

THE FREEDOM TO HAVE FUN

A LESSON FROM THE LIFE OF SARAH E. RAY



Born Sarah Elizabeth Cole in 1917, Sarah was raised in rural Tennessee. As a child, she loved to read, but segregation made it difficult for her to get an education. She dropped out of school in the 9th grade and at age 18, she married Frank Ray. The couple headed to Detroit in the mid-1930s, becoming part of [the Great Migration](#), the mass exodus of African Americans out of the South to escape [Jim Crow](#) laws and to find greater opportunity in the North, Midwest and West.

WHO WAS SARAH ELIZABETH RAY?

Now married, Sarah Elizabeth Ray enrolled in secretarial school with the Detroit Ordinance Department, where she was the only African American in her class. Given her love for learning, it must have been a glorious day when she received her certification and joined her 13 white classmates in a celebration.

On June 21, 1945, the class lined up to take a cruise on the "Boblo Boat," a ferry that cruised the Detroit River and took people to the Boblo Island amusement park in Canada. At the time, "Negroes and [zoot suiters](#)¹," were banned from general admission to the boat. (There were special days and times when African Americans could occasionally ride.) As the group boarded the ferry, Sarah got a few stares, but she was allowed to join her friends on the top deck. Before the boat set sail, officials asked her to leave. At first Sarah refused, but when her teacher said, "She will leave quietly," Sarah decided to leave without causing a bigger scene. When the boat company refunded her money, she threw it at the boat.

Sarah watched from the shore as the boat sailed away with her classmates to celebrate their graduation together on Boblo Island. Furious, she went to the Detroit office of the NAACP which filed a lawsuit challenging the company's racist policies. Famous NAACP lawyer [Thurgood Marshall](#) filed a brief on her behalf before the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1948, the highest court ruled in Sarah's favor in [Bob-Lo Excursion Co. v. Michigan](#). This was nearly a decade before [Rosa Parks](#)' history-making bus ride in Montgomery, Alabama!

Sarah's case became part of the NAACP's strategy to end legal discrimination in the United States. In 1954, the NAACP reached its goal, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separation of the races was inherently unequal.

¹ [Mariana Viera](#), "How the Zoot Suit Became a Symbol of Resistance for Mexican-American People" *Teen Vogue*, September 21, 2018. "The zoot suit — a style of suit defined by exaggerated shoulder pads, high-waisted ballooned trousers cuffed at the ankle, and long, gleaming watch chains — [can be directly traced](#) back to black dance halls in New York City's Harlem neighborhood in the mid-1930s, where its creators found the oversize fit and cuffed ankles ideal for moving freely on the dance floor. A decade later, black and non-black working-class people around the country could be seen donning an ensemble perceived by the white middle-class as gaudy, even offensive. It was flamboyant in every possible way, [a conscious call to attention](#) and much more than a fashion statement."

THE FILM & ANALYSIS



Click above to show the 4-minute film.

Afterwards, ask the students to put themselves in Sarah Ray's shoes, and prompt feedback by asking the discussion questions.

How would you feel about yourself as you watched your classmates leave you behind?

How would you feel about the teacher and your fellow classmates?

How would you feel about the Boblo Boat company?

FREEDOM TO HAVE FUN

We have all heard about the efforts of African Americans to gain equal access to the most basic aspects of life: work, education, transportation, housing, and the right to vote. We should remember that discrimination also applied to life's simple joys — from where you could picnic, to where you could swim, play baseball, or even get ice cream. That's because, according to historian Victoria W. Wolcott, "Protecting one's family, for many whites, included protecting recreational spaces from black invasions."²

Think about how it would feel if your access to parks, movie theaters, sports, beaches, concerts, swimming pools, and skating rinks was based upon the color of your skin. For many young people in Sarah's day, this was the sad reality. While adults fought for broad civil rights, young people often fought for the freedom to have fun in their cities and towns.³

"There was another group that is often overlooked in our understanding of mid century civil rights," wrote Wolcott, "the many children and teenagers who ventured into newly opened pools and parks to demand social equality on their own timeline."⁴

By forcing the integration of the Boblo Boat, Sarah Ray was part of the youth movement to ensure equal access to fun.

² Wolcott, Victoria W., *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) pp. 47-48.

³ Victoria Wolcott, "[The Forgotten History of Segregated Swimming Pools and Amusement Parks](#)," *University of Buffalo Now*, July 11, 2019

⁴ Wolcott, *Race, Riots*, 87.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There were racial conflicts in Detroit in the 1940s in recreational places, including a major [race riot](#) on [Belle Isle](#) in 1943.⁵ During that riot, 34 people died, 25 of whom were African American. Sarah Ray must have been aware of this in 1945, and aware that the Boblo Boat was closed to blacks, except on specific days. Why do you think that she boarded the boat anyway?

Possible Answers:

- She felt entitled to be there.
- She assumed that if anyone denied her passage, her friends would speak up for her.
- She believed she had "honorary status" because whites had invited her.
- She felt "special" from other African Americans who had tried to board because of her educational achievement.

2. Ray's case caught the attention of the NAACP, and the famous lawyer Thurgood Marshall filed a brief in her defense before the U.S. Supreme Court. But there is no evidence that she was part of an organized effort to end discrimination on the Boblo Boat, or that she'd had a premeditated plan to cause "[good trouble](#)" on the Boblo Boat. What did she risk by acting spontaneously as an individual?

Possible Answers:

- Intimidation from the company, courts, public.
- Threats to her safety.
- Loss of job/friends/social stature.
- Criticism of her life/personality/choices.



