Almost every American child learns that on December 1st, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus and give up her seat to a white person. With this act, the Montgomery bus boycott began. Dr. Martin Luther King.

Dr. MARTIN LUTHER KING (Civil Rights Leader): We are not wrong in what we are doing.

(Soundbite of crowd)

Dr. KING: If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong.

(Soundbite of applause and cheering)

Dr. KING: If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong.

(Soundbite of applause and cheering)

HANSEN: What some people don't know is that Rosa Parks was not the first woman to refuse to give up her seat. Before her, a number of women refused. Most were taken off the bus and quietly fined. The first woman to really challenge the Montgomery bus segregation law was a 15-year-old teenager named Claudette Colvin. Now there's a book about her.
NPR's Margot Adler reports.

MARGOT ADLER: Claudette Colvin is alive and living in the Bronx. After 30 years of working in a nursing home, at 69, she is retired. But she remembers the day on March 2nd, 1955 when she refused to get up from her seat, as clear as if it was yesterday. After the bus driver ordered her to get up, and she refused, saying she'd paid her fare and it was her constitutional right, two police officers put her in handcuffs and arrested her.

Ms. CLAUDETTE COLVIN (Civil Rights Activist): All I do remember is that I wasn't going to walk off the bus voluntarily. I...

ADLER: What were you thinking at that moment?

Ms. COLVIN: Oh, Lord have mercy, it was Negro History Month. Now, you know...

ADLER: That whole month they had been studying about black leaders like Harriet Tubman, the runaway slave who led more than 70 slaves to freedom through the network of safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. And Sojourner Truth, a former slave who became an abolitionist and women's rights activist. They'd also been talking about the injustices they experienced daily, like not being able to eat at a lunch counter.

Ms. COLVIN: And we couldn't try on clothes. You know, you had to take a brown paper bag and draw a diagram of your foot on it. A brown paper bag and take it to the store. So all of that, can you imagine all of that in my mind? Just like my head was just too full of black history, you know, the oppression that we went through.

So I tell everybody, say, you know how it felt? I said, it felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side pushing me down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other side of me pushing me down. I couldn't get up.

ADLER: As we sit in her Bronx apartment, Colvin also remembers the moment the jail door closed, just like a western movie, she said.
Ms. COLVIN: When it go, click, and I knew I was locked in and couldn't get out. And then I got scared and panic come over me, and I started crying. Then I started saying the Lord's prayer because I'm Baptist.

ADLER: Phil Hoose is the author of "Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice." He doesn't even remember where he first heard her story. There had been a few articles in the Birmingham Press, and USA Today and some mentions in civil rights histories. Here was this teenager, nine months before Rosa Parks.

Mr. PHIL HOOSE (Author, "Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice"): In the same city, on the same bus system, with very tough consequences, hauled off the bus, handcuffed, jailed and nobody really knew about it.

ADLER: What's more, she later challenged the law in court, becoming one of four women plaintiffs in Browder versus Gayle, the court case that successfully overturned Montgomery's bus segregation laws. And yet, Claudette Colvin has been pretty much forgotten. She hardly ever told her story when she moved to New York. Because at the time, she says, everyone was talking about Malcolm X and black power, no one wanted to talk about integration. When asked why she is hardly known, and everyone thinks only of Rosa Parks, Colvin said this.

Ms. COLVIN: The NAACP and all the other black organization groups knew that she would be a good icon because she was an adult. They didn't think that teenagers would be reliable.

ADLER: She says that there was something else about Rosa Parks besides her age that made her the strategic choice of black leaders.

Ms. COLVIN: Her looks. They liked her looks. The texture, and I would say the skin texture that most black people accept when they're with the middle class. So she fit that profile as a nice, you know, icon that was, you know, she was gentile.

ADLER: David Garrow is a historian and the Pulitzer Prize winning author of "Bearing
Before Rosa Parks, There Was Claudette Colvin: NPR

Mr. DAVID GARROW (Historian, Author, "Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference"): Because Mrs. Parks was so well-known and respected, she was someone with a sort of natural gravitas, and seriousness and just an inherently impressive person.

Mr. HOOSE: I think she realizes that the community was not prepared to accept a teenage girl.

ADLER: Writer Phil Hoose.

Mr. HOOSE: Claudette is pragmatic enough to realize that. On the other hand, she did it.

ADLER: And here's another thing, the images of the Civil Rights Movement that most people see - Dr. King, John Lewis, Malcolm X, James Meredith - you mostly see men in suits. Historian David Garrow.

Mr. GARROW: The real reality of the movement was often young people and often more than 50 percent women.

ADLER: Phil Hoose wrote his book primarily for teens, he says. The stories of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King are great stories, but they are people in their 30s and 40s.
Mr. HOOSE: But Claudette Colvin was 15 when this happened.

ADLER: Hoose believes she deserves to be known, and that she brings the missing perspective of young female activists who fought segregation.


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