Kentucky Wonders: The Fugate Family
by Bobbye Maggard

Kentucky is home to the Kentucky Derby, Mint Julep, Beautiful Horse Farms, The University of Kentucky Wildcats, Abraham Lincoln’s Birthplace and Mammoth Cave.

“The Bluegrass State” is also home to “The Blue People.”

The photo on the right appears to have been photo-shopped, but in fact, some of the faces in the picture are naturally blue.

In 1975, little Benjamin “Benjy” Stacy’s birth sent shock-waves through the hospital maternity ward. Some described the infant’s skin as “…blue as Lake Louise.”

Newborn Benjy was rushed to University of Kentucky Medical Center in Lexington and scheduled for a blood transfusion.

As the family gathered, the infant’s grandmother mentioned that he looked like the “blue Fugates of Troublesome Creek.” She remembered how relatives had described the baby's great grandmother, Luna Fugate, as being “blue all over” and “the bluest woman I ever saw.”

A detailed account titled "Blue People of Troublesome Creek," published in 1982 by the University of Indiana's Cathy Trost, describes Benjy's skin as "almost purple.”
The curious tale of the “Blue People of Kentucky” involves the genealogy and geography of the Fugate family.

Their story began six generations ago with their ancestor, Martin Fugate, a French orphan who settled in Appalachia near the town of Hazard, Kentucky.

Fugate’s body contained a recessive gene, which caused a mysterious medical condition called methemoglobinemia. Medical research has revealed that the disorder interferes with the flow of oxygen to body tissues, causing a bluish tint to the skin.

Because their odd appearance caused finger-pointing and snickers from the townspeople, Benjy’s ancestors moved into the hollows of the hill country. As a result of their isolation they began to intermarry, and the unique blood disorder continued through their progeny.

Benjy’s father, Alva Stacy, displaying his family tree, remarked, “If you’ll notice -- I’m kin to myself.”

One of Martin and Elizabeth Fugate's blue boys, Zachariah, married his mother's sister. Their son, Levy, married a girl named Ritchie and had eight children. One of their daughters, Luna, who married John E. Stacy, had 13 children, and Benjy descended from the Stacy line.
Most of what scientists know about the Fugate family was discovered by the late Dr. Madison Cawein III, a hematologist at the University of Kentucky's Lexington Medical Clinic. Although he died before the results of his study could be published, his family members found papers that contained copious notations. They pieced together enough to pass on an almost complete narrative of the family’s history.

The doctor, having heard rumors about the Fugate family while working at his Lexington clinic, began "tromping around the hills looking for blue people.”

At an American Heart Association clinic in the town of Hazard, he found a helpful nurse named Ruth Pendergrass. She recalled a bitterly cold day when a dark blue woman walked into the clinic and wanted to have a blood test.

"Her face and her fingernails were almost indigo blue," she told (him). "It like to scared me to death. She looked like she was having a heart attack. I just knew that patient was going to die right there in the health department, but she wasn't a'tall alarmed. She told me that her family was the blue “Combses” who lived up on Ball Creek. She was a sister to one of the Fugate women.”

More families continued to be found. Among them were Luke Combs, and Patrick and Rachel Ritchie, who were "bluer'n hell" and embarrassed by their skin color.

Cawein and Pendergrass asked them if they knew of anyone else whose skin was blue. As information began to emerge they took blood samples from the people they found and graphed a family tree.

"It's a fascinating story," commented Dr. Ayalew Tefferi, a hematologist from Minnesota's Mayo Clinic. "It also exemplifies the intersection between disease and society, and the danger of misinformation and stigmatization.”
(Update! Ben Stacy, now in his forties and living in Alaska, seems to have overcome the blue skin that was so apparent when he was born.)

Sources:
THE BLUE PEOPLE OF TROUBLESOME CREEK
by Cathy Trost

DAILY MAIL
by Mark Duell and Micela McLucas

Ben and Katherine Stacy