Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. March 2, 1955. I'm Sally Helm.

It must have felt like summer had come early to Montgomery. It's pretty hot — in the low eighties. But more than that — the real defining feature of summer, at least if you're a teenager — there is no school.

It's one of those days where a mini-vacation appears mid-week as a kind of random gift. There's a Wednesday afternoon faculty meeting, so the kids at Booker T. Washington High School get let out early.

15-year-old Claudette Colvin steps out into the muggy Montgomery air and sees some of her friends heading downtown. At Dexter Avenue — right near a tall column memorializing Alabama's Confederate soldiers — these Black high schoolers get on the bus. They pass their tickets to the driver. And sit down near an exit door about halfway back. Colvin's in the window seat, textbooks on her lap.

The bus is pretty empty at first, but before long, it's filling up. The first ten seats — the seats reserved for white passengers — they go, quick. Soon all the seats are full. So, people start standing. And as the bus approaches Court Square, Colvin and her classmates notice a white woman looking down at them from the aisle. She wants them to move. She wants their seats.

Colvin and three other girls are sitting in the four seats in this row. And the woman wants them all to leave so that she can sit. "That was the whole point of the segregation rules," Colvin later recalls to her biographer, Philip Hoose. "It was all symbolic...If she sat down in the same row as me, it meant I was as good as her. So, she had to keep standing until I moved back."

People on the bus start to take notice. "I need those seats," the driver shouts. The other three girls in the row get up, but as Colvin remembers: "I just couldn't." She didn't plan it in advance — but, she said, "my decision was built on a lifetime of nasty experiences."

Colvin is arrested on that bus in Montgomery after she refuses to give up her seat. This is nine months before an almost identical act of defiance from activist Rosa Parks will ignite the Montgomery bus boycott, and the modern Civil Rights movement.

Today: the lesser-known names of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Who is Claudette Colvin? And how does her story reveal the broader picture behind a protest that would change the nation?

SO much history has unfolded in Montgomery, Alabama. It was once the capital of the Confederacy — Jefferson Davis took his oath of office there, placing his hand on the Bible that
Alabama governors still use at swearing-in ceremonies. Montgomery became the epicenter of the modern civil rights movement—the bus boycott, the 1965 voting rights march, the freedom rides—they all tie into this city. It’s the state capital today.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: And it's also tiny.

Sally Helm: Dr. Kimberly Brown Pellum has taught history at several historically Black universities—Alabama State, Texas Southern, and Florida A&M. And I guess because Montgomery has such an important national history, I assumed it was a pretty big city. But Brown Pellum was born and raised there. And she says, it feels more like a small town. Albeit one right at the center of Civil Rights history.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: Absolutely. Tuskegee is about 45 minutes up the road, Birmingham is maybe an hour and a half. Selma, Alabama is about an hour away. You are enveloped in history by existing in this place.

Sally Helm: In Montgomery, there's Martin Luther King Elementary School. Rosa L. Parks Avenue. And, of course, there are people who lived through the Civil Rights movement. People like 88-year-old Nelson Malden, who used to operate a barber shop.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: My mother's church and the home church where I grew up is feet away from Mr. Malden’s shop.

Nelson Malden: I was her father’s barber also.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: And I think I just stopped by the barbershop one day and he began to offer one of many incredible lessons about, not only the boycott, but just the larger story of activism and resistance and Montgomery.

Nelson Malden: Every person that was involved in the boycott, basically, was within a five-block radius of my barbershop.

Sally Helm: Including a 25-year-old minister, new in town, who drove up one day in 1954. Malden was a college freshman then—the youngest barber in the shop.

Nelson Malden: I saw this blue Pontiac pull up in front of my shop. This young man got out. I looked at my watch and it was 9:30. I had a 10 o'clock class.

Sally Helm: Not a lot of time.

Nelson Malden: I looked at his head, like any barber would do. His hair was already short, and I said, ‘Oh, hey, I can knock him out in 15 minutes.’
**Sally Helm:** He did. That customer was Martin Luther King Jr.

When he finished the cut, Malden asked King what he thought. "Pretty good," King said.

