

Awakenings (1954-1956)

UNITA BLACKWELL: I guess our courage came out because we didn't have nothing, and we couldn't lose nothing. But we wanted something for ourselves and for our children. And so we took a chance with our lives.

ERNEST GREEN: We marched up the steps with this circle of soldiers with bayonets drawn. And walking up the steps that day was probably one of the biggest feelings I've ever had. I figured I had finally cracked it.

WHITE YOUNG MAN: My freedom is very much entangled with the freedom of every other man. So, I'm fighting for my own freedom here.

REPORTER: Are you scared?

WHITE YOUNG MAN: Yes. I'm very much afraid. Everyone here is.

[singing]

NARRATOR: In a ten year period in the 1950s and 1960s, America fought a second revolution. It was fought in the South by black people and white. It was fought in the streets, in churches, in courts, in schools. It was fought to make America be America for all its citizens. These were America's Civil Rights years.

INTERVIEWER: I take it then that you are advocating negroes in New York to stay out of these national chain stores?

ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR: Oh, no. That's not true. I'm advocating that American citizens interested in democracy should stay out of chain stores.

[singing]

WHITE WOMAN: I have thought for a long time that negroes should be allowed to sit at the counters where we are served downtown. This is just a part of many things that I think they should be allowed to do.

SENATOR EASTLAND: All the people of the South are in favor of segregation. And Supreme Court or no Supreme Court, we are going to maintain segregated schools down in Dixie.

C.T. VIVIAN: We're willing to be beaten for democracy, and you misuse democracy in the streets. You beat people ...*(inaudible)*[simultaneous conversation].

OFF CAMERA VOICE: Why don't you get out from in front of the camera and go on?

C.T. VIVIAN: It's not a matter of being in front of the camera. It's a matter of facing your ...*(inaudible)*[simultaneous conversation], and then hide your blows.

C.T. VIVIAN: There was a clear engagement between those who wished the fullness of their personalities to be met, and those that would destroy us physically and psychologically. You do not walk away from that. This is what movement meant. Movement meant that finally we were encountering, on a mass scale, the evil that had been destroying us on a mass scale. You do not walk away from that. You continue to answer it.

[singing]

BLACK WOMAN: I always think about what Matthew, Jr. told me. And when he called -- When he called from the jail, he said -- he said, "Be cool, mother." And that was very trying, and yet it was amusing, too. He was telling me to "be cool" at this point.

[singing]

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR: We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.

[singing]

NARRATOR: It was a hard fight, challenging America's basic beliefs. What is an inalienable right? What is equal treatment under the law? What is liberty and justice for all? It was a hard fight, but the prize was freedom, and no American could afford to lose.

[singing]

NARRATOR: For much of this century, America was segregated. It was our social system, our way of keeping blacks and whites apart. By custom and by law, most blacks were servants, laborers, tenant farmers, went to separate poorer schools, lived in separate poorer housing. Segregation was the context for black lives throughout the country, but especially in the South -- a complete environment socially and psychologically.

AMZIE MOORE: Listen. For a long time I had the idea that a man with white skin was superior, because it appeared to me that he had everything. And I figured if God would justify the white man having everything, that God put him in a position to be the best.

VIRGINIA DURR: If you're born into a system that's wrong, whether it's a slave system, or whether it's a segregated system, you take it for granted. And I was born into a system that was segregated, and denied blacks the right to vote, and also denied women the right to vote. And I took it for granted. Nobody told me any different, nobody said it was strange or unusual, it wasn't like other states.

NARRATOR: Segregation had its rules, and Southern blacks knew that if they didn't obey them, if they didn't step aside to let a white man pass, or if a black man looked too closely at a white woman, the system could be enforced by violence. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan used terrorism to uphold white supremacy, and were an ever present symbol of intimidation.

But there were always blacks who fought against segregation. Many ministers preached equality, and black unions and organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People worked for it for decades through speeches, demonstrations, and court cases.

[music]

ALL AMERICAN NEWSREEL: All American News brings you our people's contributions for America and freedom.

NARRATOR: World War II had an enormous impact on black hopes for change. Black Americans fought and died in a segregated US Army. But they saw a larger, unsegregated world. They saw their own power as they fought, and as some were trained as officers and specialists. And they came back with a new sense of themselves.

JAMES HICKS: I spent three years overseas in New Guinea, and I became an officer during that period. I had been eager to exercise authority, so when we got out it was just one more step to say, "Well, look. We aren't going to take this anymore."

