

**Small Steps:
Bus Boycotts in the United States and South Africa, 1949-1954**

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Dukies Boycott; No One Cares

In 1949 threats of a bus boycott emerged in one of the unlikelyst of places. Duke Power Company, which ran the buses in cities across the North Carolina piedmont, raised the bus fare rate in eight cities across the region at midnight on the 15th of August. Durham was one of the cities that saw a fare hike. Students at Duke University had always received reduced rate fares to travel between Duke's Main and East Campuses. Duke had owned buses but found that an arrangement with the Durham Public Service Company was more efficient than having the university run its own operation. The company took control of the Duke buses and students were able to travel between campuses for five cents per trip. The fare for bus services in the rest of Durham was ten cents or one token per trip, with a reduced price of twenty-five cents for four tokens.¹

The reduced five cent rate remained in place even after the Duke Power Company bought out the Durham Public Service Company several years earlier. But before long Duke Power claimed that the bus service was not profitable, or at least not profitable enough. In public hearings Duke Power claimed that its return on investment was about one percent a year, though

¹ Robert L. Hazel, President, Men's Student Government Association, "Report On the Bus Rate Between Campuses," October 5, 1949. Duke University Archives, Order of Red Friars records, Box 1, Folder 19: "Project: Bus Boycott, 1949-1950."

when questioned by Durham's City Attorney the company's rate engineer admitted that in Durham the company received a five percent return on its investment. The company also claimed that it had lost money in the previous year.²

When students learned that the fare hike would affect the bus run between Duke's campuses Robert Hazel, President of Duke's Men's Student Government Association, met with university officials. Students and administrators agreed that they would try to get Duke Power to maintain the cheaper rate for students. The company considered the request "and were regretful that they could not comply."³

University officials and students looked into their legal options, including the possibility of pursuing action before the State Utilities Commission.⁴ That path proved fruitless. In a letter to six women, who apparently were students at the Woman's College on East Campus and had written letters to the Commission, an official explained, "We wish to advise that this matter has been discussed with the Duke Power Company and they have stated that it would be against their principle to furnish a lower fare over the route referred to in your letters than the fare in effect in other parts of Durham." Duke Power quite clearly revealed its leverage through the Commission, as the company "also stated that they will be perfectly willing to take their buses off this route and permit Duke University to operate its own buses between the two campuses." The Commission then washed its hands of the matter, suggesting "that further correspondence in this connection be

² Robert L. Hazel, President, Men's Student Government Association, "Report On the Bus Rate Between Campuses," October 5, 1949. Duke University Archives, Order of Red Friars records, Box 1, Folder 19: "Project: Bus Boycott, 1949-1950."

³ Robert L. Hazel, President, Men's Student Government Association, "Report On the Bus Rate Between Campuses," October 5, 1949. Duke University Archives, Order of Red Friars records, Box 1, Folder 19: "Project: Bus Boycott, 1949-1950."

⁴ Robert L. Hazel, President, Men's Student Government Association, "Report On the Bus Rate Between Campuses," October 5, 1949. Duke University Archives, Order of Red Friars records, Box 1, Folder 19: "Project: Bus Boycott, 1949-1950."

directed to the Duke Power Company or to officials of Duke University as we feel that this is a controversy to be determined by those two bodies rather than this Commission.”⁵

While motivated Duke students pursued remedies through official channels, they also looked to the path of direct action protest. After the rejection of their appeal to the North Carolina Utilities Commission students engaged in a boycott of the buses. The East and Main campuses are walkable, albeit not necessarily conveniently so and not for all students. Students thought that they might be able to apply pressure on the company. But their efforts failed. As did their attempts to follow up with Duke Power officials. Robert Hazel wrote company officials in Charlotte at the end of November. His letter revealed a sense of impotence in the face of a company that had little motivation to reverse course. “Although the boycott has been over for a number of weeks,” Hazel wrote, “I do not consider the matter closed.” He had not contacted the company “sooner because I thought it only right that you and the other Duke Power Company officials should have ample time to study this special case.” He held out hope that company officials would happily meet with him “or a group of student leaders,” and wanted to assure them that “I will cooperate in any way possible.”⁶ Hazel wrote the company again on January 1, 1950 and included another copy of the November letter that had received no response. “I am writing again only because I feel that my letter must have been misplaced somewhere between my office and yours.”⁷

Hazel’s letter almost surely had not been misplaced. He and the Duke students instead were coming to realize that Duke Power had all of the leverage and little motivation to revert fares

⁵ E. A. Hughes, Director, Motor Passenger Transportation, North Carolina Utilities Commission, to Misses Kitty Anne Ballard, E. Borden, Irimi Patton, Nancy Harlow, Sandy Trimmer, and Phoebe Bailey (with a copy also sent to Duke University President Dr. Hollis Edens), October 27, 1949. Duke University Archives, Order of Red Friars records, Box 1, Folder 19: “Project: Bus Boycott, 1949-1950.” The Woman’s College opened in 1930 on East Campus. Trinity College and the Woman’s College merged in 1932 to form the Trinity College of Arts and Sciences.

⁶ Robert L. Hazel to Mr. W. S. O’B. Robinson, November 28, 1949. Duke University Archives, Order of Red Friars records, Box 1, Folder 19: “Project: Bus Boycott, 1949-1950.”

⁷ Robert L. Hazel to Mr. W. S. O’B. Robinson, January 1, 1950. Duke University Archives, Order of Red Friars records, Box 1, Folder 19: “Project: Bus Boycott, 1949-1950.”

to the reduced rate Duke students had always paid. The students had boycotted but to no avail.

The short-lived and ultimately futile Durham Bus Boycott would at first blush appear to have little to do with those boycotts either in South Africa or those to come in the South in the coming years. But in fact the aborted boycott serves as a reminder of the ways in which public transportation can be important contested terrain for those who feel powerless. It also is a reminder that the powerful most often win such conflicts.

Tension Over Buses in South Africa: 1953

It is within these contexts that another wave of municipal bus boycotts took place in South African townships and quietly in Baton Rouge in Louisiana. In South Africa the themes of the boycotts, the demands of the boycotters, continued to be remarkably similar, consisting of protests against rising fares and the economic conditions that apartheid, like segregation before it, created. But the Baton Rouge bus boycott too was about economics and took on a similar tenor to those in South Africa even if it proved to be a more isolated incident than the succession of boycotts in South Africa.

In March 1953 a crowd of up to two thousand “Natives” impatiently waited in Sophiatown for buses to take them to work. The buses, as so often happened, were running late. When several buses finally appeared well after the scheduled eight o’clock arrival that morning members of the crowd harassed the drivers and threw stones at the buses, “smashing the windows and damaging the bodywork.” A thousand or so members of the crowd then marched off in the direction of Johannesburg, their ultimate destination. As they passed other buses running their regular routes they threw more stones in some cases forcing the drivers to escape through the crowd. Although a few of the stone throwers found their mark by hitting buses and drivers no

injuries were reported and seven buses took a total of £20 of damage. Six buses, which had the potential to carry approximately 800 passengers during five hours of the morning rush hour, had been the source of the delay. That afternoon, “Natives” marching through Newlands threw stones at trams carrying passengers to Johannesburg.⁸

Mr. J. Mtinkulu, who served as chairman of the native Tram Restoration Committee in Sophiatown had long advocated for the restoration of the Native tram service and the expansion of bus services in the township. Authorities had shut down the tram service in 1949 because Natives, “incited by certain agitators,” had boycotted it. Insufficient bus services had led to Africans having to line up in long queues and in many cases getting to work late and losing their jobs.⁹

Within a day Mr. M. L. Merry, General Manager of Transport for the “Tramway and Lighting Company” announced that the question of restoring the native tram service to Sophiatown had been under discussion for six months. “When the question was discussed six months ago the Natives concerned were insistent that the service should be operated by non-European drivers and conductors. Such a demand gives rise to many problems, and the committee decided to defer any decision for six months.” He assured that “The question” was “due to be reviewed by the committee soon.”¹⁰ The Sophiatown bus terminal remained quiet that day. A day after the chaos “the Natives queued in an orderly manner and the buses ran to time.”¹¹

Within a few weeks the Johannesburg City Council’s Tramways and Lighting Commission announced that it was considering reintroducing the Western Native Township tram service. Ironically that service had been discontinued after demonstrations following the raising of tram

⁸ *Star* (Johannesburg), 18 March 1953. The bulk of the material from this section is drawn from the invaluable “Clippings – Boycotts (Buses) 1953-1957” file in the Historical Papers of the University of the Witwatersrand’s William Cullen Library.

