



# Susie Clark

## The Bravest Girl You've Ever Seen

Desegregating Iowa Schools in 1868

by Joshalyn Hickey-Johnson  
illustrated by Hayle Calvin

**SUSIE CLARK: THE BRAVEST  
GIRL YOU'VE EVER SEEN**

**by**

**Joshalyn Hickey-Johnson**

**illustrated by Hayle Calvin**



With special thanks to  
Jean and Dan Clark—two Muscatine historians  
of no relation to Alexander Clark's family,  
but who passionately value sharing their story.



# Dedication

From the author

To all of my grandchildren: Tayden, Lillian, Violet, Sage, Beckham, Jubilee, and Nova. May you always be brave enough to impact the future like Susie and know when it's your time to shine.

—Your grandmother "Big Momma"

From the illustrator

To my Grandma LaMetta Wynn, her honor.

—HC





Susie the Brave  
was also Susie the Queen  
who was born in a town  
called Muscatine.

You say you never knew there was  
a Queen in Muscatine?

Well, get ready to meet  
the bravest girl you've  
ever seen!



The brave girl's name was Susie Clark.

The walk to her first school  
was like a walk through a park.



MUSCATINE,  
IOWA



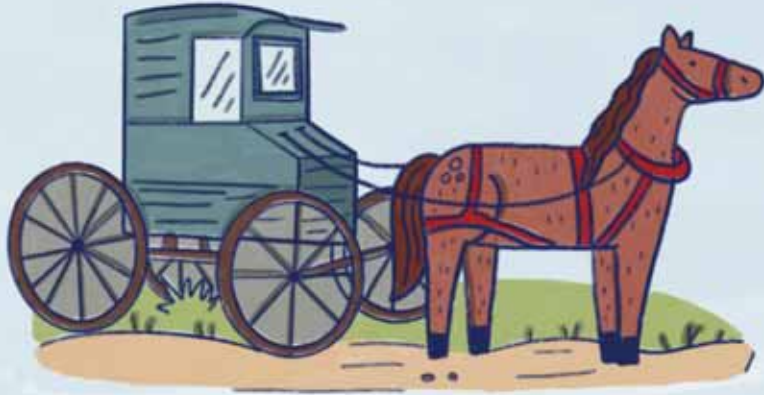
You see,  
Muscatine in the early days  
had separate schools...  
with very different ways.

One school in town had nice books  
and room to play.  
The other was way up a muddy  
hill and far, far away.





