An American mystery
Down in the valley, up on the ridge
An Appalachian people offers a timely parable of the nuanced history of race in America

HEAD into Sneedville from the Clinch river, turn left at the courthouse and crawl up Newman’s Ridge. Do not be distracted by the driveways meandering into the woods, the views across the Appalachians or the shadows of the birds of prey; heed the warnings locals may have issued about the steepness and the switchbacks. If the pass seems challenging, consider how inaccessible it must have been in the moonshining days before motor cars.

Halfway down, as Snake Hollow appears on your left, you reach a narrow gorge, between the ridge and Powell Mountain and hard on Tennessee’s north-eastern border. In parts sheer and wooded, it opens into an unexpected valley, where secluded pastures and fields of wild flowers hug Blackwater Creek—in which the water is not black but clear, running, like the valley, down into Virginia. This is the ancestral home of an obscure American people, the Melungeons. Some lived over the state line on Stone Mountain, in other craggy parts of western Virginia and North Carolina and in eastern Kentucky. But the ridge and this valley were their heartland.

The story of the Melungeons is at once a footnote to the history of race in America and a timely parable of it. They bear witness to the horrors and legacy of segregation, but also to the overlooked complexity of the early colonial era. They suggest a once-and-future alternative to the country’s brutally rigid model of race relations, one that, for all the improvements, persists in
the often siloed lives of black and white Americans today. Half-real and half-mythical, for generations the Melungeons were avatars for their neighbours’ neuroses; latterly they have morphed into receptacles for their ideals, becoming, in effect, ambassadors for integration where once they were targets of prejudice.

The two big questions about them encapsulate their ambiguous status—on the boundaries of races and territories, and between suffering and hope, imagination and fact. Where did the Melungeons come from? And do they still exist?

**Last of the Phoenicians**

At a recent gathering of the Melungeon Heritage Association (MHA), in Vardy, a hamlet in the valley, and over in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, family trees and photographs of swarthy ancestors were compared. But the underlying preoccupation was the Melungeons’ origins—a subject comprised more of legend than of evidence. They are said to be the progeny of Phoenicians who fled the Roman sacking of Carthage, or of pre-Columbian Turkish explorers (making them America’s first Muslims). They descend from wayward conquistadors, from a doomed colony established on Roanoke Island by Sir Walter Raleigh, or from Moorish galley slaves abandoned there by Sir Francis Drake. They were sired by shipwrecked pirates or by Madoc, a 12th-century Welsh explorer. They are a lost tribe of Israel.

Native Americans often feature as consorts in these narratives, such as the fable in which Satan briefly cohabits with a Cherokee woman in the mountains of Tennessee. Etymology is as vexed as genealogy. The name Melungeon derives from *mélange*, an appellation bestowed by early French settlers on the Clinch river. Alternatively, Italian pioneers in Virginia used their word for aubergine to disparage the Melungeons’ skin colour. It comes from *melas*, Greek for dark or black, from the Turkish expression *melun can*, meaning “cursed soul”, or from *melungo*, a West African term for shipmate. Or from an old English word for trickery found in Spenser’s “The Faerie Queene”.

One of the most widespread beliefs is that they are offspring of Portuguese mariners who arrived in early colonial times; or, as some 19th-century Melungeons would have put it, on the rare occasions when they spoke for themselves, they were “Portyghee”. A newspaper report of 1848 said the community was established by “a society of Portuguese Adventurers”, and now lived in “a delightful Utopia” of primitive disinhibition. (The Melungeon story has mostly been told in the calumnies and hearsay of outsiders.) A sub-theory sees them as exiled conversos, Iberian Jews who hid their faith to escape the Inquisition before fleeing to the New World.