⁹ *Star* (Johannesburg), 18 March 1953.

¹⁰ *Star*, 19 March, 1953.

¹¹ *Star*, 19 March, 1953.

fares in 1949. But the trams would have to operate at a higher cost than the bus service, with which it would compete.¹² The effort may have thus represented window dressing but it also showed that protests, even in the form of ad hoc rock throwing, could provide a lever to shift public policy.

Even as Africans in Sophiatown challenged the transportation system, events in Durban revealed that these questions were not limited to the Witwatersrand. At the March annual conference of the Road Passenger Transport Association the chairman of the Durban Transport Management Board, Major J. Raftery, announced, “Non-Europeans should be employed on non-European transport services, and steps are being taken to this end.” Durban’s decision followed similar policy changes in several municipalities in other parts of the country and seems in large part to have been borne of practical motivations. Chief among these was cost. Put simply, it was cheaper to hire black drivers for black routes. In Germiston in the East Rand, for example, “the introduction of Non-European staffs on Non-European routes . . . had resulted in a saving of about 4d. a mile.” Mr. W. T. Lever, Germiston’s transport manager, concluded from this that “We should have the courage to say that non-European vehicles should be operated by non-Europeans, and the Government should see to it that these conditions are brought about as smoothly as possible.” Another observer, Mr. R. H. Howie of Benoni, also on the East Rand, “said that the time had come when non-Europeans wanted to be served by their own people.” In adhering to this principle, financial savings would follow. Many white trade unions opposed these decisions, but Lever thought their attitude to be “unfair. If an undertaking wanted to employ non-Europeans the Government should ensure that the men did not resort to strike action.”¹³

¹² *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 May, 1953.

¹³ *The Star*, 24 March, 1953. See also *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 March, 1953.

The unions were not prepared to concede the last word. But ironically, the stand of the South African Council of Transport Workers represented a dual-edged word. The union did not support the decision to hire non-European drivers. But if such decisions were inevitable, Mr. J. J. Venter, the president and secretary of the Municipal Transport Workers Union made clear that where non-Europeans did take jobs as drivers or in other areas he wanted to ensure equal pay for equal work. He advocated this stand not as a result of a commitment to equality, but rather because he recognized the possibility that non-European drivers would work at a lower price and thus drive out white workers. “If we cannot get protection from the Government we shall take such action as is necessary to meet this cheap labour threat.” Venter also criticized Howie’s assertions that non-Europeans wanted service from their own. “Why limit this only to conductors and drivers? If what Mr. Howie says is right, then the non-European transport service should be run by non-Europeans – managerial, clerical, supervisory and so on.”¹⁴ A question that Venter saw as biting *reductio ad absurdum* might have caused many Africans, including those inclined to boycott or stone buses, to wonder “why indeed?”

Just as price hikes provided the key motivation for many of South Africa’s bus boycotters, the possibility of saving money proved to propel transportation leaders to encourage black drivers on black routes. And in South Africa, anyway, there was clear recognition on the part of those putting forward such policies that the South African government had a responsibility to make sure things went smoothly. For these white leaders of South Africa’s transport sector the popular will of the African population also made good business sense. That it re-enforced segregated practices and did not challenge Apartheid must have made such decisions – decisions that would be a long

¹⁴ *The Star*, 25 March, 1953. Labor unions in the United States often walked similar tightropes to those in South Africa. As far back as the turn of the twentieth century, for example, the American Federation of Labor had opposed the employment of women in jobs that the union and its affiliates represented but also argued for equal pay when women were hired. Ideology tended to give way to self-interest in both the American and South African examples.

time in coming in most of Jim Crow America – all the easier. The bulk of township service in Johannesburg, for example, saw exclusively black drivers. In the words of one observer, “it would be impossible to operate the service on any other basis. The passengers would immediately resent the introduction of European drivers and do in fact show a resentment on the rare occasions when a European mechanic takes a bus out on a test.” Indeed, taking something of the bite out of Venter’s scenario, in Johannesburg’s Public Utility Transport Company (PUTCO), the third largest road transport business in South Africa, “all the junior administrative staff are Natives and Native cashiers handle all the money (to the tune of over £100, 000 in fares per month) until the moment when it is paid into the bank.”¹⁵ Flexibility was certainly possible for those who chose to exercise it even in an era when the letter of Apartheid law seemed increasingly rigid.

The Native Affairs department gave its imprimatur to the principle of employing Native drivers for buses serving Native areas.¹⁶ This led the executive of the Transvaal Municipal Association to gather to discuss the issue. Some speakers approved in principle while others argued “this was a sphere in which public bodies should go slowly, as there were great responsibilities involved both in relation to property and to human lives.” The organizers thus decided “to seek further information to find out to what extent the policy of the department conformed with the requirements of the Department of Labour.”¹⁷ Local authorities in South Africa and the United States would come to embrace the tactic of delay as an increasingly effective one in the face of demands for change.

As important as the question of employment was to the masses that used the buses, however, two other issues loomed even larger. The first of these issues, which overwhelmingly paralleled the concerns of urban blacks in the American South, was the simple question of service.

¹⁵ A. B. Hughes, “That Louis Botha Avenue Avalanche,” *Sunday Express*, May 1953.

¹⁶ *The Star*, 28 August 1953.

¹⁷ *The Star*, 29 August 1953.

In 1953 the Johannesburg Junior Chamber of Commerce – hardly a supporter of equality for South Africa’s black population – conducted a survey over the course of twelve months in Alexandra and the Western Native Townships that determined that natives who used the bus services spent more than three hours a day waiting for and riding on the buses. Many Alexandrans had to get up at 3 a. m. in order to get to work at their factories on time for their 7:00 shifts. It took an average time of one hour and forty-five minutes for these workers to get from their homes to the city. For some the time was two-and-a-half hours. The times were unchanged in the afternoons. This must have taken an enormous toll on the home lives and psyches of these workers, not to mention how these hours spent in queues and on buses must have left them even more exhausted than work would have already left them. These issues were not the concern of the Chamber of Commerce, however. Instead “the survey committee felt that such a long time spent in travelling to and from work could only have a harmful effect on the ability of the Natives in their daily work.” The survey also found “that there was not enough shelter for Natives in the queues at Alexandra during the rainy weather. It was felt that the incidence of tuberculosis had been increased at Alexandra because of this.”¹⁸ The Chamber of Commerce used these findings to advocate for their main constituency, namely the employers of Johannesburg, but the unintended consequence was clear for all to see and confirmed what the workers knew: using the buses was long, tedious, exhausting, and sometimes dangerous business.

PUTCO vigorously disputed the findings, arguing that Natives did not have to wait more than 35 minutes to catch buses and that travel time beyond that took no more than 35 more minutes.¹⁹ Of course it was in the parastatal’s interest to argue as much and to claim that the Junior Chamber’s findings, accumulated over a year of observation and investigation, were

¹⁸ *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 October 1953.

¹⁹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 October 1953.

inaccurate. This dispute inspired a journalist from the *Rand Daily Mail*, which had covered the dispute, to investigate the competing claims by both observing travelers in the Noord Street bus terminus and by interviewing passengers. The *Mail's* findings, which were the result of one day of observations at one terminal, jibed most closely with those of the Junior Chamber of Commerce.²⁰ The Junior Chamber had argued that it took one hour and forty-five minutes for the average trip between Alexandra and Johannesburg. The bus company argued that the travel time combined took no more than 70 minutes. The journalist determined that it took anything from one hour and ten minutes – a number that was the maximum limit PUTCO spokesmen were willing to concede – to more than 90 minutes and acknowledged waiting times of an hour. Accounting for the time that it took natives to get from their homes to the bus stops and the acknowledgement from both the Junior Chamber survey and the journalist that passengers faced a wide variation in waiting and travel times and it is clear that the implication from the Junior Chamber survey of the burden of bus travel for the black population holds, even if the intent of that survey was to protect employer rights and not to advocate for the African masses.

The problems that Africans faced in dealing with transportation issues represented a reflection of the difficulties in living within a closed white supremacist society. Yet the evergreen issue among those who relied on bus transportation to get them to and from the sources of their livelihoods remained the issue of fares. The service providers continued to insist that they needed to raise the cost of bus fares. The public who needed those services continued to insist that they could not afford what the company tried to claim were modest hikes but that in fact had real and deleterious consequences for people living so very precariously in a society in which Apartheid and poverty were inextricably bound.

²⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 October 1953.

