

More on Melungeons and DruAnna
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on June 12, 2012)

First let me thank Joe Stephens who called to remind me to be more diligent in fact checking and rightly so. I placed John Rice Irwin as Superintendent of Anderson County Schools much too late and even put his office in Oak Ridge. Joe thought that was just too much error and called to tell me so. I plead guilty, Joe, of being lax and relying on my faulty memory without checking details.

The error was totally mine. I recalled when John Rice had an office in the same building as the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge and I knew he was once Superintendent of Schools in Anderson County. I just mixed up the two.

Fact is, John Rice Irwin was the youngest ever Superintendent of Anderson County Schools, being elected at age 31. Having been born in 1930, would put him being elected in the early 1960's, I found a quote from him placing the election at 1962. Well before the incident I related. By the time John Rice was using an office in the Children's Museum, he was no longer the Superintendent of Anderson County Schools.

Thanks to Margaret Allard, a long-time exhibit designer at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge who, at my request, contacted Shirley Gadd who used to work for John Rice Irwin. She helped me identify the position he held at the time being discussed in my previous article. He was the director of the Tennessee Appalachian Education Corporative.

Okay, now back to the story of DruAnna and her attempt to preserve the history of the Melungeons. While she says in her book, "Purposefully I have steered away from the research of anthropologists and sociologists who have hashed and rehashed the mysterious origins of the Melungeons," she did participate in the recent DNA studies. I asked her about that.

DruAnna said, "Yes, I participated in two DNA studies: one which was patrilineage which showed a propensity of Welsh DNA (with Brent Kennedy) and the other matrilineage (with Jack Goins) which I never got the report back on that one. I can only surmise that I was one of the eight which had a direct female line to the Melungeons---but, I am not sure since it ran this way: me to my mother to my grandmother to my great grandmother and then to my great, great grandmother who was a Bunch and not a Collins or a Goins. We have definitely known before any DNA studies that the Goins' tribe was African."

She went on to say, "I do have a 'spin' though on the recent article concerning DNA and would love to talk to you about it sometime in the future. I have no worries about the DNA results but I am a bit upset that comments from some writers who debunk our oral histories. For instance, I am from Vardy but if I go to another part of the country, I will say that I am from Morristown. (Does that make me a pathetic liar?)

"One halogroup of my DNA may show a connection to the Sub-Saharan strain but does that mean we should ignore all other halogroup connections? Nobody has ever denied that we are a mixture of different people but I really think that the 'science' here is ignoring other factors of our origins.

"And, for our ancestors to have said they were 'Portahee' may have had hundreds of interpretations. They lived in Portugal before coming to this country, they may have traveled on a Portuguese ship (after all 'melungeon' supposedly means ship-mate), they were part of the Portuguese ship crew, etc.

See the strange pull of the history of Melungeons? While they are obviously a people of mixed race origin, while they have been maligned over the years from prejudiced groups and while they are struggling to define a cohesive history, they are still having a difficult time with the basic details of their ancestry.

About John Rice Irwin, DruAnna said, he was Anderson County School Superintendent when she was hired to teach at Lake City High School in 1965. DruAnna said, "He had been my brother's roommate at Lincoln Memorial University and I was very honored to have been 'hired' away from Knox County School system to teach under his leadership."

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"At the time of the anthropologist's presentation at the Children's Museum, I believe that John Rice had devoted a major part of his time to the Museum of Appalachia." Actually, he was doing both by then. His focus was turning to the preservation of the history of Appalachia through the preservation of their heritage and history. Yet, he remained engaged in the educational aspects of the Appalachian region.

DruAnna continued, "As a matter of fact, I participated in a program that he offered interested teachers of Anderson County who wished to take their students to the museum for Living History presentations in the early 80s. He also was instrumental in bringing Appalachian Storytellers to our classrooms."

"Luckily, I wrote a request to have the storyteller 'Bad Hair Williams' to my classroom in Clinton which Irwin had obtained a grant to fund. And from that, I fell in love with oral histories.

"At any rate, after my second son's birth, Paul Bostic, the supervisor of Anderson County Schools asked me to move my teaching assignment to Clinton High School because as he said it he wanted me to teach his daughter Jo Ellen Bostic who now works with John Rice Irwin's daughter at the Museum of Appalachia. Jo Ellen was such a wonderful student as were so many that I was fortunate enough to teach at Clinton.

"Later I discovered that my uncle Bob Williams had been one of Mr. Bostic's boyhood friends and that Mr. Bostic's sister-in-law taught at West Haven Elementary School in Knoxville where my father was principal.

"My outburst at the Children's Museum worried me greatly because I did not want to offend Mr. Irwin in any way. He was my older brother's friend. Nor, did I want to offend Mr. Bostic by giving a bad impression of one of Anderson County's teachers...And, I certainly did not want to upset not only my mother but my father.

"I had really gotten myself into a "pickle" to say the least. Irwin and Bostic were family friends and I knew that I better mind my "Ps and Qs!" or I would hear from my father whom I admired more than anybody.

Next we will continue with DruAnna's personal story about coming to grips with the heritage she inherited and her efforts to preserve the history of the Melungeon people. She is quick to point out that the Vardy museum is a product that the Vardy Community Historical Society put together, through the donations, works, and efforts of a dedicated board and appreciative alumni of Vardy Community School.

She points out, "Our board has been great: Troy Williams, charter president; W.C. Collins, Jack Mullins, Charles Sizemore, R.C. Mullins, Anthony Collins, my husband Fred Overbay and so many other board members who put so much time and love into this project. I am only one of many others."

Next in this series, we will explore the Vardy Presbyterian Church and School Museum and the Mahala Mullins Cabin.

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A glimpse at a most unusual museum – note the arched windows in a log cabin!