For much of American history, of course, Mediterranean lineage was a valuable asset to anyone with an olive complexion, often, in this case, combined with aquiline features and sometimes blue eyes: it meant the people in question were not black. In a trial of the late 1840s, for example, a group of Melungeons were accused of illegal voting, a right withdrawn from free blacks in Tennessee in 1834. Their lawyer maintained they were Portuguese, reportedly introducing as evidence their feet, which—supposedly unlike negroes’—“were as delicate and nice as a lady’s”. He is said to have invited the prosecutor to remove his own shoes for a comparison. The prosecutor declined; the defendants were acquitted. In a case in 1872 involving
marriage and inheritance rights, a lawyer convinced Tennessee’s Supreme Court that the Melungeons were “pure-blooded Carthagenians, as much so as was Hannibal and the Moor of Venice”. Such judgments and affidavits were invaluable precedents, like imprimaturs for forged works of art.

Robert Davis, a Mediterranean-hued attendee at the MHA meeting, recalls his mother receiving an anonymous note, in the 1920s, informing her that blacks weren’t welcome at her church. Race was fodder for private vendettas as well as official discrimination. Before the civil war, “free people of colour”, as many Melungeons were described in the census of 1830, were threatened by re-enslavement and repatriation (several later got themselves reclassified as white). In the Jim Crow era such designations determined which schools their children attended. After the passage of Virginia’s “one drop” law in 1924, whereby anyone with a trace of blackness was classified accordingly, Walter Plecker, the monstrous registrar of the Bureau of Vital Statistics, singled the Melungeons out for persecution. To American eugenicists like him, such liminal groups were degeneration incarnate.

**Among the Portyghee**

No wonder that, today, the children of segregation-era Melungeons report a familial anxiety about going dark in the sun. But, in a narrow respect, Plecker may have been right—at least according to one purported solution to the origin mystery. In 2012 a DNA study disclosed that those Melungeons who took part descended largely from African men and white European women. That corresponds with research by Tim Hashaw, a Texan author who has traced the line to a cargo of Africans delivered to Jamestown in 1619—a year before the arrival of the *Mayflower*. Coincidentally or otherwise, the itinerary of those souls echoes some Melungeon myths: they were captured by Portuguese raiders in Angola, then poached by English pirates.
Some were indentured servants, not lifelong vassals: chattel slavery had yet to be codified. At liberty, some such early arrivals married white serving-women.

As Mr Hashaw says, accounts of this period in which blacks appear only as slaves are “not the real story”: there were free black people in the colonies from the beginning. This episode also dispels another simplification, in which mixed-race relationships were publicly tolerated only recently. In truth, attitudes were more open in the mid-17th century than they were for most of the 20th. And, while feelings are hard to discern across centuries, unlike the innumerable master-slave rapes that followed, these intermarriages seem to have been voluntary.

Before long, alas, sentiments and laws sharpened, until interracial couples risked fearsome punishments. Still, the Melungeons offer an insight into a lost but documented history in which America’s race relations were less hierarchical than they shortly became.
Today, among former denizens of the ridge and valley, several explanations are given for their ancestors’ decision to settle there. A wagon wheel fell off en route to the Mulberry Gap; a child on a wagon trail died, and the grief-stricken parents refused to budge. But the most plausible is that noxious treatment forced them out of Virginia and the Carolinas and, around the end of the 18th century, into what became Hancock County, Tennessee. As their legal predicament deteriorated there, too, this remote nook, on the edge of the state’s jurisdiction, was a good place to lie low. Now, as then, it is as isolated as it is beautiful, featuring lonely farmsteads, some weather-beaten barns and a few clapboard churches.

Isolated, beautiful—and poor. Hancock County remains one of Tennessee’s poorest and among the nation’s. Some of its residents resorted to the usual shifts of penury, moonshining and the like. Those exigencies, combined with a reputation for bushwhacking during the civil war—and, above all, the enduring queasiness about miscegenation—turned the Melungeons, in their
neighbours’ imaginings, into renegades and bogeymen. As a sensationalist report of 1891 put it, they were “a synonym for all that is doubtful and mysterious”.