In November 1953 PUTCO applied to the relevant local road transportation boards in the Johannesburg and Pretoria region to ask for “substantial increases in bus fares.” For example the proposed hikes would include raising fares from 4d to 7d on the Alexandra-Johannesburg trip and from 3d to 5d between the Sophiatown-Western Township and Johannesburg. PUTCO, whose authorities estimated that the company carried 62-million passengers annually, received subsidies from the government, which reduced the rates that Africans had to pay but which also meant that the company could not simply claim market forces as a justification for unilateral cost adjustments. And the possibility existed for the Minister of Transport to “authorize a subsidy from money derived under the Native Services Levy Act.” Indeed the government had done so rather than see PUTCO raise prices in 1951. The company argued that the current subsidy “was based on conditions that existed in March 1951 and was no longer realistic or adequate.”²¹ The PUTCO application went to the Local Road Transportation Board, which promptly referred the matter to the Department of Transportation in Pretoria “for cost investigation.”²² This investigation would include the ability of passengers to pay any hike.²³

The decision would not come until 1954. But in 1953 a bus boycott had played out in the United States. The contentious issue was the raising of fares, which revealed the inseparable ties between the politics of black resistance to white supremacy and the politics of subsistence in the United States, as in South Africa.

The 1953 Baton Rouge Bus Boycott

In 1953 black citizens of Baton Rouge undertook a bus protest that merged the issues of race and class in more familiar, direct, and substantial ways than had the students at Duke

²¹ *The Star*, 5 November 1953.

²² *The Star*, 13 November 1953.

²³ *The Star*, 6 March, 1953.

University. Their challenge to the system would not only bring together issues of subsistence and civil rights, it would provide a template for the Montgomery bus boycott.²⁴ As in any city in the South, segregation on the buses represented a daily reminder of the second-class status that black people faced daily. Memories abounded of those who challenged that segregation and faced the consequences. For example Black Baton Rouge residents long told of a young man who had challenged bus segregation in the early 1940s. He had refused to give up his seat to white people, who attacked him, chased him when he tried to get away, and beat him. Willis Reed, an important leader in the black community, believed that a driving force for resistance was “the policies, the attitudes of the policemen and the attitudes of the bus drivers. They were very un-courteous to people, they talked to them as if they were inhuman . . . and I would think that about eighty percent of the riders at that time were black people!”²⁵

In January 1953 the Baton Rouge City-Parish Council voted to raise the fares on municipal buses by 50%, from ten to fifteen cents per trip. As a City-Parish councilman from those years later explained, “The bus company was always struggling, and the city couldn’t afford to take it over.”²⁶ The bus company held a City-Parish-sanctioned monopoly, as in 1950 the bus company

²⁴ Much of what follows owes a great debt to the following: *The Louisiana Weekly*, an African-American newspaper published in New Orleans, particularly issues from June–August 1953; (LSU Library Special Exhibit, “The Baton Rouge Bus Boycott of 1953 . . . A Recaptured Past,” available at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/exhibits/boycott/> (accessed 3 October 2011); Louisiana Public Television, *Signpost to Freedom: The 1953 Baton Rouge Bus Boycott*, (2009); Theodore Judson Jemison, Sr., *The T. J. Jemison Story*, (Nashville: Townsend Press, 1994); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), pp. 17-25; Shannon Frystak, *Our Minds on Freedom: Women and the Struggle for Black Equality in Louisiana, 1924-1967* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), pp. 62-69; Christina Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking!’: The Baton Rouge Civil Rights Boycott of 1953,” *Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities*, Spring 2007, pp. 62-71; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976) pp. 365-366. For a historiographical perspective on the African American experience in Louisiana, see Charles Vincent, “‘Of Such Historical Importance . . .’: The African American Experience in Louisiana,” *Louisiana History*, Vol. 50, Spring 2009, pp. 138-158. See also Michael G. Wade, “Does Louisiana’s Past Have a Future?: The Challenge of the Present,” *Louisiana History*, Vol. 50, Spring 2009, pp. 389-406.

²⁵ Louisiana State University Libraries, Special Exhibits, “Baton Rouge Bus Boycott: The People,” <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/boycott/thepeople.html>, accessed July 23, 2009.

²⁶ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” p. 65.

had requested an exclusive contract for bus services in Baton Rouge. The Council acceded to the financially struggling bus company's request for privileged status and revoked the licenses of more than three-dozen independent black-owned buses with evocative names like "The Blue Goose Bus" and "Jelly Bean." The fare hike was an onerous one for many of the working-class Blacks who relied upon the buses to get them to and from their jobs, including masses of women who worked in the homes of Baton Rouge's middle-class white families.

Unlike in South Africa, however, where the buses that traveled from Township to City and back were practically by definition conveyances for the sole use of Africans, the buses in Baton Rouge had both black and white passengers and were segregated by race. Blacks would pay the same to ride the buses as whites, but as was customary throughout the region they filled the bus from the back while whites rode in the front half of the vehicle with the front ten seats reserved exclusively for whites. When the buses were crowded passengers stood, but if the white section was sparsely filled and the black section full black passengers still had to stand in their crowded area.

Reverend Theodore Judson Jemison, Sr. served as pastor of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the largest black church in Louisiana and a venue that would later be called "a building block for the Southern struggle for civil rights."²⁷ Jemison arrived in Baton Rouge with a bachelor's degree from Alabama State University and a master's degree from Virginia Union, both historically black schools, and he had done graduate work at New York University.²⁸ When he originally arrived in town Mt. Zion was a dilapidated wooden building. In 1953 the erection of a new church building had begun under Jemison's watch. He arrived to take over the church in 1949 and if he was still relatively new to the city and its politics he was no wallflower. His father had been president of

²⁷ Frank Etheridge, "Bus Stop," *Gambit Weekly*, June 17, 2003; Accessed at bestofneworleans.com, April 14, 2013.

²⁸ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 19.

the National Baptist Convention, the largest African American organization in the world. On February 11 at a meeting of the City-Parish Council Reverend T. J. Jemison stood up and denounced both the fare hike and the policy of segregated reserved seating. He would later write:

On numerous occasions, as I stood on East Boulevard watching the builders erect our church, the buses would pass by going into South Baton Rouge with hardly any whites on the bus. The Negro passengers would be standing up over empty seats which had to be reserved for whites by company policy. Many of the woman passengers on the buses were maids and cooks coming home from a hard day's labor. I thought this was wrong and unchristian and felt something had to be done about it. The Whites who rode the buses were those who had stores in the Negro community, or who worked there, and were therefore making a living from the black passengers who were riding the buses, exhausted from their day's work. This was a wrong that had to be corrected and I felt God had placed this responsibility on me.²⁹

Jemison noted a further irony. "The blacks going down into South Baton Rouge were forced to stand up over empty seats. They could put their bags, their bundles, in the seats, but they couldn't put their bodies."³⁰

Jemison's protest to the Council did not fall on deaf ears. Lewis Doherty had been elected to that body in 1952 when he was just 26 years old, and he recognized that there were "unequal facilities for black people as compared to white people and I was aware of that. At the time the law, the history and the culture were one of segregation. It was just something that was understood, not questioned."³¹ Apparently Doherty was not alone in his relatively enlightened views on the Council and the members of that body passed Ordinance 222, which mandated that blacks fill the bus from the back, whites from the front, all based on a first-come, first-served

²⁹ Jemison, *The T. J. Jemison Story*, p. 37.

³⁰ Louisiana State University Libraries, Special Exhibits, "Baton Rouge Bus Boycott: The People," accessed at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/boycott/thepeople.html>, accessed July 23, 2009.

³¹ Melton, "'We'll Keep Walking'," p. 65.

basis. The line of segregation would thus remain but would be flexible and based upon the composition of the ridership at any given time. The Council passed the ordinance unanimously and it would go into effect on March 19. Doherty believed that most of the Council agreed with his views about the buses. "I felt it was only fair where people had paid their fare and there were seats available, that they could sit down and take those seats."³² The African American newspaper *Louisiana Weekly* deemphasized the challenge to segregation, instead pointing out that the ordinance "was to prevent busses from being uneconomically loaded with reserved seats vacant and paying fares deprived of seating accommodations."³³

The fare hike would remain in place, as the Council agreed with the bus company that the costs of operation mandated a rise in fares. The segregation policy was clearly a racial issue. The fare hike was more complicated as it theoretically affected all passengers equally even though for the bulk of black passengers the five cents likely cut more deeply.

