

Sit Down Girl!: Claudette Colvin

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“There was segregation everywhere. The churches, buses, and schools were all segregated and you couldn’t even go into some restaurants”(Claudette Colvin: The 15 Year Old). This observation was made in the 1950’s by a young Black girl named Claudette Colvin. During that time, Black people were discriminated against on a daily basis. A name unfamiliar to most people today, Claudette Colvin was just 15 years old when she helped change and shape American history. Colvin started the Montgomery Bus Boycott which helped create the Civil Rights movement. The movement paved the way for progress and allowed African Americans to enjoy the freedoms they do today.

In 1955, Claudette Colvin was a teenager living in Montgomery, Alabama. During that time, children of different races didn’t walk down the same side of the street together from school, did not interact socially, and couldn’t even drink out of the same water fountain. In fact, Black children used to ask, “Why are there no Black people except for Sammy Davis Jr. and Pearl Bailey on T.V.?” (Claudette Colvin: Twice). During one interview, Claudette recalled an issue her family ran into during that time in her life. “I remember during Easter one year, I was to get a pair of black patent shoes but you could only get them from the White stores, so my mother drew the outline of my feet on a brown paper bag in order to get the closest size, because we weren’t allowed to try them on”(Claudette Colvin: The 15 Year Old).

Racism was an everyday part of life for all colors. It was common for Blacks to discriminate against each other on the grounds of how dark the color of their skin was. At the time, the lighter a person was, the more they were looked up to by the other Black people. Lighter skin was more accepted and highly respected. Claudette was one of the darker people, which put her at the bottom of the pile for not only white people, but also Black people. Because of this, some Black people didn’t support her decision to boycott the Montgomery bus.

Claudette attended a low income Black school, Booker T. Washington high school. At school, students had the opportunity to learn about the constitution. They also learned about the rights people fought to earn and how those rights were protected. Claudette paid attention and knew segregation was wrong. She began to realize she should have rights as an American citizen regardless of her color .

On March 2nd, 1955, Claudette's school had an early release for a faculty meeting. According to "First 'Rosa Parks'," her family didn't own a car. She relied on the city's gold and green buses for her transportation. She had been studying the Bill of Rights and the United States Constitution earlier that day. Claudette had also spent the whole month prior to March 2nd learning about all of the injustices Black people faced in the past. When boarding the city bus that day, Claudette and her classmates sat in the seats behind the Whites only section. The bus ride was like every other day for Claudette and her classmates until a young white woman boarded the bus. The woman was standing up as Claudette was sitting, and the bus driver instructed Claudette to move so the white woman could sit down. Claudette made a fierce decision and didn't move an inch. Claudette felt she was entitled to her seat behind the Whites only section (Claudette Colvin: Twice).

The bus driver drove until he reached a place where two policemen were waiting. The policemen physically forced her off the bus. Claudette responded, "I paid my fare, it's my Constitutional right." She was inspired by Harriet Tubman and thought, "I felt like Sojourner Truth was pushing down on one shoulder and Harriet Tubman was pushing on the other" (Claudette Colvin Biography). The two policemen dragged her off the bus and pulled her into the back of a squad car. "I wasn't frightened, but disappointed and angry because I knew I was sitting in the right seat," Claudette said (Claudette Colvin: The 15 Year Old). Rosa Parks Biography stated, the officers mocked her and made comments on her body. Colvin worried they might try to rape

her; she tried to cover her crotch and put her mind on other things. Claudette was arrested for violating city laws on segregation.

They placed Claudette in an adult prison for 3 hours. She was processed like a criminal and was required to have her fingerprints recorded because of her arrest. After her mother and pastor found out about Claudette's arrest and decision to boycott the bus, they had to bail her out of prison. As a result of her arrest, Claudette was charged with disorderly conduct and was put on indefinite probation. She had broken Jim Crow laws that were used in Montgomery, Alabama, and "became an outcast, branded a troublemaker within her community after her initial arrest and conviction" (Claudette Colvin Explains).

The incident was brought to the attention of the NAACP by people flooding their offices with written letters of support. The NAACP then attempted to get others to boycott buses because they saw that it could be effective. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed in 1909 in New York by a group of Black and White citizens fighting for social justice. Claudette was part of the NAACP youth prior to the boycott. At the time of Claudette Colvin's boycott, Rosa Parks served as the secretary at the NAACP offices. She was receiving all of the incoming letters regarding the incident. Rosa Parks visited Claudette Colvin and spoke to her about the boycott. "She (Rosa Parks) used to tell me what a brave young lady I was," Claudette Colvin remembers. "Ms. Parks was quiet and very gentle and very soft spoken, but she would always say we should fight for our freedom" (Before Rosa Parks). Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks had really connected with each other as they believed all Black people should enjoy the same freedoms as Whites.

