Interview by Donald T. Ferron

Interviewed at his home on a Saturday afternoon, King recounts the bus boycott's history following the arrests of Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks, explains the MIA's negotiations with city and bus officials, and reflects on the potential for nonviolent racial reform in Mississippi.

DATE: February 4, 1956
TIME: 1:30–3:45
PLACE: 309 S Jackson Street

Interviewer: . . . I would like to know how all of this came about.
Respondent: "Mrs. P. arrest was a precipitating factor rather than causal. There have been a series of incidents." When Miss Colving was arrested a "boycott was threatened." "We went down and talked with the bus officials" and "promises" were made. "We waited for policy and it never came." ¹

Interviewer: Was the bus company threatened with a "boycott" as such?
Respondent: "I don't remember whether the word "boycott" was used."

(phone 15 minutes)

Interviewer: I am interested in negotiations. . . . how they came about and what happened during the meetings?
Respondent: "I would say that the first negotiation took place about 5 days after the boycott. It was called by the Alabama Council on Human Relations. It served as a mediating committee. We met in the City Commissioner's room. We had a committee of about 10 men which met with the city officials. Atty. Gray set forth our grievances, and told them why we were off the buses. We told them the 3 proposals in that meeting. We discussed it pro and con. We were fighting for our position. Bus officials said it could not be done under the law. We said it could . . . under the law. Finally, the mayor decided to appoint a smaller group of 4 to see if we couldn't come to an agreement. The lawyer for the bus company was very recalcitrant about Negro drivers, and said 'first come first served' was out of their domain. All of this was on the same day. They finally saw that we weren't going to give in. "It ended in a stalemate. All attempts at settlement were ended; nothing concrete was affirmed." ²

In the second meeting, the mayor appointed a committee of whites to confer

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¹ King refers to the arrest on 2 March 1955 of Claudette Colvin (see Jo Ann Robinson to W. A. Gayle, 21 May 1954).
² For the MIA proposals, see King to the National City Lines, Inc., 8 December 1955, pp. 80–81 in this volume.
with our group. I think we had six or seven, maybe eight. The mayor said that he was appointing a cross-section of the white citizenry of Montgomery. On this committee he appointed two men whom we knew were rabid segregationists. One was a white businessman—Ingalls, an attorney—who was a member of the white Citizens Councils; the other was Rev. Frazer—a known pro-segregationist. I wondered then why he would appoint such people whose attitudes were definitely anti-Negro. But we went on with the meeting. Mr. G. Totin was present; we invited him down. He was brainwashed with the Mayor. He just echoed what Crenshaw had said earlier. The committee was dismissed at 11:00. The Mayor did the same thing that day—he decided to make the group smaller. Seven from each group (bus officials and M.I.A.) stayed over for 1/2 hr. for “mediation”. Somebody made the motion that we stop the boycott and negotiate without its pressure. They voted solid for; the Negroes voted solid against.” It was decided to postpone that meeting until three days later.³

“The third meeting was just a confirmation of the last meetings. I started out that the proposal of seating be accepted. Rev. Frazer offered a substitute motion—buses be divided on the basis of patronage in the various areas /i.e./ the relative number of patrons on the various lines, and that signs be placed separating the sections. There was a heated discussion. I told the presiding officer that he may as well dismiss the meeting because the whites were here with preconceived notions.⁴ Finally we decided to dismiss the meeting. I think Ingalls made the motion. They (Dr. Parker was chairman, presiding officer) were to have called another meeting, but it never was.⁵ We had decided that we wouldn’t go anyway. The only other meeting we had was with the bus company then to accept our seatings proposal. That was the last time we had any meeting or contact with them at any time.”

Interviewer: Suppose the second proposal had been granted, what about your third demand, drivers—would you have gone back to the buses?

Respondent: “If they had accepted this proposal, the City Commissioners said

³. This meeting occurred on 17 December 1956. King refers to Luther Ingalls, chair of the Central Alabama Citizens Council; G. Stanley Frazer, pastor of St. James Methodist Church; Kenneth E. Totten, vice president of National City Lines, Inc.; and Jack Crenshaw, an attorney who represented the bus company in Montgomery. Ingalls did not attend the meeting, and King challenged his presence on the mayor’s committee at the following meeting on 19 December (see “Committee Fails to Reach Settlement in Bus Boycott” and “Mayor’s Committee Stalls in Hunt for Transit Truce,” Montgomery Advertiser, 18 and 20 December 1955).

