

THE MYSTERIOUS MELUNGEONS

Recently my husband's sister, Carolyn Kirby Parsley, Mechanicsville, VA, sent to me an article from the RICHMOND NEWS LEADER, concerning the Melungeons. The author, Rex Springston, has granted permission for us to use the following material from his article, which I have summarized, and also added comments.

More than 200 years ago explorers crossing the mountains into E. Tennessee and S.W. Virginia encountered a mysterious clan. These people lived peacefully among the Indians and spoke a variety of Elizabethan English, it was said. These strangers, with dark skin and hair, high cheekbones and thin lips, were neither white nor Indian and came to be called Melungeons--perhaps from the French "melange," or mixture, though no one knows. (I have read of isolated areas of N.C. in which almost pure Elizabethan English is spoken, but did not know it was spoken by the Melungeons. Ed.)

The Melungeons have been the subjects of scholarly studies and many mountain legends. Some of the theories link them to shipwrecked Portuguese sailors who married Indians as they moved west, and to the "Lost Colony," but their origin remains unsolved. And they are disappearing--the young people are leaving and the old people are dying. Some say that instead of dying out, they are everywhere--no longer living in remote mountain cabins but working in every walk of life and being assimilated into society.

Melungeon communities once existed in Lee and Scott Cos., VA, particularly in the Jonesville, Pennington Gap, and Blackwater areas--and to the south in Hancock Co., TN. Their most famous settlement was Newman's Ridge, in Hancock & Lee Cos., which was home to several hundred of the clan before the job exodus began in the 1950's. Newman's Ridge is a 2,499-foot high Appalachian range winding 25 miles through E. Tennessee and SW Virginia, between the Clinch River and Panther Creek. The ridge, reached by twisting, two-lane roads, lies about 400 mi. W. of Richmond.

Today only a handful of families there bear Melungeon names. Some of the most prominent names are Collins, Gibson, Johnson, and Mullins, names which give no hint of Portuguese ancestry. (I have friends here in Arlington who are descendants of the Madearis family, the name reportedly coming from a Portuguese sailor. Cavaliers and Pioneers, Vol. II, by Nugent, shows that Domingo Maderes and James Johnson were granted land on 8 Apr. 1668, "deserted, & now granted by order, &c. Imp. of 10 pers:" to Mr. Zachery Lewis, 500 acres King & Queen Co., on 20 Apr. 1694, "Beg. neare the Draggon Swamp; along land granted to Thomas Clayborne, now belonging to Mr. Christopher Lewis, &c." I find it interesting that my friends also come from the Brown Family which has all the "B" names: Benjamin, Benajah, Barzillai, Benoni, Bernis, etc. Editor).

One of the most famous Melungeons was Mahala "Big Haley" Mullins, who was a renowned moonshiner before the turn of the century. (Mahala seems to have been a popular name among the Cherokees also). She reportedly grew so large she could not walk out her door. Her handsome, but deteriorating two-story log house still stands on Newman's Ridge and it has been suggested that the house be moved and preserved, but the owner refuses to part with it. In the meantime, people rip pieces off it, and local residents fear it will burn.

An early report of the Melungeons may have occurred in 1673 when ABRAHAM WOOD, an explorer with a trading post near present-day Petersburg, VA, sent a party into previously unknown territory, believed to now be E. Tennessee. The men reported "a white people which have long bearded and whiskers and wears clothing," Wood wrote. (Could Abraham Wood be the ancestor of the Pennington/Wood group in Arkansas, from the Abraham Pennington line?) John Sevier, part

of a surveying group, and later first governor of Tennessee, wrote a better, more detailed report in 1784, which tells of finding in the E. Tennessee mountains a settlement of "dark-skinned people." Records of two prominent Melungeons, Vardy Collins and Shepard Gibson, are found in Hancock County in the 1780's.

White settlers reacted to their dark-skinned, reclusive neighbors with suspicion and prejudice--feelings that persisted until recent times. Henry R. Price, a Rogersville, TN, attorney and amateur historian, has known and studied Melungeons for more than 35 years. "There was a time here when anyone with dark skin was suspect, whether Indian or Negro," Price said. At the urging of E. Tennesseans, the state's constitution was changed in 1834 to declare Melungeons "free persons of color," which was the equivalent of declaring them black. Under the law, they could not vote or sue whites. While some had their right to vote questioned, many others acted as whites and continued to vote, pay taxes and buy land. During segregation, Melungeons were sometimes forced to attend black schools, and often responded by simply keeping their children home.

Nothing is more strange about the Melungeons than the theories of their origin. Some suggest they are descended from members of the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island off the North Carolina coast. The English colonists who had arrived in 1587 had vanished without a trace when a second expedition arrived three years later. Under the theory, the first colonists--perhaps to escape hostile Indians--moved west and intermarried with friendly ones to become the forebears of the Melungeons. Some of the Melungeons, in fact, claim Portuguese heritage. (I have often pondered about the "Spanish-sounding" names in some of our families. Ed.)

