

John Fox Jr. wrote two stories that had Melungeon characters-- he often included them in early 'drafts' but usually changed the characterizations before publication. This short story, called "Through the Gap," was published in 1897, in the collection, *Hell-fer-Sartin and Other stories* He is referring to Big Stone Gap, (the gap in Wise County's Stone Mountain and a gateway to Lee Co., VA, Bell Co. and Harlan Co., Ky, and also toward Cumberland Gap, and thus Hancock Co., TN). Notice how Fox uses 'Malungian' and 'half-breed' interchangeably; of what 'ethnic' background is the woman? What's her relationship to the 'Malungian'?

THROUGH THE GAP

by John Fox Jr.

WHEN thistles go adrift, the sun sets down the valley between the hills; when snow comes, it goes down behind the Cumberland and streams through a great fissure that people call the Gap. Then the last light drenches the parson's cottage under Imboden Hill, and leaves an after-glow of glory on a majestic heap that lies against the east. Sometimes it spans the Gap with a rainbow.

Strange people and strange tales come through this Gap from the Kentucky hills. Through it came these two, late one day -- a man and a woman -- afoot. I met them at the foot-bridge over Roaring Fork.

"Is thar a preacher anywhar aroun' hyeh?" he asked.

I pointed to the cottage under Imboden Hill. The girl flushed slightly and turned her head away with a rather unhappy smile. Without a word, the mountaineer led the way towards town. A moment more and a half-breed Malungian passed me on the bridge and followed them.

At dusk the next day I saw the mountaineer chopping wood at a shanty under a clump of rhododendron on the river-bank. The girl was cooking supper inside. The day following he was at work on the railroad, and on Sunday, after church, I saw the parson. The two had not been to him. Only that afternoon the mountaineer was on the bridge with another woman, hideously rouged and with scarlet ribbons fluttering from her bonnet. Passing on by the shanty, I saw the Malungian talking to the girl. She apparently paid no heed to him until, just as he was moving away, he said something mockingly, and with a nod of his head back towards the bridge. She did not look up even then, but her face got hard and white, and, looking back from the road, I saw her slipping through the bushes into the dry bed of the creek, to make sure that what the half-breed told her was true.

The two men were working side by side on the railroad when I saw them again, but on the first pay-day the doctor was called to attend the Malungian, whose head was split open with a shovel. I was one of two who went out to arrest his assailant, and I had no need to ask who he was. The mountaineer was a devil, the foreman said, and I had to club him with a pistol-butt before he would give in. He said he would get even with me; but they all say that, and I paid no attention to the threat. For a week he was kept in the calaboose, and when I passed the shanty just after he was sent to the county-seat for trial, I found it empty. The Malungian, too, was gone.

Within a fortnight the mountaineer was in the door of the shanty again. Having no accuser, he had been discharged. He went back to his work, and if he opened his lips I never knew. Every day I saw him at work, and he never failed to give me a surly look. Every dusk I saw him in his door-way, waiting, and I could guess for what. It was easy to believe that the stern purpose in his face would make its way through space and draw her to him again. And she did come back one day. I had just limped down the mountain with a sprained ankle. A crowd of women was gathered at the edge of the woods, looking with all their eyes to the shanty on the river-bank. The girl stood in the door-way. The mountaineer was coming back from work with his face down.

"He hain't seed her yit," said one. "He's goin' to kill her shore. I tol' her he would. She said she reckoned he would, but she didn't keer."

For a moment I was paralyzed by the tragedy at hand. She was in the door looking at him when he raised his head. For one moment he stood still, staring, and then he started towards her with a quickened step. I started too, then, every step a torture, and as I limped ahead she made a gesture of terror and backed into the room before him. The door closed, and I listened for a pistol-shot and a scream. It must have been done with a knife, I thought, and quietly, for when I was within ten paces of the cabin he opened the door again. His face was very white; he held one hand behind him, and he was nervously fumbling at his chill with the other. As he stepped towards me I caught the handle of a pistol in my side pocket and waited. He looked at me sharply.

