



COLLECTING INNOVATION TODAY

THE HENRY FORD - CURATOR INTERVIEWS

TRANSCRIPT OF A VIDEO ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW WITH

DONNA BRADEN ON ROSA PARKS

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THE HENRY FORD,

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BARRY HURD:

00:01:06:00 All right, tell, tell us where we are and why this bus is one of the most famous...

DONNA BRADEN:

00:01:08:00 Okay.

BARRY HURD:

00:01:09:00 ...busses in history.

DONNA BRADEN:

00:01:09:00 We're at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. We're inside the *With Liberty and Justice for All* Exhibition. This is a very famous bus, we sometimes refer to it as the Rosa Parks bus. Some people say that this bus is where the civil rights moment started.

00:01:25:00 On December 1st, 1955, this is the bus where Rosa Parks, who was a seamstress in a local department store in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to stand up when she was told to make room for a white passenger that was getting on the bus. And that set off a huge change in the way that people thought about things.

BARRY HURD:

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So tell us about where you are and how they would set the bus up between colored and white, back in Montgomery.

DONNA BRADEN:

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So we're sitting inside the so-called Rosa Parks bus. I'm actually sitting in the very seat that she was sitting back in 1955. The way it was set up in Montgomery is there were ten official seats for white passengers in the front, and then in the very back, more like benches, there were about ten seats for African American.

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And then there were 16 seats in the middle. And what happened in the middle is that the first people onto the bus could sit there. But for African Americans, if white people, white passengers came in, they had to move back. So they might keep moving back, or depending on the bus driver, they might be told to go to the very back. And if there weren't enough seats back there, they had to stand.

BARRY HURD:

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Okay, so you're Rosa, you're sitting there, tell us what

happened. Some white people got on the bus, and then what happened?

DONNA BRADEN:

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When Rosa got on the bus, she sat in this first row behind the official white passengers' seats. But as more and more people came on the bus, eventually a white passenger came on and wanted to sit in this row, behind the white passenger rows were all full. So the bus driver told the, now four, African American passengers in this first row to move back. And the three other ones, three other people did get up and move back, but Rosa decided that she'd had enough at that point, and she just stayed where she was.

BARRY HURD:

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Now, at the time, did she know she was going to be the spark of this Civil Rights Movement that happened?

DONNA BRADEN:

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No, of course, she didn't know that she would be sparking a whole movement at the time. She did know that she was taking a big risk by doing this. She knew that there

were a lot of bad things that could happen to her and her family. She didn't know any of that. She just, all she knew was she'd had enough, and she was going to just make a stand right there on that bus.

BARRY HURD:

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She was also kind of prepared for this moment, because of where she worked. Tell us about that.

DONNA BRADEN:

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She was prepared to, she didn't know at the time [what] she was going to do. I mean, it wasn't premeditated. It was just a spontaneous action at the time. But she had quite a bit of background and experience with sort of the emerging civil rights kind of activities that were going on.

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She was involved with the NAACP. She had some training in civil rights action. She had some experience trying to register to vote, and each time she would get experience like that, it would help her know what the risks were, what kinds of, what her choices were.

BARRY HURD:

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Okay, well, she refused to stand up, so that was gonna cause something to happen. So what happened and how did that sort of become the trip wire that led to what we now call the Civil Rights Movement?

DONNA BRADEN:

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Well, there's many stories about what actually happened right at that moment. One of them, one of the stories is that the bus driver said, "You need to get up." And they had a short conversation, probably not a friendly one. And he finally said, "Well, I'm going to have to get you, have you arrested if you don't get up, because the law is that you have to get up, according to our laws of the segregation on this bus." And she said, "You may do that." And so everybody waited, and the police came and did arrest her.

DONNA BRADEN:

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So she was arrested and taken to the police department. And while she was there, fairly soon after that, some of her civil rights and activist friends showed up. Some of the

leaders of the NAACP, of the local chapter, and another woman, who was very invol[ved], and actually wanted to make a test case of the bus desegregation, came by and asked whether she would be willing to be the example made of somebody taking a stand on a bus, about segregation.

BARRY HURD:

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Okay, and this led to a boycott, the famous boycott. What's the story of that?

DONNA BRADEN:

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So she said, "Yes, you may make an example of me." And that stunned everyone, because Rosa Parks would never do something like that, that would be against rules, against laws. She was very easy going, very serene, very, you know, respectful of laws. And it just made everyone's eyes open at that.

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And the fact that she was willing to have this become an example to be made, helped her friends, her activist and civil rights friends, be able to start what was then called,

became called the Bus Boycott, the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Within a couple of days, they organized this boycott around Rosa Parks' example.

BARRY HURD:

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And then who was the leader of the boycott, and how long did it last? And just tell me some things. That was a famous time in history that really kicked off, it was the first actually big, successful, peaceful protest of the Civil Rights Movement, I think, wasn't it?

DONNA BRADEN:

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Yes. There were actually a couple of people that helped get that really going and made it successful. And at this point, Rosa Parks has moved kind of into the background. So, one of the people was Jo Ann Robinson, who was a local school teacher at a college who had really wanted to make an example and inspire African Americans in the community to take a stand against this segregation.

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So, she really had an agenda. And started printing leaflets right away and started handing them out to the local

community. Another group of people that became very involved in this right away were the local ministers. The African American community looked up to their local ministers and a number of ministers got together and started meeting.

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The one that became the most famous was Martin Luther King, who was actually fairly unknown, very young, kind of new to the area. But he was asked whether he would lead a group in doing this, and he, at the beginning was a little bit reluctant.