NARRATOR: The South they came back to was determined to resist change, and most of the nation was not ready to hear black demands for justice. Then in the early 1950s, after years of carefully planned litigation, the NAACP brought these demands to the Supreme Court. The test cases were set in schools.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that segregated schools were unconstitutional. It called into question the whole system of segregation.

THOMAS WARING: It was quite a shock to Southerners to be told that the way they had been running their affairs for many, many years was no longer acceptable to the nation as a whole. And a great many of the older crowd of white Southerners felt that they had come of an ancestry that were founders of the Republic, and they knew the Constitution, and customs, and laws of the country as well as anybody else.

NARRATOR: The South resisted desegregation with legal and illegal delays. It would take years before the Supreme Court's decision would be implemented in any meaningful way. But it had one immediate effect.

CONSTANCE BAKER MOTLEY: I think that the greatest impact of the *Brown* decision was on the black community itself. It was a statement to the black community that they had a friend, so to speak, the Supreme Court. And so, it emboldened the communities of blacks around the country to move forward, to secure their own rights.

NARRATOR: The change began slowly, especially in rural areas. Blacks knew they could still lose their livelihood or their lives if they pushed whites too fast. But step by step, the change began, first with small acts of personal courage.

In September 1955, an old man named Mose Wright took that remarkable first step. His story starts at the Tallahatchie River in Money, Mississippi. Here, the body of Mose Wright's nephew, Emmett Till was found way down in the waters. Two local men were arrested and charged with the murder. They were white. Emmett Till was black. Till had come down from Chicago to visit his relatives.

MOSE WRIGHT: This is Mose Wright. I am the uncle of Emmett Louis Till. Sunday morning, about 2:30, someone called at the door. And I said, "Who is it?" And he said, "This is Mr. Bryant. I want to talk with you and the boy." And when I opened the door, there was a man standing with a pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other hand. And he asked me, did I have two boys there from Chicago? I told him, "I have." And he said, "I want it. I want the boy that done all that talk." And they marched him to the car, and they asked someone there, "This is the right boy?" And the answer was, "Yes." And they drove toward Money.

MAMIE TILL BRADLEY: And I found out about it 9:30 Sunday morning. I was in bed. I got up, called my mother when I got the news, because every decision I have ever made, or ever crack that I had ever been in, it took her to get me out of it. And I took that one to Mama, too, because I didn't know what to do. Mother told me to come right over, and she would start making calls. And I got over there as quickly as I could make it, and that wasn't very long.

NARRATOR: By this time, everyone in Money knew what had happened. Emmett Till had broken one of segregation's rules. He talked fresh to a white woman in a store. He was only 14. He was a Northerner, and he didn't understand.

CURTIS JONES: He went into the store to buy some candy. Before he went in, he had shown the boys around his age, he had some picture of some white kids that he had graduated from. That was, you know, female and male. So, he told the boys down there, you know, "Hey, gather(?) around this store." So, it must have been round about maybe ten to twelve youngsters around there, that the girls was his girlfriend, you know. So, one of the local boys said, "Hey, there's a girl in that store that." He said, "I bet you won't go in there and talk to her," you know. So, he went in there to get some candy. So, when he was leaving out the store, after buying the candy, he told her, said, "Bye, baby." And the next thing I know, one of the boys came up to me and say, "Say, man,

you got a crazy cousin. He just went in there and said bye to that white woman." And that's when this man I was playing checkers with, this older man -- I guess he must have been around about 60 or 70 -- he jumps straight up and say, "Boy, say you all better get out of here." He say, "That lady will come out of that store and blow your brains off."

MOSE WRIGHT: When the sheriff came and told me they had found a body at Pillow [?], and wanted me to go and identify the body, which I did. And we found the body, which it didn't have on any clothes at all. The body was so badly damaged that we couldn't hardly just tell who he was, but he happened to have on a ring with his initials, and that cleared it up.

NARRATOR: The body was shipped home, back North to Chicago where Mamie Till Bradley insisted on an open casket funeral, "So all the world can see," she said, "what they did to my boy."

[singing]

NARRATOR: *Jet* magazine showed Till's corpse, beaten, mutilated, shot through the head. A generation of black people would remember the horror of that photo.

