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The Rape of Gertrude Perkins

Late one night a young black woman named Gertrude Perkins was walking home from the bus stop when she was accosted by two uniformed white men in a marked police car. They forced her into the car, drove to a secluded area, and raped her. Hours later, she was dumped back at the bus stop with the dire warning to keep her mouth shut or else.

Gertrude then faced the choice that every rape victim has--to keep quiet or to report the crime and try to bring the rapists to justice. Only survivors of violent crimes know how difficult it is to come forward and offer evidence against their perpetrators. The rest of us can only imagine. Gertrude had the additional burden of having to go to the police to file a charge against two of their own.

In New York City we have support for rape victims--hot lines, advocates, specially trained hospital staff, female police officers, etc., but the assault on Gertrude did not take place in modern day New York City. It took place in Montgomery, Alabama in the year 1949. The only support available to her was from the rest of the black community--especially her church.

Two days after the assault, Gertrude visited the law offices of a pair of young, white attorneys who had recently received their law degrees courtesy of the GI Bill. One of them had a two year old daughter--me.

They listened to her story, became convinced that she was telling the truth, and decided to take her case. Their job was to help find out the names of the two policemen so that a warrant could be served against them. That shouldn't have been a problem. In 1949 the Montgomery police department had two marked police cars manned with two officers each. One car patrolled the white section of town, and the other patrolled the black section. The rapists had made no attempt to cover their faces, so Gertrude would have no trouble identifying them. However, a warrant for their arrest could not be served without their names, and the police department was refusing to release their names.

The lawyers filed a [writ of mandamus](#) for the Montgomery police department to provide the names of the two police officers who had patrolled the black section of town on the night of Gertrude's rape. The police refused. There was no one to enforce the writ in this pre Civil Rights era. Not only that, but the lawyers began to receive death threats. A Ku Klux Klan cross was burned at one of their homes. A funeral wreath was delivered to their office.

Similar threats were obviously being made against Gertrude, who was finally forced to stop her attempts to bring her attackers to justice. There is no happy, feel good ending to this story.

A few years later, however, the black people got together and organized the bus boycott after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give a white man her seat. With all due respect to Rosa, you don't get that many people mobilized based on one incident. [Most of the blacks in Montgomery knew exactly what had happened to Gertrude Perkins](#) some years before. There had been other rapes before and after Gertrude's, and southern activists, including Rosa Parks had been active in trying to get justice for the victims.