(There are many reminders of vanished peoples in Middle Tennessee. One of the most persistent legends was that they had been of the white race. Among the Shawnees is a tradition that all of Tennessee and Kentucky were once settled by whites who were exterminated in a great battle at Falls of the Ohio. Filson of KY and others thought these white people had originally come from Wales. Literature is available dealing with the tradition of "Welsh speaking Indians," supposedly descendants of Modoc and his followers who sailed from Wales in 1170. Some of the stories originated with early Welsh settlers who could converse with the Indians. Ed.)

(An EARLY HISTORY OF WARREN COUNTY, TN, by Will T. Hale tells of early settlers finding in 1811, in a cave 20 mi. from McMinnville, the bones of a male and female buried in baskets constructed with considerable skill. Both bodies had been dislocated at the hips and placed erect in the baskets, each with a cover of cane. The flesh was undecayed, dry, and of a brown color. A well-dressed deer skin was around the female, and a mantle of bark and feathers three feet wide and six feet long. In her hand was a fan made of the tail feathers of a turkey, to open and close at pleasure. And strangely, her hair was yellow and of a fine texture. Her discoverers wondered if she was the white squaw of some chief. "She seemed to be not more than 14 years of age, and may have been a captive from some early white settlement and adopted by the Indians; or the two may have been representatives of a race of Asiatics who had come to this country centuries ago." Ed.)

Because the Melungeons are fiercely private, wanting only to be left alone, they have been regarded by some outsiders as barbaric and even dangerous. Mothers told their children to behave "or the Melungeons will get you." The word "Melungeon" became a slur and only in recent years have some Melungeons used the word comfortably. Most of the Melungeons were honest, hard-working people who didn't worry about convention or dress. They loved fishing and hunting, and were good with livestock and skilled at finding ginseng ("sang") and edible plants.

As some of them began to earn college degrees and hold respected positions, the old tensions eased. In 1969, residents of Sneedville, county seat of Hancock, "seized upon the idea of staging an outdoor drama about Melungeons that would instill pride and, at the same time, draw a few tourists to the economically troubled area." The play, "Walk Toward the Sunset," first drew fair-sized crowds, but they dwindled away by the mid-1970's.

Concerning religion, Melungeons chose the Protestant "fire-and-brimstone" variety. In some of the Pentecostal churches on the ridge, the worshipers "speak in tongues, writhe on the floor when the spirit moves them, and "pray all night, if necessary, to save a soul." When Ruth Johnson was growing up on Newman's Ridge, "Melungeon" was a fighting word. Today she is proud to call herself one. She has vivid memories of a handful of worshipers who held rattlesnakes and copperheads as a sign of their faith in God's protection. At a church service, "They'd get 'em out and handle 'em when they'd get to shoutingThey'd be holding that snake and the next thing you know that dang thing's looking right at you." If someone got bitten, it meant a lack of faith. Miss Johnson states that a lot of Melungeons are still around, but "on Newman's Ridget' the wilderness is reclaiming the log cabins, lonely chimneys, old root cellars and graves marked with flat, wordless stones."

From: Mary A. Kirby

ABRAHAM WOOD

From the Richmond Book Store last summer I purchased the book, ADVENTURERS OF PURSE AND PERSON - VIRGINIA 1607-1624/5, Rev. & Ed. by Virginia M. Meyer & John Frederick Dorman, pub. by Order of First Families of Virginia, 3rd Ed. 1987. The book cost \$85.00, but is a goldmine for early Virginia researchers. Look for it in your local library, or better yet, order one.

On p. 695 begins an article on Abraham Wood. A footnote after his name lists a book by Augusta B. Fothergill, PETER JONES AND RICHARD JONES GENEALOGIES (Richmond, 1924), pp. 303-11. In a muster 4 Feb. 1624/5, Abraham Wood was listed as "10 years of age, came to Virginia in 1620 in the MARGARET AND JOHN and was among those living at Capt. Samuel Mathews' plantation across the river from Jamestown, where he was recorded also, 1623/4. In all probability he was an orphan."

On 31 Dec. 1636, Abraham, jointly with Richard Johnson and Roger Davis, leased from Ralph Wyatt for 21 years a tract on SIZEMORE'S CREEK, and extending to the rock in Appomattox River. He patented 400 a. in Charles City Co. on the Appomattox River adj. lands of JOHN BAKER and Joseph Bourne on 14 May 1638, and another patent for 200 a. in Henrico Co. on N. side of Appomattox River "Deere unto the great Rocke and opposite land of John Baker on 8 June 1639." These two tracts, with 100 acres added, were incorporated in a patent for 700 a. in Henrico Co. on Sizemore's Creek granted to him 20 Oct. 1642.

Fort Henry was an outpost built 1645/6 near the falls of Appomattox River as protection against the Indians, and was probably on Flea Island, near Abraham Wood's plantation. The Assembly which authorized the outpost shortly found maintenance of the fort too great and authorized "Capt. Abraham Wood whose service hath been employed att Forte Henery to be the undertaker for the said Forte, unto whom is granted six hundred acres of land for him and his heirs for ever; with all houses and edifices...all boats and ammunition...provided that....Capt. Wood do maintayne and keepe ten men constantly upon the place for the teme of three yeares...". This 600 a. was included in a patent for 1,557 a. lying at Fort Henry granted to Ma; Abraham Wood 9 June 1653.

Abraham Wood served as a justice of Charles City Co. and commanding officer of the "trained bands" of Charles City and Henrico Cos., holding the rank