But Susie loved the muddy trail  
that led to every stop—



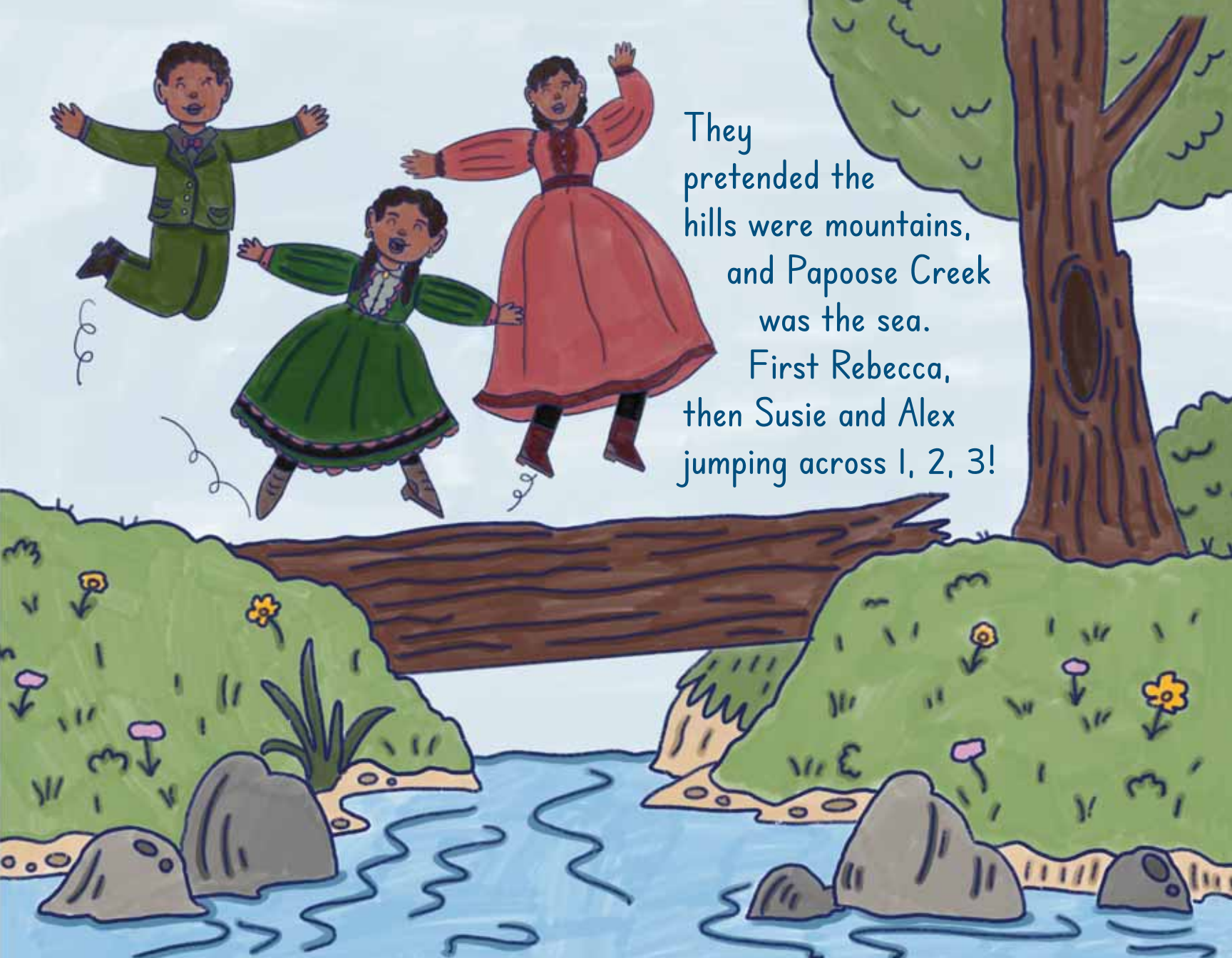
first the mail wagon's horse  
going trot, trot, trot!

Next, the stinky pigs  
rolling in their slop,  
slop, slop!



Sometimes they'd  
meet soldiers  
marching to  
keep a pace—  
OH NO!  
WE'RE ALMOST  
LATE, WHO WANTS  
TO RACE?





They pretended the hills were mountains, and Papoose Creek was the sea. First Rebecca, then Susie and Alex jumping across 1, 2, 3!

Susie enjoyed school every day  
and learned to  
read and write.

High school would be coming soon,  
so she studied  
every night.





