The Smithsonian Institution, in collaboration with the Troy University Rosa Parks Library and Museum, presents an American story of bravery, honor and idealism. The exhibition, “381 Days: The Montgomery Bus Boycott Story,” commemorates the events of 1955 that became the genesis of the modern civil rights movement. The exhibit will open at the Stearns History Museum in St. Cloud, MN on January 31, 2009. “381 Days” will remain on view through April 14, 2009 before continuing on a 14-city national tour through 2009. It is made possible through the generous support of AARP.

“Rosa Parks’ extraordinary act was a profound turning point in the civil rights movement,” said Anna Cohn, director of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). “We are extremely proud to share this American story of 50,000 courageous people who forced a segregated bus system to open its doors to equality.”

The boycott was initially a one-day protest to mark Parks’ December 5 court appearance and to register the weariness of those who endured daily assaults to their humanity. African Americans who rode Montgomery’s buses were considered second class, defenseless against humiliation and undeserving of basic respect from drivers and white passengers.

After Parks’ arrest, professors, doctors, lawyers and preachers stood alongside students, domestic workers and blue-collar laborers and refused to board the buses. A volunteer-based transportation system was developed and effectively shut down the public transit system. The boycott, which lasted 381 days, evolved into a strategic act of faith and determination that galvanized a people who refused to give up hope.

“AARP is pleased to underwrite ‘381 Days: The Montgomery Bus Boycott Story,’” said Dr. Lowery Johnson, AARP Interim State President. “As an advocacy organization for social change, we hope that our participation in this exhibit will serve as a reminder that activism is an American tradition—one that many of our members who lived through this era experienced, and one that we want to pass down to future generations.”

Photographs, quotes and historical text are combined in a multidimensional collage to convey the dynamism of the civil rights movement. Visitors immerse themselves in the language, imagery and emotional response to the nation’s growing awareness that its founding tenet “all men are created equal” could possibly apply to the entire population. “381 Days” documents a key victory for the use of non-violent action to empower social and political change that influenced subsequent, powerful events such as the Woolworth lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, N.C., the Freedom Rides, the Birmingham demonstrations and the eventual passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that helps people over the age of 50 have independence, choice and control in ways that are beneficial and affordable to them and society as a whole. The organization produces AARP The Magazine; AARP Bulletin; AARP Segunda Juventud; NRTA Live & Learn; and a website, www.aarp.org. AARP Foundation is an affiliated charity that provides security, protection, and empowerment to older persons in need with support from thousands of volunteers, donors, and sponsors.

Situated on the historic site of Rosa Parks’ arrest, the Rosa Parks Library and Museum was built in tribute to both Parks and the civil rights movement in Montgomery. This state-of-the-art museum is committed to educating audiences about the boycott’s momentous turning point in our country’s history and its continued effect on society. Visit the museum online at http://montgomery.troy.edu/museum.

The Stearns History Museum is located at 235 South 33rd Avenue in St. Cloud, MN. Call (320) 253-8424 or toll free 866-253-8424 for information. Hours are Monday – Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday Noon - Admission is $5 adults, $2 children; members of the Stearns History Museum are free.