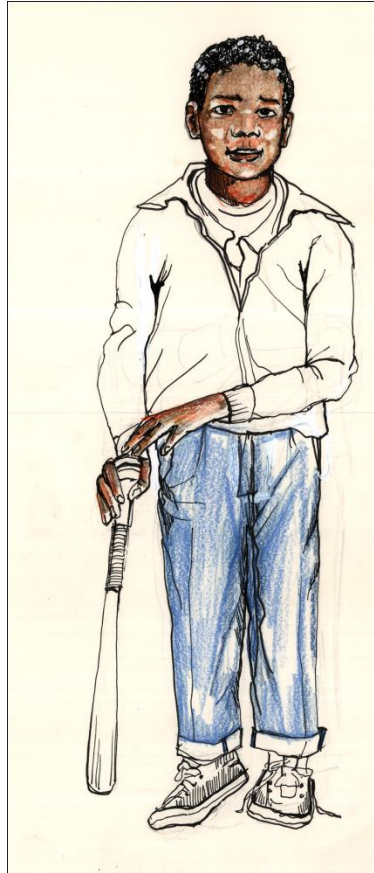


Robert Stone



An African American Child in Russell City
(historical)
1945

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Storybook Summary

Teacher Introduction

The story of Robert Stone was written in the tradition of our African ancestors.

The Griot Speaks – The griots (pronounced *gree-oh*), or oral historians of West Africa memorized the history and great deeds of their people. Mamoudou Kouyate', a griot in the modern nation of Guinea, declared that this method of recording history was superior to writing. He said, "Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past any more, for writing lacks the warmth of the human spirit."

(African American Family Album by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler)

Robert Stone was a real child who lived in Russell City, a neighborhood that was once along Hayward's shoreline. Residents of the Hayward area today may not be familiar with Russell City, because unfortunately it no longer exists as a physical place. But for people who once lived there, the community of Russell City is still alive.

Russell City was once an unincorporated area of Alameda County in the area of Hayward that is now known as the industrial corridor. Residents of this community were relocated in the 1960s when the City of Hayward chose to increase its light industry and redevelop the land there. Russell City had long been neglected by political powers and had very little infrastructure; in essence local officials saw it as an opportunity for development.

Families like Robert's saw it differently. Russell City was a tight-knit community with a multi-ethnic population and a strong sense of place. Families were actively involved in school and church life.

The story of Robert Stone's life was told through the eyes of his widow Vertilee Shaw-Stone, his brother Malachi "ML" Stone Jr., and other surviving family members to Asale Kimaada, a local educator and business owner. Asale has been researching African American and African history for many years and is the director of Grandmothers Who Help (www.grandmotherswhohelp.com), an organization dedicated to teaching children about African American heritage.

Asale spent time with Mrs. Stone-Shaw in 2005, listening to stories that Robert's widow recalled hearing from her late husband. He used to talk about his family and Russell City for hours, reminiscing about a place he loved from the time he moved there in 1945 until the time he and his family were forced to leave.

Robert Stone

Robert Stone was the son of Malachi and Ruth Ann Cosby Stone, who had ten children. His father Malachi was born in Mississippi in 1892, and his mother Ruth Ann came from Lake Village, Louisiana. The family lived on an 80 acre farm in Lakeport, Arkansas. In 1939, Malachi Stone came to Russell City leaving his wife and family in the South while he came to find work. He was skilled in farming and liked to sing gospel music. When Mr. Stone had secured a place for his family, his wife and children followed him to Russell City. They contracted with a property owner in Russell City to work the land and pay for it out of the money they made.

Russell City was a place of hope for African Americans who traveled across country, in search of a new life found hope, work, and familyhood.

Over the centuries, African Americans had been finding their way to California through various avenues. Even as early as the 1500s, Africans traveled with the Spanish Conquistadors and explorers, coming as artisans and sailors. During the California Gold Rush, many white southerners brought enslaved African Americans with them to search for gold. After 1850 when California became a state, slavery was outlawed and some previously enslaved people claimed or purchased their right to be free. However, the state constitution forbade "Indians, Africans, and the descendants of Africans from voting." Many northern states passed discriminatory laws which set the stage for how African American and Indians would be treated in many cities and town for years to come.