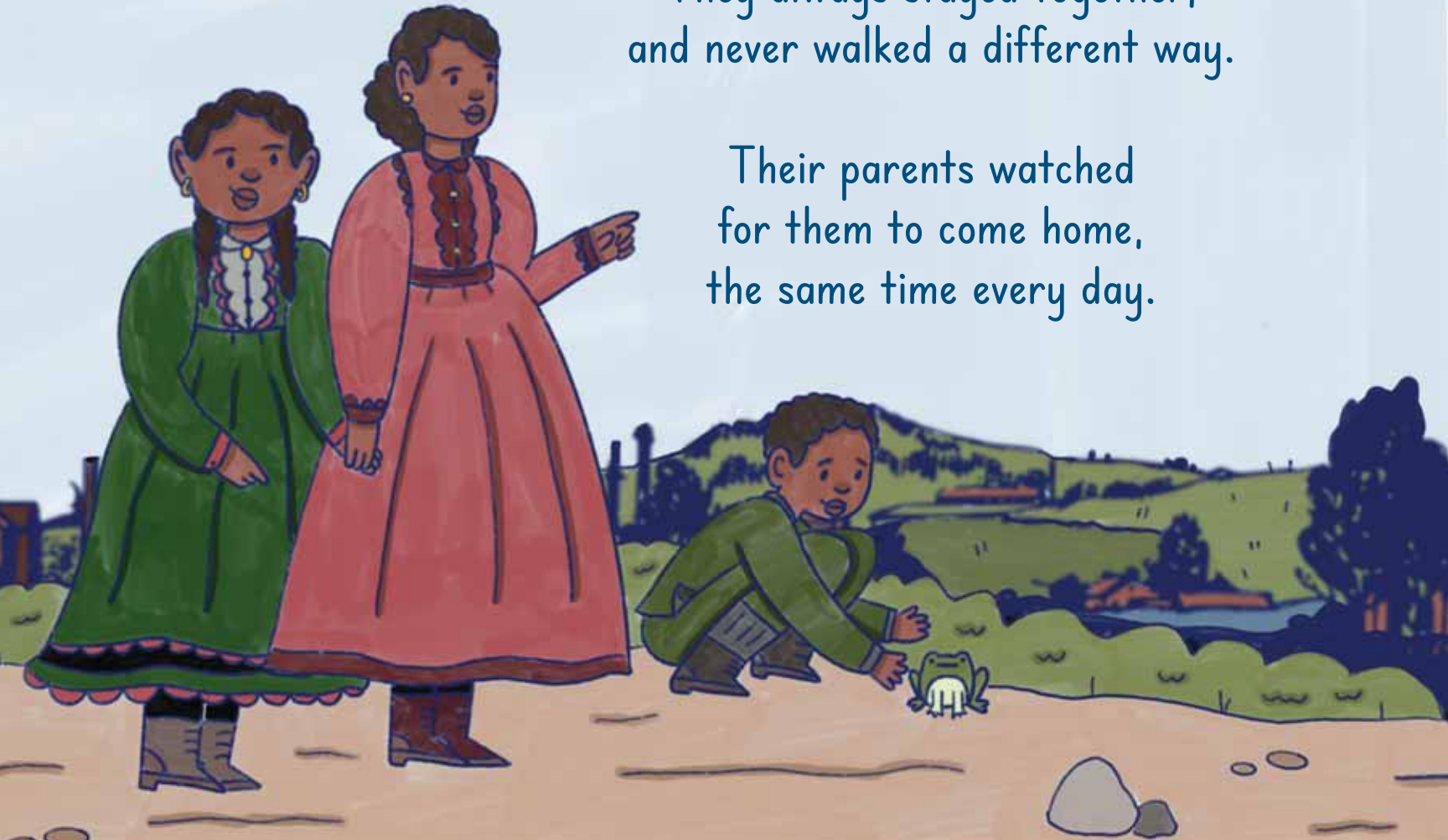
Every day was different,  
and in many ways  
the same.

Whenever she got to her first school,  
her friends were glad  
she came.



They always stayed together,  
and never walked a different way.

Their parents watched  
for them to come home,  
the same time every day.



# THE CLARK HOUSE



12

11

11

You see, Muscatine in the early days  
had separate schools  
with very different ways.

Mean people then,  
like mean people now,  
wanted to be nice,  
they just didn't know how.



Get out of my WAY!

They had rules that were wrong  
and needed to be made right.

Susie's dad thought about it every day and night.





Then one day,  
Susie's dad said...





"I know what to do!"  
Let's have ONE school system  
instead of having TWO!"

