



# AUGUST FREEDOM DAYS MOMENTS IN CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY

By JANUS ADAMS

## AUGUST 3

In the summer of 1936, Eslanda Goode Robeson fulfilled a lifelong dream to visit Africa — her "old country" — as an African American. The granddaughter of a pioneering educator of former slaves, she had been "brought up in a household wide awake to every phase of the Negro problem in America." With a Columbia University degree in chemistry, she was richly educated for her breakthrough as a black woman in medical research. But, while visiting Europe with her husband, Paul Robeson, she was "startled" to find how censored her view of Africa had been in America. "In England, on the other hand, there is new of Africa everywhere." Living in Europe while her husband worked in film, she earned a degree in African anthropology from the London School of Economics, took the trip of a lifetime — three months touring South Africa, Swaziland, Basutoland, Uganda, and the Congo — and later published her travel diary as a photoessay.

## AUGUST 15

Ironically, one of the most critical moments in the Civil Rights movement did not involve African Americans. It took place in India on August 15, 1947, as that five thousand-year-old civilization retook its freedom from England.

The hero of India's freedom fight was undeniably Mohandas (or Mahatma) K. Gandhi, born to a prominent Hindu family. His grandfather and father were prime ministers of subjugated Indian states. Gandhi had studied law in London, returned to India to practice in 1891, emigrated to South Africa two years later, and became a successful lawyer within that country's Indian community — otherwise referred to as apartheid's "colored class." It was there that he honed his human rights activism. But as an Indian, he was, therefore, also British subject. During the Boer War (between the British and Dutch for control of South Africa), he joined the British ambulance corps. He returned to India in 1914, during World War I, remaining loyal to the Crown. But it was the Amritsar Massacre of April 13, 1919, that changed his life. As South Africa's whites would do



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east Africa) to study in India. African America's crusade had found inspiration in a Hindu, a Hebrew, and a Christian disciple of both.

## AUGUST 27

The annual East-West game brought out families in droves for the high point of Negro Leagues baseball season — often more than forty thousand fans in all. These were the days when legends like Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson, and Satchel Paige had their turn at bat. For sport, for fun, for box office, there was nothing like it. And one of the greatest games ever played on August 27, 1938. There was nothing minor about the Negro Leagues, where, as it has been said, "only the ball was white." "They say that we were not organized," said Kansas City Monarch veteran Sammie Haynes. "We were organized. We had

two leagues. We had a 140-game schedule. We played an all-star game every year in Chicago. We had sell-outs. We had a World Series at the end of the season. If that's not organized, I don't know what is." And it was Rube Foster's idea. This visionary team owner invited other owners to join him at the Colored YMCA in Kansas City, where together they founded the National Negro League (NNL) on February 13, 1920. Thanks to Foster, the Negro Leagues were serious business — a business with a full spectrum of jobs on the playing field and off, in management and every other related field; a business that was lost when, as Foster always predicted they would, the white major leagues integrated the players, closing out black businessmen and leaving them behind.

## AUGUST 29

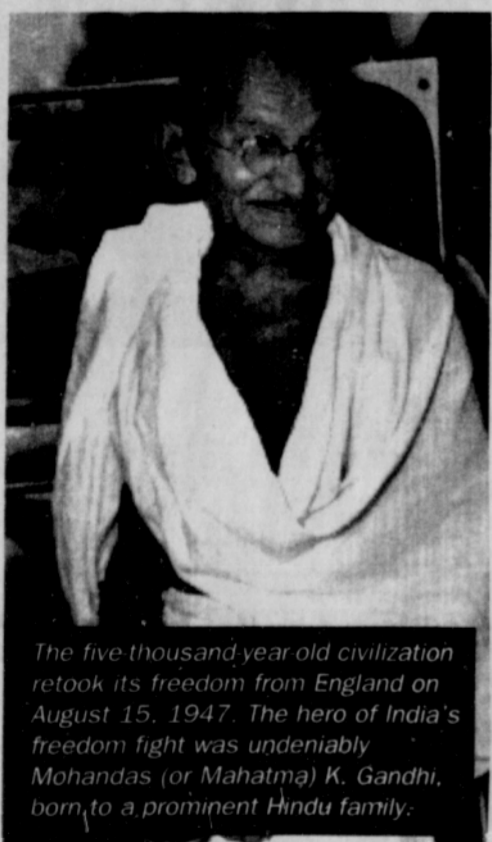
On August 29, 1957, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Despite some official efforts to limit Jim Crow, not since 1875 and the end of Reconstruction had the federal government made a definitive antisegregation strike. Yet the 1957 act was a step backward for the movement. In its language, if not its intent, it undermined the federal government's power to intercede in Civil Rights enforcement. Title III actually repealed an 1866 statute giving the president power to raise troops to enforce or to prevent violation of Civil Rights. While the president retained powers to the same end, the motive behind Congress's repeal of presidential powers at the same time that it was so reluctant to enforce desegregation was certainly suspect.

For on this very day, a situation was bubbling over considered one of the South's most progressive as one of its most racist. Three years after the Supreme Court rendered its school desegregation order, a judge granted an injunction preventing the desegregation of Little Rock schools on August 29, 1957.

## AUGUST 31

On August 31, 1955, the body of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was found in the Tallahatchie River. Just ten days earlier, he had come to Mississippi for a visit with relatives. On his first day there, in the town of Money, an incident took place that ended in his lynching — an event of international notoriety.

Having fun with some local boys, he showed them pictures of his interracial school friends in Chicago and identified one as his girlfriend. Kidding around, one of the local boys dared him to speak to a white woman in a nearby store. Emmett did just that. With this, the boys told him he'd better get away. Unaware of the rules of the South, Emmett didn't know to take their words seriously. Nor did he know to tell the relatives with whom he was staying what had happened. They would have known to get him out of town. The following Sunday morning at around 4 a.m., they were awakened by intruders who struck Emmett's grandaunt in the head with a shotgun and demanded that his granduncle, Mose "Preacher" Wright, give them the boy "who did the talking." Kidnapping Emmett, they vowed to kill everyone in the house if Wright called the sheriff. When Emmett didn't return later that morning, his cousin called the sheriff, and his and Emmett's mothers in Chicago. Emmett was found dumped in the river that Wednesday; one eye had been gouged out, his forehead had been crushed, he'd been shot, and his badly mutilated body was swollen beyond recognition. Without permission from the family, the sheriff ordered immediate burial. Emmett's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, called everyone up to the governor to stop the burial. Giving in, the sheriff shipped the body to Chicago with orders not to open the casket. Mamie Bradley did. And what she saw so sickened her that she wanted the world to see it too. *Jet* magazine published the brutal photo, thousands filed past the open casket, more gathered for the funeral. The burial was delayed four days to allow still more to see that a lynching was not a victimless, nameless act. It bore the face of a child.



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in Sharpeville and Soweto, as America would do in Orangeburg and at the Pettus Bridge, Britain did at Amritsar. The army gunned down twenty thousand Indian men, women, and children penned inside a walled garden to which they had come for a meeting on the suppression of their rights of speech and assembly. From that tragedy, the Indian revolution — a nonviolent crusade with Gandhi as its moral and strategic leader — was born. Even if geographers had not yet found that the world was round and interconnected, consider this. Gandhi's activism began in Africa, where he read Henry David Thoreau, the American pacifist and Underground Railroad station master; Rev. James Lawson helped ground the "Civil Rights wars" in Gandhi's theory. And it is said that Jesus departed the Middle East (north-

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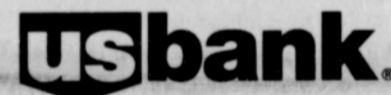
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