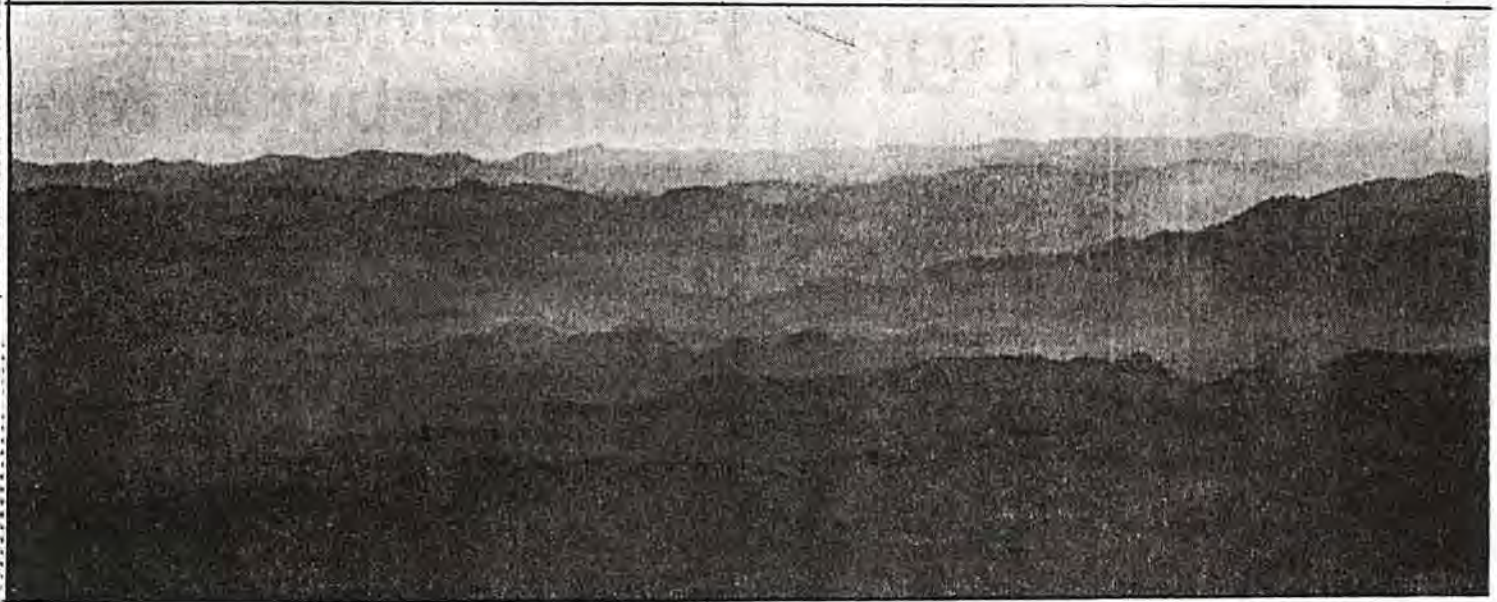
"Did you say the preacher lived up thar?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, breathlessly.

In the door-way just then stood the girl with a bonnet in her hand, and at a nod from him they started up the hill towards the cottage. They came down again after a while, he stalking ahead, and she, after the mountain fashion, behind. And after this fashion I saw them at sunset next day pass over the bridge and into the mouth of the Gap whence they came.

Through this Gap come strange people and strange tales from the Kentucky hills. Over it, sometimes, is the span of a rainbow.

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From Stone Mountain, Va., sun sets over the Appalachians where Melungeons have inhabited area for years

Traces of lost society haunt Appalachias

By Ted Anthony

AP National Writer

NASH HOME PLACE, Va. — He always believed them. No reason not to. Kennedy was his name, and of course Scotch-Irish was his background — a self-reliant lineage straight back to the cool hills of western Europe, people who took to Appalachia's ridges with vigor and verve. Intrepid mountaineers.

But this illness, this thing that threatened to consume his body and hijack his control — well, it just didn't fit. Not at all. An odd malady common in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern people? How did it invade him, of all people?

No time to worry about it, though. Other things were more pressing: The unbearable agony in his bones. The lungs that couldn't grab enough air. The grotesquely swollen legs. The panic. The wife and young son.

Explanations be damned. He resigned himself to those months of injections and treatment and pain. He thought he might die.

Then he got better, and curiosity begat obsession. Middle Eastern, Mediterranean — did that have some connection to the unexplained olive skin, swarthy features and bright blue eyes that his family, and others up on Coeburn and Stone mountains, had exhibited for generations? To the fact that his brother, improb-

ably, was a dead ringer for Saddam Hussein?

