

Reverend Robert Graetz: White Foot Soldier in the Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

This paper traces the race relations awakening of Robert Graetz and his journey as a pastor who came to minister to an all-Black congregation in Montgomery. While most people know the names of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, few know the role that Reverend Graetz played.

Keywords

Civil Rights Movement, Fred Gray, Martin Luther King, Jr., Montgomery Bus Boycott, Robert Graetz, Rosa Parks

1. Introduction

While most people are familiar with the leading figures of the Civil Rights Movement, few know the remarkable life story of Reverend Robert Graetz. Rev. Graetz worked alongside Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and he was not only there during pivotal moments of the Civil Rights Movement but he admits he was one of the agitators in his book, *A White Preachers' Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Graetz, 1998). Graetz received a call to service by coming to Montgomery, Alabama from the Lutheran Church officials who requested that he serve a Black Congregation (Gjelten, 2020). This paper highlights the contributions made by Reverend Robert Graetz in the interracial organizing of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and his pastoral leadership in the community during this critical time-frame. Certainly, the primary leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and in particular of the Montgomery Bus Boycott were Black Americans who called themselves “foot soldiers” in the movement which was a term of common usage in the 1950s and 1960s. These “foot soldiers” took a frontline role in the marches, sit-ins, voter registration drives, and civil rights activities such as the bus boycott. As Reverend Robert Graetz was a White man, he can then be labelled a “White Foot Soldier” in

this historical movement. As a Source-and-Method Note for the Reader, the sources used in this paper center on the personal memoirs and biographies of Robert Graetz and Rosa Parks, as well as court cases, and media news accounts on the notable players in the Civil Rights Movement.

2. In the Middle of Trouble

While in Ohio, Rev. Graetz and his wife, Jennie, were known activists speaking out on civil rights issues so Lutheran Church administrators specifically asked him to focus on his pastoral duties and not start any trouble in Alabama (Graetz, 2006). His wife Jennie Graetz, in an interview given to a news reporter, wryly stated that her husband never started any trouble in Montgomery but was compelled to join the trouble there (Moon, 2005). Graetz was moved to join his Black parishioners as they were affected by the discrimination, insults, and indignities they experienced when taking bus transportation to their jobs, doctor appointments, shopping trips, and other necessary excursions. These Black citizens of Montgomery heavily depended on bus transportation as their primary means of moving about the city (Gjelten, 2020).

3. Indignities of Riding the Montgomery Bus

Graetz (1998) pointed out in his book that Black bus riders were required to pay their fare at the front of the bus, then they had to exit the bus, and reboard at the back of the bus. All the seats in the front of the bus were denied to Blacks as they were White-only seats. Even walking down the bus aisle, after paying the fare, to get to the back of the bus was considered an insult to the few White citizens who sat in the front. It was common practice for a bus driver to suddenly pull away with a laugh leaving the Black passenger behind, minus their money, and minus a bus ride to work. Sometimes a few Black passengers would have managed to enter the bus but inevitably some were left behind. Complaining to the Montgomery Bus Company and to Montgomery City officials would fall on deaf ears. Having enough fare to pay for several bus rides was essential if you did not want to take the risk of being left behind by a bus driver after paying a fare and having to take a long hot dusty walk to work. Rev. Graetz said he felt compelled to break his promise to his Lutheran Church officials as he listened in horror to the stories of his Black congregants and their stories of their interactions with the city of Montgomery bus drivers (Graetz, 1998).

These Black folk did not respond in kind to the abuses they suffered as they well understood that showing disrespect or defiance to a White Montgomery bus driver could result in death. When told to relinquish a seat, when the White bus section was filled, a Black man, Black woman, or Black child would obediently move further to the back of the bus to find another seat and if none were available, then they stood for the duration of the ride to their destination. There was no accepted notion of “first come, first served” as Black people knew that White people, regardless of when they got on the bus, must be given a seat, even if an ancient and

arthritic Black woman with a bent back and walking cane had to stand swaying as the bus lurched along. Paying your fare, if you were Black entitled you to a bus ride, but you might have to stand while a White person always got a seat. That was a given.