MAMIE TILL BRADLEY: I believe that the whole United States is mourning with me, and that the death of my son can mean something to the other unfortunate people all over the world. Then for him to have died a hero would mean more to me than for him just to have died.

NARRATOR: Roy Bryant, husband of the woman in the store, and J. W. Milam, her brother-in-law, were arrested for the murder of Emmett Till. The trial was held in nearby Sumner, Mississippi.

Black organizations like the NAACP and the black press were especially interested, and they worked hard to keep the case in the news, to make an example of Southern racism for the world.

ROY WILKINS: It was because it was a boy that they went there. They had to prove that they were superior. They had to prove it by taking away a 14-year-old boy. You know, it's in the virus, it's in the blood of the Mississippian. He can't help it.

SHERIFF H. C. STRIDER: I'd like for the NAACP, or any colored organization anywhere, to know that we are here, giving all parties a free trial, and intend to give them a fair and impartial trial. And we don't need the help of the NAACP, and we don't intend for them to help it. We never have any trouble until some of our Southern niggers go up North, and the NAACP talks to them, and they come back home.

JAMES HICKS: I covered the courts in many areas of this country. But the Till case was unbelievable. I mean, I just didn't get the sense of being in a court room. It was, first place, segregated. The black press sat at a bridge table far off from the court. And the boy's mother came down. They sat her there at the bridge table with us. Plus, the United States Congressman, at that time, Diggs, he came down and I was the one that got him in, because the sheriff wouldn't let him in. He said to the deputy that he called over, he said, "This nigger here," he said, "there's a nigger outside who says that he's a Congressman, and he has corresponded with the judge, and the judge had told him to come on down, and he would let him in." He said, "But the sheriff won't let him in, so he's sitting in his car out there." I said, "This guy said a nigger Congressman?" And he says, "That's what this nigger said." I said to myself, "My God, I have never seen anything like this in my life."

CHARLES DIGGS: There was, of course, a lot of buzzing when I entered the place and was placed in that area. And I think the judge said something about, "Yeah, have that boy come on up here and sit down over here with these news reporters," you know.

INTERVIEWER: What do you intend to do here today?

MAMIE TILL BRADLEY: To answer any questions that might -- that the attorneys might ask me to answer, to the best --

INTERVIEWER: How do you think you could possibly be a help to them?

MAMIE TILL BRADLEY: I don't know. Just by answering whatever questions that they ask me.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any evidence bearing on this case?

MAMIE TILL BRADLEY: I do know that this is my son.

NARRATOR: The defense argued that the body found tied to the cotton gin fan in the river was so disfigured that it could not be identified as Emmett Till. The trial took five, long, hot days. Because of threats to his life, the prosecution's star witness, Mose Wright, was kept hidden out of state.

INTERVIEWER: Will you go back to Mississippi to testify in the kidnap trial?

MOSE WRIGHT: Sure, sure. I'll go back, because I promised the sheriff I'd be back. And so if I live, I'm going back to testify. And after the trial, well, I'm through with Mississippi, forever and ever. They can have my part of Mississippi. I'm through with it. I don't want nothing...(inaudible).

CURTIS JONES: At the time, I really didn't realize how brave my grandfather, Mose Wright, was, you know. But after I got older, I realized that he was a brave man. He was a mighty brave man to travel back down there, you know, among all those hostile peoples, and testify, and to get up, up in court and point his finger at a white man and accuse him of murder.

JAMES HICKS: He was called upon to testify as to, could he see anybody in the court room, identify anybody in that court room, that had come to his house that night and got the -- Emmett Till out? He stood up and there was a tension in the court room. And he says -- in his broken language -- "Dar he."

NARRATOR: "Dar he," there he is. Other black witnesses came forward, too. Their courage made no difference in Sumner, Mississippi. As the trial ended, a defense lawyer told the jury he was "sure every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men." It took the jury the hour to find the men not guilty.

INTERVIEWER: How do you folks feel now that it's all over? Roy, how about you?

ROY BRYANT: I'm just glad it's over with.

INTERVIEWER: J. W.?

J. W. MILAM: I am, too.

INTERVIEWER: Mrs. Bryant?

MRS. BRYANT: I feel fine.

INTERVIEWER: How about you, Mrs. Milam?

MRS. MILAM: Fine.

INTERVIEWER: Did you expect this verdict?

ROY BRYANT: Well, I was hoping for it.

MAMIE TILL BRADLEY: Well, the whole trial was just a farce, and the verdict was the one that I had expected to be given.