After the civil war and despite years of reconstruction, African Americans were being kept in an economic oppressive system in the south. They had no economic, social, or political voice and the Supreme Court approved a system called the "**Jim Crow**" laws. African Americans and white Americans were legally separated by the court system: in education, housing, and all in facets of life. Thousands of African American began to migrate from the south to escape this life style. This movement became known as the "Great Migration." People moved to find a better life and to escape discrimination and injustice.

During WWII many African Americans migrated to the East Bay to work in the naval shipyards, canneries, and in construction. They came from Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Some bought property in Russell City. The Stones, too, came looking for a better life.

The theme in their new home of Russell City was **familyhood**. The people who lived in the community loved and cared for each other. Everyone shared the belief that their neighbors were part of an extended family. They accepted and understood that this community was only going to survive by working together as a family. Over time, Russell City became a self-sufficient community. Many families owned their own homes and land where they raised crops and livestock.

Robert Stone

Robert's story illustrates life of a Southern migrant family moving to Russell City. As an adult, Robert Stone owned a backhoe business and remained living in the Hayward area. His grave marker can be found at the Russell City Cemetery.

Thoughts from Asale Kimaada:

What stands out in my mind and what will always keep Russell City alive for me are the people who put their heart and soul into living together as an extended family, building and passing down languages and traditions that will never be forgotten, that will continue to be passed down until another Russell City is built in its place.

I would like to thank all the people who opened up their homes to me, who took the time to remember so that a small portion of their history and the history of Russell City could be preserved. I would like to thank Mrs. Fannie Browner, Mrs. Simmons, Rev. Ben Ross, Mrs. Lillian Litzzy, Mrs. Patsy Ambers, Mrs. Francis Doyle, Mrs. Celeste Doyle, Mrs. Lisa N. Shaw, Mrs. Velma Scalzitti & Family, Mr. Darral Bassard, Deacon Van Buren, Sister Bobbie Jones, Mr. Rick Reynolds, Mrs. Betty Reynolds Moser. I want to give special thanks to Mrs. Vertilee Shaw-Stone and Mr. M.L. Stone Jr.

Introduction



My name is Robert Stone. When I was just five years old I moved to Russell City with my family from Lakeport in Chicot County, Arkansas.

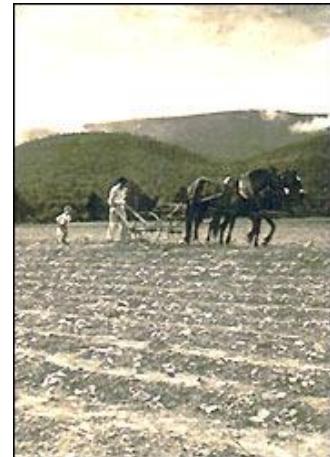
I had nine sisters and brothers: Wilfred, Clementine, Gilbert, Charlie, Nathaniel, Inez, Jay, Malachi Jr. and Rosie. With me – there were ten children in the family!

Let me tell you more about my family's move to California and our life here.

Life in Arkansas

Before we moved to Russell City, we lived on a big farm in Arkansas. We had chickens, hogs and goats, and Momma had a large vegetable garden. Even though we had plenty of land, we were **cash poor**. But Momma and Poppa always made sure we had plenty to eat. Sadly, times were not getting better.

To make money, we sold eggs, chickens, and vegetables. Sometimes we had to sell all of the crop, even before harvest and would be left with very little and sometimes nothing. It was especially bad if the **boll weevils** destroyed the crops. Farming was hard and **uncertain**. If the boll weevils got into the crops, they would destroy everything, sometimes even a week or two before the **harvest**. The boll weevil could destroy plants and animals.



Other things were hard about living in Arkansas. Because my family was black, many people did not like us. Sometimes when Poppa went to sell the harvest, he would be cheated out of most of his money. We were thankful for the few friendly white people who would take our harvest to sell it for the right price.

Between the boll weevils and **racism**, life in Arkansas became too much to **bear**.

Robert Stone

Luckily, Momma and Pappa had friends who had moved to California. Word had come to us that in California you could find a good job, a nice place to live, and children could get a good education. Our parents decided that we would move to California.

