HISTORY This Week EP 323: Bayard Rustin Marches Free
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: History this week, June 11th, 1946. I'm Sally Helm, Lewisburg federal penitentiary in rural Pennsylvania is surrounded by rolling fields of farmland, the kind of fields where a man can't hide, but Bayard Rustin doesn't have to hide. He's leaving prison today as a free man. And in any case, Bayard Rustin is not the hiding type.

He was incarcerated in the first place because he refused to hide his beliefs. Even with World War II raging and patriotic fervor at its peak Rustin refused to fight. He'd grown up a Quaker in Westchester, Pennsylvania, and had been a pacifist since he was a child. That made him a “conscientious objector.” For this, he'd been arrested, convicted and sent to federal prison.

From the beginning prison officials haven't known quite what to make of Rustin. When he first arrives, they note in his file, it is believed that this inmate will continue to bring up racial problems in this institution as has been his practice before being committed here. His adjustment in this institution is doubtful as time goes on. Reston's file turns up many signs that indeed he does continue to bring up problems in the. He's disciplined for getting fellow inmates to protest things like the state of medical care, the policies on mail. The fact that the cafeterias are segregated, you can feel in the record that the prison officials are just no match for him. They write that one day at lunch, he refused to line up with the other black inmates. “Instead started to deliver an oration on his opinions of segregation, etc. He was told to liner up as required…but this he refused to do.”

Eventually they transfer Rustin into the lower security farm camp and finally, release him. But even at this last moment, Rustin is defiant. He won't agree to any travel restrictions. He's gotten a job with an interfaith peace group, and he'll need to move around, and he won't agree to wear a prison issued suit. When he steps out into those wide Pennsylvania fields, the clothes that he’s wearing are his.

Today: Bayard Rustin. What made Rustin so confident he could force fundamental change? Especially knowing that powerful people were digging around in his personal life to ruin him. And by hearing from his partner, we’ll discover how a man who’d been married for most of his life to a cause found love.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Bayard Rustin completes his two-year stint in the penitentiary in 1946. And when he gets out, he has something new in common with a man he’s long admired—Mahatma Gandhi.
Both men have recently spent two years in prison for acting on their beliefs. Rustin for his personal commitment to pacifism. Gandhi for leading a political movement built on civil disobedience. Challenging 90 years of British imperial rule in India to gain independence.

John D’Emilio has written a biography of Rustin. He told us, Rustin is deeply interested in Gandhi’s movement.

**John D'Emilio:** So here is a man of color in New York city, reading about a man of color on the other side of the globe, who is challenging the most powerful empire on the planet at that point, the British empire. And this led him to explore and embrace active non-violence as a form of political organizing and social change.

**Sally Helm:** Rustin himself is a gifted political organizer. He protests segregation with acts of civil disobedience. He works as a strategist for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a pioneering Black union. And he speaks widely on pacifism and nonviolence.

He’s impressed by the way Gandhi is rallying thousands to his cause – and earning worldwide media coverage. It suggests to Rustin the possibilities of a tactic called *active nonviolent resistance*. *Active.* That’s the key.

**John D'Emilio:** You could live a life of what we might think of as passive non-violence in which you, yourself never engage in a violent act or never participate in a war.

**Sally Helm:** The active part involves Gandhi and his movement confronting their oppressors through marches and boycotts and acts of civil disobedience. The nonviolent part is refusing to attack or kill people in the process. It goes far beyond an individual moral choice. and it’s working. Rustin wonders, “what's to stop me from doing that?”

**John D'Emilio:** It offered the greatest, possibilities. If you believe in nonviolence and you're facing one, a nation that is building up the largest defense establishment, including nuclear weapons that the world has ever seen and to engages in racial segregation and has racial hierarchies embedded into law and everyday life around the country.

What are you supposed to do to challenge that? Unless you're willing to take on what he would describe as active, nonviolent resistance.

**Sally Helm:** It's now late 1948. Rustin has become so well known as an organizer and a speaker on nonviolence that Gandhi invites him to India. He asks Rustin to take part in an international conference scheduled for the following year.