NARRATOR: Months later, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam told their story of the night of August, 28, for \$4,000 dollars to reporter William Bradford Huie.

WILLIAM BRADFORD HUIE: Milam was startled at the belligerent attitude, or the fact that young Till didn't appear to be afraid of them. He had gone and gotten him out of bed and had him in the back of the truck, and young Till never realized the danger he was in. And I'm quite sure that he never thought these two men would kill him. Or maybe he's just in such a strange environment, he doesn't -- he really just doesn't know what he's up against.

And it seems to a rational mind, today, it seems impossible that they could have killed him. But J. W. Milam looked up at me and said, "Well, when he told me about this white girl he had," he said, "my friend, that's what this war is about down here now." He says, "That's what we've got to fight to protect." And he says, "I just looked at him and I said, 'Boy, you ain't going to ever see the sun come up again.'"

NARRATOR: For much of Southern history, lynching had been an ordinary story. Race killings were down by the 1950s, but over the years, there had been more than 500 documented lynchings in Mississippi alone.

FRED SHUTTLESWORTH: And the fact that Emmett Till, a young black man, could be found floating down the river in Mississippi, as, indeed, many had been done over the years, this set in concrete the determination of people to move forward. And I think we said back there that really only God, only the books in heaven can know how many negroes have come up missing, and dead, and killed under the system in which we lived.

NARRATOR: In Mississippi, a few black people stood up to the system. But it was not enough. Their challenge was easily beaten back. Three months later in Alabama, when many stood together, the challenge would be strong.

It started with a woman named Rosa Parks in Montgomery.

JOE AZBELL: Montgomery, in 1955, was a typical Southern city. We are called the Cradle of the Confederacy. And there is a tradition in Montgomery of having the -- carrying out the old Confederate South type of things that -- the stars and bars flags. It was a totally segregated community. Department stores had white water fountains and colored water fountains. We had separate taxis. You had black taxis and you had white taxis.

NARRATOR: And Montgomery, like all of the South, had segregated buses. In interstate buses, like this one, and in city buses, the whites sat in the front, the blacks in back. If more whites got on, the blacks had to give them the middle and back seats, too. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger.

ROSA PARKS: The front seats were occupied, and the one man, a white man, standing. And at this point, the driver asked us to stand up and let him have those seats. And when neither -- none of us moved at his first words, he said, "Ya'll make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." And when the police man approached me, one of them spoke and asked me if the driver had asked me to stand. I said, "Yes." He said, "Why don't you stand up?" I said, "I don't think I should have to stand up." And I asked him, I said, "Why do you push us around?" He said, "I do not know, but the law is the law, and you're under arrest."

E. D. NIXON: Mrs. Parks was formerly my secretary in the NAACP, in the local branch, for about 12 years. She also worked with me when I was State President in the NAACP. And she also assisted me in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. And if there ever was a woman who was dedicated to the cause, Rosa Parks was that woman.

NARRATOR: This was not the first time a black person had defied the bus segregation in Montgomery. It was not Mrs. Parks's first time. It was her first arrest. E. D. Nixon went to the police station to bail her out.

E. D. NIXON: I said, "Mrs. Parks," I said, "with your permission, we can break down segregation on the bus with your case." I said, "And I'm convinced that we can do it." And I said, "If I already wasn't convinced, I wouldn't be bothered by it." She asked her mother what she thought about it, and she said, "I go along with Mr. Nixon." Asked her husband. He said, "I'll support it." Says, "That's fine."

NARRATOR: E. D. Nixon and other black leaders called for a one-day bus boycott. In some cities, it would have been impossible to organize 40,000 people in two days. But black Montgomery had a core of activists in the Women's Political Council, and they distributed these boycott notices all over the city.

JO ANN ROBINSON: I called every person who was in every school, and every place where we had planned to be at that house, somebody at that school, or wherever it was, at a certain time, that I would be there with materials for them to disseminate. I didn't go to bed that night. I cut those stencils, I ran out 35,000 copies.

FRANCES BELSER: Well, the bus passed right down in front of my house, you know. And I got up to see it, and several buses passed. I was late for work, because I was trying to see how many buses was empty. And they were totally empty.

NARRATOR: The one-day boycott was a success. That night, a mobilized black community turned out for a meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church, and voted unanimously to continue the boycott.