Poppa and Malachi Go To California First

My older brother Malachi Jr. and our father Malachi Sr. went to California to find work. They would find a place for the family to live and we would join them later.

Poppa and Malachi packed the 1934 Chevy with all they could get in it. Early one morning in 1939 we waved goodbye as they set out for California. Momma cried as they drove off. They later told us about the journey.

The trip across the Mojave desert was hot and uncomfortable. They had packed a lot of food and water so they didn't have to make so many stops. At night and sometimes in the day they would stop and get out fold-up **cots** and rest on the side of the road. Most people traveling long distances often slept by the side of the road and felt safe.

It was very cramped in the car, because they had packed so many things that would be needed for our new home. Poppa and Malachi would sing songs to help the time go by faster. It took about three days to travel from Lake Port Arkansas to Oakland California.



When Poppa and Malachi reached California they found friends who lived in Oakland, where they stayed for a while. Poppa found work at the **Oakland Naval Base** where big ships were made. Malachi wanted to work, too. After reading a job advertisement he found his way to Stockton where he worked for a **cannery**.

During World War II, people went to work in factories building airplanes and ships for the war effort. Many workers, like my father, were African Americans who had left the south in search of good jobs.

A New Life Awaited Us

Now that they had good jobs, Poppa was anxious to find a place to live and send for us. He heard of a place call Russell City. It seemed just the place to start a new life, the price was right and the community welcomed him.

In 1945, Poppa bought land that had two wood frame houses on it. He paid \$1,600. The house in the front was called the “big house.” But it had just three rooms: kitchen, living room and a bedroom for Momma, Poppa, and our little baby sister. The back house had seven rooms where we children were going to sleep.

Poppa had made sure that we would have a new start at life.

One day we got a letter from Poppa. It was time to go to California! So right away we started packing up all that we could carry on the train. We tried to sell or give away anything that we could not take with us. We were so excited that we left chickens standing in the yard!

The trip by train was hard. Where we lived in the South, there were laws called **Jim Crow laws**. This meant that we had to be in a different part of the train from white people. Our part of the train was hot and uncomfortable. We had to have a separate restroom, too. It was very dirty.

Finally, we reached California! Poppa was waiting at the train station to take us to our new home in Russell City.

Life in Russell City

After moving to Russell City, we saw that most of our neighbors were just like us. Other black families had moved in search of a better life. We didn't have much money, but we enjoyed the freedom of living in Russell City.

Each day, Poppa went to work at the shipyard. Momma worked at home. All of us children had chores to do, too.

Like all of our neighbors, we had a vegetable garden. We helped weed the garden and pick the corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and mustard greens. We had a small flock of chickens. They laid lots of eggs. Some of our neighbors raised pigs. It was fascinating to watch them get **butchered**.

Robert Stone

After chores and schoolwork we could play!

We did the normal things like play kick-the-can and marbles. The marble games started out with just a few boys, but would soon attract 20 or more children! Sometimes, the older boys would make go-carts out of old wood and boxes. Those go-carts didn't have steering wheels – just a rope to turn the wheels!



Halloween Parade

We sang songs like Hambone, Mary Mack, and This Old Man. We played hopscotch, too. One of my favorite times was when Momma and Poppa played Hide-and-Seek with us. Momma was the best at this game!

Sometimes we would all go down to the dairy. At the dairy we bought milk, chickens, fruit, even candy. When Momma ordered a fresh chicken the dairy worker would cut the chicken's neck right there in front of us! We were all afraid of the chicken when it started running around with no head. But all in all a trip to the dairy was very exciting.



Every Sunday we went to church. It was good to hear all the same songs we used to sing back in Arkansas. The pastor spoke of important stories and always taught us to be proud. All the adults at church knew each one of us kids by name. No one could get away with any **horsing around**, because there was always someone watching out for us. It was common to go to church every night.

Some of the most exciting times were when the blues musicians came to town. Famous singers and bands played at Russell City clubs. Poppa said that the blues music reminded him of home.



Russell City Library

Going to School

I was too young to start school when we first got to California. But the next year I was able to enroll in Russell City Elementary School.



