users. Penalties are provided by a maximum fine of \$500.

Montgomery Bus Arrest May Bring Test Of Segregation

MONTGOMERY, Ala., Dec. 5.—The arrest of a Negro who refused to move to the colored section of a city bus may bring a court test of segregated transportation in the cradle of the Confederacy.

While thousands of other Negroes boycotted Montgomery city lines in protest, Rosa Parks was fined \$10 to refuse to get up today for the purpose of a driver's order to move to the rear of a bus last Thursday.

Negro passengers ride in the rear of the buses here; white passengers sit in front. Rosa Parks was fined \$10 to refuse to get up today for the purpose of a driver's order to move to the rear of a bus last Thursday.

Police and bus lines officials will be in court today to argue the bus routes in protest, violence after Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers said he had reports some Negroes had been threatened with harm if they took buses to work.

One Negro was arrested on a disorderly conduct charge after refusing to move to the rear of a bus last Thursday.

The boycott was organized after circulars were distributed in Negro residential areas Saturday urging "positive action" against the bus boycott.

Released On Bond

The 42-year-old woman appeared here for \$500 bond and was released under \$500 bond signed by Negro Atty. Fred Gray and a former state president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, E. D. Nixon.

Gray and Charles Langford, another Negro lawyer representing the 42-year-old woman, filed a motion today to set aside the fine and to allow re-examination of the segregation law affecting public transportation.

But Gray told the Associated Press that "every issue will be raised that I think is necessary to defend my client."

No hearing on the appeal has been set in circuit court.

Under State Laws

The Negro woman was first charged with violating a city ordinance which gives bus drivers police powers to enforce racial segregation. But at the request of City Atty. Eugene Lee, the warrant was amended in court today to charge violation of a similar state law.

Passed by the legislature in 1951, the state statute authorizes bus companies to provide and enforce separate facilities for white and Negro users. Penalties are provided by a maximum fine of \$500.



#2857

Newspapers all over the country picked up the Rosa Parks story and followed it through to the Supreme Court. Shown are actual newspaper clippings which were placed in a scrapbook maintained by Charles Cummins, a manager at Montgomery City Lines. This scrapbook would become important in verifying the bus number and would end up being auctioned at the same time as the bus. HENRY FORD MUSEUM.

the new model 3610 was offered with any combination of gas or diesel power and automatic or mechanical transmission. Some were even built as suburbans without standee windows. Easily the most popular version of this group was the TDH3610 (T=Transit, D=Diesel power, H=Hydro-matic [automatic] transmission, 36=nominal seating, and 10=model number sequence).

Records suggest that the TDH3610 was probably the second-most popular model of all the "old look" models shorter than 35 feet. It emerged at an opportune time, immediately following the war. It was difficult or impossible to obtain new buses during the war years so most bus companies were in need of new equipment.

Local bus and streetcar operators did well during the war when wartime restrictions forced many people to ride public transportation. However, the years immediately following the war saw a substantial decline in public transit ridership as automobiles became available again, and Americans lined up to buy them. Many companies operating streetcars converted to buses as an economy measure, and many of the smaller companies already operating buses

decided to sell in the face of declining revenue.

Our story now turns to Chicago, Illinois, the headquarters of National City Lines. This company expanded and became prominent in the post-war years when it took over several of these transit operations. New buses were painted with a white roof, a green window band and yellow below the windows in what many in the industry referred to as a "fruit salad" paint scheme. By 1948, National City Lines had expanded to include ownership of nearly 1,400 buses and 31 streetcars at nearly 30 transit properties in 11 states. The greatest percentage were in smaller cities and in northern Illinois. However, operations were as far away as Florida and Texas, and were as large as Los Angeles Transit Lines.

National City Lines placed an order for new TDH3610 buses with General Motors in 1948. The bus carrying serial number TDH3610-1132 was given National City Lines fleet number 2857 and originally assigned to Terre Haute, Indiana. At that time Terre Haute City Lines was the only National City Lines property in Indiana and operated 79.4 miles of route and 44 buses.

Bus 2857 apparently served unremarkably in Terre Haute for six years before being transferred to Montgomery, Alabama in 1954. Montgomery City Lines had been acquired from Alabama Power Company and was one of only two National City Lines properties in Alabama. At this time it operated 118.8 route miles and 67 buses.

The incident which brought fame to bus 2857 took place on December 1, 1955 when Rosa Louise McCauley Parks, a 42-year-old black woman on her way home from work, was asked by the bus driver to give up her seat to a white male passenger. Rosa Parks refused. While the immediate penalty was a \$10 fine for violating a Montgomery city ordinance, this action of Rosa Parks has subsequently been credited with being the spark for major social change. Four days later, local civil rights activists initiated a boycott of Montgomery buses which lasted 381 days. A young minister leading the protest, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., received national recognition. A year later, in December of 1956, the case reached the Supreme Court which ruled that the segregation law was unconstitutional. Rosa Parks has since been known as the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement."

Bus 2857 continued to operate in Montgomery until the early 1970s when it was retired and removed from service. Roy H. Summerford bought two vehicles from the bus company and was told by employees that 2857 was the Rosa Parks bus. He put the bus in a field and used it to store lumber and tools. Summerford passed away in 1986, and ownership of the bus went to his daughter and son-in-law, Vivian and Donnie Williams, who owned a grocery store in Montgomery.

