Melungeons: The Mysterious Mountain People
by Bobbye Maggard

In the late 1700s, the people group known as Melungeons was first discovered living in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains. Since then, Melungeons have been spotted in areas throughout the entire Appalachian Chain in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia.

Common thought holds that the mysterious people known as Melungeons are tri-racial (Sub-Saharan African, European Caucasian and Native American). The dark skinned, blue-eyed inhabitants of the knobs and hollows of Appalachia also have their own language with words that sound like an odd mixture of Portuguese and Native American.
Because of their secretive, clannish behavior, little is known about their heredity. In his 1994 book *The Melungeons: The Resurrection of a Proud People*, researcher Brent Kennedy espouses his theory that the mixed-race group can trace its lineage to Spanish and Portuguese explorers in the 16th century and perhaps their Turkish sailors and slaves. He maintains the possibility that Melungeons also could be descendants of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern settlers, who later intermarried with Native Americans and freed slaves.

Kennedy even goes so far as to suggest that Elvis Presley, Ava Gardner and Abraham Lincoln could have had Melungeon heredity, although none of them were born anywhere near any Melungeon colony.

Many legends and myths have long surrounded the origins of this fascinating people group. Some researchers have believed they were either survivors from the Lost Colony of Roanoke or from Portuguese shipwrecks. Others suggested they were descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel or of early Carthaginian or Phoenician seafarers. Sociologists and anthropologists have argued that Melungeons are “tri-racial isolates,” with Scotch-Irish, Native American and African origins.

Kennedy became interested in the Melungeons when he contracted a rare disease that occurs most often in African, Middle Eastern or Portuguese people. He had always been told that his ancestors were “Scotch-Irish” but the dark skin that runs throughout his family line, didn’t seem to match with that heritage.

Even the term, “Melungeon”, has undetermined origin. In the 17th century, French explorers encountered swarthy-skinned people with straight black hair, European features and high cheekbones in the North Carolina hills. They called themselves “Portyghee.” causing some scholars to argue that
“Melungeon” is a variation of the French “mélange” for “mixture” or “mixed-blood.” Still others believe Melungeon comes from the Portuguese “melungeo” or “shipmate”. Still others believe that the term finds its roots in Turkish or Arabic words which mean “cursed soul.”

Although much dispute seems to swirl around the peculiar racial group, what is not disputed is that Meluneons, like Australian Aborigines, have been discriminated against by their Anglo-Saxon neighbors.

They were declared “free persons of color,” because they were thought to have intermarried with Blacks, and were denied the right to vote; to own their own land; to educate their children in public schools; to legally defend themselves; or intermarry with anyone other than another Melungeon.

“Melungeon” was once used as an insult, and as Scottish and Irish immigrants began to spread down the Shenandoah Valley, the Meluneons were pushed further and further into virtual obscurity in the remote hills and valleys of the Appalachian chain.

An article in USA Today states, “In a more diverse United States with celebrities like Tiger Woods or movie star Dwayne Johnson, let alone a president, Barack Obama, who was born to a white mother and an African father, fewer people find stigma in having mixed-race heritage.”

In recent years, as interest in heredity has become a more popular pursuit, many individuals have begun finding Melungeon roots hidden in the branches of their family trees. This has caused a renewed passion for learning more about the quaint people who remain almost hidden in their remote communities. It is estimated that from 5,000 to 75,000 Meluneons live in the United States.
The first gathering of people of Melungeon descent in Wise, Virginia in 1997, garnered 500 people, which surprised the meeting’s organizers who had only expected about 50 participants!

Attendees came to listen and tell family stories of “Portuguese blood” they had been familiar with since childhood. Some wondered why an ancestor had changed his surname from “Duck” to John Adams, or why their family always had referred to themselves as “Black Dutch.” Interest has become so intense that the gathering has rapidly grown in numbers and is now an annual event.

Kevin Jones, a University of Virginia Biology Professor, has done a two-year study of Melungeon DNA. He has concluded that Melungeons have European, African and Native American ancestry, as early scholars believed, but also genetic commonalities with groups in Turkey and northern India.

Jones cautions, “Being a Melungeon is not defined by genetics alone. A person might also believe they are Melungeon because of oral tradition, genealogy or family history.” He further explains, “Melungeons are a self-defining population.”

Are the Melungeons a culture or a racial group? That question may never be adequately answered, but in Cesme, Turkey, Melungeons are definitely accepted. On the Aegean coast, from where ships have sailed for centuries, natives of Cesme, have renamed a nearby peak, “Melungeon Mountain.”