Russell City Elementary

School was much different in California than it was in Arkansas. In Arkansas, the school that my brothers and sisters went to was just for black children and the teachers were African American, too. School there was rough. But the schools in Russell City had people of all sorts, but our teachers were all white. The students came from all backgrounds and we all played together. It didn't matter what color your skin was.

My older brothers, Gilbert, Charlie and Jay, on the other hand did not have it so easy at Hayward High School. There were not many African Americans attending this school. At first they were laughed at because of the clothes they wore. But my brothers made sure that their overalls were ironed and creased to the "T" (meaning that they were well-ironed). After a while, life at Hayward High became more comfortable. They even got a nickname. The other children called them "Farm Boys" because they always wore overalls.



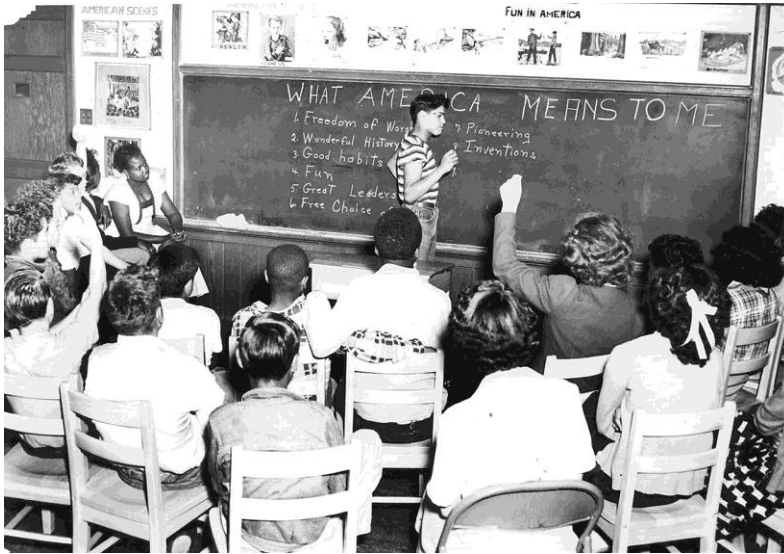
Play at school

My oldest brother, Nathaniel, was the first African American student at Hayward High to become the President of the Debate Team.

One of my favorite pastimes was playing sports. Some of the teams at school were so good that they won championships!

I am happy that I grew up in Russell City.

Robert Stone



Taken in Russell City School in 1950 of an 8th grade class studying democracy



1946 Russell City Champs!

Vocabulary

advertisement – used to get you interested in something

anxious – worried

backgrounds – having families that come from different cultures or places

to bear – to handle

boll weevil – a small grey beetle that damages plants (especially cotton plants)

butchered – when animals are killed and prepared for market

cannery – a place where fruits and vegetables are put into cans

cash poor – had very little money

championships – the biggest contest

cot – a small fold-up bed

cramped – being very close together

creased to the “T” – when pants are well ironed

crop – plants grown on a farms

discriminate – to not like someone because of something about them

enroll – to sign up to go to school

harvest – the time to gather plants from the farm

horsing around – messing around

Jim Crow laws – laws discriminating against black people (in the southern part of the United States in the 1880s to 1960s)

overalls – pants that are held up with straps over the shoulders

pastor – the leader of a church

pastimes – fun things to do in your spare time

racism – to not like someone because of the color of his or her skin

shipyard – a place where ships are made and kept

uncertain – not sure, doubtful

Robert Stone



Lesson Plans

Classroom Kit:

People: Robert Stone
Immigration Discovery Kit

1- Letters Home

Activity Goals

- To write a personal letter with a purpose and context.
- To understand the economic and educational opportunities of California during post-World War II.
- To understand the complexities and implications of the Second Great Migration.

Setting the Context:

Throughout United States history, African Americans had mostly lived in the rural south, working in agriculture. Between the 1910s and the 1960s, there was a mass migration of African Americans from southern states to urban centers of the north and midwest. This is called the **Great Migration**. Several factors of the first Great Migration, which began after World War I, included **ecology** (Boll Weevil infestation of the cotton fields, Great Mississippi Flood of 1927), **economics** (lack of jobs, Great Depression) and **racism** (Jim Crow laws, Ku Klux Klan).