This softer and gentler if more expensive form of segregation may well have prevailed. But whatever the letter of the law, the white bus drivers by and large ignored it after the City-Parish Council issued a directive to the bus company and its drivers. After three months black leaders met with city officials to argue that the bus company must adhere the new policy. They left that meeting believing that drivers would be compelled to adhere to the laws. Reverend Jemison and B. J. Stanley, the head of the local branch of the NAACP, prepared and distributed fliers that explained the rights of black riders and told them how to address intransigent bus drivers and police officers.³⁴

Martha White, a 23-year-old housekeeper walked so many miles to the bus stop, stood so often on the bus, and was on her feet for so many hours for her job that, as she later remembered,

³² Melton, "'We'll Keep Walking,'" p. 68.

³³ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 27, 1953.

³⁴ Melton, "'We'll Keep Walking,'" p. 68; LPB *Signpost to Freedom*.

she “never knew what a chair looked like.” On June 13 “I was just wore out. Although black passengers were standing, there were “white” seats available toward the front of the bus, and she took one of them. She explained to the driver that she would give up her seat if a white person boarded. The driver told her to get out of the seat, at which point another woman, whom White identified only as “Pearl,” sat down beside her and announced to the other passengers and to the driver, “Everybody’s gonna stick together this morning. No one’s gonna get off the bus and we’re gonna stick together.”³⁵ Initially even some of the black passengers had “laughed and made a mockery of White” before realizing that a serious challenge was under way.³⁶

At this point the ever-vigilant Reverend Jemison, whom the *Louisiana Weekly* declared to be “this dauntless leader,” became involved.³⁷ He had been preparing to test the enforcement of the ordinance himself when he happened upon the incident on Martha White’s bus. Police were there in response to the driver’s summons and Jemison tapped a policeman on the shoulder. According to White Jemison said, “Now officer, you know you can’t do that,” and while the police officer relented, the driver removed Jemison from the bus. “I’ll never forget,” Jemison later recounted. “The bus company manager, H. D. Cauthen, came to the scene and told the driver, ‘Get back and drive the bus because the City Council passed an ordinance that said they could sit down there. I agree. Let them sit.’”³⁸

A day later the company suspended two drivers for ignoring the city ordinance. It seemed that Baton Rouge was prepared to go gently into compliance with something representing equality under a policy of separation on the city’s buses.

³⁵ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” pp. 68-69.

³⁶ Alexis Alexander, “Baton Rouge bus boycott,” *The Southern Digest*, online edition, February 25, 2005; See also Louisiana Public Broadcasting, *Signpost to Freedom*.

³⁷ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 27, 1953.

³⁸ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” pp. 69.

But then in response to the suspensions and incidents such as Jemison's, ninety-five bus drivers in Baton Rouge went on a strike on June 15 that lasted for four days. The *Louisiana Weekly* asserted, "This erstwhile placid and harmonious city where the status quo has never been challenged by mass action, was shocked by the sudden and unprecedented strike by bus drivers of the Baton Rouge Bus Company."³⁹ Drivers claimed to be looking out for the interests of white passengers, but they ended up facing considerable public backlash. An editorial in the Baton Rouge *State Times* argued, "The City Ordinance is an important step toward the betterment of race relations among the citizens of this community and should be given a fair chance to work." Letters to the editor overwhelmingly agreed. One reader worried, "This silly strike is sending Louisiana back to the days of King Cotton. This is a progressive state and I hope the company fires all the drivers who won't comply with the laws of the people." Another opined, "All Baton Rougeans who favor increased social fair play for Negroes will let it be known and back them up."⁴⁰ The bus drivers countered through their wives and children, many of whom marched on the parish courthouse on Wednesday, June 17, announcing that their families "were suffering because of the strike and urged the council to rescind the seating ordinance."⁴¹

On June 19, the Louisiana Attorney General Fred Leblanc declared Baton Rouge's new city ordinance illegal as it flew in the face of segregation laws.⁴² The bus drivers ended their strike, but bus company authorities and city officials could not breathe a sigh of relief. A new organization of blacks in the city, the United Defense League (UDL), met and organized a bus boycott. Jemison served as the new organization's president. Although the UDL was heavily

³⁹ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 27, 1953.

⁴⁰ *State Times*, **June ???** 1953. Also quoted in Melton, "'We'll Keep Walking'," pp. 69.

⁴¹ *State Times* June 17, 1953. See also Frystak, *Our Minds on Freedom*, pp. 64-65.

⁴² *Louisiana Weekly*, June 27, 1953; *New York Times*, June 21, 1953.

male-dominated, one woman, Fannie Washburn, a housewife active in the Voter's League, was the sole woman on the UDL executive board.⁴³

The UDL is best understood as having served to coordinate and direct the events of the boycott, but it did so within the context of the many churches and other organizations that saw themselves as being involved in the movement as well. The black churches served as the most important institutions in the city for conveying information, providing re-enforcement for the boycotters and funds for the larger effort. But the churches were not ideal for providing leadership, and the UDL could both coordinate and draw in considerable secular support that was beyond the reach of the churches. In the words of Aldon Morris, the UDL thus "became an organization of organizations."⁴⁴

Jemison and a local tailor, Raymond Scott, went on radio station WLCS at 11:30 on Thursday night to announce the bus boycott, asking blacks to avoid the buses and announcing a "Free ride" system of car pools and taxi services, which they called "Operation Free Car Lift," to ensure as little hardship as possible on those many blacks for whom using the buses was not a luxury but rather a necessity to allow them to go to work and otherwise live their lives. Jemison's church donated two thousand dollars early on in anticipation that the funds would support a potential boycott.⁴⁵ Jemison and Scott also asserted that the boycott would continue either until drivers recognized the recent ordinance or until "a franchise could be obtained for a Negro corporation to operate a bus system."⁴⁶ The boycott organizers managed to corral approximately

⁴³ Frystak, *Our Minds on Freedom*, p. 65.

⁴⁴ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, pp. 21-22.

⁴⁵ Jemison, *The T. J. Jemison Story*, p. 38.

⁴⁶ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 27, 1953.

125 cars and trucks “and everything that would roll” to assist in the Free Ride program, festooning the vehicles with signs to indicate their role in the city’s new transportation infrastructure.⁴⁷

Hazel Freeman, one of the boycott participants, noted about Jemison’s leadership, “We had a lot of powerful black people, but the others had not had the courage and the guts to come forward. Reverend Jemison came here a young man, very bold, and others joined him.”⁴⁸ Jemison had some freedom because of his role as leader of the largest and most economically stable church in the black community. He therefore was not dependent on whites for his or his church’s economic well-being. Prior to the boycott he had taken chances to advocate for members of his community. He took on the white proprietor of a candy store in the black community who was accused of “fondling” young black girls who entered his store. Jemison apparently threatened the store’s owner with bodily violence from “young tough blacks,” which served to be enough to get the man to close his store. On another occasion Jemison helped to provide land and a spacious home for a black family that crowded a mother, father, and nine children into one small room. Some within the community believed that Jemison must have had ulterior motives, including alleging that he must have kept the title to the home for his own future benefit, but when Jemison and his followers took out a full-page newspaper ad showing the title in the family’s name it curbed the criticism. “From that point,” Jemison recalled, the black community “had confidence” in his leadership and motives. “There were other incidents. Several of them. It was incidents like this that made people know that I was more or less for other people rather than for myself, and that I could be followed and that I could be trusted.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ LPB, *Signpost to Freedom*.

⁴⁸ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking,’” p. 68.

⁴⁹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 20.

It also helped rather than hurt Jemison that he was a relative newcomer to the city. Much as with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Montgomery a couple of years later, Jemison benefited from being unsullied by local factional rivalries. In Jemison's words,

I didn't have any conflict from others. And I was new in the community, more or less. I didn't come until forty-nine. So I didn't have any deep-seated problems with others, having been on this side or that side. I was a middle-of-the-road man. This is the same thing that happened in Montgomery. You had different ones there that had been leaders in that community. But King had just come.⁵⁰

In the words of Aldon Morris, "The lateness of Jemison's arrival thus enhanced his ability to unite the diverse segments of the community for sustained protest," as did the fact that he "became well integrated into community activities and belonged to a number of organizations."⁵¹

But if Jemison was by and large recognized as the movement's leader, he did not act alone. The many leaders of local churches provided considerable guidance and leadership. Without their ongoing support the boycott likely would have failed. The UDL augmented and coordinated the work of the churches and "promoted creativity, discouraged jealousies and rivalries, eliminated needless duplication of effort, and maximized group cohesiveness. In the words of Jemison, "No matter how the power structure and splinter white groups tried to tear us apart, we were able to maintain a united front . . . We were united."⁵²

Above all, the thousands of boycott participants did the real work, made significant sacrifices, and ran substantial risks. Dupuy Anderson, one of the Free Ride volunteer drivers, recognized that he was putting himself at risk by working with the boycotters. "You don't prepare to go to jail," [but] "when you are fighting for right and justice, you accept what ever goes along

⁵⁰ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, pp. 20-21.