**Nelson Malden:** So, when you tell a barber “Pretty good” you know, that's kind of an insult. But he came back two weeks later, I was busy, another barber was vacant, but he waited on me. I said, “that must have been a pretty good haircut.” He said, “You alright.” But I had no idea that that would be cutting one of the most historical figures of the 20th century at that time.

**Sally Helm:** The barbershop Malden worked in was in Centennial Hill, a Black business district. Malden attended Alabama State, a Black university. In Montgomery at the time, segregation was the law.

**Nelson Malden:** When you grew up in a segregated society, there was no ups or downs. You're just born into that society. So, you know the rules of the game. So, your parents taught you how to survive.

**Sally Helm:** Malden recalled his earliest memory of segregation. He was four or five years old, visiting a department store with his mom. And he went over to play with a little white boy by a water fountain. A whites-only water fountain.

**Nelson Malden:** My mother, who was very kind to me, but she grabbed my head and pulled it real hard, and she kept me from drinking at the whites’, she was trying to save my life because here you don't know what could happen if I had played with the white-water fountain.

**Sally Helm:** Jim Crow meant separate restrooms and sports teams. Separate dining rooms in restaurants—in Alabama, the law was that the barrier between the white and Black sides of the restaurant had to be at least seven feet high. And, of course, separate seating areas on buses. This is the Montgomery that Nelson Malden knew.

This system wasn't just designed to keep Black and white people apart. It was designed so that Black people had fewer opportunities to get ahead in life.

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** Let's be honest here, most Black people were not upwardly mobile.

**Sally Helm:** In the early ‘50s, nearly ninety percent of Montgomery's Black population was working class.
Kimberly Brown Pellum: Even those so-called middle-class Black people weren't that far removed from poverty. I mean, I'll give you the example of my grandmother, educated woman, received her degree from ASU, but ultimately, she worked as a domestic.

Sally Helm: Many Black women did. 42 percent of those in the workforce were employed in private homes, according to the 1950 Census. Those homes, in Montgomery, were largely on the East side.

Nelson Malden: So, on one east side of Montgomery, you had a large white population where the ruling class lived, the doctors and the lawyers and the judges and the stockbrokers. So not enough domestic help on the east side to take care of the rich white people then so they had to bring them over on the west side of Montgomery.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: That's why you had so many African American women who are riding the buses because many of them are employed in white households as domestics.

Sally Helm: The buses.

The first ten seats were reserved for white riders. If those seats filled up, the rules of segregation demanded that Black riders give up their seats. An entire row of four Black passengers would have to stand if one white passenger wanted to sit in that row.

Nelson Malden: The bus driver, he had the authority to ask that Black person to move back.

Sally Helm: Official police authority —sometimes, drivers carried pistols. They knew that maintaining Jim Crow was part of the job description. Black passengers paid their fare at the front, right by the driver. And then, unless the whole white section was empty, they had to walk out the door again and get back on through the rear door. Sometimes, buses would pull away and leave them on the curb.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: Can you imagine now these Black folks in Montgomery are paying the same fare upfront and then asked to walk around the back for entry? And so, it's just outrageous. They are beyond tired.

Sally Helm: We also talked about this with Dr. Bettye Collier-Thomas, a history professor at Temple University, and the founder of the Bethune Museum and the National Archives for Black Women's History.

Bettye Collier-Thomas: African Americans, they were the majority of the people riding the bus. The majority of the bus patrons. And they felt that they should receive more respect.
Sally Helm: Collier-Thomas told us that Black people had boycotted segregation on Montgomery streetcars as early as 1902. Through the ’40s, a handful of people got arrested for sitting in whites-only seats. In 1952, one man paid his fare up front. Then he walked through the whites-only section to the back of the bus, instead of getting out and boarding again through the back door. The driver called the cops. They shot the passenger. He later died of his wounds.

Bettye Collier-Thomas: You had Black people protesting from the Civil War on, but it was not a movement.

Sally Helm: That would begin to change with Alabama State professor Jo Ann Robinson. Remember how tiny Montgomery is?

Kimberly Brown Pellum: Now did you do Jo Ann Robinson's hair?