By the second Great Migration, at the end of World War II, more African Americans lived in cities than in rural areas. The postwar economic boom provided opportunities for black workers in northern cities. Industrial production grew in the north and Midwest, providing several factory jobs. Racial prejudice in the north existed but was not as violent or severe as the terror campaigns of the Ku Klux Klan in the south. Robert Stone's family moved from rural Arkansas to California because of the opportunities for better education and jobs.

Activity Instructions:

Read Robert's story and the storybook, *The Great Migration*. Show and discuss photographs and other images from the second Great Migration era.

Have the students pretend they are Robert or one of his siblings and write a letter to their friends back home. What would they want their friends in Arkansas to know about their new life in California? What are some of the similarities and differences between the two places? Have them discuss school, work and church life.

Robert Stone



Lesson Plans

Classroom Kit:

People: Robert Stone
Immigration Discovery Kit

2 – Journal Entry

Activity Goals

- To write a fictional narrative, recalling an event or experiences.
- To understand the economic and educational opportunities of California during post-World War II.
- To understand the complexities and implications of the second Great Migration.

Setting the Context:

Throughout United States history, African Americans had mostly lived in the rural south, working in agriculture. Between the 1910s and the 1960s, there was a mass migration of African Americans from southern states to urban centers of the north and midwest called the **Great Migration**. People moved to find a better life and to escape discrimination and injustice.

Activity Instructions:

Read Robert’s story and discuss the journey to California. Let your students speculate what it would be like to migrate from the South to California in 1945. Have them write a journal entry as if they were one of the Stone children on this journey.

Encourage the students to think about what would be scary or exciting about this trip. Ask them what would be missed from back home. Given that they wouldn’t have much room or any money to buy new items, what supplies might they bring? How would they feel going on this long journey? How would they want people to treat them when they arrived?

Robert Stone



3 – Debate Team

Lesson Plans

Classroom Kit:

People: Robert Stone
Immigration Discovery Kit

Activity Goals

- To understand governmental forms of racism in the early 20th Century.
- To write a persuasive paragraph.

Setting the Context:

Jim Crow laws were created after the American Civil War of 1865 to enforce racial segregation and deny black people from doing things a white person could do. Laws dictated that a black person could not vote, live in certain areas or even sit in the front seats of a bus. Thousands of black families began to migrate from the south to escape this life style

It wasn't until the mid 20th century that all these laws and regulations were considered unconstitutional. Even then, change and progress were slow. Despite the legal changes, Jim Crow "etiquette" still existed. It was a set of unwritten rules governing how blacks and whites should interact. For example, a black man could not shake hands with a white man because that implied social equality. Schools remained segregated in some areas until 1954.

Activity Instructions:

Nathaniel, Robert's oldest brother, was the first African American student to be the President of the Debate Team at Hayward High. Read Robert's story to the class and discuss the implications of Americans' prejudiced past. Talk about the Jim Crow laws and etiquette and other forms of racism. Have the students write a paragraph arguing against these laws and social regulations.

Storybook Summary - Robert Stone
The Great Migration

Paintings by Jacob Lawrence, with a Poem by Walter Dean Myers
Museum of Modern Art, New York, HarperCollins, 1993

This book presents the famous series of paintings by Jacob Lawrence that depicts life in the south for African Americans and their journeys in search of work. The style of these paintings instantly draws the viewer in and clearly tells the story of poverty, sorrow, and hope. Lawrence started painting this series in the 1940s, and it is now one of the most recognizable and celebrated group of paintings from the era.

The author describes how African Americans began to leave their homes in the south to work in factories in the north, and in agriculture in the west. We learn how boll weevils destroyed crops and that laborer recruiters came to convince people to move. Families had to make hard decisions about leaving their homes. And even though there were more opportunities outside the south, there was still racism and poverty in the north and west. The book ends with a poignant poem by Walter Dean Myers entitled "Migration."

Discussion Topics

- Reasons why people sometimes must leave their homes
- Poverty and race
- Different regions of the country have different economies
- The Great Migration
- This story relates to the journey that the *Crossroads* child Robert Stone and his family made in the 1940s