4. The Murder of a Black WW II Veteran on a Montgomery Bus

These Black folk in Montgomery knew better than to try to buck the system. They well remembered Private Thomas Edward Brooks who had been murdered by a White Montgomery Police Officer (Graetz, 1998). On August 20, 1950, this World War II veteran was dressed in his army uniform and on the last day of his life, he boarded a Montgomery bus. Told he must pay at the front then exit the bus to reboard at the back, Private Brooks refused the directive of the bus driver. When ordered to get off the bus by the bus driver, Private Brooks demanded his bus fare back and the argument escalated into violence. The White Montgomery Police Officer that responded to aid the White bus driver, ended the life of Private Brooks by shooting him in the back that August day. The murder was ruled a “justifiable homicide” noted Rev. Graetz (Graetz, 1998) in his book. Yet, it was clearly the murder of an unarmed Black man who was treated with gross disrespect for refusing the directive of the White bus driver to disembark the bus after paying his fare only to reboard at the back of the bus. What was the harm in being allowed to walk down the bus aisle to the back of the bus? Private Brooks was a WWII veteran who had risked his life in war numerous times for all Americans, including White Montgomery bus drivers, the White Montgomery City Mayor, all the White Montgomery City officials, and all the citizens both White and Black of Alabama, and the entire United States. Private Brooks had agreed to leave the bus only if his bus fare was returned to him, which was a reasonable request yet the outraged White bus driver escalated the argument into physical violence. What were the last mortal thoughts of Private Thomas Edward Brooks on that hot August day in 1950?

5. Trouble Brewing

For years, complaints had been registered with the Montgomery Bus Company and with city officials to no avail (Graetz, 1998). The Women’s Political Council (WPC) had been threatening a bus boycott for years but it was an empty threat as the Black populace depended on those buses for their livelihood. In 1946, an English Professor at Alabama State College had organized the WPC and in 1955 another ASU faculty person, Mrs. Jo Ann Robinson, had taken up the threats. Rev. Graetz worked with Mrs. Robinson on the Montgomery Council on Human Relations (MCHR). This group was composed of courageous Blacks and Whites who met regularly for their meetings to discuss how to improve race relations. The police would monitor who attended the meetings of MCHR as they would congregate outside the building and take down license plate numbers and write the names of persons going in to attend the meetings in order to intimidate them.

Small acts of unity could lead to trouble as Graetz (1998) pointed out in his book that the Governor of Alabama caused a number of activist professors at Alabama State College to be fired.

On Saturday, December 3, 1955, Rev. Graetz (Graetz, 1998) was told by another Lutheran minister that a Black woman had been arrested due to her refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Rev. Graetz had only been living in Montgomery for 6 months at this time but he was determined to assist his Black parishioners and other Black citizens as best he could. He decided to call his friend and neighbor, Mrs. Rosa Parks, to ask her if she knew the identity of the arrested woman thinking she probably heard the story on the Black grapevine. Rev. Graetz expressed his shock in his book, as he recounted hearing the mild mannered and soft-spoken, Mrs. Rosa Parks, admit that she was the one who had refused to yield her bus seat as all the White seats had been taken (Graetz, 1998).

6. Mrs. Rosa Parks: She Started the Trouble

Mrs. Rosa Parks admitted that on Dec. 1, 1955, she was very tired having put in long hours at her job sewing clothing at the Montgomery Fair Department Store (Parks & Reed, 2017). It was the Christmas season and the workload was heavy. Carrying several packages, she boarded the bus, paid her fare, then exited the bus, and reboarded at the back of the bus. Mrs. Parks had been resting her feet when she was requested to relinquish the seat to a White person as all the White seats at the front were full and Mrs. Parks said, “No” in her soft voice. Tired from her long day and tired from a long life full of demeaning experiences, the tiny woman with the most polite manners simply said, “No.” Rosa Louise McCulley Parks was born on February 4, 1913 and on December 1, 1955, this 42 year old Black woman took a courageous stance with a single word (Parks & Reed, 2017). By her courageous act, Rosa Parks ignited the Montgomery Bus Boycott on that day, December 1, 1955.

