

# Something Happened Here

*Lesley Payne*

Perhaps you would not be surprised to hear that the time when I felt the most effective as a classroom teacher was the time when I was closest to a homeschooling teaching style.

This past school year, at the end of the first semester of my stint teaching 8th grade science (see my “School Days” article in the Lent 2002 issue), I tried to find a creative way to finish up our earth science unit. On the Internet, I stumbled across lesson plans for “Something Happened Here,” an integrated unit on the Great African Rift Valley which combines earth science, biology, geography, African history and culture and pretty much anything else you might want to throw in. I felt my mostly African-American students would be particularly interested in studying the geological and cultural importance of Africa, especially since we began the unit during Black History Month.

Before we began the unit, I tracked down the recommended books and some of the videos from local libraries. From the 10-for-a-dollar magazine pile at our public library, I found several copies of the issue of *National Geographic* containing the article which inspired the unit. I never could find the poem that inspired the unit’s title – and I even emailed the university professor who wrote it!

The unit is composed of four main sections, each of which can take a day

or a week, depending on which activities you choose to do. With my classes, some of the activities were too young for them (i.e., Play-Doh fault models) and some were too complex (i.e., constructing a paper maché relief map of Africa). However, a homeschooling family or cooperative learning group might be able to complete most of the suggested activities, since different children can do different assignments.

This thorough unit includes specific expectations for what the students will learn, as well as ways of assessing whether they learned the information. There are printable maps to color, a crossword puzzle and a continent-jigsaw puzzle activity.

An easy way for homeschoolers to use the unit plan is to print out the activities and go through and highlight the activities that look useful. Most of the reading activities can be done as

## Fault Model

Download a great fault model to color and cut out for fun hands-on geology study or to go with the African Rift Valley unit:

[http://interactive2.usgs.gov/learningweb/teachers/faults\\_part1.htm](http://interactive2.usgs.gov/learningweb/teachers/faults_part1.htm)

family reading time. You could send an older student off to research Mt. Kilimanjaro while you help a younger child color and label the map of eastern Africa.

One of the most time-consuming preparations for this unit was previewing a bunch of videos to pick a few to show my students. I tried to find videos without too much in the way of lions eating antelopes, animals mating, etc. You can find tons of National Geographic videos at any public library, from generic animal programs to a 10-part political history of Africa from ancient times. I liked Discovery Channel School's video "Africa: People and Places." You can purchase this from [www.school.discovery.com/teachers](http://www.school.discovery.com/teachers). Click on "Videos." The web site includes lesson plans to go with the video. I did, as the unit suggests, show a clip from "Out of Africa" and the students were impressed. However, this is not a kids' movie and the scene in which Meryl Streep and Robert Redford are flying over the Rift Valley in a biplane is followed immediately by a scene of them in bed—so keep your thumb on the "stop" button if you want to show this clip.

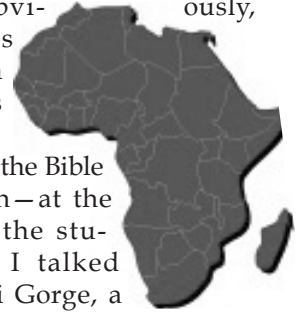
The final activity—to integrate what was learned and assess student performance—is a student-led "tour" of the African Rift Valley. Each student researches a particular area or animal (i.e., the Serengeti Plain, wildebeests) and functions as a "tour guide" in a whole-class presentation. This format would work with a co-op, but probably not a single family. However, you could do a whole-family "virtual tour" of the Rift Valley on the computer and forego the research portion of the assignment.

I found several tangents to take with my students. I managed to work in activities fulfilling the school district's requirement that students do a computer skills unit. As part of this, I wrote a "Web Quest," which you can access at <http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/fil/pages/huntthegreale.html>. The extended resource list that goes with the site is: <http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/fil/pages/listafricanle.html>.

Also, in the course of studying ancient African cultures, we discussed the stories of the Queen of Sheba and the Ethiopian official from the Bible. Obviously, homeschoolers could run much farther with this connection.

The topic of the Bible came up again—at the insistence of the students—when I talked about Olduvai Gorge, a section of the Rift Valley in which the Leakeys found "Lucy," a skeleton which some scientists believe to be the earliest pre-human ancestor discovered. To my surprise, these students, many of whom dressed like gangsters and proudly bragged about drug use, were dead-set against the idea of evolution, and even knew some of the arguments against it.

I couldn't resist a "teachable moment" like this and we openly discussed various interpretations of the Bible and scientific evidence for and against evolution. I had never seen these students so engaged in a lesson. We made a math/statistics lesson out of a classroom poll regarding evolution; 95% of the students favored the 6,000-year-old model, with 5% voting



for the old-earth creationist version. I myself waver between the latter view and divinely-guided evolution, so I had a lot of ideas to share with these students.

Another controversial topic we covered was the question of whether Africa (or, indeed, the world in general) is overpopulated. Fortunately, the United Nations released a statement warning about looming underpopulation while we were working on this unit, so I had the perfect opportunity to read them a *New York Times* article (no problem if an administrator walked in) and discuss its implications. Some messages I know hit home with most of them include the idea that the world is not overpopulated and that Planned Parenthood is a racist organization wanting to sterilize "unfit" (poor and minority) people. If these were the only lessons they learned from me, I would consider it a well-spent year.

If you want to work this topic into an African Rift Valley unit (at least with your older students), you can get up-to-date statistics and info from the Population Research Institute ([www.pop.org](http://www.pop.org)) and from Africa 2000 ([www.africa2000.com](http://www.africa2000.com)).

We even managed to study some molecular biology in this unit, including the workings of the AIDS virus ravaging Africa and the genetics that make Darwinian evolution improbable.

One of our most fruitful discussions occurred when one student asked, out of the blue, why some people have darker skin. We talked about the fact that the only differ-

ence between black and white people is the amount of the melanin pigment in their skin cells (this was news to my students). I added that recent findings of the Human Genome Project demonstrated that there is no genetic basis for dividing people into "races."

I would like to have shown my students the new Discovery Channel production, "The New Eve," a study of mitochondrial DNA which tracks a series of measurable genetic changes occurring as humans apparently migrated from Africa to Asia and then to Europe. This is not on video yet, so you will have to check Discovery Channel's web site for show times.

One additional tie-in I was able to provide for some of my students was a trip to UCSD to see a production of "Children of Uganda," a folk dancing and singing production by a group of orphans from Uganda. This incredible performance had added meaning for my son and myself; after the show, we discussed the way these Catholic Africans had merged their culture with Catholicism. Many of the songs were hymns to the Blessed Mother and many of the dances were from liturgical celebrations. Unfortunately, the group just completed their 2002 Tour of Light and they do not have another tour scheduled until 2004. You can get info about the group, purchase their CD or sponsor a child by visiting the Uganda Children's Charity Fund web site ([www.uccf.org](http://www.uccf.org)).

*You can find this African Rift Valley unit on-line at <http://fga.freac.fsu.edu/academy/afrift.htm>. The site has other creative geography lesson plans, including a sports-themed U.S. geography unit.*