9 months after Claudette's boycott, the NAACP president, E.D. Nixon, decided that they were going to boycott Montgomery's buses. The NAACP didn't want a 15 year old as the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The NAACP thought that people wouldn't support her (Claudette

Colvin: The 15 Year Old). They decided to use Rosa Parks as the representative of the Montgomery Bus Boycott because she could play the part of a tired old woman, and doing so would make people sympathize with her. The NAACP had specifically planned Rosa Parks' boycott to take place on a certain date, unlike the other boycotts that were not prearranged or planned. On December 5th, 1955, Rosa would make history because of her actions. She set the stage for others to fight inequalities due to race.

“On May 11, 1956, Colvin testified in a Montgomery federal court hearing about her actions on the bus” (The First). Claudette pleaded not guilty in the court case. It was known as Browder vs. Gayle. She was one of five Black girls involved. During that case, it was determined all of the girls' rights to follow the 14th Amendment were violated by the Montgomery, Alabama, police officers when they were escorted off the bus for not giving up their seats to White people. The court ruled in the case two to one that bus segregation is unconstitutional and violated the girls rights to follow amendments of the Constitution. The city and state appealed. The case then transferred to the Supreme Court on November 13th, 1956. The Supreme Court agreed and made the final decision to approve the case. The case legally ended racial segregation on public transportation in the state of Alabama.

Claudette Colvin was not the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, even though she was the first to refuse her seat to a White person. After the trial and court cases concluded, she became pregnant at just 16 years old and was publically known to be a fallen woman. “Because she was a fallen woman, she fell out of history altogether” (She Would Not). The NAACP thought no one would support a pregnant teenage girl, and instead used Rosa Parks as their spokesperson. The NAACP believed the public would feel sympathy for an older, mild mannered woman who didn't have a negative public reputation. According to Claudette, “They said they didn't want to use a pregnant teenager because it would be controversial and the

people would talk about the pregnancy more than the boycott” (Claudette Colvin: The 15 Year Old). So, Claudette was not chosen to be the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This is the reason most people today are unaware of who she is. Rosa Parks went on to earn great fame and was inducted into the Civil Rights Hall of Fame for her courageous stand against racism and segregation instead of Claudette Colvin.

Later in life, Claudette went on to have another child, faced many life challenges including the death of her oldest son, and held a long career as a nurse’s aide in the Bronx, New York. She retired in 2004 and still lives in the Bronx today. Looking back at her life, she recalled, “As a teenager, I kept thinking, why don’t the adults around here just say something? Say it so that they know we don’t accept segregation? I knew then and I know now that when it comes to justice, there is no easy way to get it”(Claudette Colvin: Twice). Claudette is proud of herself for staying seated on the Montgomery city bus when she was 15, even though she has not received the public recognition that Rosa Parks has.

Claudette Colvin’s knowledge of the United States Constitution persuaded her to enact her rights as a citizen and to refuse her seat to the young White woman. She is an important part of our country’s history and helped to put an end to segregation in the United States. Because of Claudette Colvin and her court case, Blacks and Whites were now considered equal when using public transportation. Claudette Colvin broke barriers in Black rights through the Montgomery bus boycott.

Secondary Bibliography

“Claudette Colvin.” *AWTT*. N.p. n.d. Web. 3 Dec. 2019.

<<https://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/portraits/Claudette-Colvin>>.

I used this website because it had information on Claudette Colvin’s place in the NAACP and how she was involved with Rosa Parks. This website also explained why they chose Rosa Parks to be the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott instead of Claudette Colvin. This website was a biography lightly going through Claudette Colvin’s life.

“Claudette Colvin.” *Biography*. A&E Television Networks, 13 Aug. 2019. Web. 7 Nov.

2019. <<https://www.biography.com/activist/Claudette-Colvin>>.

This site briefly explained Claudette’s early life and what she was arrested for.

This was helpful because her background explains why she acted out. Also, it gave me what she was arrested for and why.

“Claudette Colvin.” *Info Please*. N.p. n.d. Web. 26 Nov. 2019.

<<https://www.infoplease.com/people/who2-biography/claudette-colvin>>.