Mrs. Rosa Parks admitted that the bus driver who gave her the directive on Dec. 1, 1955 was the same man who in 1943 had pulled away from the curb after she had paid her fare as she was left standing outside the bus at the rear entrance waiting to reboard the bus (Parks & Reed, 2017). James F. Blake, was that man who 12 years earlier had left her waiting on the curb for the rear bus door to open. She never forgot his face, his name, or that experience as it was seared in her memory. This was the same man who shouted at her to relinquish her seat to a White man on December 1, 1955, even though she had been sitting in a designated Black seat. The tiny seamstress had swollen feet, her fingers ached from a long day of sewing as a tailor’s assistant, and her soft voice uttered a word that had been bubbling in her brain for most of her 42 years of life as she stated in her memoirs. Rosa Parks was married to a man, named Raymond Parks, who had been an active supporter of the “Scottsboro Boys” who had been wrongfully convicted of raping two White women in 1931. This was a couple who were involved in the NAACP, and Mrs. Parks even became the Secretary for this organization in 1943 (Parks & Reed,

2017). This was a woman of quiet dignity who on December 1, 1955 found the courage to overcome her fears and stood up for social justice.

In 1996, Mrs. Rosa Parks was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and in death she was the first woman to lie in honor at the U.S. Capitol rotunda (Tryens-Fernandes, 2024). In the middle of the city of Montgomery, Alabama known as “The Cradle of the Confederacy” in 2024 a statue of Rosa Parks was placed. This statue was created by the sculptor, Basil Watson, depicts a bespeckled and diminutive sitting figure with her legs crossed and a calm expression on her face. The site of the statue is the location where she boarded the Montgomery bus on that fateful December 1, 1955. Rosa Parks had been arrested due to the refusal to give up her seat and her attorney was Fred Gray in 1955 and in 2024, Gray was present at the unveiling of the Rosa Parks statue. Attorney Gray expressed his belief that the statue not only honored Mrs. Parks, but also the 40,000 Black citizens of the city who for 382 days stayed off the buses (Tryens-Fernandes, 2024). The original intent of the boycott was simply to ask for better treatment of Blacks on the buses, to stop demanding that Blacks relinquish their seats to Whites, and to ask that a few Black bus drivers be hired (Bond, 2014). The Montgomery Bus Boycott birthed the Civil Rights Movement which called for social justice in all areas of life for Blacks and which demanded an end to the humiliation, oppression, and intimidation of the Black populace. Dr. King stressed in his speeches that he was tired, that the Black people were tired of living in such demeaning conditions (Clark, 2009). Rosa Parks was tired on December 1, 1955, because her people were tired and Reverent Martin Luther King Jr. gave voice to their tiredness. The sitting Rosa Parks statue is shown in a news photograph surrounded by Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, Black Montgomery Mayor Steven Reed, and her former attorney, Fred Gray (Tryens-Fernandes, 2024).

The sitting Rosa Parks statue is the second statue of this Civil Rights heroine placed in Montgomery. In 2019, a standing Mrs. Rosa Parks statue was placed on Dexter Avenue in the downtown of the city. This depiction of Rosa Parks is also bespeckled and serene but she stands with both hands holding the handles of a purse. Fred Gray represented Mrs. Rosa Parks at her trial in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat. She had been given a fine of \$10 plus \$4 assessed in court costs. In 2019, an elderly Fred Gray, at the unveiling of the standing Rosa Parks statue, lamented that she was not present at the event (MacNeil, 2019). What would Mrs. Rosa Parks have to say about the two statues of her placed in Montgomery, Alabama? Mrs. Parks died in 2005 at the age of 92 and her body lay in honor in the nation’s capital (Tryens-Fernandes, 2024).