JOE AZBELL: The preachers were preaching as I came in. I was about two minutes late coming in, and they were preaching. And that audience was so on fire. The preacher would get up and say, "Do you want your freedom?" And they would say, "Yeah. Yeah. I want my freedom." "Are you for what we're doing?" "Yeah, go ahead, go ahead."

JO ANN ROBINSON: Overwhelmingly, I don't know if there was one vote that said no, don't continue. That people wanted to continue that boycott. They had been touched by the persecution, the humiliation, that many of them had endured on buses. And they voted for it unanimously, and that meant thousands of people.

E. D. NIXON: You see, when I first started fighting, I was fighting to keep -- so that the children who came behind me wouldn't suffer the same thing I suffered. Then the night of the bus boycott on December, 5, I told the people that I'd been fighting like that for all these years. And I said, "Tonight I changed my mind." I said, "Hell, I want to enjoy some of this stuff myself." And you ought to heard people holler.

NARRATOR: The keynote speaker at Holt Street Church was a new preacher in town, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was only 26, and was almost unknown outside his own congregation. King wasn't sure he should accept when his fellow ministers and other leaders ask him to head the new Montgomery Improvement Association, and the boycott. But they wanted him, in part, because he was new in Montgomery.

E. D. NIXON: Reverend King was a young man -- a very intelligent young man. He had not been here long enough for the city fathers to put their hand on him.

CORETTA SCOTT KING: And Martin said, "Well, you know, I'm not sure I'm the best person for this position, since I'm new in the community, and -- But if no one else is going to serve, you know, someone has to do it. And I'd be glad to try to do it." And, of course, I guess everybody then assured him they wanted him. So, he came home very excited about the fact that he had to give the keynote speech that night at mass meeting. He only had 20 minutes to prepare his speech.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. That's all. And certainly, certainly, this is the glory of America, with all of its faults.

And we are not wrong. We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong.

RALPH ABERNATHY: We have never seen a crowd like that before. It took 15 minutes before the people would sit down and become quiet and let us begin the meeting. And I can tell you the name of the first song that we sang. And it was "What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine, Leaning on the Everlasting Arms."

[singing]

NARRATOR: Before the boycott, two thirds of the bus riders were black. After December 5, there were almost no blacks at the segregated bus stops or on the buses. They walked and they created a complex system that used private cars to carry thousands of people each day.

RUFUS LEWIS: We asked for persons who had cars and would voluntarily put them in the transportation pool to let us know and what time they could be used. And in that way, we could know when we will have cars, and where they had to go to pick up people. People would call in and say, "I'm out here on Cloverdale Road, on such and such a block, and I'll be ready at such and such a time." But this was being done all through the day, and we would know what time they was supposed to be picked up and where they were.

GEORGIA GILMORE: It was really surprising, because we thought, well, maybe some of the people would continue to ride the bus. But, after all, they had been mistreated, and been mistreated in so many different ways, until I guess they were tired. And they just decided that they just wouldn't ride.

NARRATOR: The black community was inspired by its own success. They held meetings with the mayor and the bus company, and found they could stand up to the city commissioners.

CORETTA SCOTT KING: At first, we didn't even ask for desegregation. We only asked for a more humane system of segregation on the buses. And when the opposition refused to grab that, then we realized that they wouldn't grab anything anyway, so we might as well ask for, you know, complete desegregation. And that's what we went for, and we realized we had to go for broke, so to speak.

NARRATOR: By this time, the boycott had lasted longer than anyone expected. A wave of violence started. Shots fired at buses, bombs thrown at Martin King's home, and E. D. Nixon's home.

INTERVIEWER: You've had some rather personal and trying experience yourself. Are you afraid?

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR: No, I am not. My attitude is that this is a great cause. It is a great issue that we are confronted with. And that the consequences for my person life are not particularly important. It is a triumph of a cause that I am concerned about. And I have always felt that, ultimately, along the way of life, an individual must stand up and be counted, and be willing to face the consequences, whatever they are. And if he is filled with fear, he cannot do it.

FRED SHUTTLESWORTH: We thought that you could just shame America. Say, "Now, America, look at your promises. Look at how you treated your poor, negro citizens. You ought to be ashamed of yourself." But you know, segregate -- You can't shame segregation. Rattlesnakes don't commit suicide. Ball teams don't strike themselves out. You got to put them out.

NARRATOR: The nightly mass meetings in church were the backbone of the boycott.