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Naturally, nobody wanted to be one. Wayne Winkler, an author of Melungeon descent, says his grandparents’ generation wouldn’t utter the word, which, to them, connoted shiftlessness and dishonesty as much as racial instability. Clarke Collins, who grew up in Vardy in the 1930s, says he never encountered the term until 1948. Returning from college and asking his mother about it, he was told never to say it again.

Then, beginning in the late 1960s, in the wake of the civil-rights movement, its valency changed. First, Hancock County staged “Walk Towards the Sunset”, an outdoor drama about the Melungeons that ran for six seasons. In the 1990s, as the internet ignited a genealogy craze, a new consciousness blossomed. Activists sought to reclaim the Melungeons’ identity from vilification; an influential book cast them as victims of “an untold story of ethnic cleansing”. Amid the enthusiasm Abraham Lincoln and Elvis Presley were outed as crypto-Melungeons.

Events since exemplify the web’s power both to bring people together and to drive them apart. Disagreement over the Melungeons’ provenance turned rancorous after the DNA study of 2012. Stalwarts of the MHA, an ecumenical outfit with the motto “One People, All Colours”, had always been aware of the family tree’s black branches. But, perhaps inevitably after centuries of denial, a few avowed Melungeons were less sanguine about the findings. Some were keen to corroborate a Native American component; some coveted Jewish or Muslim connections, while others repudiated them. People wanted to vindicate family lore, or simply to be proved right. The Portuguese and Turkish hypotheses were noisily championed. A fledgling community was riven by in-fighting.

In fact, a surprising number of the rival theories are, if not plausible, at least not impossible. Those DNA tests have proved no more unifying than has the internet: other samples have yielded Native American, Middle Eastern, North African and South Asian strands. Part of the trouble is that by the time the Americas were colonised, the European gene pool had already been augmented by invasions, expeditions and enslavements. Stir in the improvisational nature of marriages on the colonial frontier, plus the patchiness and misrepresentations of old records, and refuting all but the wildest fantasies becomes tricky.

Ketchable, not fetchable

A key sticking point concerns who should be tested: where the Melungeons have ended up is almost as contentious as where they came from. The ridge, the valley and their environs, runs one answer: “We that descend from [their former residents] are Melungeons,” says Mr Davis. Others consider surnames more important. Today’s Melungeons, they think, bear the ones that recur in the valley’s cemeteries, in which lizards dart among the Collins, Mullins, Gibson and Goins gravestones, beside a road dissolving into dirt on its way into Virginia.
Then again, a hard-core “ridge only” faction repudiates the valley-dwellers. Still others reasonably note that, especially during the exodus of Appalachians after the first world war, many Melungeons moved away. Racism, and the chance to “pass” for white elsewhere, gave them an added impetus. A Presbyterian missionary school provided some with the means to escape, education’s bittersweet one-two of opportunity and deracination.

Gallingly, there is little by way of culture to distinguish them—except, perhaps, their mini-pantheon of folk heroes. One is Vardemon Collins, variously recorded as Cherokee and Portyghee, who married “Spanish Peggy” and moved to the valley. He allegedly set himself up by selling into slavery a pal who, as planned, promptly escaped. Later came Mahala (“Big Haley”) Collins Mullins, moonshiner and mother of 20, whose house burned down when Confederates came to kill her sons. She grew so fat that, when a deputy tried to arrest her, she couldn’t be pried from her cabin: “She’s ketchable,” he reported, “but she ain’t fetchable.” The cabin has since been moved from the ridge to the valley; DruAnna Overbay, of the Vardy Community Historical Society, indicates its arched windows, with their hint of Moorish style, as a distinctive Melungeon touch.

In general, though, the ways of the people known as Melungeons were similar to their Appalachian compatriots’. They practised the same crafts and the same Christian faith, relying on the same ingenuity and hardiness. Their experiences overlap, too, with other mixed-race groups in the south-east, such as the Red Bones of Louisiana or the Brass Ankles of South Carolina. “There is no distinct ethnic identity or cultural heritage,” concludes Melissa Schrift of East Tennessee State University. Physical markers—cranial bumps, sixth fingers—are more rumour than reality.