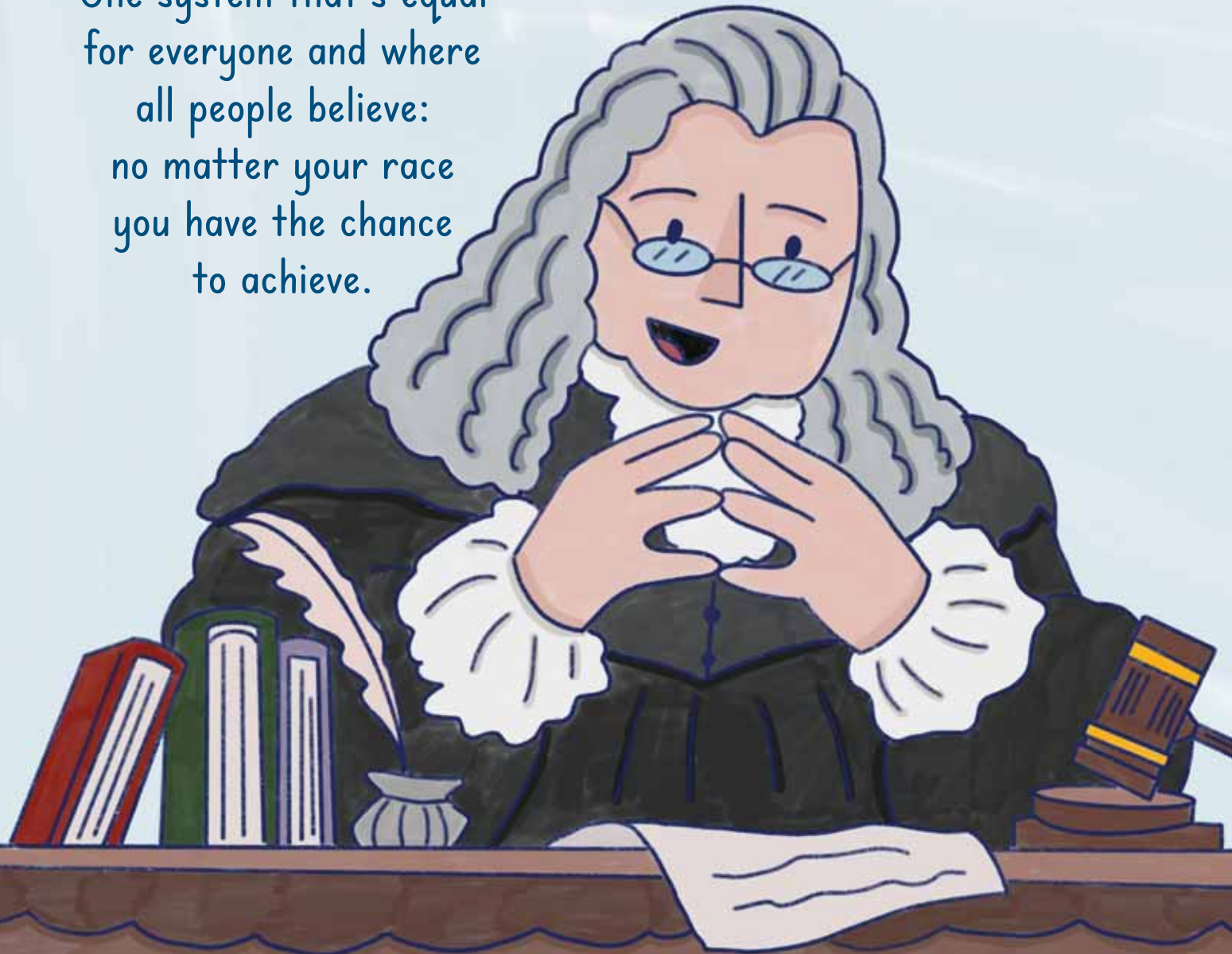


ONE BIG SCHOOL  
WITH BLACK  
AND WHITE KIDS!

It took a lot of doing,  
but with help  
he got it done.

It took Iowa's  
highest court to make  
two schools into one.

One system that's equal  
for everyone and where  
all people believe:  
no matter your race  
you have the chance  
to achieve.



...THAT'S WHEN  
the rules all changed

...THAT'S WHEN  
her world was  
rearranged AND...

THAT'S WHEN Susie  
found the courage  
to be brave.

That summer she finished  
her first school  
and entered the  
high school grades.



That summer she played  
with new friends that she met...  
but whatever she did,  
she just couldn't forget.

Soon summer would pass  
and the rules had to change...  
Going to a new high school...  
It all felt so strange.




A new school that didn't want her to come in,  
just because brown  
was the color of her skin.

She begged "Daddy please  
I don't want to go!  
I want to stay at my school  
with the people I know.

Our school is the  
best school around,  
with kids that look like us  
and don't put us down!"





"The new school  
doesn't want us there.  
They were **MEAN** to us...  
and it just isn't fair.  
They don't like our  
smiles, or our skin,  
or our hair!"

"WE TRIED TO GO THERE!"  
she started to shout, "We all three went there,  
and they just kicked us OUT!"

I felt so bad when teacher said...  
'You must be Susie Clark!  
Please go back home now,  
your skin is too dark!'

Then teacher said,

'Get your relatives too,  
this school has no room for you!'"

"Now, that's enough Susie," her father said,  
"Go to your room now and rest on your bed.

I'll be in soon,  
we've got some talking to do.