Maybe, he mused, it was part of a bigger story. He began asking questions. About his parents' parents' parents. About those shy, raggedy folks with shining eyes who'd come out of the woods now and then. About an odd word he'd always heard. About history. About race. About community.

The questions brought him here, to a mountainside graveyard filled with souls who spent their lives ashamed of who they were. Brent Kennedy, whose own eyes shine, wanted — needed — answers.

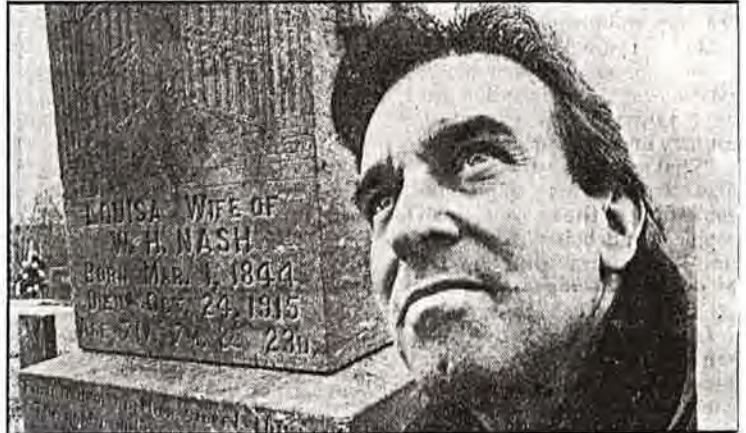
It was the beginning of his new calling — and of something far more.

One word. One lousy word. An obscure word. A powerful word, uttered over the centuries in confusion, derision and, most recently, pride.

Melungeon.

One word. And behind it, a tapestry of truth and possibility, of people wanting to be what they're not and not wanting to be what they are. Of understanding your life by owning a chunk of your past. Basic things. Complicated things.

For 300 years, racial, social and cultural stigmas made second-class citizens of anyone in this region who was branded with that one word. Scattered in pockets through the mountains, they



AP Photos

Kennedy sits at grave of his great-great-grandmother

sat at the bottom of the white trash pile — discriminated against, denounced, denied voting rights, branded "colored" by the government in the days when that was a fighting word.

But why? What was — what is — a Melungeon?

The short answer: Nobody's quite sure.

This much is known about the people called Melungeons (rhymes with dungeons): Today many are concentrated in southwestern Virginia, eastern Kentucky and eastern Tennessee. They have been derided for where they live (the hills), how they live (often poorly), how they are named (Mullins, Collins, Goins, Roberson, etc.).

And then there's this. Unseemly, politically incorrect even, but here it is: Though they fit our nation's modern definition of white, many with Melungeon ancestry just plain look different from the majority of white folks around here. Long, regal noses, dusky faces, jet-black hair, shining blue eyes. One glimpse can evoke foreign lands, strange tongues.

Were they originally Spanish? There has long been talk — some

of it bolstered by fact, some rampant speculation — that survivors of Santa Elena, a Spanish colony on the South Carolina coast in the 1500s, forged inland and settled in the hills.

Were they Turkish or North African? Both the Turkish "meluncan" and the Arabic "malun jinn" mean "outcast" or "accursed soul." Were Turkish slaves from Spanish ships abandoned on the coast to work their way to Appalachia?

Or were they Portuguese? Early Melungeons, discovered by Scotch-Irish settlers in the mid-18th century, reportedly spoke broken Elizabethan English and described themselves simply as "Portyghee."

The prevailing academic theory offers an equally slapdash, though less romantic, origin. It suggests Melungeons are descended from "tri-racial isolates," a mixture of whites, blacks and American Indians who historians say interbred along Appalachia's ridges during the 18th century.

The tantalizing speculations go on, culled from old documents

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Melungeon

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and stories passed down: Spaniards living in a mining community in the southern Alleghenies in 1654. Hints of Catholicism, Judaism, even Islam. Refugees from Sir Francis Drake's ship. Moors and the Spanish Inquisition. American Indian words that inexplicably mirror Turkic words.

So many clues. So little incontrovertible evidence. Pieces, interlocking, but no puzzle picture yet.

