

Women Often Overlooked in Civil Rights Era

Rosa Park's death shines light on movement

(AP) — Ella Baker. Septima Poinsette Clark. Fannie Lou Hamer.

They and others risked their lives and worked tirelessly, demanding a social revolution — but history has often overlooked them. They were the women of the civil rights movement.

Though historians now acknowledge that women, particularly African-Americans, were pivotal in the critical battles for racial equality, Rosa Parks' death highlights the fact that she was one of the very few female civil rights figures who are widely known. Most women in the movement played background roles, either by choice or due to bias, since being a woman of color meant facing both racism and sexism.

"In some ways it reflects the realities of the 1950s: There were relatively few women



Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville, Miss., speaks to Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party sympathizers outside the Capitol in Washington, D.C. after the House of Representatives rejected a challenger to the 1964 election of five Mississippi representatives, in this Sept. 17, 1965 file photo.

in public leadership roles," said Julian Bond, a civil rights historian at the University of Virginia and chair of the NAACP. "So that small subset that becomes prominent in civil rights would tend to be men. But that doesn't excuse the way some women have just been written out of history."

For many, the wives of the movement's prominent male leaders, including Coretta Scott King, Betty Shabazz and Myrlie

Evers Williams, were among the most visible women in the struggle.

But scan historical images of the most dramatic moments of the civil rights movement — protesters blasted by fire hoses and dogs lunging at blacks — and women and girls are everywhere.

There is a 1964 image of Mississippi beautician Vera Piggy styling hair and educating her customers on voter registration. And there's a 1963 photo of stu-

dents at Florida A&M University, a historically black college, in which hundreds of people, mostly women, answer court charges for protesting segregated movie theaters. Six of the so-called Little Rock Nine, black teenagers whose lives were threatened when they integrated the Arkansas city's high schools in 1957, were young women.

In 1955, Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Ala.,

sparking a mass boycott by thousands, mainly black women domestic workers who had long filled the buses' back seats. Immediately, black women activists who had for years urged city officials to integrate the buses rallied to her cause, said Lynne Olson, author of "Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970."

The women arranged car pools and sold cakes and pies to raise money for alternate transportation. The boycott lasted more than a year until the Supreme Court upheld a lower court's ruling in favor of four black Montgomery women who had — months before Parks — refused to comply with bus segregation.

Though women had spearheaded that campaign and many others, when their efforts began to bear fruit prominent men often took the helm, Olson said.

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Memorial Honors Courageous Rosa Parks



Officer Robert Mazakis, a member of Rosa Parks' Honor Guard, helps Parks' great nephew Schuyler McCauley-Brown with his tie as they wait with other mourners for a memorial service in Washington, D.C.

continued ▲ from Front and Sing."

Earlier, more than 30,000 people filed silently by her casket in the Capitol Rotunda in hushed reverence, beginning Sunday night and continuing until well past sunrise Monday.

Elderly women carrying purses, young couples holding hands and small children in the arms of their parents reverently proceeded around the raised wooden casket.

Many were overcome by emotion. Monica Grady, 47, of Greenbelt, Md., was moved to tears, she said, that Parks was "so brave at the time without really knowing the consequences" of her actions.

Parks, a former seamstress, became the first woman to lie in honor in the Rotunda, sharing the tribute bestowed upon Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy and other national leaders. President Bush and

congressional leaders gathered for a brief ceremony Sunday night, listening as members of Baltimore's Morgan State University choir sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Rep. Conyers said the ceremony and public viewing showed "the legacy of Rosa Parks is more than just a success for the civil rights movement or for African-Americans. It means it's a national honor."

At the Capitol ceremony Sunday, Senate chaplain Barry Black said Parks' courage "ignited a movement that aroused our national conscience" and served as an example of the "power of fateful, small acts."

Bush, who presented a wreath but did not speak at the ceremony, issued a proclamation ordering the U.S. flag to be flown at half-staff over all public buildings Wednesday, the day of Parks' funeral and burial in Detroit.

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