

Who are the Melungeons? Meet DruAnna (As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on June 5, 2012)

Fred Eiler is a good friend who is passionate about several things, one of which is the Peak Cemetery, located in Gamble Valley's Scarboro Community, where potentially two Revolutionary Soldiers are buried. More on this in an upcoming *Historically Speaking* column.

A second passion is the Melungeon community of Vardy in Hancock County in upper East Tennessee. On Saturday, April 21, 2012, Fred and I journeyed northeast to within 10 miles of the Virginia border in the beautiful and quaint Vardy Valley. This quiet East Tennessee valley is named for Vardemon Collins, ancestor of DruAnna Williams Overbay (who would become an admired hero of mine before the day was gone).

DruAnna has written the book, *Windows on the Past - The cultural heritage of Vardy*. She has done an exceptional job of capturing the oral traditions and oral history of the Melungeons of Vardy Valley. She is also dedicated to preserving the artifacts of the Vardy Valley community and to convey their history.

This section of upper East Tennessee was from the mid-19th to the late 20th century the primary location of what was thought to be an isolated tri-racial ethnic group who were descendants of the multiracial Collins, Gibson, and several other related families of Newman's Ridge, Vardy Valley, and other settlements in and around Hancock County, Tennessee.

DruAnna notes in the introduction to *Windows on the Past*, that she was born a melungeon into a lifelong quest to dispel the stereotypes associated with her family and friends. She recalls the derogatory remarks made by Will Allen Dromgoole about her ancestors "who were nothing but kind to her." The hurt is obvious in DruAnna's writing, she could not begin her book without noting the pain.

Dromgoole was a renowned poet from Murfreesboro, TN. She wrote prolifically, publishing more than 7,500 poems, 5,000 essays and 13 books. One of the books was titled, *The last of the Malungeons* (a variation of the spelling placing an "a" rather than an "e" in the second letter position).

She also wrote a series of articles published in the Nashville *Daily American* in 1890 and the *Boston Arena* in 1891 that contained many derogatory comments about Melungeons. Her observations were based more on hearsay than fact and expressed common biases about mountain people.

I find it interesting to note that while she was critical of a multi-racial group she hardly knew, she was descended from great grandparents who were Scotch-Irish (husband) and Cherokee (wife). The Melungeons have long been thought to possibly be of tri-racial ancestry, European, African American and Native American (primarily Cherokee). It is said that over the past several generations Melungeons have increasingly married into European American families and have thus integrated into mainstream white society.

However, if you research "Melungeons" you will quickly note there are as many theories to their origins as there are people writing about them. The one thing that I find common in all the writings is the disdain, distrust and prejudice to which a small group of mixed race families have been subjected to over the years. No wonder that DruAnna feels the hurt.

In the Introduction to her book, DruAnna asks, "When did this quest begin for me? Was it coded into my genetic makeup even before I was born? I'm really not sure when I knew with certainty that I was Melungeon. The whispers among adults when I was growing up only made me curious. 'Don't let them take your picture,' my mother warned when photographers came to the Vardy Community Center to document our existence. Why did we need to be ashamed of who we were?"

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She goes on to note that her mother's anger over a *Saturday Evening Post* article, *Sons of the Legend*, by W. I. Worden, caused her to want more desperately to know the stories associated with her maternal family. Her mother was descended from Vardemon Collins, one of the most prominent individuals in the Melungeon cultural heritage.

One of the turning points in DruAnna's life that led to her total immersion into fully understanding her Melungeon heritage happened right here in Oak Ridge. She says it this way in her book, "During the early 1980's, I spoke out against stereotyping the Melungeons as the Children's Museum in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, as a result of remarks made by an earlier speaker. Because of my insistence that I, a Melungeon, have equal time, the museum director Selma Shapiro invited me to make a presentation."

DruAnna was kind and polite in the publication of the incident that pushed her over the edge and caused her deep desire to know and understand and to defend her people's reputation. When I asked her to tell me about that day in Oak Ridge, she was a bit more concise and much more willing to let me understand her innermost thoughts about the situation she found herself in on that fateful day.

Here is how it actually went down. The speaker was one who specialized in Appalachian cultures. The topic was of interest to many teachers from the area and DruAnna was in the audience. Near the end of the speaker's presentation at the "question and answer" segment, someone in the audience raised the question, "what about the Melungeons?"

The speaker responded with a terse reply that the Melungeons were a bunch of mixed race lazy moonshiners and thieves who were certainly not worthy of consideration as a cultural heritage of Appalachia. Well, DruAnna, responded loudly with the express comment that "Not only is that a lie, it is a G__ D__ Lie! And I demand equal time to defend the Melungeons here at the museum!"

Immediately, she realized what she had done and said and she thought, "Well there goes my job teaching in Anderson County!" You see, John Rice Irwin was the Anderson County School Superintendent and his office was in the same building as the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge at that time.

However, Selma Shapiro, responded right then by telling DruAnna that she would most certainly get equal time to present the Melungeon story. While DruAnna was grateful for Selma's brave response, she had never made a presentation before about the Melungeons and quite frankly did not really know much about her Melungeon heritage. She just knew she could not sit by and let that insult to her ancestry go unchallenged. See why she is one of my admired heroes?

I have but barely introduced you to DruAnna Williams Overbay. There is more to be said about her life's work to commemorate the heritage that is her family and the history of the maligned people called Melungeon who settled in the mountains of East Tennessee and who, though oppressed from all sides, have not only survived, but have thrived. DruAnna is a living example.

In upcoming articles we will feature her work to create and maintain a most unusual museum inside the historic cabin of Mahala Mullins, a character that is now a part of the folklore of Melungeons. But Mahala was actually a kind and sweet soul afflicted with elephantiasis who became so large that she could not get through the door of her bedroom. She was ultimately buried in her bed just outside the location of her cabin when she died. This was accomplished by taking the logs out of the corner of her cabin to remove her from her confined bedroom.

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DruAnna William Overbay, a Melungeon – note her slate blue eyes, a trait shared by my wife, Fanny

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Fred Eiler presents DruAnna with a piece of antique "Flow Blue" glass for her museum