Today, myth and fact are often inseparable. Abraham Lincoln, it's suggested, was a Melungeon through his mother, Nancy Hanks. And Elvis Presley — look at those dark poor-boy features. Classic Melungeon, some like to speculate.

In Wise County, along the cloud-shrouded ridges of Stone and Coeburn mountains in southwestern Virginia, such notions have always been whispered or left unsaid. After all, in the pre-civil rights era, you didn't want to be related to Melungeons, to the "Black Nashes" or "Black Ira" or "Spotted Dave." You didn't want to be pushed around in school by townies; just living on the mountain was stigma enough without being tagged a Melungeon.

And you certainly didn't want a surname that caught W.A. Plecker's attention. Two generations ago, the Virginia state official compiled a list of common names that he deemed Melungeon (like Mullins, or Collins), then instructed local officials to sniff out these "mixed families" and prevent them from claiming American Indian ancestry as an "aid to intermarriage into the white race."

You didn't even want to poke into your own background; who knew what might turn up? Connie Clark, who teaches in the Wise schools and counts herself as a Melungeon, remembers in eighth grade being assigned to trace her family history — but to stop with her grandparents.

"I said, 'What if we can go back farther?'" she recalls. "And they said, 'No — some people might not like what they find.'"

Now here's the odd part: Today, though there remains passionately angry resistance, more and more people who believe they are Melungeon are going back farther.

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"Want to feel my bump?" Brent Kennedy asks.

It is on the back of his head, and it is, he proposes, classically Central Asian — proof, along with a ridge behind his upper teeth, that such genes reside within his 47-year-old body, that he's not Scotch-Irish.

A stretch? Even Kennedy acknowledges that possibility. But it speaks directly to what he's spent the 1990s trying to do: create, uncover, prove — use whatever verb you wish — similarities between people. Find shared history, common ground.

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World Wide Web. Like Chester DePratter, an archaeologist excavating the Santa Elena ruins who — first tentatively, then enthusiastically — became part of the Melungeon investigation. Like Scott Collins, a Sneedville, Tenn., court official who has spent 25 years walking Newman's Ridge in eastern Tennessee and researching his Melungeon ancestry.

Kennedy kept at it. He networked. He wrote letters; he got letters back — emotional letters, thank-you letters, hate letters, death threats. He helped form a committee (as college administrators do) composed of historians, anthropologists, geneticists, regular folks. A Spanish researcher, a Portuguese researcher, a Turkish researcher.

"Brent is running the whole gamut — from oral history to 'real' history and into the realm of science," DePratter says. "I do find myself having to caution him from time to time, but if he had been totally out there on the fringe, I never would have gotten involved."

Then Kennedy wrote *The Book*. *The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People* resonated in all corners of Melungeondom. It left people on the two mountains aghast; Melungeon simply wasn't a word they discussed. In academia, Kennedy was either welcomed as a provocative kindred spirit or dismissed as a loose cannon who made conclusions, then sought facts.

"It was not written as history," Kennedy insists. "The book is a manifesto."

Not good enough for some. David Henige, an oral history expert at the University of Wisconsin, dismantled Kennedy's book in a recent critique. A believer in the "tri-racial isolate" theory, Henige attributes the Melungeon movement to people feeling inadequate and creating a "mass attitude."

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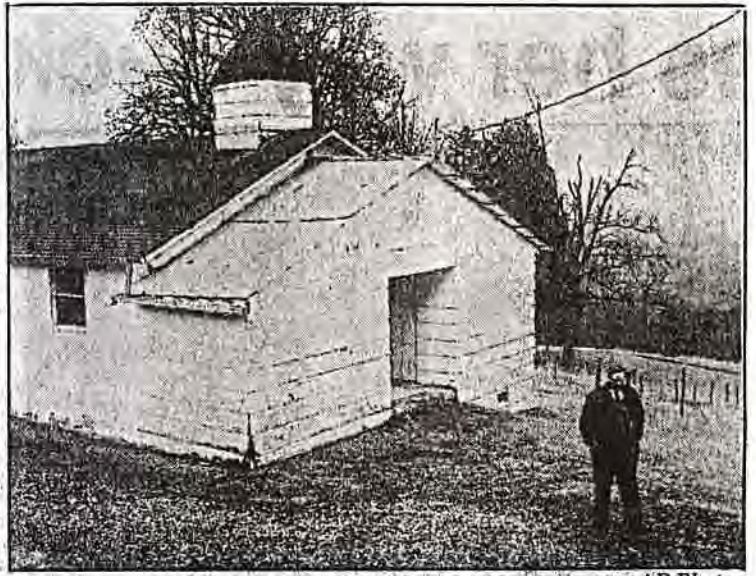
Proof or not, the faith is accelerating. This is what it has caused:

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AP Photo

Scott Collins walks from Goins Chapel Baptist Church

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Things that happen in a community.