CORETTA SCOTT KING: The mass meetings, usually, were attended by the maids and cooks, and janitors, and people who really used the buses a lot. And they would be there singing and praying for hours, sometimes, before the program actually started, the main part of the mass meeting.

[singing]

GEORGIA GILMORE: I attended just about all of them. We were really very interested in it, because you could go and you could learn about so many things that you didn't know exist. And so many people would tell you how they was being mistreated, and they were glad that they were able to come up and not have to take the same treatments that they was -- had taken and was afraid to admit.

RALPH ABERNATHY: The fear left. The fear that had shackled us across the years, all left suddenly when we were in that church together.

CORETTA SCOTT KING: Dr. Abernathy would speak first usually. And he had the ability to really make them laugh, and maybe make them cry some. He really knew how to, you know, kind of get them in the mood.

RALPH ABERNATHY: This show is your show. Not only is this show the show of negroes in Montgomery, but this is the show of negroes all over America. And then I want to go a little farther than that, and tell you that truly this show is the show of all freedom loving people all over the world.

CORETTA SCOTT KING: Oh, I guess you'd call it a kind of folksy quality, and he was able to do that, because that was a part of his style. Whereas with Martin, he was more, I guess, what you would consider formal, and he would come along with a very thoughtful message.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR: Let me ask you to be sane and rational. Eventually, segregation in public transportation will pass away. Eventually. And I think we should start now preparing for the inevitable. And let us, when that moment comes, go into the situations that we confront with a great deal of dignity, sanity, and reasonableness.

RUFUS LEWIS: It's very hard for an ordinary person to describe Reverend King's speaking ability, because he was such an outstanding -- He could make you feel what he was saying, as well as hearing what he was saying. He was sincere and dedicated. And he could lift you out your seat. You couldn't just be quiet, and look like -- It was such a stirring thing, that it would affect you -- It would just go right through you. So, I can't say much more than that, because it was such a stimulating thing. And he was carried away with his own speech.

FRED SHUTTLESWORTH: Dr. King spoke with a new voice. Not only was it a new movement, but it was a new voice, that you must love. You must not hate the people who hate, or who act like they hate, you. You must -- And the best thing to make out of your enemy is a friend. So, this had a very profound effect upon not only blacks, but whites at this time.

SEN. JAMES EASTLAND: You are not going to permit the NAACP to control your states.

NARRATOR: As the boycott entered its second month, the white community's position hardened. There were whites who were sympathetic to the boycott, but many more were not. A segregationist group called the White Citizen's Council held huge rallies and vastly increased its membership, becoming the largest organization in white Montgomery. They targeted anyone, black or white, who supported desegregation.

STATE SEN. SAM ENGELHARDT: Ninety percent of the white people in Alabama are all for segregation. But in the last few years, we have had a -- quite a number of backsliders, you might say, that, for political reasons, to further their political ambitions have been trying to garner the nigger vote, and would do most anything to get that vote. The Citizen's Council is out to utterly destroy those people.

JOE AZBELL: The thing that kept the whites going was segregation, was the old way. Don't break the old way. Don't break this fabric. Don't break down segregation. Don't take this away, this old South. Don't take back the things that we've always known and that we fought a war over these things, and that our forefathers would have us do this.

NARRATOR: Despite the pressure, the buses remained empty. The black leaders decided the boycott might weaken if they didn't respond quickly to the violence. They filed suit in Federal Court, claiming that bus segregation was unconstitutional. White officials retaliated by indicting almost 90 black leaders under an old anti-boycott law. The tactic backfired. Suddenly the national press was very interested in the story, and in the eloquent Martin Luther King, Jr.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: We still feel that we are right and that we stand within our constitutional rights in the protest. And we still advocate non-violence with passive resistance and still are determined to use the weapon of love.

[singing]

NARRATOR: Armed with the weapon of non-violence resistance, Montgomery's blacks kept walking, month, after month, after month.

INTERVIEWER: How many miles do you think you've walked?

DONIE JONES: Oh, about seven or eight miles a day. Maybe along further than that, because, you know, going and coming, it made a great deal distant.

INTERVIEWER: Ever take a ride from --

DONIE JONES: No. Uh-uh. No. But if sometime we would be out on the road coming home, well, it'd be a white lady that'd come along and pick us up and carry us so far. And we would thank her for that. We would be very glad, and we would offer her pay, but she wouldn't take it.