You'll understand things better  
when I explain them to you."

Susie went to her room,  
Rebecca and Alex outside.  
She grabbed her favorite pillow,  
then laid down and cried.



Mom went to the kitchen to make some tea.

Grandmother said to dad, "I'll talk to her...  
she'll listen to me."

Grandmother sat on her bed,  
and dried Susie's eyes  
"Shhh...sweet Susie,  
it's okay to cry!

Cry tonight and get it all done.  
With the new morning there will be a new sun."



"It's hard for you to understand today,  
but it just couldn't be any other way.  
We've always taught you the golden rule.  
We use it at home and use it at school.

Your father is a leader in making the rules right.  
There are others that will help in this fight.  
Progress will take time,  
it won't happen overnight... BUT...  
the best NEW RULE  
will be one EQUAL SCHOOL...

And your time is coming fast  
to impact the future, so we don't repeat the past."

"But I'm just a kid,  
I don't know how to fight!  
You shouldn't even  
ask me, that doesn't  
seem right!"

"Goodnight, my sweet  
Susie, your mother will be in,  
I know she can help you  
understand how to begin."





Soon Mother came in with chamomile tea.  
She then lit a candle so they both could see.

As they sat on the bed by candlelight  
Susan learned all about her brave ancestors' fight.

Mother began,  
"I was young once like you,  
and I can't even tell you  
the things I've been through."



"I can tell you it took courage...  
and all that I had.  
When I was a baby,  
I was taken from my mom and dad.

Before I was taken,  
passed along with me,  
was a package of courage  
in these okra seeds.

From the Motherland  
and through all the years, they're still here tonight  
to help calm your fears."

"The Motherland?"



Susie marveled as Mother opened her hand.  
In her hand were round seeds  
the prettiest color of green.

"Yes! From the Motherland,  
where our ancestors were Queens.  
Against all odds, and all the way to Muscatine!

This seed brought from Africa generations ago,  
year after year,  
we've reaped and we've sown.

Like the seed is our family,  
growing stronger every generation.  
Which led up to you, to lead the whole NATION!"



"I know you're worried, but here's what I'll do,  
I'll braid a crown of courage for you!

No one will see it,  
but you'll feel it there.

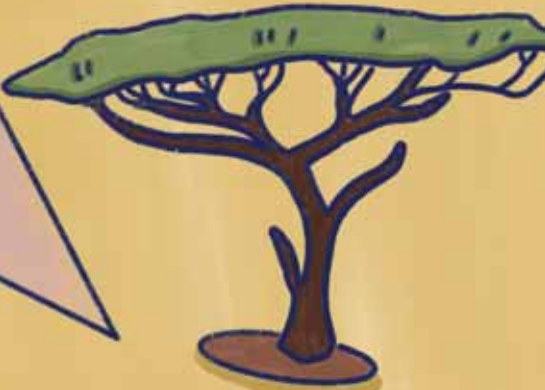
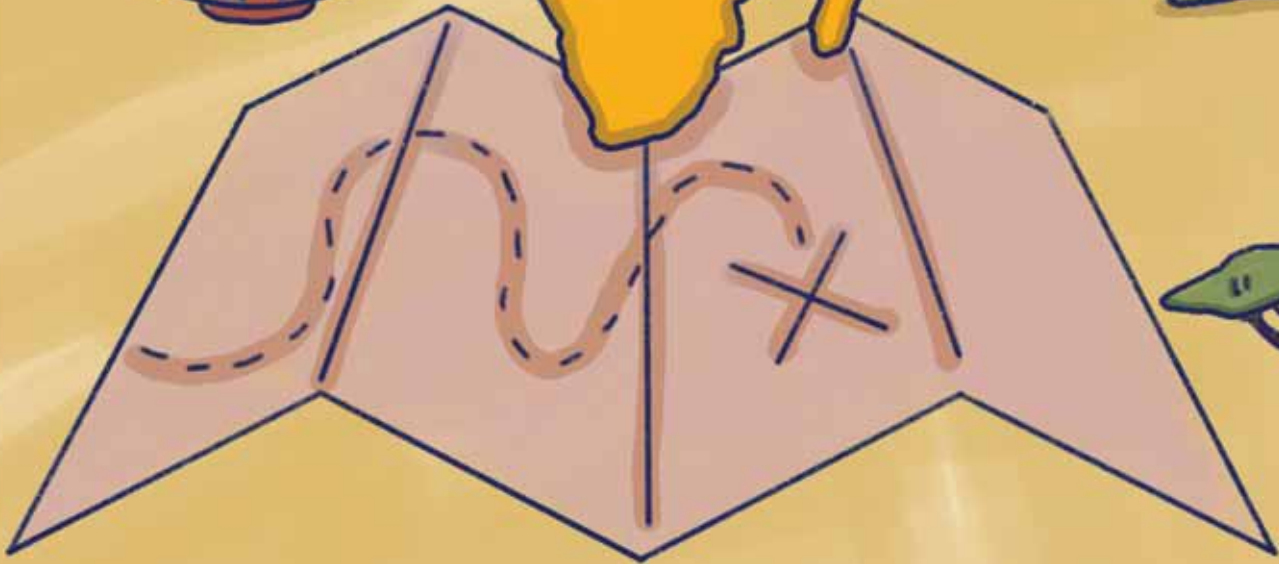
Then remember the courage braided deep in your hair.