But before it can be held, Gandhi is killed by a Hindu nationalist assassin

the news is devastating to India, to believers in nonviolence, and to Rustin. In a letter, he praises Gandhi as an angelic troublemaker. It might sound like he's calling Gandhi and other worldly figure or saying that only a Saint could use non-violence to bring about change, but Rustin has
come to believe the opposite: that nonviolent resistance only works when ordinary people do it together. "The only weapon we have is our bodies," he writes "and we need to tuck them in places, so wheels don't turn." That conference in India? It still happens. And Rustin attends.

**John D'Emilio:** He never meets Gandhi directly, but he does meet many of the central figures in the Indian independence movement.

**Sally Helm:** At first, his Indian hosts have a hard time grasping how the oppressive conditions that they face under Imperial rule compare to the American Jim Crow system. Rustin has lots of stories that can help make it clear. Stories like the one that'll happen when he returns from this trip. And spends 22 days on a chain gang after trying to peacefully integrate a public bus. One morning, he tries to impress a prison guard by starting work early. The guard says, “stop, you bastard!” And presses a revolver to Rustin’s head. Rustin stays calm and no harm comes to him. When he later tells this story in speeches, Rustin will make clear that, crucially: he didn’t give up on the guard. That’s a key part of Ghandian non-violence. Rustin treats the guard with respect, and after a while, the guard begins responding in kind. Even offers Rustin cigarettes and soda.

Rustin’s stories have a huge impact on Indian audiences. He speaks widely about pacifism and nonviolence. Sometimes, he even sings.

*Archival of Bayard Rustin singing Ezekiel Saw the Wheel*

That’s a rare recording of the kind of song Rustin sang on this trip. A spiritual about loss and overcoming.

**Sally Helm:** Word spreads about this American visitor Bayard Rustin. For the rest of his time in India, he has more speaking invitations than he can accept. He also learns more from his hosts about the philosophy and the spirituality of nonviolence. The commitment to do no harm to any other living thing.

When Rustin returns to the states…

**John D'Emilio:** He becomes somebody who experiments in using nonviolence as a way of challenging the government's policies around warfare and nuclear arms and especially government policy and around racial hierarchy and racial segregation.

**Sally Helm:** By 1955, Rustin has a nationwide network of contacts. From them, he starts hearing about a young preacher in the south who is directly confronting racist laws and customs.

**John D'Emilio:** This is something Rustin has been dreaming would happen for. Or over a decade that you have a whole community of African Americans united together. And so, Rustin makes his way down to Montgomery.

**Sally Helm:** Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is leading a boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, and Rustin arranges a meeting. He wants to speak to King about widening the goals of
this emerging Civil Rights Movement, make it about equal access, not just to buses, but to restaurants, barbershops, hospitals, schools. In fact, to all of American life.

**John D'Emilio:** Rustin played a key role in developing Dr. King stature as a national leader, rather than simply, a local minister in an Alabama city.

**Sally Helm:** When Rustin arrives, the scene is tense. Night riders have recently firebombed King’s home. Now, armed guards stand outside. Inside, when Rustin starts to sit down, someone half-jokingly says, "wait, a couple of guns in that chair. You don't want to shoot yourself."

Rustin will later write: "when I got to Montgomery, Dr. King had very limited notions about how a non-violent protest should be carried out."

So, he and King step aside for a private talk.

**John D'Emilio:** Rustin begins to explain to him in step-by-step piece, by piece ways, the principles of non-violent active resistance and Dr. King embraces it completely, and not only that. Rustin says to King, this has to be understood as not just a Montgomery movement.

**Sally Helm:** Instead, he urges King, go national with the campaign for civil rights. And root it in nonviolence. He tells King that he's been traveling the country for years speaking to countless audiences, many of them in the black community, he says "no situation in America has created so much interest among Negroes as the Gandhian proposals for India's freedom."

King listens.

**John D'Emilio:** Without exaggeration, you could claim that Bayard Rustin was more responsible than anyone for bringing Gandhian nonviolence into the heart of the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

**Sally Helm:** Some white residents of Montgomery respond to the boycott with violence. Snipers, fire into buses, members of the Ku Klux Klan bomb black churches. Specialists have to diffuse a bomb that was left at Martin Luther King's door. But King's followers do not respond in kind.