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—the microscopic residents of Whoville in Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who*, yelling in unison to persuade the regular-sized universe that their world exists upon a dust speck.

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Today her great-grandson comes to her grave for contemplation — as he has since he was four, when his mother first brought him to the monument-dappled hillside. "Even then," he recalls, "there was a sadness."

Now, though Kennedy's shoes crunch through the same graveyard's grass, the ground he treads is different. Those who preceded him may have felt they were islands in an ocean of disdain, but now tens have become hundreds have become thousands — Sextons, Gipsons, Collinses, Robersons, Kennedys, random people who have heard of what's happening. People who want to belong.

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Kennedy didn't. Wilson didn't. Collins didn't. And today, in the mountains of southwestern Virginia, eastern Tennessee and eastern Kentucky, almost everyone who wants to be a Melungeon can find a reason, and the paucity of hard facts makes it almost impossible to exclude anyone. The pegs whittle themselves to fit the hole.

And why not? You could say this lesson — what Darlene Wilson calls the "incredible mosaic" — is a fitting development for an America mixing like never before. What Brent Kennedy envisions is a new kind of ethnicity — one based not upon race or color or background but upon shared experience and history.

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Kennedy's ailments — sarcoidosis and suspected familial Mediterranean fever — halted his life. He gave up a big-time Atlanta PR job and moved back to Wise, his hometown, to become a college administrator. Like many who fall gravely ill, he shuffled priorities.

What emerged from his crucible of pain and curiosity was a deep, abiding desire to learn why his family would never discuss being Melungeons, why his mother's people were called the "Black Nashes," why the M-word still made many of his contemporaries bristle.

So he went onto Stone Mountain and poked. He went onto Coeburn Mountain and pried. He alienated family members with questions; some even destroyed photos to prevent him from getting them. Burn in hell, one cousin told him.

He found kindred spirits like Darlene Wilson, a gregarious doctoral student in history and the main Melungeon voice on the

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HIDING NO LONGER



Melungeon Heritage Now a Source of Pride

Story and Photographs by Trish Milburn

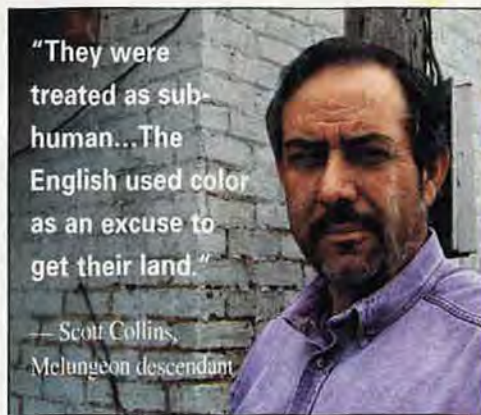
Photograph courtesy of Scott Collins

American history books are filled with accounts of freedom won, equality attained and civil rights granted. Unfortunately, they also tell stories of persecution — the cruelty of slavery in the South, the treatment of Irish immigrants in New York and the policies of extermination directed toward American Indians.

Each of these ethnic groups found different ways of dealing with their persecution. One group of people who was on the receiving end of the dominant white society's discrimination handled the situation by abandoning their heritage and retreating farther into Appalachia with each wave of white settlers moving westward.

In fact, the Melungeon people kept so much to themselves that they are not even mentioned in mainstream history texts. Only recently, with published books, conferences and several Internet sites, have Melungeon descendants begun to uncover more bits and pieces of their mysterious past.

A number of theories about the exact origin of these mostly dark-skinned, dark-haired people exist. Talk to 10 people, and you'll likely get 10 different theories — including combinations of the others.



"They were treated as sub-human... The English used color as an excuse to get their land."