VIRGINIA DURR: There's a strange thing that happened, was a kind of play between white women and black women. And the mayor at the time issued an order saying if the white women would just stop carrying their maids back and forth that the boycott would be ended. And so, I don't say all of them, but some of them replied, and said, "Well, if he wants to come out and do my cooking and laundry, and nurse the children, and clean up, he can." So, the white women went and got them in the car. They said they did it because the bus had broken down or any excuse you could possibly think of.

JO ANN ROBINSON: Well, I would have to say that there were many sympathetic whites who knew that the system was wrong, and they were doing what they could to help to correct it.

[singing]

GEORGIA GILMORE: Well, you know, a lot of times, some of the young whites would come along and they would say, "Nigger, don't you know it's better to ride the bus than it is to walk?" And we would say, "No, cracker, no. We rather walk."

NARRATOR: April, 1956. The boycott was four months old. In other states, lawsuits and black pressure were breaking down bus segregation, but not in Alabama.

CLYDE SELLERS: We expect the city bus lines of Montgomery and the people of Montgomery to continue to obey all segregation laws as written. I have, this day, issued orders to the Chief of Police, and any police department, to continue to make arrests in all violations with reference to the segregation laws.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR: Several Southern cities, including Richmond, Virginia, Little Rock, Arkansas, Dallas, Texas, and others, have ended segregation on city buses. And white and negro passengers rode together on front seats without incident, mishaps, or disturbances. The public officials of the city of Montgomery and of the state of Alabama intend to obey the segregation laws of the city of Montgomery, and we, the negro citizens of Montgomery Alabama, do now, and will continue, to carry on our mass protest.

NARRATOR: June, 1956, six months. There had been boycotts before in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, three years before. Even in Montgomery itself, 50 years before. None had lasted so long with so much support. In Tallahassee, Florida, another boycott started. It was so effective that the bus company was forced to shut down operation. It was clear the boycotts hurt the bus companies, businesses, and the cities. It was not clear if they could end segregation.

September, 1956, nine months. The Klan in Montgomery held a series of highly visible rallies.

KLAN SPEAKER: They want to throw white children and colored children into the melting pot of integration, through out of which will come a conglomerated mulatto mongrel class of people. Both races will be destroyed in such a movement.

NARRATOR: Many in the black community were frightened, but they kept walking. Ten months, eleven months. The boycott's second Christmas was approaching. Downtown stores were hurt, but neither the city nor the marchers would compromise.

On November 13, 1956, the US Supreme Court broke the deadlock, ruling unanimously that Montgomery's bus segregation was unconstitutional. That day, the Ku Klux Klan rode and walked the black neighborhoods again. This time, the blacks just watched, unmoved and unafraid.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR: The decision rendered by the Supreme Court yesterday was a victory. But it wasn't a victory for colored folks. God don't make that victory that small. It wasn't a victory for 50,000 negroes in Montgomery. It wasn't merely a victory for 15 million negroes of America. That was a victory for justice and goodwill.

Now, what will be our mode of action in the light of this decision? After thinking through this question very seriously, the executive board of the Montgomery Improvement Association recommends that the 11-month-old protest against the city buses will be called off, and that the negro citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, will return to the buses on a non-segregated basis. Are you ready for the question? All in favor, let it be known by standing on your feet. It seems that it is carried unanimously.

FRED SHUTTLESWORTH: Because you get the understanding that God is with you, that God can take care of you, that this is God's way. And you are there to do it. And I think there's a sense of drive. That's what many people don't understand about what happened back in the Deep South, that here I am. That this is my duty. I've got to do something, and God is with me. And if God is with me, how can you lose, leaning on the Everlasting Arm?

[singing]

RUFUS LEWIS: When the bus boycott was over, the people just -- The blacks got on the bus to sit on the front seat just to show off. And they had a lot of fun sitting on the front seat riding, riding to the college or riding away from the college. Nobody sat in the back then, because all of them sat in the front. It was a jubilation. It was a joy.

[singing]

JO ANN ROBINSON: We had won self-respect. We had forced the white man to give what we knew was a part of our own citizenship. And so, we had won that. And if you have never had the feeling to feel that this is not the other man's country and you are an alien in it, but that this is your country, too, then you don't know what I'm talking about. But it is a hilarious feeling that just goes all over you, that makes you feel that America is a great country and we're going to do more to make it greater.