⁴. This meeting occurred on 19 December 1956. On that occasion King objected to Ingalls’s involvement in the negotiations. Claiming that some of the white members brought “preconceived ideas” to the discussion, King moved for adjournment. Several whites countered that King held preconceived notions of his own. King later recalled, “For a moment it appeared that I was alone. Nobody came to my rescue, until suddenly Ralph Abernathy was on the floor in my defense. He insisted that I spoke for the whole Negro delegation. . . . As he continued, one could see obvious disappointment on the faces of the white committee members. By trying to convince the Negroes that I was the main obstacle to a solution they had hoped to divide us among ourselves. But Ralph’s statement left no doubt” (“Mayor’s Committee Stalls in Hunt for Transit Truce,” Montgomery Advertiser, 20 December 1955; and Stride Toward Freedom, p. 120).

⁵. King refers to Henry Parker, pastor of Montgomery’s other First Baptist Church; Ralph Abernathy was pastor of a predominantly black church with the same name.
that they (city) had nothing to do with the third proposal.” . . . it would be up to
the bus company. Respondent stands up and peers out of the window, saying “I
thought somebody was putting something on the porch”

Interviewer: When did you hear about Mrs. P. arrest?

Respondent: “I heard about it on Friday, the next day. I was called . . . ” I can
give “no names up to Monday (day of first mass meeting) because the City Com-
missoners said they would indict /the leaders/ on the basis of the anti-boycott
law. I don’t like to use the word ‘boycott’, because “boycott gives the connotation
that we’re placing an economic squeeze on an enterprise. It’s more in the lines
of non-cooperation. The economic factor is just incidental. The fact that it hurts
the company economically is just incidental; this is a movement of passive resis-
tance to a system that has perpetuated for so many years.”

Interviewer: To what do you attribute the relative inactivity of the police at the
downtown car pools?

Respondent: “There are probably two or three factors: 1) it didn’t break down
the transportation system.” They couldn’t “frighten the folk”, 2) “the court in-
junction—maybe.”

Interviewer: Have you or has anyone in the Association contacted the
Governor?

Respondents: (Hesitates)—”I’ve talked with the Governor twice . . . he came
down once. I promised him I wouldn’t say anything” about his part in this. “He
promised us protection and said he would talk to the Mayor.” He is very “liberal”
and “sympathetic with our cause.” He wants the reappportioning bill to go
through because it would provide for “more senators and representatives from
North Alabama” who are “in accord with his views”.

Interviewer: How effective do you think this sort of movement would be in
Mississippi?

Respondent: “It wouldn’t work! I’m for “peaceful evolution” rather than
“damaging revolution.” If you’ve noticed, when a chicken’s head is cut off, it
struggles most when it’s about to die. Somebody told me that a whale puts up its
biggest fight after it has been harpooned. It’s the same thing with the Southern
white man. Maybe its good to shed a little blood. What needs to be done is for a
couple of those white men to lose some blood; then the Federal Government will
step in. No matter how they feel, they respect the law. Legislation (is an) effective
weapon.

6. As part of the federal lawsuit filed by Fred Gray and Charles Langford, the NAACP and the MIA
asked the federal court to enjoin the city of Montgomery from violating the protesters’ civil rights.
The injunction was not granted.

1959. On King’s meeting with Folsom, see Cliff Mackay, “Ala. Bus Boycotters Sing ‘My Country ‘Tis of
Thee,’” Baltimore Afro-American, 11 February 1956.

8. In Stride Toward Freedom, p. 88, King attributed similar statements to a member of his congrega-
tion: “It would be to our advantage to ‘kill off’ eight or ten white people. ‘This is the only language
these white folks will understand. . . . If we fail to do this they will think we’re afraid. We must show
them we’re not afraid any longer.’ Besides, he thought, if a few white persons were killed the federal
government would inevitably intervene and this, he was certain, would benefit us.”
Came to Montgomery in 1954. Called to the Church on March 1. Came once a month until September 1954 when he came for full time.

Organizations:
President—Montgomery Improvement Association
Vice President—Montgomery Branch of Alabama Council
Executive Board of NAACP

9. King was vice president of the Montgomery branch of the Alabama Council for Human Relations.

From Julian O. Grayson

4 February 1956
Washington, D.C.

Crozer classmate Grayson wires King after the bombing, likening him to an Old Testament prophet.

DR M L KING
309 SOUTH JACKSON ST MONTGOMERY ALA

FIGHT ON AMOS GOD IS WITH YOU

J O GRAYSON

PWSr. MLKP-MBU: Box 91.

1. Julian O. Grayson (1916–) was born in Alexandria, Virginia. A World War II veteran, he received his B.A. (1947) from Virginia Union and M.Div. (1950) from Crozer Theological Seminary. After serving as a Methodist minister (1952–1957), Grayson was ordained an elder in the Methodist Church. The churches and charges to which he ministered included Carrol Chapel (1955), Chicamuxen (1957–1960), and the Colesville Circuit (1964–1966), all in Maryland.

From Milton Britton

[5 February 1956]
Roxbury, Mass.

This letter of support came from a member of Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury, where King had occasionally served as a guest preacher while a student in Boston.