7. Frey Gray: Attorney for Civil Rights Movement Agitators

Attorney Fred Gray had just turned 25 two weeks before the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks (Gray, 2023). Not only did this young lawyer represent Mrs. Rosa Parks but he also served as Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s attorney as well. In 2024, Attorney Fred Gray was 94 years old. This man has been lauded as one of the most success-

ful Civil Rights attorneys of the Twentieth Century. Gray was one of the first Blacks elected to the Alabama legislature, and he became the first Black President of the Alabama Bar Association. Gray made his mark in a number of landmark civil rights cases such as voting rights, education, housing, employment, law enforcement, jury selection, among many other important civil rights issues. To briefly cover some of his achievements it is important to cite the ([Browder v. Gayle, 1956](#)) case which resulted in the integration of buses in the city of Montgomery. The case of ([Gomillion v. Lightfoot, 1960](#)) concerned redistricting of reapportioned of legislative bodies to more fairly reflect the racial make-up of the populace. The case of ([William v. Wallace, 1965](#)) resulted in the court ordered protection of the Civil Rights marchers as they walked from Selma to Montgomery to present their voting grievances. The case of ([Mitchell v. Johnson, 1966](#)) sought a remedy to the systematic exclusion of Blacks from jury service. And the case of ([Lee v. Macon, 1967](#)) integrated public elementary and secondary schools as well as all state institutions of higher learning in Alabama ([Gray, 2023](#)).

The case of ([Browder v. Gayle, 1956](#)) was heard in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama. The question was whether bus segregation was unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution ([Gray, 2023](#)). Attorney Gray approached five Black women who had been discriminated against by the Montgomery Bus Company and all agreed to become plaintiffs in the federal lawsuit. Later, one of these Black women refused to participate any further in the lawsuit due to threats made against her by the White community in the city. This woman later claimed that she had never agreed to be part of the lawsuit and there was an unsuccessful attempt to disbar Attorney Gray for improperly representing her ([Gray, 2023](#)).

Attorney Gray also represented Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as he was put on trial for conspiring to boycott the Montgomery Bus Company ([Gray, 2023](#)). There were 89 boycott activists who were also indicted, Dr. King was the only one ever put on trial claims Attorney Gray. In his book, [Graetz \(2006\)](#) remembered how Attorney Gray humorously told him that it would be interesting to see if Montgomery County could gather 89 juries for all those indicted. Graetz recalls that he was very tense during Dr. King's trial as he was to be called as a witness but it was only on the last day of the trial that he was finally called to the stand. Only one White pastor had participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and that was the Reverend Robert Graetz ([Graetz, 2006](#)). This Lutheran minister had to answer questions about how he came to be in Montgomery, how he came to join the bus boycott, and the role he played in the Montgomery Improvement Association, and other civil rights organizations he was a member of in the city.

8. Robert Graetz's Involvement in the Bus Boycott

Called to serve a Black congregation in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, [Graetz \(2006\)](#) explained that he could not turn his back to the plight of his parishioners as Graetz and his family arrived in Montgomery only six months before the launch

of the bus boycott. In 1954, the young Graetz had just completed his studies at the Lutheran Seminary of the Ohio Synod in Columbus. As the new pastor at Trinity Evangelical Church in Montgomery, he had been called to serve an all-Black flock in his first full-time job since his seminary graduation. Wanting to be a part of the Black community to better serve his Black congregation, Graetz joined city and county organizations whose focus was to improve living conditions for Blacks as well as White citizens (Graetz, 2006).