Nelson Malden: Yeah. I cut all the—

Kimberly Brown Pellum: I didn’t know that! (Sally laughs)

Sally Helm: In 1954, Robinson meets with the bus company, and the city. She also writes a letter to the mayor, asking him to intervene. Not to stop segregation on the buses.

Nelson Malden: Told them how to basically keep segregation. All you got to do is teach your bus drivers how to be more courteous to the Black riders.

Sally Helm: She asks for those basic courtesies: allowing Black riders to approach their seats from the front door after paying their fare, assuring riders that buses would stop at every corner in Black neighborhoods, the way they did in white ones.

Near the end of the letter, Robinson warns, "there has been talk...of planning a city-wide boycott of buses." No one answers her letter.

One year later, students at Booker T. Washington High School get let out early for a Wednesday faculty meeting. And a fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin boards a Montgomery bus. Here's Kimberly Brown Pellum again.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: She's learning about the 14th Amendment in school.

Sally Helm: The one that gave citizenship rights to formerly enslaved people.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: She is also studying Black history. So, what a moment for Claudette Colvin to be forced to give up her seat, for another woman who is not elderly, who is not handicapped, but just white. Alright?
Sally Helm: Colvin refuses to stand. Soon, a transit cop boards and tries to intervene. Colvin won't budge. Finally, two Montgomery city policemen board the bus. Colvin later recounts the story to Phillip Hoose in his book, "Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice."

She said she heard the driver say, "I've had trouble with that thing before." "He called me a thing," she says. The officer comes over and says, "Aren't you going to get up?" and she says no. "It's my constitutional right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare, it's my constitutional right!"

Kimberly Brown Pellum: The incident turns into Claudette Colvin being arrested.

Sally Helm: They pull Colvin out of her seat. Her schoolbooks fall to the ground. An officer drags her off the bus and into the squad car.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: She is assigned three different charges.

Sally Helm: One: violating segregation law. Two: disturbing the peace. And three: assaulting the police officer who removed her from the bus. Which she says she most definitely did not do: "I went limp as a baby," she says. "I was too smart to fight back."

In the weeks after the 15-year old’s arrest, Montgomery’s Black activists embrace her. Her case could be an opportunity to spark the movement that they’re already talking about. The movement against segregation, specifically on the buses. E. D. Nixon, the head of the local NAACP, arranges for a young lawyer to represent Colvin — a man named Fred Gray. Martin Luther King Jr. would later call him "the chief counsel for the protest movement." King joins other local leaders to meet with the police commissioner and advocate on Colvin's behalf. It's in many ways the young minister’s political debut. Leaders also encourage Colvin to join the local NAACP youth group... a group that is led by a 42-year-old seamstress.... named Rosa Parks.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: Mrs. Parks had been an activist with the NAACP more than 10 years. She becomes a secretary for E. D. Nixon, but much more than filing paperwork, she is actually leading anti-rape investigations.

Sally Helm: Parks first meets Colvin one day before a youth group meeting. Apparently, she's surprised: "I was looking for some big old burly overgrown teenager who sassed white people out," she says. “But no: they pulled a little girl off the bus."

Kimberly Brown Pellum: Claudette Colvin talks about this — she says that, you know, Rosa Parks took care of me. She mentored me. She was a quiet woman, and kind, but Colvin also says that when those meetings began, Rosa Parks turned it on. Her voice changed, she was commanding, and she made it clear what side of the fence she was on in terms of making sure that Black people were treated justly. And so, there's always this side of Rosa Parks that was probably more militant than what average folks sort of associate with her.
**Sally Helm:** After some NAACP youth meetings, Colvin would stay at Parks’ home.

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** She says that she knew how I liked my coffee. She would make me peanut butter and crackers.

**Sally Helm:** When Colvin was raising money to cover her legal fees, Rosa Parks' mother baked cookies. Colvin later said she ate some of them and Parks told her, "Claudette, don't eat all the cookies or we won't have any to sell!"

Colvin needs the money because she’s been convicted on all three of those initial counts. Including violating segregation law. But she’s going to appeal. In May, she and her lawyer Fred Gray go before a judge. And:

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** Two of those charges are going to be dropped.