Sarah E. Ray and Father Robert Zerafa, Detroit, 1971 - courtesy of Detroit News

3. Sarah was interviewed in 2006 when she was 88 years old. She told her interviewer that she never set foot on the Boblo Boat again, even after her 1948 Supreme Court win. In fact, over the course of her life, she rarely spoke about her involvement with the case. Why do you think she rarely spoke about her role in history?

Note: We have not been able to confirm her reasons in our research. But this question is designed to get students to think about the trauma, and the long-lasting mental anguish that our civil rights heroes may have endured in their quest for equality. Sarah Ray may have decided to never forgive the company for the hurt, betrayal, and humiliation she withstood that day in 1945. She may have been so traumatized that she could not bear to return to the boat.

⁵There are many photos of the 1943 race riot in the Walther P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University. You can access them free [here](#).

4. Ray's case became part of the test cases that the NAACP used in their strategy to end legal segregation in the United States. Almost a decade after Sarah's case, the Supreme Court struck down school segregation with the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. But remnants of discrimination in areas of leisure remain today. Can you think of ways "certain people" are still barred from parks, pools, resorts, or other areas of leisure?

Possible Answers:

- High fees
- Gated communities
- Members-only facilities/clubs
- Leisure facilities located in remote areas/places not serviced by public transportation
- Designated times when an establishment caters to an ethnic audience (Urban music night, Latin night, etc.)
- Curfews
- Licenses



US Supreme Court rules in Sarah's favor, 1948


5. Let's look at the "2021 Word of the Year" selected by Dictionary.com: **allyship**. What is [allyship](#)?

- Ask the students for their definitions and talk about what an ally is and is not.
- **IMPORTANT NOTE:** This should not be a conversation focused only upon whites being allies of people of color. Allies come from all walks of life. People of color may be allies for those with different abilities. LGBTQ people may be allies for environmental justice, etc.

[Dictionary.com](#)

[Merriam-Webster](#)

2021 WORD OF THE YEAR | SEE WHY

allyship [al-ahy-ship] [SHOW IPA](#)  

noun


- 1 the status or role of a person who advocates and actively works for the inclusion of a marginalized or politicized group in all areas of society, not as a member of that group but in solidarity with its struggle and point of view and under its leadership:

Genuine allyship does not come with special recognition—we do not get awards for confronting issues people have to live with every day.

- 2 the relationship or status of persons, groups, or nations associating and cooperating with one another for a common cause or purpose:

In 1943, fearing that earlier racist immigration laws would hinder allyship with China in the war against Japan, the U.S. passed legislation allowing 105 Chinese immigrants per year.

allyship noun

 Save Word

al-ly-ship | \ 'a-,lī-,ship 4, ə-'lī-\

Definition of allyship

: the state or condition of being an **ally**: supportive association with another person or group

// The rest of the third season of House of Cards details a fumbled *allyship* between the Russian president and President Frank Underwood.

— R. A. Farley

specifically: such association with the members of a marginalized or mistreated group to which one does not belong

// The actress also shared how her *allyship* with the LGBT community played a part in her interest in playing Shelly Pfefferman in "Transparent."

— Mariah Cooper

6. Sarah Ray's classmates and her teacher should have been her natural allies. Yet, in the moment that Sarah was ousted from the Boblo Boat, they did nothing. What are some of the reasons that Sarah's teacher and classmates failed to be an ally?

Possible Answers:

- They didn't want to give up the privilege of having fun on the boat that day.
- They were intimidated by the boat staff/the other people on the boat.
- They didn't want to be labeled as allies for people of color (and jeopardize their status in their families, jobs, neighborhoods).
- They felt Sarah Ray would understand since she was black.
- They didn't want to cause a scene, or worse, start a riot.
- They didn't like Sarah Ray.
- They felt powerless.
- They felt they had to follow the rules.

7. Think about the role that young allies recently have played in social movements, including [Black Lives Matter](#), [anti-school violence](#), [LGBTQ+ rights](#), and [climate change](#). Why are allies important to creating lasting change?

Possible Answers:

- Allies help people understand why "other people's problems" are everyone's problems.
- Allies reduce the isolation of marginalized groups and help create awareness of social injustice.
- Allies lend their privilege to marginalized groups, providing access to resources denied them by historical and structural bias.

DIGGING DEEPER INTO ALLYSHIP

- Have students share stories about when they became an ally for social justice. Have them describe their fears, challenges, and victories. How did it feel? What did they learn?
- Have students write an alternate history for Sarah Ray, one in which allies took action on that day in June 1945. They can write it in the form of a newspaper article, a diary entry, or even perform a television story complete with eye witnesses. Be creative!
- Have students make collages or videos of things they love to do in the summer. Encourage them to make the representations as inclusive as possible. As they share them in groups or with the whole class, have them reflect on how those things were limited to children in Sarah's time, and how there are still barriers to fun today.
- Have students interview an older person (60+) about how they experienced racial barriers to fun when they were growing up. How was the elder's life different or similar to teen life today?
- Have students discuss current influencers and celebrities who are using their privilege and power to champion equality. How effective are they? What can you do to further their cause?

MORE RESOURCES

["And the Youth Shall Lead Us"](#)

["Youth in the Civil Rights Movement"](#)

["A Summer of Change: The Civil Rights Story of Glen Echo Park"](#)

["Racism kept Connecticut's beaches White up through the 1970s"](#)



Sarah E. Ray at 88 years old, Detroit, 2006
courtesy of William Archie, Detroit Free Press