Instead, they fight in court and keep walking or carpooling or hitchhiking to get where they need to go. After little more than a year, the boycott ends in victory. A federal court rules that Montgomery's segregated bus system is unconstitutional. The movement's success launches, a wave of nonviolent protest across the country.

**John D'Emilio:** Sit-ins are exploding throughout the south, 1961 is the Freedom Ride and another explosion of demonstrations. The Civil Rights ovement is growing at a pace and with visibility like it has never had before.
Sally Helm: Now it's early July 1963. Rustin has joined Martin Luther King in the top ranks of the Civil Rights movement. The leadership feels that now is the time to move with their plan for a show of strength – a national demonstration that will bring people from every state to Washington, DC.

They decide to hold the March in late August. That is just seven weeks away. But who will wrangle all the logistics from speeches to sound system from permits to port-a-potties? There is a clear choice. King turns to the most gifted organizer he knows: Bayard Rustin. He says, "a lot is riding on this and you're in charge." Rustin rolls up his sleeves.

John D'Emilio: It's a level of organizing it's hard for us to understand in the new technological world that we live in today, but it's a comment on Rustin's networks and his ability to be absolutely organized, to keep track of everything. Through telephone calls, through letters, through attending meetings traveling to other cities to spread the word, and he had some key assistance, obviously. He has the support of all of the other organizations that are endorsing the March and the word gets out there.

Sally Helm: The word also reaches a Senator from South Carolina: Strom Thurmond. When Thurmond hears about the March, he assigns his staff to gather information on the lead organizer, including on his personal life—especially on his personal life. Thurmond is a rabid segregationist.

He'll do what it takes to undermine this show of movement strength. His staff goes off to rifle through the life of Bayard Rustin and return with what they've found.

On August 13th, Strom Thurmond takes to the floor of the U.S. Senate to make a statement for the record. "Bayard Rustin," he says, "is a sex pervert."

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Bayard Rustin is not a quote-unquote "sex pervert." What Strom Thurmond is really accusing him of is being gay. "He attacked me as a homosexual," Rustin later sat in an interview, "which of course I was." As a boy, Rustin was raised by his grandmother, Julia. She was a Quaker and a loving woman who accepted him unconditionally.

John D'Emilio: Julia always gave buyer the message that he needed to be true to himself and buyer talk to her as a teenager and a young man about his special caring for men. And Julia basically told him, you have to be yourself. You have to be true to yourself.

Sally Helm: That's John D'emilio again. By the accounts of those who knew Rustin, he's comfortable with his sexuality and doesn't try to hide it. Yet, he's not what we might call "out."
**John D'Emilio:** He wasn't politically gay, but he didn't pretend to be heterosexual. And these were the decades that were the worst time to be an LGBTQ person in the United States.

**Sally Helm:** D’Emilio says that in 1963, being “out” is barely an option for Rustin. Homophobia is rampant. And the mere fact of being gay can be weaponized to blackmail someone or destroy their reputation. Which is what Strom Thurmond is trying to do. Just *weeks* before the March on Washington.

Rustin has been persecuted before for having sex with men even arrested. He was jailed in Los Angeles and made to register as a sex offender. When word of the incident got around in peace movement circles back in the 50s, Rustin had to leave his job. But this vicious speech by Strom Thurmond, this is a whole new level of trouble. Thurmond not only charges Rustin with lewdness he a Rustin's past association with communism.

Thurmond is trying to convince the public that Rustin is dangerous, untrustworthy, perverse and in the process, he's trying to bring down the upcoming March.

**John D'Emilio:** Thurmond, who has been fed information about Rustin by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Stands on the floor of the United States Senate and denounces the organizer of the March on Washington as a sexual pervert and puts information about Rustin into the Congressional Record.

At this point, Bayard is already known and referred to as Mr. March on Washington. So, if Civil Rights leaders, accept what Thurman is saying, they're endangering the entire mobilization effort.

**Sally Helm:** Some in leadership feels strongly that the March matters more than its organizer. And that Rustin must step aside. Rustin himself makes no public statement at the time. So, it's hard to know exactly how he's feeling. But years later, he opens up to his partner, Walter Naegle.