⁵¹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 21.

⁵² Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, pp. 22.

with it.”⁵³ Furthermore, some white women picked up their maids and others whom they saw walking. Isadore Tansil, President of the Usher Board at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and a postal worker who therefore could not directly be involved with politics – though he did make donations – noted that this sort of support from some white community members “brought a lot of camaraderie for a lot of us.”⁵⁴

There was also a mass meeting that night, and as Martha White recalled, “The place was full, and they end up saying that nobody ride the next morning, and everybody leave that place that night knock on somebody’s door all night if it takes you. Don’t go home, knock on the people’s door and let ‘em know that no black people’s riding that bus next morning. And that’s what we done.”⁵⁵

The boycott began the next day and although early on there were a few black passengers who had not heard about the strike, by day’s end black ridership of city buses was zero.⁵⁶ That night Jemison’s Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which had earlier in the day seen the boycott’s first mass meeting to mobilize the community, received that least subtle of messages: burning crosses on the church lawn. Boycott participants knew that there were hardships ahead. Willie Spooner, Jr, a boycott supporter, noted years later, “It was a tremendous sacrifice for me because I was married, I was working on Terrace and Highland Road, so bus transportation was the only transportation that I had at that time. But we gave it up, my wife and I. We gave it up to try to make the bus boycott work.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Louisiana State University Libraries, Special Exhibits, “Baton Rouge Bus Boycott: The People,” accessed at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/boycott/thepeople.html>, accessed July 23, 2009.

⁵⁴ Louisiana State University Libraries, Special Exhibits, “Baton Rouge Bus Boycott: The People,” accessed at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/boycott/thepeople.html>, accessed July 23, 2009.

⁵⁵ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” pp. 70.

⁵⁶ Jemison, *The T. J. Jemison Story*, p. 39.

⁵⁷ Louisiana State University Libraries, Special Exhibits, “Baton Rouge Bus Boycott: The People,” accessed at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/boycott/thepeople.html>, accessed July 23, 2009.

Substantial support for the boycott was based largely just north of central Baton Rouge in the African American community of Scotlandville. Scotlandville included Southern University, a historically Black school that provided an intellectual and economic epicenter for local civil rights protest and contributed to statewide civil rights leadership and provided not only education, but also “social consciousness.” The area included a fairly substantial black middle class from which it drew much of its leadership, with a host of educated professionals, skilled tradesmen, teachers, ministers, professors and other university employers, and industrial workers, many of whom had union protections or worked for national corporations that provided more protection than did local employers. Esso-Standard Oil, based in New Jersey but providing “the backbone of the local economy” both employed and did business with many within the black community. Among these was Horatio Thompson, a prominent local businessman who owned several service stations and who was the first African American in the South to operate an Esso service station.⁵⁸

In subsequent days boycotters collected gas money for those operating car pools and held mass meetings at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, McKinley High School, and in a sign of the expanding popular appeal of the boycott, at Memorial Stadium.⁵⁹ Horatio Thompson sold gasoline at cost to those who maintained the car pools. “I couldn’t attend all the rallies and marches,” Thompson noted many years later, “But I wanted to support them. It was a heck of a sacrifice for me at the time.”⁶⁰ Mrs. Almenia Freeman drove one of the cars for the Free Ride system and would later remember, “I was available to get out and drive up and down the road, take people

⁵⁸ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” pp. 65-66; LPB *Signpost to Freedom*.

⁵⁹ Aldon Morris points out that Jemison’s church could only hold about 1,000 people, and that at the high school, “which normally seated about 1,200 . . . on those hot June nights, 2,500 to 3,000 people would wedge themselves into the auditorium, and according to Jemison they stood around the walls, sat on window sills, and occupied all available space.” Furthermore, “Bumper-to-bumper traffic en route to the mass meetings tied up the town of Baton Rouge.” Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 18.

⁶⁰ Lottie L. Joiner, “Baton Rouge Bus Boycott Paved Way for King’s Montgomery Effort,” *The Crisis*, July/August 2003, p. 7.

wherever they needed to go. It was like a daily job.”⁶¹ Women, who disproportionately relied on the buses to get to jobs as domestic workers, played vital roles throughout the course of the Baton Rouge boycott, providing the initial challenge, serving as drivers, attending meetings, and of course participating in the boycott through its duration.⁶²

According to Jemison, the leadership of the boycott also “closed all bars in the Negro community. In other words we patrolled all our sections in the city to insure order.”⁶³ But even the hard-core drinkers “didn’t seem to mind too much because their new role was to open up the car doors of movement participants as they arrived.”⁶⁴ This sense of comprehensive involvement in the boycott, even amongst those who may not have otherwise been politically inclined, proved essential.

Although the boycott was overwhelmingly peaceful, it was not an explicitly non-violent protest. Jemison had armed bodyguards. One of these bodyguards, Chester Laborde, told of his role many years after the events in 1953. “Jemison, he gave us some guns, told us to guard the house” while Jemison went about dealing with some of the business related to the boycott. “So we stayed there. Two policemen came by in a car and they saw us with the guns. I had the gun cocked on him. He told me to lower it. I didn’t hear him say that! Well, the policeman said, ‘I’ll have to take you uptown.’ So I went up” to the police station “with him. We was out there to shoot or be shot, too.” Jemison went to the police station to get Laborde, who had been held but not arrested. Bodyguards rode with Jemison on several occasions and kept watch over Jemison’s home and the church. Another bodyguard, Freddie Greene, who also served as Jemison’s driver, remembered

⁶¹ Louisiana State University Libraries, Special Exhibits, “Baton Rouge Bus Boycott: The People,” accessed at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/boycott/thepeople.html>, accessed July 23, 2009.

⁶² For the best treatment on the role of women in the Baton Rouge boycott see Frystak, *Our Minds Set on Freedom*, pp. 62-69, *passim*. See also Frystak, “Louisiana Women and the Black Struggle for Equality, 1924-1968” in Michael S. Martin, Ed., *Louisiana Beyond Black & White: New Interpretations of Twentieth-Century Race and Race Relations*, (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011), pp. 125-144.

⁶³ Jemison, *The T. J. Jemison Story*, p. 39.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 19.

that he would go into various businesses with Jemison and the proprietors or employees would slip envelopes full of money under the counter because the storekeepers and workers wanted to support the boycott but did not want to be seen visibly doing so.⁶⁵ In the wake of the Montgomery bus boycott and King's rise to prominence it is easy to paint the civil rights movement as wholly committed to nonviolent protest, but as Baton Rouge shows, such was never really the case.⁶⁶

On the morning of Saturday, June 19th there was a meeting between Baton Rouge's Mayor President, Jesse Webb, Jr., union representatives, the City Council, and representatives of the United Defense League, including Jemison. The Parish Attorney had called the meeting. But the union attorneys were out of town and therefore that group did not feel as if they were officially represented. That night the United Defense League held another mass meeting, which drew more than a thousand attendees. Jemison explained the lack of traction from that morning's summit meeting. The boycott would thus continue. Jemison explained that even with wholesale prices from Thompson and other black service station owners, gas was costing the boycott \$250 daily and so he called for an offering, which netted \$1,189.69. Officials decided that the free ride program would continue until either the Bus Drivers Union capitulated or else the bus company hired black drivers to replace them, or else the city allowed a franchise for a black owned and operated bus system. The next day reports came in that churches raised another \$2000.⁶⁷

Within four days the bus company manager reported that the boycott was 100% effective. "A continuation of this loss will ultimately mean we will have to cease operations."⁶⁸ The company was losing \$1600 a day, and soon the company was on the verge of collapse.⁶⁹ Word of

⁶⁵ Louisiana State University Libraries, Special Exhibits, "Baton Rouge Bus Boycott: The People," accessed at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/exhibits/boycott/thepeople.html>, accessed July 23, 2009.

⁶⁶ **Cite some of the literature on violence/self defense – Strain, Deacons for Defense, etc.**

⁶⁷ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 27, 1953. On fundraising for the boycott see Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, pp. 23-24.

⁶⁸ Melton, "'We'll Keep Walking,'" p. 70.