9. Montgomery Improvement Association Secretary

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was elected President of the Montgomery Improvement Association and Robert Graetz served as Secretary of the group (Graetz, 2006). The goal of the group was to improve the lives of Black citizens and among their list of priorities was to seek an end to the discriminatory treatment of Blacks on the buses of the city. They asked for Blacks not to be required to relinquish any of the seating set aside for Blacks and that a few Black bus drivers be hired, which were all reasonable and fair requests. Rev. Graetz had belonged to the NAACP since 1943 when he first joined as a college student. So, in Montgomery he was also attending NAACP meetings. He met Mrs. Rosa Parks who served as the Secretary for the NAACP and she was also a neighbor of the Graetz family who lived in a Black neighborhood. The Parks and the Graetzes began a life-long friendship. After Mrs. Rosa Parks was arrested, the chief function of the Montgomery Improvement Association became to organize and support the bus boycott. More than 200 people volunteered to drive Blacks during the boycott as there were over 42 locations in the morning to pick-up riders and 48 locations in the evenings (Graetz, 2006).

10. Arrested for Being a Volunteer Driver during the Bus Boycott

Reverend Graetz took on one of the volunteer drivers slots as he worked both mornings and evenings transporting Black passengers (Graetz, 2006). It was common for boycott drivers to be stopped by Montgomery Police Officers and also by Montgomery County Sheriff's Deputies who sought to intimidate them and looked for any reason to arrest the drivers. Graetz (2006: p. 76) was once stopped by the Sheriff Mac Sim Butler, who asked him why he was "hauling n-word". Graetz was arrested on drummed up minor charges and he was soon released once his bail money was quickly gathered up by the boycott leaders. The Reverend gave rides to as many as 40 to 50 Black persons a day and he soon began receiving death threats by both phone and mail. Graetz (2006: p. 79) endured being called the "n-word lovin preacher" in threats made commonly by slurred voices on the phone and menacing letters from all over Alabama and the country. He once found a small pile of sugar on the ground underneath his gas tank and had the car towed to a garage for examination and they found the tank had sugar in it. They also discovered that the front tires of the car had been slashed from the inside so the

damage was not noticeable. Graetz believed that the intent was for him to have an accident while on the highway. His ministry took him all over the state of Alabama and even into surrounding states to attend to church business and attend meetings and conferences as the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church (Graetz, 2006).

11. Two Bombings of the Graetz Family Home

January 30, 1955 was the advent of a new kind of terrorism being used on the boycott leaders as a bomb was thrown at the home of Dr. King (Graetz, 2006). Black churches were also bomb targets, and the homes of other boycott leaders also became the sites of bombings. Graetz (2006) revealed that he had conversations with members of the Montgomery Improvement Association and they felt that some of them would die and they had come to accept that fact as they “just didn’t know where or when” it would happen (Graetz, 2006: p. 79). The bombings inflicted both property damage, physical harm, and psychological harm to those involved in the bus boycott.

In August 1955, the Graetz home was bombed but the family was away at a retreat in Tennessee, they had loaded up their car and had invited Mrs. Rosa Parks to participate in a workshop on race relations (Graetz, 2006). They received a phone call about the damage done to their house and on their return found broken windows and the dishes in the kitchen in shards. Mrs. Parks knelt beside Robert and Jennie to help them pick up the pieces of glass in the clean-up. A second bomb was thrown at their house on January 10, 1957 which lifted the roof off the house and did extensive damage to the front door, windows and things inside the house. Another bomb with 11 sticks of dynamite was found that day in the drive-way of the home but the bomb failed to explode miraculously. The investigating FBI Agents determined that if the second bomb had gone off it would have blown up the entire neighborhood. The Graetz family had all been present at the home and were asleep with Jeannie cradling an infant that was only 4 days old and two young children under five were in their beds. After, the second bombing, Mrs. Rosa Parks came over once again to aid the Graetz family in the clean-up and help take care of the children. On April 29, 1957, the Maggie Street Baptist Church presented the Graetz family with a new set of glasses and dishes to replace those lost in the bombing (Graetz, 2006).