**Walter Naegle:** He found it depressing, he found it sad. It made him sad. The sadness had to do with, I think the personal relationships that were involved, the people who made these decisions to push him aside or to marginalize him.

**Sally Helm:** Still, Rustin has always placed the cause before himself.

**Walter Naegle:** His focus was always, you know, "what's good for the movement?" What good. What’s going to push us forward. And even if it means my stepping aside, I will do that. But it doesn't necessarily mean he wasn't hurt by it.
Sally Helm: But then, according to John D'Emilio something unexpected happens. A. Phillip Randolph comes to Rustin's defense. He's a powerful union leader and a lion of the Civil Rights Movement. And he stands up in support of Rustin in a way that others have not before.

John D'Emilio: Unlike in the previous years where Rustin sexual identity was used to move him off to the side, the key leaders, organizational leaders in the Civil Rights movement with A. Phillip Randolph have a press conference in which they openly proclaim their support for Byard Rustin as the chief organizer of the March. And it really is an important moment. It doesn't eliminate the personal prejudices that different people in the movement might have towards Rustin because he's gay and this is 1963, but it no longer sidelined Byard in terms of being a key person in this growing movement.

Sally Helm: Rustin continues organizing the March on Washington. Now all he has to do is make sure it’s not a flop.

In 1963, there's no great way to know in advance. How many people will be attending your large event. You just put the word out far and wide and hold your breath. On the morning of August 28th, dawn breaks, hot and humid.

John D'Emilio: You could describe it as a day of high tension the press asks him, “What are you expecting?” Bayard looks at some paper that he's holding in his hand, which has nothing to do with the question. And, and basically says, “Oh, everything is fine. People will be coming.”

Sally Helm: Now he just has to wait and see if that's true.

John D'Emilio: He had no way of knowing whether this was going to be the success that it was

Sally Helm: And then...

John D'Emilio: As the morning develops the buses pour in the cars, pour in, people get off trains and the public transportation in the greater DC area.

They are all gathering at the mall, ready for this dramatic event.

Sally Helm: It's clear that history will be made this day.

John D'Emilio: And then, you know, Rustin is on the podium.

Sally Helm: As one of the scheduled speakers, and he's introduced by the actor and activist Ossie Davis.
Archival Ossie Davis: Bring to you the executive director of the March on Washington, the man who organized this whole thing, Mr. Bayard Rustin.

John D'Emilio: He's there in front of the Memorial with Dr. King and John Lewis and the other speakers.

Archival Bayard Rustin: Ladies and gentlemen. The first demand is that We have effective Civil Rights legislation. No compromise. No filibuster. And that it includes public accommodation, decent housing, integrated education, FAPC and the right to vote. What do you say.

Sally Helm: Typical for him, Rustin's speech is a list of practical demands but of course it's another speech that day is really remembered for. When Martin Luther King stands before 250,000 people and says, "I have a dream."

It's the largest demonstration in America up to that time. Its success belongs to all the people who made sacrifices to be there to prove that Civil Rights was a mass popular movement. One that wouldn't be denied, but Rustin deserves some personal credit to and another thing the march accomplished: it made him famous.

John D'Emilio: Besides the success of the March itself as an event, it also gives Rustin himself a level of visibility that he never had before, because the following week Life Magazine, which is a weekly magazine that circulates throughout the country during these years and that people all over the United States read, Byard Rustin, and A. Philip Randolph together are a full-page cover of the magazine.

Sally Helm: In a typical episode, we'd start to wrap things up here. We'd say that Byard Rustin lived 24 more years and had many more organizing successes. He spoke out against segregation, colonialism, nuclear proliferation. When he died in 1987 at the age of 75, he was hailed far and wide for his work.

But bear with us a moment longer. We want to tell you about an unusually warm April day in 1977. The day he found love.

Sally Helm: Tell me about the moment when you first encountered Bayard Rustin in New York on that corner, what happened?

Walter Naegle: We're talking 45 years ago last week.

Sally Helm: This is Walter Naegle again.

Walter Naegle: I was on my way to a newsstand in times square, where they sold out of town, newspapers and I was going there to pick up a San Francisco Chronicle. Wearing a
pair of white bell bottoms, which of course one never wears white before Labor Day, as we know, but I thought I looked pretty nice, to the degree that I've ever allowed myself to think that.