In 1990, bus 2857 was removed from the grassy lot and received some attention. It was one of three buses used in the making of a movie titled *The Long Walk Home*, which told the story of the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. Unfortunately, bus 2857 was no longer operational and was pulled by a cable during the movie. The bus went back to its former resting place after its temporary fame as a movie star.

A family conference in 2000 resulted in a decision to sell old 2857. In late May of that year, the bus was listed on e-Bay as "The Rosa Parks City Line Montgomery Ala. Bus" with a minimum bid of \$100,000. A few days later, e-Bay withdrew the item and asked that Donnie Williams vouch for its authenticity. It was later relisted, but no one opted to place the minimum bid of \$100,000.

The listing on e-Bay did accomplish two things. It became obvious that the only proof that 2857 was the Rosa Parks bus was the word of the Montgomery bus company



Looking into the front door of the bus, the fleet number of 2857 remains painted in gold above the driver's side window. HENRY FORD MUSEUM.

employees who had sold the bus to Roy Summerford. The second thing was that the e-Bay listing generated some national publicity when the media picked up the story. At this point Robert Lifson became interested in the bus and contacted the owners. Lifson is the president of MastroNet, an auction house on the Internet. He took an interest in the bus and set out to connect it with Rosa Parks.

While there were police records of the December 1, 1955 incident, none of them mentioned a fleet number or a serial number of the bus.

With all of the interest in the Rosa Parks bus over the years, it was surprising that Lifson uncovered a scrapbook which had been put together in 1955 by a professional clipping service and maintained by Charles Cummings, who was a manager at Montgomery City Lines at that time. The scrapbook contained hundreds of clippings of items published in newspapers. He had written the bus number, 2857, on a page with a newspaper clipping on the arrest of Rosa Parks. Next to another clipping he wrote "Blake/2857," the name of the bus driver and fleet number of the bus.

Now that the connection between Rosa Parks and old 2857 had been confirmed, it was decided to go ahead with the auction. Late October of 2001 saw Robert Lifson offer the bus through MastroNet. Appropriately, it was offered in MastroNet's first Americana auction which was scheduled for October 25 and 26. The Rosa Parks bus was listed on six pages at the front of the 328-page auction catalog. Included in the same auction was the scrapbook assembled by Charles Cummings of Montgomery City Lines. A third lot included a 1955 Montgomery City Lines bus driver's uniform and related materials including a coin changer and punch.

At least 45 bids were received on the bus. The Smithsonian Institution was one of the bidders as was a civic group in Denver who wanted to put the bus on display in the city's African American research building. Bidding started on October 25 and continued



After its retirement and purchase from Montgomery City Lines, bus 2857 sat in this field and was used as a repository for lumber and tools. Records indicate that the bus was once briefly removed from the field and used in the making of a movie. This photo was taken just prior to the MastroNet auction. The original white, yellow and green "fruit salad" paint scheme of National City Lines. MASTRONET.



A special ceremony at the Henry Ford Museum on December 1, 2001, marked the 46th anniversary of Rosa Parks' arrest. *Left:* Cleaned up a bit but not restored, bus 2857 was on display. A photo of Rosa Parks was placed in front of the bus. *Right:* The crowd gathered around a small stage which marked the center of activities for the December 1 ceremony. HENRY FORD MUSEUM.

until 2 a.m. the next morning. The bus sold for \$492,000 to the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. At the same time the museum also acquired a Montgomery bus driver's uniform and the scrapbook. More than one person suggested that this was an appropriate location for the bus since Rosa Parks, who was then 88 years old, had moved to Detroit in 1957.

Headquartered in Oak Brook, Illinois, MastroNet, Inc. is the world's leading source for premier collectibles and sports memorabilia. The American auction in October featured more than 900 lots and generated more than \$3 million in final bids. The Rosa Parks Bus commanded the highest bid. In second place was the first Batman comic

book which went for \$278,190. To order an auction catalog and to pre-register for MastroNet's next auction, phone (630) 472-1200 or surf to www.mastronet.com.

The bus was moved from Montgomery to Dearborn on a 18-wheeler truck. On December 1, 2001 the unrestored bus was the centerpiece in a ceremony that was held at Henry Ford Museum commemorating the 46th anniversary of Rosa Parks' arrest. Parks attended the ceremony which presumably was the first time she had been reunited with the bus in 46 years. On the following day, the bus was put on display to the public.

Currently the bus is off-site pending restoration for exhibition. Presumably,

old 2857 will eventually be on public display. It is currently one of several buses in the Henry Ford Museum collection. For more information on the museum, surf to www.hfmgv.org.

Our special thanks to Andrew Johnson from Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village and Robert Lifson from MastroNet who provided substantial help to our staff with research and photographs. □

Left: Individuals who attended the December 1, 2001 ceremony at the Henry Ford Museum were given an opportunity to view the bus which transported Rosa Parks into a new era of social change. *Right:* Steve Hamp, president of Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, greets Mrs. Rosa Parks at the ceremony.



**From the
September, 2002 issue
of
National Bus Trader
9698 W. Judson Road
Polo, Illinois 61064**

*Visit our Web site at
<http://www.busmag.com>
and subscribe today.*