12. A New Calling for Reverend Graetz

In 1958, Reverend Graetz received a new call to serve as the pastor at St. Philip Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio and he learned he would be serving another Black congregation (Graetz, 2006). He and his family did not want to leave Montgomery and Robert and Jeannie prayed for days to learn if they should accept the new call to serve or request to stay in Montgomery. They decided to allow the Lord to lead them and set off to Ohio with heavy hearts. Rev. Graetz began his new duties as the pastor of St. Philips’s Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio on January 25, 1958. Besides his ministerial duties at St. Philips, Graetz continued his

involvement with the Columbus Chapter of the NAACP, he was also a member of the Urban League, the Near East Side Area Council, the Columbus Council on Human Relations, the Greater Columbus Committee for Fair Housing, the Citizens Advisory Committee, and the Columbus Leadership Conference as the primary focus of all these groups was on improving race relations. At one church gathering at the Mount Olivet Baptist Church in Columbus both Mrs. Coretta Scott King and Rev. Graetz took turns addressing the congregation. He was called to duty again in 1963, when he represented the American Lutheran Church in Chicago at a National Conference at which the topic was “Religion and Race” and among the participants were members of many different religious denominations. The Graetz family lived in Ohio, Kentucky, California, and Washington D.C. as Reverend Graetz went wherever he was called to service (Graetz, 2006). Robert and his wife, Jeannie, worked for 30 years doing ministry work in Appalachia as they aided the poorest families there (Harrison, 2020). They raised 7 children with one being born in Montgomery, Alabama, and several in Ohio. At the end of their life, they had 26 grandchildren, and a number of great-grandchildren as well (Harrison, 2020).

13. A Return to Montgomery, Alabama for Robert and Jeannie

The couple decided to return to Montgomery, Alabama in their 70s, and their work in social justice continued throughout their lives. Reverend Graetz continued to educate others about the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Civil Rights Movement (Word Press, 2013). He and his wife often gave talks at the National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture at Alabama State University. The couple were named “Ambassadors in Residence” at ASU where they often participated in campus activities and conferences. Graetz was regularly invited to speak all over the State of Alabama on his experiences in social justice. The Reverend said thoughtfully that he believed the city of Montgomery had made greater strides in racial reconciliation than many other cities (Graetz, 2006).

Every month for years after his return to the city, Reverend Graetz would meet with “One Montgomery” which was a group composed of both Black and White citizens who met to strategize about improving the city and race relations (Moon, 2005). And, into their 80s the couple was still leading groups on pilgrimages to Civil Rights locations throughout Alabama, making Montgomery a pivotal stop as they served as guides to tourists to all the attractions then headed to Selma to view historic sites there. These tours also included visits to Birmingham and surrounding areas. These civil rights pilgrimages became a central part of the lives of Robert and Jeannie Graetz. The couple was well-known in the community and very much appreciated by the citizens of Montgomery who treated them like celebrities. They were much beloved at Alabama State University and Jeannie, in her late 80s decided to finish the University degree she had started in the 1950s, and yes, she graduated from ASU at the age of 86 (Moon, 2005).

14. Robert Graetz: Civil Rights Movement Foot Soldier Who Still Marched On

Graetz made an effort to continue to be at the beck and call of his mentor, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as he made the trip to be at the March to Washington in 1963 and he made the trek from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. Rev. Graetz remained an activist and his feelings on the subject were clear, that he was ready to take on any role that Dr. King offered him in the Movement. In 1963, Reverend Graetz, was part of the March on Washington and he had a place of honor next to the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. It was a spot he had well-earned. In 1965 Graetz was called to join the Selma to Montgomery March and he flew from Ohio to take his designated place again next to the Civil Rights leaders. Graetz was a faithful foot soldier in the Civil Rights Movement and he was always active in Lutheran Church organizations, the NAACP, and in many regional and national groups who sought social justice for Black Americans. The 1965 march started with over 8,000 marchers but under court order only 300 marchers were allowed to make the entire trip guarded by heavily armed federal troops. Fred Gray had brought a lawsuit in order to force a federal court to provide the needed protection so that the marchers could carry out their demonstration with a measure of safety. It was the *Williams v. Wallace* case in 1965 which forced the hand of the Governor of Alabama so that he could not prevent the Civil Rights foot soldiers this needed protection as they made their way from Selma to Montgomery to redress their voting grievances. Graetz (2006) stepped into his place among the 300 marchers, ready to serve as always. The little-known White foot soldier of the Civil Rights Movement completed the march near his close friend, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and alongside the principal leaders of the movement.

