

Good evening,

My name is Elmer Fonza, I am here to talk about Nelson Bell, a black gold miner and land owner who lived in Coloma, California from 1850 until his death in 1869. He is my 3<sup>rd</sup> Great Grandfather.

In 1790 Nelson was born into slavery on the John Gregory plantation in Mecklenburg, Virginia. It was customary during that time for slaves to take the surnames of their masters. At the age of 20 Nelson was allowed to marry and have children. In 1816 John Gregory died and Nelson and his family were sold. Across the southern states, slaves were generally prohibited by law from entering into any legally binding marriage. The wife and children were bought by a man name Mr. Finch while Nelson was sold to a slave trader and taken to New Orleans. Nelson later became the property of James Sparks and returned to Virginia. At that time Nelson took a second wife and after the death of James Sparks, in approximately 1820, Nelson became the property of a Mr. Bell, Nelson was valued at \$600.00. It was at that time that Nelson took the surname Bell. Between the years 1833 and 1850 Nelson Bell and his wife had three sons; Nelson Bell jr, Phillip Bell (my 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Grandfather) and Paul Bell. During that time his wife and Children were sold and taken to Kentucky. In 1850 Nelson came to Coloma California with Mr. Bell and was given his freedom shortly thereafter. In 1856 a free Nelson Bell purchased several parcels of land (approximately eleven plus acres) in and around the town of Coloma where he worked driving a water wagon and mined for gold.

Nelson died in January 1869. The cause of his death is unknown since death certificates were not required until 1900. Within a few days after Nelson's death his land and personal property were put into probate. The personal property was later sold by the probate administrator, but the sale of his land was not recorded in the probate report. However, the probate report did list his real property as a dwelling house and land adjoining the town of Coloma, which was bounded on the North by Maine St, on the East by Martin Fleming's property, on the South and West by Jonas Wilder's property. Also, the land fronting Maine St., belonging Nelson had four Chinese tenement houses on it, valued at \$300.00. The land once owned by Nelson Bell is now part of a California State Park. It is unclear how the State acquired the land once owned by Nelson Bell. We believe it was by eminent domain.

As I look back on my family's journey, I can only imagine the hardship that Nelson Bell must have endured. Living in slavery for more than 60 years, having two of his families sold during that time, unworthy of family love, care, and support. The joy he must have felt upon becoming free prior to the end of the Civil War. He was now able to be paid wages for his labor, own land and accumulate wealth for his family.

Nelson Bell descendants may have experienced a better quality of life if his wealth was past on to future generations. There was no effort made by the State of California to contact his sons; Nelson Bell Jr. and Phillip Bell, who were both alive and working in Virginia as laborers during 1867. Nelson Bell Jr. died in 1914 still living in Virginia and working as a laborer.

Things may have been different for Nelson's Great Grandson, William Bell Jr. who did more than 20 years in Iowa State Penitentiary or for his Great Grand Daughter Ethel Bell my Grandmother who was raped by a white man when she was 15 years old and got pregnant with my Mother Blossom Bell. My mother married Hallie Fonza and raised 7 kids on a 4<sup>th</sup> grade education. We lived on the Southside of Des Moines Iowa, an area known as the "Dirty Bottoms". There were dirt roads, no sidewalks and our house had no running water or inside bathroom. Every spring the river would over flow and flood our yard with toxic waste filled water for weeks at a time. My mother worked as a cook and my father was a butcher at the slaughter house. My Mother died not knowing her family history, with the exception of her Grandfather, William Bell. But, she made sure that all her kids graduated from high school. However, the negative environment of poverty that existed influenced my oldest brother and I to make poor choices, for instance we both did time in the penitentiary. However, my other siblings made better choices to escape poverty. For instance, my other brother, who is here with me today, filed a Civil Rights law suit against the City Of Des Moines and became the first Black Fire Fighter in the State of Iowa. He went on to become the Fire Chief in the City of Compton, California. One of my sisters was a member of the Platters, a well known singing group and sang all over the world. Another sister was in charge of purchasing for the Kaiser Corporation. We had to fight racism all our lives, both in Iowa and California. We must continue to fight for what was taken from or denied to us as a people.

On behalf of the descendants of Nelson Bell, thank you for inviting us here today to tell our family story. We rightfully believe that we have been denied the generational wealth that our family may have been entitled to if given our rightful inheritance, the land once owned by Nelson Bell.