Think of me and *MY* courage, then think of your crown.  
Walk tall in your power that's been passed down."

Mother kissed her goodnight. They said the Lord's Prayer.  
She picked up their cups, then Daddy was there.



AFRICA





"Iowa will have one equal school system,  
no matter your race.

This means the high school in town  
couldn't make you go home  
just because your skin is brown!

It won't be easy, but it will be okay.  
There will be nice people helping along the way.

You were born  
in the right place and time  
to be a leader—  
it's your time to shine!"



Susie felt her courage building up inside.  
She felt her mother's pain, and she felt her family's pride.

Her parents were teaching her to be strong.  
Now she knew she could be brave  
and help others get along.

That summer came and went the way summers always do.  
Soon autumn rolled around  
and it was time for school.

The summer of 1868 was a summer to remember  
because of all the fun they had,  
right up to September!



All the way until that weekend before  
the Clark kids took that walk they all adored.  
They climbed their hilly mountains.  
They sailed on "Papoose Sea"  
counted all the stinky pigs again,  
1, 2, 3!

BUT NOW...

The mountains seemed more like hills,  
and the sea looked like Papoose Creek.  
The pigs were still stinky,  
but not nearly as fun to seek.

They were all older now, more wise and even smart.  
Susie had gained the  
courage for a brave  
new start.



So...THE NIGHT BEFORE HER FIRST DAY,



as Mother placed the last  
seeds in the very last part,  
she braided the courage  
from the past  
for Susie's  
fresh new start.





Then Mother tied a scarf on Susie's head  
to keep her hair in place,  
she bent over one last time and caressed her face.

"When tomorrow comes, you'll have to do your best.  
Show up at the new school,  
and let your courage do the rest."

Susie was more than ready.  
She knew what dress to wear;  
she felt she had the courage with the seeds in her hair.



Those wonderful seeds from the Motherland,  
the prettiest color of green,  
made Susie feel not just like "Susie,"  
but "QUEEN SUSIE OF MUSCATINE!"

THE BRAVEST GIRL YOU'VE EVER SEEN!

Susie walked tall in her power  
on the first day of school.  
Some kids knew who she was,  
and they thought she was cool.



Soon two school systems became one with all kids together.  
Susie's dad changed the rules  
and made it so much better.

Susie's story is so important,  
and really HAS to be told.  
She impacted the future at only thirteen years old!

The future came in 1954 when the  
US Supreme Court opened history's door.

The fall of 1868  
was an autumn for the books.  
Queen Susie and her Dad made IOWA take a look.



Now Susie Clark has a school  
with her name in her town.

SUSAN CLARK  
JUNIOR HIGH

SUSAN CLARK  
JUNIOR HIGH





A blurry, low-angle photograph of a road with a yellow center line, viewed from a vehicle's perspective. The image is heavily blurred, suggesting motion or a shallow depth of field. The text "With lots of kids," is centered in the middle of the image.

With lots of kids,

Black, white, and brown!