**Sally Helm:** The only remaining charge is assaulting an officer. Which means Colvin’s case isn’t a direct challenge to the segregation law anymore. Now, community organizers have to decide what to do…should they seize on Colvin’s case? Or…should they wait?

After Colvin’s appeal, Montgomery’s Black activists are faced with a question. Is Colvin the person to launch a protest movement behind?

You may already know how this story ends —the activists decide “no.” Rosa Parks will become the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, seven months after prosecutors dropped two of Colvin’s charges. So why do they choose Parks and not Colvin?

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** One of the things that we must do, is stop creating this revisionist history beef between Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks.

**Sally Helm:** Kimberly Brown Pellum says, stories about Colvin and Parks often falsely pit them against each other. Ignoring the fact that Parks actually mentored Colvin.

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** I think it’s really important that we hone in on this nurturing relationship between Mrs. Parks and Claudette Colvin rather than rushing to these assumptions that, you know, there was any kind of schism between these two.

**Sally Helm:** That being said, there are also indications that movement leaders consciously chose not to promote Colvin as the face of a boycott movement. Whether that’s because the court dropped the key charges against her, or for other reasons. Bettye Collier-Thomas told us, activists didn’t consider Colvin, or another teenaged girl arrested that year, as ideal spokespeople.
**Bettye Collier-Thomas:** As teenagers coming from working class backgrounds, they were not the role models that the NAACP and the WPC, Women's Political Council, were looking for.

**Sally Helm:** When Colvin herself speculated about why the NAACP didn't choose to elevate her within the movement, she said:

**Bettye Collier-Thomas:** They felt she would not appeal quote to the adults and to middle class people because I'm dark skin.

**Sally Helm:** Since her arrest, Colvin had also gotten pregnant. She believes that pushed away some of her allies. She was unmarried. It was 1955.

To Brown Pellum's mind, though, none of those factors was as important as timing and experience.

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** These folks are strategists. Rosa Parks is a grown woman with a long record of activist experience. Claudette Colvin is a 15-year-old girl. And so, when you talk about whether or not Claudette Colvin could have been the face, I think when you think about it in terms of the experience that the other individuals bring to the table, it becomes very clear that she is not as well prepared to take that kind of role, but it doesn't mean that her role isn't necessary.

**Sally Helm:** The head of the Montgomery NAACP, E. D. Nixon, explained it this way: "I had to be sure that I had somebody I could win with."

That person… is Rosa Parks.

That December, Parks refuses to stand for white passengers on a Montgomery bus. When policemen board, Parks willingly stands up. She sits in the patrol car uncuffed. Officials charge her with disorderly conduct. No jail. No assault charge. So, this can become a clean challenge to the bus segregation law. That very night, Jo Ann Robinson, leader of the Women’s Political Council, mobilizes her members.

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** These professors tap the talents of their students to help generate these tens and tens of thousands of flyers that need to go out to Black Montgomery to communicate instructions for the boycott.

**Sally Helm:** The flyers say: another Black woman has been arrested on the bus. So, this coming Monday, "please stay off the buses."

With that, the Montgomery bus boycott begins. Rosa Parks is its face…and its voice.
**Reporter and Parks Archival:** What immediate results do you hope to achieve? Well, we hope to achieve equal rights. How long do you think it would take? I have no idea how long.

Sally Helm: Behind Rosa Parks, making the movement happen…are tens of thousands of regular black bus riders in Montgomery.

Sally Helm: Mr. Malden, I'm so curious about your first memories of the boycott. What do you remember about when the bus boycott got started? How did that affect you? How did that affect people in your life, your clients?

Nelson Malden: So that morning, first near the board side, one of my customers ran to the one he said, here come, the bus had turned the bus. All the customers jumped up and ran to the one that she was going to wait because there was one man standing on the corner, across from the barbershop. The man worked at a hotel downtown, and every morning he would catch the bus across from the barber shop. And we're going to see whether you get on the bus or not. The police were following the bus on the motorcycles. So, when the bus stopped, and the bus pulled up and the man was still standing everybody started howling. Oh, Lord, it’s going to work!

Sally Helm: Black domestic workers start traveling on foot from their homes on Montgomery’s west side to their jobs over on the east. Some walk as many as eight miles a day.