⁶⁹ *LPB Signpost to Freedom*.

the protest spread nationally too. In the words of historian Adam Fairclough, “The shear [sic] fact that they could boycott the buses for a week and do this in a very disciplined way was an example, and it showed that white supremacy was something that was simply not going to be accepted by black people in the South. Change was in the air. A revelation in consciousness was evolving.”⁷⁰

The boycott promoted backlash beyond the striking bus drivers. Both city council members and boycott leaders received death threats. Johnnie Jones, who had been serving as the lawyer for the boycotters, was driving across railroad tracks when two cars tried to trap him when a train was approaching.⁷¹ The situation may have become more volatile had the boycott continued much longer.

Within days, on June 23rd, Reverend Jemison called off the boycott and ended the free ride program after long negotiations between city leaders and the boycott organizers, though divisions within the black community meant that many were outraged and some even continued to avoid the buses. The UDL executive voted 5-3 to end the boycott.⁷² At a meeting at the city’s Municipal Stadium more than 7,000 African Americans gathered in hot and humid conditions. A vote of the rank and file supported the decision to end the boycott, but it was far from unanimous. Many of them wanted to continue with the boycott, shouting: “We don’t have to ride the buses!”; “There is nothing wrong with our feet!”; “We’ll keep walking!” Some wanted to protest against Reverend Jemison because, in the words of Hazel Freeman, they were “ready for change [. . .] could see a change coming and this was the beginning of it.”⁷³

In the end, as part of the compromise the City-Parish Council passed Ordinance 251 declaring that with the exception of the front and back rows of the buses, still reserved for white

⁷⁰ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” p. 70.

⁷¹ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” p. 70.

⁷² Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 24.

⁷³ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” p. 63.

and black passengers respectively, open seating would prevail in between. Though the City-Parish Council's new law represented a modest victory for the boycotters, the maintenance of token Jim Crow revealed that for many white southerners the symbolism of Jim Crow still mattered even if its realities were fading. As the *Louisiana Weekly* surmised, "Apparently the compromise law was enough to end the strike, but it does not end the Negroes' desire for the right to sit where they please on the buses."⁷⁴ Jemison promised that the UDL would file suit over any form of segregation on the city's buses, and he kept that promise later that summer.⁷⁵

Jemison's largely unilateral decision came as a shock even to many members of the UDL leadership, but it was not an arbitrary one. In the words of one writer who has studied the boycott, "It would seem that Jemison and the United Defense League had the upper hand. But, what was the next step? At the time the boycott's leaders had no roadmap laid out before them and no way to judge the white community's response to a full-fledged challenge to segregation."⁷⁶

Still, many in the black community were angry and frustrated and feared that Jemison had sold them out. Willis Reed believed that there was great promise in continuing the boycott and he especially did not like the way Jemison simply went forward with a compromise. "They should have at least consulted us before stopping the boycott. That's what they should have done but didn't."⁷⁷ Over the years Reed, who would go on to serve as editor, owner, and sole proprietor of the free weekly African American the *Baton Rouge Post*, has developed some bitterness about the way the boycott played out, and about Jemison's outsized role in the telling of the tale. "People often attempt to position themselves as leaders in the black community, but they're not real leaders." As the 50th anniversary of the boycott approached, Reed would insist that he had in fact

⁷⁴ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 27, 1953.

⁷⁵ *Louisiana Weekly*, August 15, 1953.

⁷⁶ Melton, "'We'll Keep Walking,'" p. 70.

⁷⁷ Melton, "'We'll Keep Walking,'" p. 70.

been the driving force behind the boycott in his position as head of the First Ward Voters League, which he had founded in 1952, “months and months” before the establishment of Jemison’s UDL. Reed argues that the Voters League held the first mass meeting to protest segregated bus seating and that the first meeting took place illegally at all-black Capital High School, a gathering that the school principal forbade. At 50th anniversary events in 2003 the First Ward Voters League held several events to try to “set the record straight.”⁷⁸

Jemison graciously refused to enter the fray about Reed’s assertions. “I’m not going to comment on what he said about me and the bus boycott. It’s too late in my life now to be contradictory. Willis Reed was a member of my church. He’s a good man, and did a lot of good for the people, and I won’t say anything to take that all away from him now.”⁷⁹ Boycott lawyer Johnnie Jones, however, would not be so reticent. “Willis Reed’s contention is wrong. He’s tried to convince me of his side for years, and it’s simply not true. The concept of the boycott may have originated with the First Ward Voters League. But talk didn’t start it. The boycott started when Reverend Jemison decided to ride the bus in the face of segregation. He did the same thing Rosa Parks did, and like her, he started the boycott.”⁸⁰

Whatever the truths of the origins of the Baton Rouge Bus Boycott – and it seems pretty clear that Jones is right in defending Jemison, but that Reed may well have a point in wanting to remind people of the role of the First Ward Voters League in the larger struggle for civil rights in Baton Rouge – its conclusion has continued to be a point of controversy as the years have passed. Horatio Thompson, who would continue to build on his business holdings by becoming a significant force in North Baton Rouge real estate, tempered his frustrations. While he believed

⁷⁸ Etheridge, “Bus Stop.”

⁷⁹ Etheridge, “Bus Stop.”

⁸⁰ Etheridge, “Bus Stop.”

that the boycott “wasn’t what it should have been,” he also acknowledged, “but during that time that was about all you could get.”⁸¹

Jemison certainly recognized the criticisms and even would later acknowledge that maybe his own professional ambitions played a role. “I didn’t go to the end in desegregation. I stayed on the side where I could become president of the National Baptist Convention,” which he later did, following in his father’s footsteps. “I wasn’t trying to end segregation. We started the boycott simply to get seats for the people, and once we accomplished that what else was there for us to get?”⁸² Contrasting his decision with that of Martin Luther King and the boycotters in Montgomery a few years later, Jemison would say, “King accomplished so much for people; as his good friend, I supported and backed him the whole way. But I chose to stay focused on the church, not the whole country.”⁸³

Historian Douglas Brinkley has looked at Baton Rouge through the lens of what later took place in Montgomery after Rosa Parks set that epochal event in motion. “I think” Jemison “capitulated too soon.”

But look, Jemison did try to get a group of people with different attitudes all together to take on the authorities. That’s not an easy task. Are people right to be frustrated and feel more could have been done? Of course. But let’s not lose sight of his role in history. He was somebody who had the courage to stand up, and don’t kid yourself, he was putting his life on the line and he deserves to be treated as one of the great heroes of the Civil Rights Movement, not somebody who failed, but somebody who won because he was willing to try.⁸⁴

A further reality is that nearly all of the criticism of Jemison has appeared in the last decade or so, decades after the original boycott, and only after the successes of the Civil Rights Movement have in the light of hindsight come to seem inevitable. In reality, the events in Baton

⁸¹ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” p. 70.

⁸² Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” p. 70.

⁸³ Etheridge, “Bus Stop.”

⁸⁴ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” p. 70.

Rouge were nearly unprecedented. It seems unfair to criticize Jemison too harshly for not doing more when he went farther than anyone else had ever gone.

The situation on the buses would occasionally still flare up. Because of the passage of Ordinance 251 District Court Judge Charley Holcombe dismissed a case that Jemison's organization had brought. And for some blacks that symbolic segregation still grated. But even the UDL lawyer Johnnie Jones, who had just been admitted to the Louisiana bar, knew that the legal case was a virtual non-starter. Jemison wanted to pursue the case in state rather than federal court because, according to Jones, "he didn't want to alienate the powers that be." But the reality was that, "The state court could not deal with what the federal court did, because state law was based on Plessy v. Ferguson, and the state's interpretation of that ruling was Jim Crow." Therefore when Holcombe "ruled against us on no right of cause of action" it "was the correct decision." We could have won in federal court on my arguments, but not in state court." When Jones admitted that it was the right decision for that court to make, he received a great deal of grief. "The black community was outraged with me. They called me a sell-out and said stuff like 'don't let the hungry dog guard the bones,' meaning I was too young and inexperienced to handle it. But later on, in the later cases, when they found out I was right, everybody loved me." In telling this story, the octogenarian Jones punctuated his comments with a laugh.⁸⁵ Meanwhile in October, 1953, Joe Howard was arrested when he sat next to a white man on one of the front seats. The arrest did not lead to a new boycott but rather revealed that the buses continued to represent a source of racial tension as long as any form of segregation prevailed.