This source gave me an explanation of what had happened on the Montgomery bus. I benefited from this because it also explained that she was with other classmates at the time and how they reacted to the situation.

Clinton, Chelsea, and Alexandra Boiger. *She Persisted: 13 American Women Who Changed The World*. New York: Philomel, 2019. Print.

I received a summary of what Claudette Colvin did on the Montgomery bus. This

summary did not give major details, but it helped me because it explained what happened on the Montgomery Bus in a few sentences.

Gold, Jonathan and Alder Margot. "Browder vs. Gayle." *Teaching Tolerance*. Teaching Tolerance. n.d. Web. 11 Dec. 2019.

<<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/browder-vs-gayle-the-women-before-rosa-parks>>.

I learned what the Browder vs. Gayle case was and how Claudette Colvin was a part of it. I learned that Claudette inspired other girls by her actions to do also Boycott the bus.

Hoose, Philip M. *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*. New York: Melanie Kroupa/Farrar Straws Garoux, 2009: Print.

This book gave me a lot of details about the boycott. This source explained the whole story, but more in depth. This was helpful because I learned more about the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Claudette's personal life.

"Jim Crow Laws." *History*. A&E Television Networks. 28 Feb. 2019. Web. 15 Dec. 2019. <<https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>>.

This source was helpful because it explained why whites and blacks weren't allowed to share seats, stores, etc. The source explained reasons why Claudette acted the way she did when she was asked to remove herself from her seat for the white lady.

"She Would Not Be Moved." *The Guardian*. Guardian News & Media. 16 Dec. 2019. Web. 8 Dec. 2019.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2000/dec/16/weekend7.weekend12>>.

I used this source because it explained what happened on the bus boycott Rosa Parks conducted. I knew previously that they had planned the boycott and this information in this source allowed me to visualize what was happening in my head.

Theoharis, Jeanne. "Claudette Colvin." *Rosa Parks Biography*. Cuny. n.d Web. 15 Nov. 2019. <<https://www.rosaparksbiography.org/bio/Claudette-Colvin/>>.

I was informed that there was a myth in the story that most tell if they know about Claudette Colvin. The myth was that she was not pregnant during the case. This also explained how Rosa Parks was helpful towards Claudette and was the only one who kept in touch with her during the summer.

Primary Bibliography

"The First 'Rosa Parks'." *Core*. N.p. n.d. Web. 8 Nov. 2019.

<www.core-online.org/History.colvin.htm >.

This source taught me about the relationship between Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin. This source also described what was running through Claudette's mind while she boycotted the bus.

Hoose, Phillip. "Before Rosa Parks, There Was Claudette Colvin." *2019npr*. National Public Radio. 15 Mar. 2009. Web. 1 Dec. 2019.

<<https://www.npr.org/2009/03/15/101719889/before-rosa-parks-there-was-cla>

udette-colvin>.

In Phillip Hoose's article "Before Rosa Parks, There Was Claudette Colvin," he explains what had happened in the police car Claudette was in after her boycott. The information given is extremely in depth with description. I also didn't find any other source that explained this part of the "story."

Jacobson, Roni. "Claudette Colvin Explains Her Role In The Civil Rights Movement."

Teen Togue. Teen Vogue. n.d. Web. 19 Oct. 2019.

<<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/claurette-colvin-explains-her-role-in-the-civil-rights-movement>>.

This source provided an interview with Claudette Colvin which was helpful because the answers were her exact words. This made it easier to create quotes to put in my paper.

"The Other Rosa Parks." *Democracy Now*. N.p. 29 Mar. 2013. Web. 8 Dec. 2019.

<https://www.democracynow.org/2013/3/29/the_other_rosa_parks_now_73>.

This source had an interview that was conducted so I could get primary information. This source did have secondary source information but I used this source as a primary because the interview with Claudette gave me a lot of information about her thoughts during the boycott. This is important because then I can include what she was feeling.

Rumble, Dior Taylor. "Claudette Colvin: The 15 Year Old Who Came Before Rosa

Parks." *BBC*. British Broadcasting Corporation News Services, 10 Mar. 2018.

Web. 6 Nov. 2019. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-431717997>>.

This source provided another interview with Claudette Colvin, but was extremely helpful because it gave me examples of incidents that happened during segregation. It gave me a story from when Claudette was a young child and they were not able to try on shoes because the store was only for whites. I used this information because it gave background information to explain why Claudette boycotted the bus.