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But, he stepped up and ended up being so inspiring, such a good orator; really was very interested in nonviolent protest and used this as an example to make a bigger issue about this. And really turned it into a debate, a conflict between justice and injustice, rather than just a debate, something a conflict, between blacks and whites. And people understood that, really got into that bigger point that he was making.

BARRY HURD:

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Okay, tell me, how long did the boycott last, and what was the final resolution of this whole confrontational deal, the segregation laws?

DONNA BRADEN:

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Well, amazingly, the boycott lasted more than a year, 381 days. And while people looked up to their ministers, it was really the people themselves that made the biggest difference. The people, who before this time had left activism and actually making a stand, and [left] doing something active to the politicians, to the members of the NAACP, they let their political leaders and their religious leaders do what needed to be done. And they just kind of ignored it, and figured it didn't really, there wasn't anything that they themselves could do. But with Rosa, inspired by Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, it just really spurred them into action and really inspired them.

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And they're the people who made it all possible. They basically knew each other. They would get together and

call on each other for rides, or they would walk to work, or the taxi cab drivers would pick up people, people would share carpools.

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And they made it such a successful boycott that the bus company had to take notice. I mean, about three-fourths of the people that took busses were African Americans. And all of a sudden, if none of those people are on the bus, what is the bus company going to do? They have to start worrying about that.

BARRY HURD:

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Rosa Parks is really considered the mother of the Civil Rights Movement, but, what's interesting is just this one little action started this whole..., she really wasn't planning this at all. I mean, what do you think of that whole thing, can one person really make this huge change in society, although they're not planning to do it?

DONNA BRADEN:

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Well, what's interesting is at the time, and for many years, almost decades after that, she didn't really get a lot of

credit, other people wanted to take more credit; white people in town wanted to blame her for all the problems. But it's really been over time and fairly recently, that people have realized that it can be the unsung heroes, the quiet people, the people who might just do one thing that spark a big thing that really get a lot of credit.

BARRY HURD:

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We think of innovators being people who've built a machine or a process, but this was really sort of a process of social innovation that she started, wasn't it?

DONNA BRADEN:

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Well, and I think of social innovation as opposed to technological innovation as more about ideas, or ways of thinking about things. And to really call it an innovation, I would think that the idea or the way of thinking about things, bringing something new into a group of people, a community, a society, has to have a very large impact.

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And I would say that is something that she did. Of course, she would've never thought that at the time. But when we

think about it now, it changed the way people think about themselves, or at the time thought about themselves, their community, other people they had dealings with, and the whole world really. It made old ways obsolete. And people thought about new ways of doing things. And it's something, that today that impact is still with us.

BARRY HURD:

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I guess one of the lessons here is that you should stand up for what you believe in, because you might help a large group of people stand up for what they believe in, right?

DONNA BRADEN:

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There are a lot of risks involved in that, certainly she had not a real happy life after she did that. But, she knew what she was doing, and in retrospect certainly, she would've never changed what she did. A lot of people are not willing to take risks like that. But it can be worth it, yes.

BARRY HURD:

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Let me ask you this, we're obviously here at the museum. You have the bus. How did you get a hold of this bus?

DONNA BRADEN:

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This bus has a long story of ownership. But, it did come up at auction. The descendants of the original owner of the person who bought the bus from the bus company in the 1970s, they wanted to sell it. And it came up for auction. We had to make sure this was the real bus. For years and years and years, there was no real documentation that anybody could find.

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There were just family stories that this was the real bus. But it was in the man's back yard. He had taken out, stripped the inside, and thrown away all the seats. The bus was really just a shell that he stored things in. And people weren't sure they could believe the ownership story or not.

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An auction house found a scrapbook by a bus station manager who had saved and collected, and put together a number of articles about the bus boycott from that era. And on one of the pages, which was right when the Rosa Parks incident happened, he wrote down the actual

number of the actual bus and the name Blake, who was the name of the bus driver.

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And that was compared with the number of this bus, and they did match up. But still, there was a question about whether that had been faked. And so, forensics expert looked at the paper and the handwriting, and decided that it was all authentic. And that was how we knew that this was really the bus. So, it was auctioned off, and we managed to be the highest bidders in 2001. That was how we got this bus.

BARRY HURD:

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And of course, the people coming to the museum, it's all been restored. 'Cause when you got it, it must have been in disrepair, right?

DONNA BRADEN:

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There was a little bit of controversy and discussion about that. Why didn't we keep it the way it was when it was in the guy's back yard? Well, it had bullet holes in it. It was a shell, a hulking, rusting shell. And we felt that we didn't

want people to think that's how it looked during or right after the Rosa Parks story.

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It really wasn't connected with her story or the bus boycott at all. It had taken on a whole other quality and aura to it. And so the decision was made to restore it to look as much as possible like the bus did during that time when Rosa Parks sat in the seat and refused to get up.

BARRY HURD:

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And what else, if I came out here and walked, or what else is [in] the exhibit other than the bus, that people can see?

DONNA BRADEN:

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Liberty and Justice for All is divided into four sections, and it's about different American freedom movements, social movements, from the Revolutionary War era to the Civil War. We talk about women's suffrage, and then the section where the bus is, is about the Civil Rights Movement.

BARRY HURD:

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Okay, the final question, and this is a surprise question.

Did Rosa Parks ever come here after the bus was back?
Or was it, she died in 2005, I think, right?

DONNA BRADEN:

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Okay. When we first acquired the bus and brought it here, it was actually before it was restored. Rosa Parks was invited here for a party, and I do remember her showing up. I think it was on all the TV channels. It was big news, because Rosa Parks lived here in Detroit for many years.

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And is beloved here in Detroit, as well as, you know, down south. So, I do remember that she was quite frail. I think she had been ill, but it was quite amazing that she had actually made it here to this party. So there was a wonderful celebration of her and I remember a big smile on her face.