— Scott Collins, Melungeon descendant

One theory hypothesizes the Melungeons are of Portuguese descent. Proponents of this explanation point to documents that show the dark-skinned people of Appalachia called themselves "Portyghee." John Sevier encountered such people in the mountains of East Tennessee in 1782.

Closely related to the Portuguese view is that of a Spanish origin. Spain and Portugal, collectively known as the Iberian Peninsula, were conquered by Moors and Berbers from Morocco in the eighth century. During the Spanish Inquisition in the late 15th century, descendants of these invaders, who had by then intermarried and considered themselves Spanish or Portuguese, became the persecuted and were taken to North America to settle Spanish colonies.

One such colony was Santa Elena on the southern tip of what is now Parris Island, S.C. Santa Elena was a military outpost operated from 1566 to 1587, when it was abandoned following the burning of its sister outpost at St. Augustine, Fla., by the British.

During Santa Elena's early years, Capt. Juan Pardo dispatched men into the country's interior and established a series of five small forts, some believed to be near present-day Knoxville. Pardo's troops included some Portuguese as well as Spaniards.

The Turkish influence is backed by word similarities and incidences of Melungeon people developing Mediterranean diseases. Since most theories mention intermarriage with the Indians of the region, these word similarities are seen best in some of the Indian languages. One of many examples is the Cherokees' word for themselves — ani-yun-wiya — which means "the principal people." The Turkish word "ana-youn" means "the primary people."

Other American words show a possible link to Turkey. Among these is "Appalachian," which is similar to the Turkish "Apa-la-che," which means "widespread" or "multitude."

Brent Kennedy, a chief researcher into the origins of Melungeons and a Melungeon himself, traveled to Turkey and was struck by several similarities in dress and food. His work points out the Creek fez and the Cherokee turban could be evidence of the Turkish influence.

Kennedy's research began when he contracted sarcoidosis, a disease that causes painful breathing, blurred vision, aching joints and muscles, exhaustion and skin rashes. He discovered the disease is most prevalent in blacks, Portuguese immigrants and people of Mediterranean descent. This led him to ask questions about his heritage, questions to which definite answers are next to impossible to find.

According to Kennedy's book, *The Melungeons, The Resurrection of a Proud People — The Untold Story of Ethnic Cleansing in America*, Turks and Central Asians exhibit some physical characteristics not commonly found in Europeans but found in Melungeons. These include cranial bumps on the back of the head, an inability to digest cow's milk and being born with six fingers on each hand. Kennedy had his extra digits removed at birth.

"The real meaning of this story is not the historical aspect, the mystery of the Melungeons," Kennedy says. "It's that it ties all human beings together in ways we never realized before."

"The book has helped spawn a lot of research, academically and medically," he says. "It's been the greatest journey of my life."

Clockwise from top, far right: Scott Collins stands inside what was once the Sneedville jail's kitchen. Sneedville is framed on one side by Newman's Ridge, the area Melungeons retreated to when whites began to settle in the valley. The now vacant jail in Sneedville will undergo extensive renovations in the coming months in preparation for its transformation into a museum highlighting the Melungeons' contributions to the early days of Hancock County. Collins hopes to have the museum open by the year 2000, after interior and exterior renovations are completed.



Blood testing also has given some validity to the Mediterranean ties theory. This testing found similarities between Melungeons and people from Spain, Portugal, the Canary Islands, North Africa, Malta, Turkey, Cyprus, Cuba and some Indian tribes of South America.

Further evidence that Melungeons might have ties to the Moors was found in documents recorded by Christopher Columbus. He mentioned passing a large galley ship off the Jamaican coast much like Moorish galleys he had seen. The people on board were dressed in Moorish fashion, especially notable since the Indians he came in contact with wore no clothes.

Various other theories state the Melungeons could be descendants of the Lost Colony of Roanoke or the Welsh explorer Modoc, who brought several ships of colonists to North America around 1100 A.D. Still others discount anything but a tri-racial isolate made up of intermarriages between blacks, American Indians and Caucasians.

The truth may indeed be a mixture of these theories, just as the Melungeons may have a true melting-pot heritage. Even the word "Melungeon" alludes to the intermingling of peoples. The French "melange" means "mixture;" the Greek "melas" means "dark" or "brown;" and the Afro-Portuguese "melungo" or "mulungo" means "shipmate" or "comrade."

