

"Treading the Tightrope of Jim Crow"

Born on February 4, 1913 in Tuskegee, AL, Rosa Parks was raised by her mother and grandparents in Pine Level, Alabama. Her grandfather supported the Garvey movement and, when Klan violence escalated after World War I, would sit out on the porch with his shotgun to protect the family home. A 6-year-old Rosa would sometimes sit vigil with him. Rosa McCauley was a shy young woman but she had a feisty side, picking up a brick when a white bully threatened her and her brother and pushing back when a white boy pushed her. Her grandmother worried about her granddaughter's determined spirit and her ways of "talking biggety to white folks". An older Rosa Parks recounted how her grandmother grew very angry when a young Rosa told her about the brick incident and worried for her safety. Rosa told her grandmother: "I would rather be lynched than live to be mistreated than not be allowed to say 'I don't like it.'"

Rosa Parks framed the power of speaking back as fundamental. Full personhood required the option "to say 'I don't like it,'" and key to the functioning of white supremacy was shutting down the right and space to assert this. Nonetheless, Parks' "determination never to accept it, even if it must be endured" led her to "search for a way of working for freedom and first class citizenship."

Related primary source: [Early childhood incidents and experiences and family, Parks' recollections.](#) Library of Congress, courtesy of Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development.