**MLK Archival:** For several weeks now, we, the Negro citizens of Montgomery, have been involved in a non-violent protest against the injustices which we have experienced on the buses for a number of years.

Sally Helm: The young pastor Martin Luther King Jr. heads a new association that organizes carpools on a scale the city has never seen.

Nelson Malden: We had a good transportation system. Black taxi drivers, you know, they cut the fare and the people who see you walking, they would give you a ride.

Kimberly Brown Pellum: You had Black business owners who would volunteer their parking lots to sort of function as a makeshift taxi hub really. Folks like Mr. Malden, who was able to use his business to advance the cause of Black people here.

Nelson Malden: All the barbershop could talk about then was politics and sex. Strategy. Uncle Tom, Black militants. You know, it was a Black man’s country club.

Sally Helm: Leaders estimate that over 90 percent of Montgomery's Black residents take part in the boycott. And…there’s pushback from white people in Montgomery. There are threats of violence. Reverend King’s home is bombed. Two months into the boycott, officials arrest over 80 movement leaders and carpool drivers. They're accused of boycotting without just cause.
Some boycotters lose their jobs. Still, King preaches at Black churches, including the one Brown Pellum attends now, encouraging people to stick with the boycott.

**MLK Archival:** *As long as you sit in the back, you have a false sense of inferiority and so long as you let the white man sit in the front and push you back then he has a false sense of superiority.*

**News Report Archival:** *For 381 days, the Negroes of Montgomery walked or rode in special carpools. The half-filled and sometimes empty buses made the effect of the boycott felt.*

**Sally Helm:** With each day of the boycott, Montgomery transit loses between 30 and 40-thousand bus fares. And the boycott lasts for over a year. It doesn't end until the U.S. Supreme Court takes up the matter of segregation on Montgomery's buses.

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** *And ultimately by the time we reach this Supreme Court case, Claudette Colvin becomes one of the central plaintiffs that lead us to this moment of reckoning in our nation's history.*

**Sally Helm:** Claudette Colvin is still a teenager when she testifies before the Supreme Court. Which rules in her favor. Fred Gray, the lawyer who defended Colvin and Parks, would reflect later: "I don't mean to take anything away from Mrs. Parks, but Claudette gave all of us the moral courage to do what we did."

**MLK Archival:** *And I don't believe that we're ever going back to any segregated buses.*

**Sally Helm:** Colvin’s story also shows, it really did take a village to realize the goal of fair treatment on the buses.

**Nelson Malden:** What made the bus boycott so successful, every Black person in Montgomery had been on the bus, had been humiliated by the bus seating arrangement. It wasn’t so much Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. What made it so successful was the spirit of the people. And when they asked for the boycott, the feeling was already in everybody’s heart.

**Sally Helm:** Nelson Malden last saw Dr. King just months before the reverend would be assassinated. A lot has changed in the decades since. The home where Dr. King once lived, down the block from Malden’s barber shop, is now a museum.

In 2021, Montgomery’s mayor renamed Jefferson Davis Avenue after Fred Gray, the lawyer who defended both Colvin and Parks. That very same day, a judge officially expunged Claudette Colvin’s arrest record. She told CBS News, “I’m no longer a juvenile delinquent at 82.”
Brown Pellum told us, it’s wonderful to see these civil rights leaders honored in Montgomery. But...you can’t re-name a street after every single person who was essential to making the boycott happen. There just aren’t enough streets. And besides, Brown Pellum says: to her mind, symbolic gestures aren’t enough.

**Kimberly Brown Pellum:** I never heard of any of the leadership from the civil rights movement asking for a street to be named after them. What I would like to see is many of the things put forth during the civil rights movement in terms of goals actually come into fruition. Economic justice, fair housing, equal access to education. Many of our public schools are underfunded. How can there be a Rosa Parks Museum and there not be formal teaching of Black history throughout public schools in Alabama? And so, I celebrate Claudette Colvin. Fred Gray is deserving of a street, an avenue, a school, a monument, and so many other things. But without teaching our young people about them in their totality, I'm not sure how much renaming a street really means.

**Sally Helm:** Not only that. Sixty-six years is a long time to wait to have your record cleared. Change happens slowly. And for many, it comes too late.