And I was just waiting on the corner. Turn to my side. And there was this very handsome, tall, distinguished looking very well dressed in a nice suit with a nice hat man, and he looked at me and we, you know, lightning struck. It was just the one of those moments.

**Sally Helm:** Wow. What do you mean? What did that feel like?

**Walter Naegle:** Well, I mean, it was exciting. I mean the physical type, obviously we're talking about that. We weren't standing on the corner talking philosophy, that came later of course, he had a wonderful smile, very engaging, very warm. Introduced himself. Very friendly.

And so, you know, what was not to like?

**Sally Helm:** What did the two of you talk about and connect over on that first date? Did you just walk off together on your first date right then and there from the street corner?

**Walter Naegle:** No, I went and got the newspaper. I was on a mission.

**Sally Helm:** Naegle wasn't buying the Chronicle on a whim. He was planning to move to San Francisco. He wanted to look at apartments, jobs—but that plan was about to change. His life was about to change.

**Walter Naegle:** What I loved about him most was his tremendous openness, his tremendous ability to relate to people at their level, whoever it was. Bayard was somebody that was very genuine, very sincere.

Very gentle and very loving. I know very often the public footage of him, you see him speaking at a demonstration, waving his arm or pointing his finger. And he comes across as is pretty fierce. But those people that really knew him and worked with him, knew him as someone who was very giving, very generous.

**Sally Helm:** Naegle and Rustin fall in love. They move in together and remained together until Reston's death a few days shy of the 24th anniversary of the March on Washington.

**Sally Helm:** I wonder like when Bayard did die, you know, you were grieving people around him were grieving, did you sort of feel his impact or legacy a new in any way at that moment after he had died?
Walter Naegle: I was probably a little surprised at the amount of attention that his death generated in the press and on the news. I was delighted. I was perfectly happy about it. But you know, it's kind of a weird feeling when you, when someone you love dies and you pick up the New York times the next day -- kind of the surreal kind of thing. But I felt that he certainly deserved that attention.

Sally Helm: The White House thought Bayard Rustin deserved attention, too.

Sally Helm: In 2013, quite recently, you accepted the presidential medal, the presidential medal of freedom on Bayard's behalf. It was posthumously awarded to him, partly because of this work and the March on Washington and the other work that he did. I'm curious what that was like for you to accept that award on his behalf.

Walter Naegle: It was very exciting. I have to admit I'm not somebody who was easily thrilled or easily excited, but it was important. It was important that Bayard be given the award because he, again, he had been somewhat marginalized. Dr. King, of course John Lewis they had all been given the Medal of Freedom and Bayard, who was the man that really made it happen again, had not been given one.

Sally Helm: What do you think he might have said if he had been able to accept that award?

Walter Naegle: He would have been very grateful, but he would have started talking about, well, what's the next step here? What do we need to do next to fulfill the promise of the March on Washington? Which, you know most of those promises have not all been fulfilled.

He would not rest on his laurels, if you will because he was somebody that believed that the struggle for equality is never a done deal. It's never a final victory.

You have to be vigilant, and you have to be ready to go back and continue the fight.

Sally Helm: When this story began, Bayard Rustin was in his mid-30s walking out of prison with little more than the clothes on his back. He’d been made to suffer for his race and for his beliefs many times by then, and for who he loved.

This story ends in 2013, when Rustin is posthumously awarded America’s highest civilian award. Accepting on his behalf is his long-term partner, Walter Nagle. And the man who hands him the award is the nation’s first Black president, Barack Obama.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to history this week for moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the history channel today.
If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410. We are reading and listening, and we’d really love to what from you, so please reach out. Special, thanks to our guests, Walter Naegle the current executor, a Bayard Rustin's estate, and his partner. And professor John D’emilio of the university of Chicago, Illinois.

[Archival of Bayard Rustin singing Ezekiel Saw the Wheel]

Remember, that’s Rustin himself singing – not bad! Thanks to Walter Naegle for sharing this rare recording.

This episode was produced by Morgan Givens sound designed by Brian flood and story edited by Jim O’Grady.

Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. History This Week is also produced by Julia Press and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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