**THE END**

## Author's Note

### Susan V. Clark 1854-1925

From Jean Clark: "Susan V. Clark was just 13 when she became the first Black student in the United States to integrate a public school through a court order. Her lawsuit, decided by the Iowa Supreme Court in 1868, gave all Iowa children the right to attend public school regardless of race, religion, nationality, or any other distinction.

Segregated schools were the norm in many states until the 1954 US Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Susan's case contributed to that landmark decision.

In 1871, Susan Clark finished high school with honors as Iowa's first Black high school graduate. She was chosen as one of the graduation speakers because of her high moral character and leadership."

While writing this book as a mother and grandmother of African American children, and understanding the challenges of today's society, I had to immerse myself in Black lore, legend, and culture through generations of survival. I had to find the inner strength it took each of my ancestors

to have an impact on future generations in order to understand what true strength lies within us. That's where the okra seed idea stemmed from.

I learned that many African women braided rice or other seeds into their hair to prevent starvation on their way to enslavement via the Middle Passage. Often the enslaved braided seeds into their children's hair before being sent away to other plantations so they could eat.

Although we can't be certain Susan's mother braided an okra crown in her hair for courage, we do know historically that Black people relied on all they had to survive and often needed to be creative and resourceful in encouraging their children. I know one of the main challenges I faced parenting in this century was to hold off the horrors of reality our children will learn soon enough.

I felt the need to go back in time to try to imagine every perspective of each family member and their connection to Susan's story. Her paternal great-grandparents were a white enslaver (whose surname was Clark) and a Black woman of whom little is known. He emancipated their son John Clark along with Rebecca Darnes, both described as being of mixed race. John and Rebecca gave birth to Susan's father, Alexander.

In May 1842, at age 16, Alexander Clark settled in Muscatine (then known as Bloomington), Iowa. After getting established, Clark married Catherine Griffin of Iowa City on October 9, 1848, and the couple had three children: Susan, Alexander Jr., and Rebecca (named after her grandmother). In this story, I introduce the sad fact that Catherine was taken from her parents and given as a "gift" to a white family at age three. She was emancipated much later in her life and was described as "of African and Indian origin."

I felt that Catherine wanted to pass on the family's courage to her brave young daughter Susan. Since this family wasn't too far removed from Africa, the okra seeds (which originate in West Africa) began to lend themselves to a story line for me.

Researching the story of the Clark family enabled me to witness the fortitude and creativity this family represents in US history.

Because of the strength and courage this family exhibited, the United States was able to see how long overdue desegregation was when the Supreme Court considered Susan Clark's case when issuing its *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling on May 17, 1954.

Although Grandmother Rebecca acknowledged "progress takes time, it won't happen overnight," I'm sure she never imagined it would take nearly another century to integrate schools across the country.

Having the honor to shine a light on this family in a children's book has been particularly meaningful for me, as I am a grandmother now. Like Susan's grandmother, I understand better about progress. In my lifetime, I've witnessed that it comes in waves.

I feel our country has experienced another wave of progress since summer 2020. I hope this story helps encourage everyone to do what you can to ride this wave and make progress toward a more inclusive understanding of those around us.

## Historical Note from the Alexander Clark Foundation

This picture book beautifully simplifies for young readers a decades-long struggle for civil rights in a period before, during, and after the Civil War. It offers an imagined glimpse into the true story of an African American child and her family who overcame barriers to equal access to education.

Slavery never existed officially in the new state of Iowa, but it was not yet a welcoming place for Black people who were a small minority of the population and relegated to inferior status. Yet Iowa was first in the nation to establish a state law that "Two schools should be one."

Black children of all ages attended Muscatine's small "African" school with no grade levels. Several primary schools for white students fed into two grammar schools, the highest education level for

most people of the time. Grammar School No. 2 turned away Alexander Clark's children after all three attended two days in 1865. We do not know if Alexander Jr. tried again in 1867 along with Susan, but their father sued in her name alone. Home schooled in 1867-68 during the lawsuit, she then entered Muscatine High School at age 14 after the Iowa Supreme Court ruled in her favor.

The high school was quite new, with admission by examination. Susan was its first Black student, and her brother, Alexander Jr., was the second, as far as we know. It is reported that their sister Rebecca graduated sometime too, but school records were lost in a fire.

Much is known of Alexander Clark's forty-plus years as a leader in the equality cause.

Explore this history at <https://iowa.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/alexander-clark>.









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