Their mysterious heritage led to discrimination by the flood of white settlers rushing over the mountains. Some Melungeons claimed to be Cherokee while others said they were Black Dutch. No matter what they claimed, they were lumped together as



"free persons of color," a designation that prevented them from owning land, attending public school and voting.

As a result, Melungeons kept to themselves and adopted Scotch-Irish surnames such as Collins and Kennedy in an effort to avoid further discrimination. Their children were kept covered, even in the hot summer months, to prevent their skin from darkening further. Some tried in vain to scrub the darkness from their skin. Kennedy says in his book that his mother was accused by a college professor of not washing properly and was sent to the showers in front of the other students. No matter how much they scrubbed, the melanin that made them who they were refused to disappear.

They eventually were pushed into southwestern Virginia and northeast Tennessee. The Tennessee counties of Hancock, Hamblin, Grainger, Claiborne and Hawkins as well as the Virginia counties of Lee, Scott and Wise are rich in Melungeon history. Appropriately, this area is the center of the renewed attention in the Melungeon people.

The tremendous interest was nowhere better reflected than last summer's First Union: A Melungeon Gathering held at Clinch Valley College in Wise, Va. Organizers expected 50 people at an informal picnic; what they got was a three-day conference with between 500 and 600 attendees.

The event was so successful that a Second Union is planned for July 9-12 at Clinch Valley College. Speakers include authors, historians, anthropologists, artists, genealogists, archaeologists and storytellers.

"We were pleasantly surprised by the interest last year," says Connie Clark, the chair of the planning committee for this year's conference. "We're expecting more this year."

Scott Collins of Sneedville also is doing his part to see that the Melungeons are never forgotten. Collins, along with the other members of the Hancock County Historical and Genealogical Society, hope to renovate an old jail in Sneedville and turn it

into a museum with rotating exhibits highlighting the Melungeon people's contributions to the area.

"We have nothing here that preserves Melungeon history," Collins says. "There's a demand for something to be assembled to show the historical significance of Melungeons."

Collins, a Melungeon descendent, became interested in his heritage in 1969 when an outdoor drama, "Walk Toward the Sunset," began its nine-year run in Sneedville. The drama examined the hard times and suffering endured by the Melungeons.

"They were treated as sub-human," says Collins, a Powell Valley Electric Cooperative member.

Collins had the idea for the museum about four years ago and decided the circa-1860 jail would be ideal because of its central location. The Melungeons lived in the valley where the small town is located, growing their crops beside the Clinch River. When white settlers entered the valley, the Melungeons retreated up to Newman's Ridge, which overlooks the town.

Further evidence that Melungeons occupied the mountainous regions of eastern Tennessee are located in the writings of Dr. Thomas Walker, who traveled through the area in the mid-1700s. He wrote of people who spoke broken English and claimed to be "Portyghee." It was noted they weren't American Indians because they wore clothes and had long beards.

Collins says he believes the discrimination against his ancestors had at its root the desire for land.

"The English used color as an excuse to get their land," he says.

Since 1969, Collins has done extensive research about his heritage, and he anticipates putting that knowledge to work when the museum opens, which he hopes will be by the year 2000.

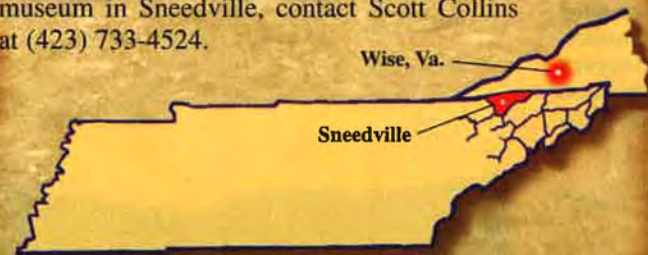
Collins also believes some adjustments to American history texts should begin to surface.

"Changes will certainly be developed in the curriculum in the near future," he says. "The demand (for knowledge) will require it."

A MELUNGEON GATHERING

Second Union: A Melungeon Gathering will be held at Clinch Valley College in Wise, Va., July 9-12. Registration for the full weekend, including all events, is \$30 per person. One- and two-day fees are pro-rated. Call Connie Clark at (540) 523-0891, or write her at 330 Pearl St., Big Stone Gap, VA 24219, for more information.

For information on the planned Melungeon museum in Sneedville, contact Scott Collins at (423) 733-4524.



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