The Baton Rouge Bus Boycott thus represents a clear (if incomplete) victory over segregation in public transportation. The boycott over racial separation took precedent over the fare hikes. In the United States segregation was incomplete. Blacks and whites rode the same city

⁸⁵ Etheridge, "Bus Stop."

buses and occupied the same public spaces despite what might have been the ultimate fantasies of some segregationists. By contrast in South Africa Apartheid, both petty and grand, continued to take greater hold with each passing act of Parliament and created a far more holistically segregated society. But even in South Africa segregation could not be total if for no reason other than that the need of black labour outstripped the fantasies of apartheid's architects. Indeed, had white South Africans not needed Native workers there would have been no bus boycotts. The situation in Baton Rouge and other southern cities was similar, especially with regard to the desires of the white middle class to utilize black domestic workers, but the South African example was an *in extremis* version of this phenomenon.

Hazel Freeman, looking back on the boycott from the vantage point of several decades, believed that the boycott had tremendous impact on the psyche of the city's black community, the members of which could:

. . . See themselves organizing and bringing about things that they had held within them and were afraid to say. And they felt free and open to be able to express themselves. Just imagine people, when they see a change coming and knowing, 'we are part of bringing it about,' and that felt good! Can you imagine that? Can you imagine that?⁸⁶

The editors of the *Louisiana Weekly* were in a celebratory mood in the days after the boycott ended. "The courageous and united stand by the citizens of Baton Rouge in the recent bus dispute was indeed inspirational and heart warming to all with fighting hearts throughout the state." The paper tied the growing political consciousness of black Baton Rouge to its economic empowerment. "We now have bigger incomes and are now a factor to be considered in the political life of any community." With regard to the buses, blacks in Baton Rouge "are paying for service that they are not getting. It just doesn't make sense to be the largest group riding the bus

⁸⁶ Melton, "'We'll Keep Walking,'" p. 71.

not to be treated fairly, especially when its [sic] their money that is largely responsible for the successful operation of the bus company.” This economic power was crucial. “We have come of age now. We have money to spend, invest and expect to be treated as human beings. Certainly we don’t expect to be pushed around any longer as second class citizens.” And the lesson should not have applied just to the capital city. “The sooner more communities in Louisiana learn the lesson of unity that was displayed in Baton Rouge by its stalwart citizenry the quicker we will get the respect of those who previously have saw [sic] fit to ignore us as human beings and deny our group first-class citizenship.”⁸⁷

There was victory in Baton Rouge and that victory did not prove ephemeral. Not only did an incomplete but real chipping away at segregation take place, but the Baton Rouge boycott also helped to reveal the power of mass meetings in black churches, it helped to reveal the capacity for religious leaders to shape opposition to white supremacy, and it showed that the black community would put their money and time into desegregation efforts. Martin Luther King, Jr. would contact Reverend Jemison in 1955 to try to pick his brain about how Baton Rouge had approached their boycott. Indeed, Jemison would be one of the founding officers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that emerged as the result of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.⁸⁸ King was not the only impressed observer in Montgomery and across the country. Rosa Parks told her biographer Douglass Brinkley, “She was completely captivated by what happened in Baton Rouge. She was part of the underground civil rights circuit in the South. They were all in awe” of the bus boycott in Baton Rouge.⁸⁹

But King’s phone call to Jemison would come in the future. During the strike Jemison had referred to the struggle in Baton Rouge as part of an “onward march of a people who desire to be

⁸⁷ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 27, 1953.

⁸⁸ Jemison, *The T. J. Jemison Story*, p. 39-41.

⁸⁹ Melton, “‘We’ll Keep Walking’,” p. 63. **Cite Brinkley’s Rosa Parks book?**

totally free.”⁹⁰ But for the time being Baton Rouge stood as something of a lone symbol about what might be accomplished, but not necessarily of what must come to pass.

Setting the Table: Bus Boycotts in the Witwatersrand in 1954

In early 1954 PUTCO made yet another push to raise fares on ten bus routes traveling between the city and Alexandra, Sophiatown, and the Western Native Township. The justifications were familiar to anyone who had been down this road before. The fares and government subsidies were not, according to an official for the bus company. The costs of operating the buses had increased, according to Mr. G. E. Frith, PUTCO’s operating manager, by £124,128 from 1951 to 1953, which amounted to 2.8d a mile. The Alexander Standholders’ Protection and Vigilantes’ Association, represented by Oliver Tambo, raised objections to the proposed hikes. Tambo argued that passengers could not afford the unjustifiable fare increase and that they already had to cut back on things like food to pay for transportation costs as it was.⁹¹

Soon after PUTCO announced its plans the Alexandra branch of the African National Congress held a mass meeting in which they passed a resolution objecting to the proposed increase. “We are convinced that transport charges in relation to the African’s wages are beyond the capacity of the African to pay. Therefore, viewing this increase in bus fares as another economic strangulation of the African workers, this meeting resolves never to pay any increase whatever in bus fares as long as the present discriminatory wage determination policy of the South African Government and the subordination of the African to the European moneyed interests persists.”⁹² The ANC and the Alexandrans they mobilized quite clearly saw the connection

⁹⁰ LPB *Signpost to Freedom*.

⁹¹ *The Star*, 12 January, 1954.

⁹² *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 January 1954.

between the economic plight they faced and Apartheid. Other meetings followed with promises of a boycott of the buses if the Road Transportation Board granted the fare increase.⁹³

By 1954 PUTCO carried more than six million passengers monthly on 300 diesel-fueled buses, which were more efficient and economical than the petrol-fueled buses that the company used in the mid-1940s.⁹⁴ There were certainly rising expenses that went with running so many buses on so many routes. But in a five-year period ridership had risen dramatically. In 1948-1949 PUTCO buses had carried 30,751,000 passengers. In 1953-1954 they carried 71,581,000. These increases had caused the company to order thirteen new buses that could seat 83 persons each. The new buses were 36-feet long, six feet longer than Transvaal ordinances allowed, so PUTCO had to receive special exemptions from both the Provincial government and the Johannesburg Traffic Department.⁹⁵

Indecision reigned for nearly five months with no decision from the Local Road Transportation Board.⁹⁶ And just as had happened the previous year stories began to appear in the press reporting the length and arduousness of the daily commutes for those who relied on the buses and trains to take them from township to city, city to township with estimates ranging up to five hours for the daily trip. One man, Alvin Gala from Kliptown who worked as a painter, left his home at 4:45 in the morning each day and took a half hour to walk to the closest bus stop to his home. He usually had to wait for about fifteen minutes for his bus to arrive and take him on a half hour trip to the train station at Nancefield where he had to queue for tickets and get to the platform, a process that took another half hour. If he caught the 6:30 train he would arrive at Johannesburg Station at 7:15. The walk to his job, which began at 7:45, took about ten minutes, so

⁹³ *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 January 1954.

⁹⁴ Transportation and Travel Supplement of the *Sunday Express*, 15 August 1954.

⁹⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 October 1954.

⁹⁶ *The Star*, 21 April 1954.

he had time to spare, assuming that all went well before that and he was able to catch the 6:30 train.⁹⁷ Transportation continued to represent a source of misery for Africans independent of fares, with the extended transportation times a function of Apartheid residential demands.

In May officials from the National Transport Commission announced a plan that would spare natives “the hardship of a rise in fares” while allowing PUTCO to avoid losing money. Recognizing that “the prospect of increased fares caused consternation among Natives,” the NTC decided to develop “a formula to increase the State subsidy as an alternative to” higher fares. G. E. Frith declared that PUTCO was “satisfied with the new arrangement ‘under the circumstances’.”⁹⁸

The second half of the year saw a wave of bus boycotts in the Witwatersrand that South African officials were unable to avoid. The first and briefest of these took place in Evaton township, south and west of Johannesburg and north of Sebokeng, on the 25th of August. That morning the first bus to leave Evaton arrived at the No. 1 stop with a full load, stranding all eight people waiting for the next bus to arrive. When it did, there were only five passengers aboard but the eight refused to enter it, instead asking to speak to a representative of the bus company. They also were able to convince the five passengers on the bus to debark and join their impromptu protest.⁹⁹

By the time Mr. H. Zimmerman of the bus company arrived “almost the whole bus-travelling population of Evaton had gathered at the stop.” Zimmerman summoned an empty bus for the disgruntled locals but they refused to board, causing the temporary halt of bus service to and from Evaton. At that point Zimmerman began negotiations with J. S. P. Molefi, joint secretary of the “Evaton People’s Transport Council.” They were able to hammer out a new bus timetable

⁹⁷ *The Star*, 22 March 1954.

⁹⁸ *The Star*, 10 May 1954.

⁹⁹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 August 1954.

that was to take effect the next day, pending approval of the Road Transportation Board.