Certainly, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was a transformational experience for Rev. Graetz and for many others. For Robert and Jeannie, it became a mission to carry on the torch for the rights of others as their lives were spent struggling against injustices wherever they found them. On their 65th wedding anniversary, the couple was interviewed by a reporter for the Montgomery Advertiser and they revealed that even though both of them had health issues and were in their late 70s that they still wanted to continue to spread Dr. King's message of love (Moon, 2005). They still believed in the "Beloved Community" as they sought to help create a society where everyone was respected and differences did not divide people (Graetz, 2006).

Graetz (2006) remained a confidant of Dr. Martin King Jr. until his death on April 4, 1968. He remained a close friend of his neighbor, Mrs. Rosa Parks until her death in 2005 (Tryens-Fernandes, 2024). His longest friendship with one of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement was with Fred Gray. Graetz (2006) recounted his close lifelong friendship with Attorney Fred Gray in his last book. Graetz and Gray had first met when they attended the Montgomery Improvement Association's (MIA) meetings together in 1955. So close was the friendship that Graetz served as a groomsman at the wedding of Fred to Bernice. When the end came for Robert Graetz, Fred Gray was at his bedside. The friendship that began

in 1955 lasted until Rev. Robert Graetz passed to his heavenly reward in 2020 at the age of 92 (Gjelten, 2020).

A life well-lived is the simple statement that can sum up the life of the Reverend Robert Graetz. Rev. Graetz played a role in changing the face of American society. Some may say he had only a small role in the history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and in the Civil Rights Movement but others would argue that his contributions made a significant difference to his Black parishioners and to the hundreds of Black citizens he ferried for 382 days on volunteer shifts both morning and evening. This man was fearful for himself and his family but Graetz trudged on like a good foot soldier in the struggle for social justice as he knew that the laws were discriminatory and harming all of society. Confronted with threats at all hours of the day and night, Reverend Graetz took the teachings of Dr. King to heart as he learned how to handle himself during his arrest for transporting Black citizens during the bus boycott, he learned how to comport himself on the witness stand in the trial of Dr. King for organizing the bus boycott, and he was among the participants at the March on Washington, he also learned how to repel violence during the Selma to Montgomery Civil Rights March. Reverend Robert S. Graetz was not just present at key historical events in the Civil Rights Movement but he was an active participant. As his wife said, the good Reverend did not start the “trouble” but he managed to place himself smack in the middle of “trouble” as his vision was to serve to the best of his ability as a minister and adhere to the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Graetz, 2006). Fighting discrimination, oppression, and violence with reason and love, that is the legacy of the Reverend Robert Graetz and his wife, Jeannie.

Reverend Robert Graetz made significant contributions to the Civil Rights Movement through his participation as a member of the NAACP since 1943, through his pastoral duties at his all-Black church in Montgomery, through his service as a boycott driver during that time-frame, through his duties as the Secretary for the Montgomery Improvement Association, and his participation in marches and Civil Rights activities throughout his life. Reverend Graetz carried out his role as a White foot soldier in all his capacities and contributed in a small but significant manner to that historical movement. Standing alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Fred Gray, Jo Ann Robinson, and other notable Black Civil Rights leaders was a firm White soldier who did his part.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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