![Eternal peace among the hills](image-url)
Given this cultural elision, the inconclusive DNA and physical dispersal, firm membership criteria are elusive. Hence a final, telling twist in the Melungeon saga. As Mr Winkler says, in the days when they formed a semi-coherent group, no one claimed or accepted the label for themselves. But that cohort, and the injustice they faced, are mostly gone. That sort of loss often sets off a belated urge to know more about the passing generation. In this case, the void also represents an opening. Because, now, a claim to Melungeon extraction is difficult to deny.

And, despite the online ructions, in recent years some Americans have laid such claims. Whereas formerly “Melungeon” was a slur to be renounced, it has become an allegiance to be embraced. Once the Melungeons were a barometer of discrimination, their situation shifting with the law’s caprices, the forebearance of strangers and their own canniness, chutzpah and skin tone. Now they are emblematic of a 21st-century urge to belong. “Some people think a mystery is something that has to be destroyed,” says Paul Johnson, the MHA’s registrar. “Other people think it’s something that has to be preserved.”

The fabric of America

Those who feel this way share some characteristics. Most (though not all) are fair-skinned. Several report suspicious silences about their families’ pasts, plus a childhood sense of not quite fitting in. Sometimes there are foreign names among their forebears. And, very often, they had never heard of the Melungeons until middle age.

Nan Tuckett, for instance, was raised amid whispers of Cherokee blood; a strand of her family had dark skin and hair and roots in Virginia. As an adult she both converted to Judaism and discovered an affinity with the Melungeons. “They’re such an open loving people,” she explains at the MHA event. “I want to be able to go into any group of people and feel like I belong”. Kathy Lyday, a board member of the MHA, believes she has Indian blood on both sides of her family; on her mother’s there were dusky folk with Hispanic names such as Alfonso and Carlos. She came to the Melungeons through her academic work (she teaches American literature); initially she wanted to establish a link, but now is simply intrigued. “We’re all mixed race to some degree, if you grow up in this part of the world”, Ms Lyday reasons.

It is easy to be sceptical of such a discretionary association. As Ms Schrift says, it bestows on those who choose it an ethnic loyalty at once exotic and, these days, stigma-free. It dissociates them from white America’s past sins, replacing that guilty legacy with the afterglow of trials overcome, plus a mantle of victimhood that may properly belong to others. In one interpretation, such feel-good ethnic tourism threatens, as Ms Schrift puts it, to render the term Melungeon “so elastic that it really has no meaning at all.” To join the Melungeons, she says, is to acquire “a skeleton key to identity”.

On the other hand, there may be a deeper honesty, and a kind of idealism, in this voluntary embrace of a mixed-ethnic background—a make-up common to millions of Americans, but which many remain reluctant to acknowledge. And there is something optimistic and timely about the vision of race that the Melungeons imply. These days, on university campuses and beyond, the old, humanistic faith that everyone is the same at heart has been ousted by an essentialist idea of black- and whiteness, which sees the experiences of each as distinct, even
mutually incomprehensible. The grievances that underpin this attitude are often legitimate, but the result is that race in America can sometimes seem like a prison. The notion of racial categories as fluid and optional, even invented, is a refreshing counterpoint to this ossifying sense of unbridgeable difference.

Scott Withrow, the MHA’s hospitable president, says he, too, never heard of the Melungeons as a child, discovering them only as an adult. He has traced an 18th-century North Carolinian ancestor named Collins, one of the core Melungeon surnames, who may have been related to the Collinses of Hancock County, though incomplete records mean Mr Withrow can’t be sure. He hasn’t done a DNA test—though what, really, would it prove? His tolerant organisation does not require a pedigree: “We don’t get into who’s more Melungeon than others.” The Melungeons, he says, inarguably, “are part of the fabric of Appalachia. The fabric of America.”