Zimmerman was shocked by the protest. “We have had letters of complaint, but we did not expect the boycott to-day.”¹⁰⁰

Molefi recognized that the brief but successful protest might have ramifications for its participants. “Many Africans were not at work today,” he said. “I hope their employers will understand that it was in an attempt to improve the bus service, and thus cut down future late arrival, that they did it. Everything will be all right now.”¹⁰¹ The boycott in Evaton showed that even within the context of Apartheid locals who relied upon the buses held power inasmuch as the bus companies also relied upon them. In this case, anyway, the protest was a success. The next bus-related incidents would not be settled so easily. Or so quickly.

Residents in Evaton were outraged by overcrowded conditions. Those in Brakpan on the East Rand in late October and well into November brought bus services to a standstill over the issue of who should drive the buses. On 22 October the “non-European transport system . . . came to a complete standstill . . . when Natives living in the location refused to use municipal buses unless the Town Council employed non-European drivers.” When bus drivers arrived at the gates of Brakpan’s township they were met by a crowd of picketers. Some of the protesters had written slogans such as “No Buses” and “African Drivers” on the walls of the bus depot offices and the protesters prevented people from boarding the buses. Eventually police arrived along with municipal officials. The officials tried to speak to the assembled and boisterous crowd but when they did the crowd chanted “We want African drivers!” The protesters remained peaceful and

¹⁰⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 August 1954.

¹⁰¹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 August 1954.

promised to continue to do so, but they also promised that they would not ride the buses until “non-Europeans replaced the European drivers.”¹⁰²

Pickers remained at the bus stops throughout the day and “a long stream of Native men and women walked to town, a distance of about three miles.” Protesters also picketed at the gates leading from the location to the municipal beer hall and “persuaded residents not to patronize the beer hall as a protest against the recent increases in rents in the location.” Thus the bus protest quickly expanded to a protest in large part against the very conditions Apartheid had created. The municipality, meanwhile, chose to shut down bus services until they could broker a resolution. The local advisory board called an emergency meeting that evening and municipal officials listened to complaints from residents. The Town Council had already decided to introduce “Native drivers on the non-European bus service” but they wanted to do so gradually. They expected the policy to go into effect soon.¹⁰³

But whatever the intention of the Town Council and other municipal authorities, they did not implement any demonstrable changes in policy right away and so the protests continued. Protesters continued to gather at the gates of the township early in the morning in order to meet the first buses that arrived and left virtually empty. The protests at the beer hall continued as well in hopes of preventing people from either drinking at the hall or bringing beer home. The October 1 increase in house rentals proved to be inextricably bound with the bus protests, at least initially. The ANC held local meetings, which stood in stark contrast to meetings that the town council committee called but “abandoned” when they could not achieve a quorum.¹⁰⁴

Perhaps white bureaucrats and bus company officials thought they could outlast the protesters. Or maybe the wheels of change turned quickly. But the residents of Brakpan’s

¹⁰² *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 October 1954.

¹⁰³ *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 October 1954.

¹⁰⁴ *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 October 1954.

township held firm as nearly three weeks passed. Hundreds of people walked to and from their homes daily and those who had the means or the connections took taxis. In mid-November the Town Council acquiesced to the demands of the protesters. Europeans would no longer drive the routes that led into and out of the township and instead “non-Europeans” would take their place.¹⁰⁵ Yet again a coordinated effort on the part of black South Africans had proven successful. In Brakpan concrete goals and internal discipline led to a concrete victory in the form of black drivers on black routes. In the larger context this was a small victory, but a small victory it was.

The last, most extensive, and most protracted of the bus protests in South Africa in the latter part of 1954 took place in Kliptown, the oldest residential district in Soweto. In just a few months Kliptown would take its place in South African history as the site of the gathering of the Congress of the People, which passed the Freedom Charter. The bus protests of November 1954 may well have helped to fuel a culture of direct-action protest. The Kliptown boycott had its roots in the familiar grievance against higher bus fares. And the boycotters were able to pit components of the transportation infrastructure against one another as the protesters utilized the trains even as they avoided the buses.

On November 1 approximately 4,000 residents of Kliptown refused to use the bus services and instead took the trains from Kliptown and Nancefield Stations to get to Johannesburg, some 13 miles away. The protest came about because the Kliptown Bus Committee and the Coloured Community Bus Service could not come to agreement over a fare hike that went into effect the day the residents began boycotting the buses. According to Arthur Davids of the Kliptown Bus Committee tickets valid from Monday morning to 2:00 on Saturday afternoons had gone up by 6d to a total cost of 9 shillings. On Saturday afternoon the fare became a substantial 1s 6 d. This hit industrial workers, especially those from the garment industry especially hard because of

¹⁰⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 November 1954.

considerable overtime” available at that time of the year. And so regular bus patrons chose to walk several miles to the train stations or to take feeder buses that another company operated to the stations to catch trains to Johannesburg. Train fares ran 6s 11 d per week.¹⁰⁶

Arthur Davids, whose organization advocated for the riders, argued that employers should “make some sort of provision for the transport of their workers.” The bus company countered that “the impression created by Mr. Davids’s report was not quite correct” and that bus services operated on a weekly rate and on a daily rate and that the weekly rate was valid up to midnight on Saturday (it is unclear if by this he literally meant until midnight on Saturday or if he meant through midnight Sunday).¹⁰⁷

Within a day the buses were virtually empty running to and from Kliptown. More than 6,000 Indians, Natives, and Coloureds (the largest group) participated in the boycotts and according to Davids, “The Kliptown bus boycott is now virtually 100 per cent.” Tellingly, protesters in Kliptown and Evaton had also begun communicating in anticipation of the omnipresent threat of possible fare hikes in Evaton.¹⁰⁸

The boycott lasted for four weeks. It endured through rain.¹⁰⁹ It endured through police harassment, though on occasion the police showed up and arrested picketers for applying pressure “enforcing the boycott,” which indicated that without the coercive presence of some of the more assertive protesters there might not have been quite as much unanimity in support of the boycotts. Police also detained some individuals for throwing stones at buses.¹¹⁰ The Kliptown Bus Committee held mass meetings to coordinate plans and likely to maintain morale as well as to

¹⁰⁶ *The Star*, 1 November 1954.

¹⁰⁷ *The Star*, 1 November 1954.

¹⁰⁸ *The Star*, 2 November 1954; *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 November 1954.

¹⁰⁹ *The Star*, 3 November 1954.

¹¹⁰ *The Star*, 3 November 1954; *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 November 1954.

provide a coherent and unified message.¹¹¹ Supporters of the Kliptown boycott also hoped to garner support in the form of sympathy boycotts from neighboring “locations.”¹¹² There is little sign that these pleas proved effective. Bus boycotts still tended to be locally focused and somewhat reactive though in time such outreach efforts would bear fruit.

Yet again in the end the protesters won the day. It took nearly a full month to reach a conclusion, but after a meeting between the bus company management and the Kliptown Bus Committee Arthur Davids was able to announce that the dispute had been settled. Following the meeting “application was made” to the Local Road Transportation Board “for the fares to be changed” back to something approximating what they had been before the boycott commenced. The fare reverted to 8s. 6d. for the weekly fare through midnight Saturday. The increased rate for daily weekend travel, however, would remain. Not only did the protesters win a substantial (if not complete) victory on the issue of fares, they also wrung some extra concessions from the bus company, including “the provision of a later bus, an improvement of bus upholstery, and more convenient timetable,” according to Davids.¹¹³

Conclusion

The boycotts in Durham and Baton Rouge and many of those in South Africa involved the issue of fares, at least in part, reinforcing the linkages between socioeconomic and racial issues in societies where the one tends to follow closely on the heels of the other. If in the Baton Rouge example boycotters more explicitly connected the line between economics and race it was only because circumstances allowed the boycott leaders to link those issues effectively. But in South Africa protesters took on myriad issues and generally won either complete victory or received the

¹¹¹ *The Star*, 5 November 1954.

¹¹² *The Star*, 8 November 1954.

¹¹³ *The Star*, 30 November 1954.

lion's share of what they demanded. Within a matter of months bus boycotts would go from being ancillary protests to being front-page news in both countries. The intermittent incidents from 1948 to 1954 had set the stage for epochal events to come.

In a letter to the *Louisiana Weekly* in December 1953, J. Clarke posed the rhetorical question, "Where else in all the world except here and South Africa, does such racial discrimination and racial segregation exist?" Clarke posited, "Racial segregation is the father of racial discrimination, and racial discrimination carries the plain implication of racial superiority, which is rejected by men of good will everywhere as absurd."¹¹⁴ In neither country in 1953 and 1954 were there enough such people of good will to counter racial segregation and its cruel offspring.

¹¹⁴ *Louisiana Weekly*, December 26, 1953.