



Before Rosa Parks: Ida B. Wells

Discussion and Glossary Handout

Ida B. Wells was born into slavery in 1862 in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Because of the Civil War, her family was soon free. Her parents were politically active in the community and she sometimes feared that the Ku Klux Klan would kill her father when he went to community meetings at night.

When Wells was 16, her parents died suddenly from yellow fever. She was left alone to support and care for her five younger siblings.

Fortunately, Wells' parents had made sure she got the best education possible. She left school before graduation, made herself look older by putting up her hair, passed the teaching exam in her county and got a job teaching six miles from her family home. A friend of her mother's took care of the children while Wells fulfilled her teaching duties, and Wells spent her teenage weekends raising her younger brothers and sisters.

When she was 22, Wells got a better teaching job in Memphis. She boarded a first-class "ladies" car on the train to go to her job. Two conductors tried to remove her to the smoking car because, by 1884, southern states were passing Jim Crow laws. Wells refused to go sit with drunken, rowdy men in the smoking car. When the conductors tried to drag her, she disembarked from the train and filed a lawsuit against the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern Railroad Co—and won. Three years later, the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned Wells' victory, claiming that the railroad cars were "separate but equal."

Wells became a journalist devoted to writing about injustice. Two of her most famous campaigns were the anti-lynching campaign and the struggle for woman suffrage. Because she spoke out and refused to follow rules she believed were unjust, Wells was considered a non-conformist.

Here are some reflections about Ida B. Wells by her daughter, Alfreda Duster, excerpted from the book *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*:

"Even when there was no segregation in Chicago, there were certain places you didn't go because you knew they wouldn't treat you right. After discrimination intensified, Mother went to Marshall Fields department store. She waited and waited, but no clerk would help her. Finally, she took a pair of men's underpants, put them over her arm, and walked toward the door. Immediately, a floorwalker stopped her, and so she was able to buy them.

“She used to tell about this as a funny incident, Ida Wells-Barnett with a pair of underpants dangling over her arm. She was only five feet three or four, and she had grown plump in her fifties, but she walked as if she owned the world.”

Pre-writing Questions for Reflection

What problem do you think Wells was trying to address? Why did she choose this strategy to gain the shop clerks’ attention?

What kind of silent statement was Wells making about the way the shop clerks were treating her? If you could translate the gesture into a sentence, what would the sentence say?

How do you think the shop clerks felt to see an angry customer marching toward the door “with a pair of underpants dangling over her arm”? Why?

Do you think Wells had a sense of humor? Why or why not?

Non-conformity takes courage and sometimes results in ostracism. Why do you think Wells “walked as if she owned the world”?

How was Wells acting like a non-conformist? How would a conformist have acted?

Glossary

Ku Klux Klan A white supremacist organization formed shortly after the Civil War. The Klan’s main activity in the late 19th and early 20th century was to terrorize black people who challenged white supremacy.

Jim Crow laws A series of laws passed in the South after the Civil War to enforce segregation.

“Separate but equal” Because the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution demanded equal protection under the law for all citizens, communities and businesses committed to racial segregation used the logic that the races could be kept separate as long as they had similar accommodations.

Anti-lynching campaign Activism to stop the Klan and other vigilante groups from illegally taking custody of and committing violent acts upon people they suspected of some infraction of the law or resented because they defied white supremacy.

Woman suffrage The movement, consolidated in the 1860s, to demand a constitutional amendment granting women the vote.

Non-conformist A person who defies social norms and customs.