



MELUNGEON MEMORIES



By Stacey Aviva Clark

Melungeon's are a tri-racial ethnic group formed by early Americans located in Appalachia composed of Black, white and Indigenous citizens. As strict racial laws were codified, many fled into the mountains to escape persecution. Some, however, chose to blend completely into white or Black communities. To learn more, see the [Melungeon Heritage Association](#).

Honoring the Past to Build a Future

I am writing this story because I am the inheritor of a fantastic family legacy. This story (probably the first installment) is a tribute to my family. Our fantastic legacy can be traced back to the 1700s in colonial Virginia. It can be traced back to the 1600s, in Europe; to the Eastern Band of Cherokee, pre-colonial contact, where we once lived in the region of modern-day Kentucky and its surrounding areas; and our fantastic family legacy can be traced back, of course, to Africans (enslaved and free).

I write this to begin documenting and honoring the most important people in my life who raised me and have sadly all passed. From these simple people, I learned about the importance of family and the value of not letting anything divide it. Great Granny eventually moved to Ohio to live with my grandma, near her son and my aunt, where she lived to be 105. I was sixteen when she died. My aunt passed in 2023, and my grandma passed this past June at age 97.

I was always the youngest and, as the brownest, I was affectionately called, “brown sugar.” You see, Great Granny was quite fair and never really referred to herself as a race, other than her Cherokee heritage. My cousins were white, Black, and mixed. I loved seeing my cousins, who had dark skin and green eyes! I thought this was everyone’s family makeup.

Race or color, man-made laws, or state boundaries never separated us. I took this for granted as a child, and at times, I was quite naive about race relations because of how I had grown up and idealized what I saw of my family. I now know that there were internal fights over race and name-calling, betrayals, and much trauma that racism had on our family.

I was once ashamed of the heavy drawls, bare feet, and strange food, but now **I am grateful that I carry the stories, recipes, and memories of a unique American family with a proudly Black, white, and Cherokee heritage... a unique American ethnicity known as Melungeon.**

But let me tell you about my great-grandma, Laura B.

An Appalachia-unique history: Afralachians-Melungeons

Melungeon Matriarch

My earliest childhood memories are of being loaded into the red Buick Electra 225 (aka Duce and a Quarterto) to drive from Cincinnati, Ohio to Millersburg, Kentucky to visit my great-grandma: “Granny,” “Granny Laura,” “Old Lady,” or **Laura B.** Visiting family in Millersburg was like stepping back in time. Granny’s house held objects you can only find at rural flea markets now: ice picks, a pot-belly stove, and feather tick beds (not a good idea when the “facilities” are behind the house in a small town lit up only by the stars). She lived on 12th street, a dirt road that deadened into railroad tracks. The real saving grace was next door, at my cousin’s fancy double-wide trailer, because she had indoor plumbing.

Our arrival always evoked the feeling of Thanksgiving. Every kind of homemade food imaginable would be on the table, including my favorites: the starches — homemade buttermilk biscuits, hot water cornbread, and, of course, salt-rising bread (stinky Appalachian bread!).

Back in Ohio, I was teased about how I spoke. Classmates accused me of having a nose job because, apparently, mine was not broad. I was ridiculed when my “white” aunt came to school functions as my family member when my grandma, Emma, couldn’t attend. Kentucky always felt different.

The Stories We Inherit: Police Chase

When anti-miscegenation laws still ruled Kentucky in the 1940’s, the police followed and arrested my family constantly, until my great-uncle and aunt eventually crossed the **Mason Dixon line**,* across the river, to a more tolerable Ohio.

But even across the river, the police crossed state lines – defending themselves on some bogus charges that my family now retells as a hilarious story about hiding in moving boxes.

My grandma Emma and my aunt Sylvia were best friends from childhood. Eventually, my aunt married her brother — my great-uncle. When the police found and arrested my aunt, my grandma exclaimed:



*If you’re
taking her,
you have to
take me too.*

So off to jail the two women went, the mixed multitude, where my grandma relays that between the two of them they made a raucous noise, launching and throwing spitballs. The exasperated police released them. That part of the situation, yeah, it’s hilarious. But anti-miscegenation laws were not hilarious. Hunting down people, chasing members of my family, forcing strategies for escape — that’s not hilarious.

Stories were also passed won to me as I sat at Laura B’s feet. Lots of times, there would be complete silence for long periods. But when she spoke, through pipe smoke. I was transported back to when the buffalo roamed past her house, to tales of her yodeling, blue-ribbon square dancing, and horse riding – side saddle, of course. It was my honor to light her corn-cob pipe. I would take the tobacco – which was sometimes fresh from my grandfather’s farm in Ripley, Ohio – crush it into the pipe, and then light and puff on it to get it going. Then, I passed the lit smoke to her.

Fluidity of Race and Status: Before One Drop

Before computers existed, my Great Granny told me she was born in Nicholasville, KY, to parents Jesse Henry Clay and Amanda Clay. Her father had lived in Mays Lick but was *born* in Virginia. When digital records emerged, I typed these fragmented facts into ancestry databses and the Kentucky Archives, and a whole new world opened to me — and to my family.

Interestingly enough, we are descendants of Senator Henry Clay, Muhammed Ali (originally born Clay), martial artist Jim Kelly, and Johnny Nash (song writer and publisher for Bob Marley).

In 1870, Jesse Henry was labeled as “**Mulatto**”* on the US Census. A decade later the census taker identified him as “Black.” Several of my uncles and aunts were listed as Mulatto into the 1900s, and I know of only one great-aunt who went on to pass for white, in Philadelphia.

I have since learned from **manumission*** documents (legal freedom declarations) that my great-great-great-grandmother, Amanda (Laura B’s mom), and Amanda’s mother, Phoebe Talbott/Smith, had been enslaved.

Phoebe was then bought by a Black man named Smith who later freed them. My cousin in Kentucky found records revealing my family had a history of purchasing slaves to free them, teaching them to farm to become self-sustaining as most freed slaves often ended up in situations not much different from enslavement. Many ended up as **sharecroppers** — who rent property to farm and end up owing the property owner due to the corrupt system that overcharged and cheated them.

My great-grandfather, however, was *not* a slave, nor was his mother: Abigail. In 1836, she was called to court to prove her freedom. The records from the courthouse state that Abigail produced sufficient evidence to prove that she, her daughter Jenny, and her son Jesse Henry (my great-grandfather) had all been born free.

Questions as a Bridge

Many people from mixed heritages are asked, *what are you?* For me, as a Jew who does not fit the typical **Ashkenazi*** phenotype, I am asked, *How are you Jewish?* While I have found no solid evidence for the claim, some say Melungeons are descendants of Portuguese Jews — who fled Inquisition-era persecution. Now, a question I often ask myself is: *how can I weave my Jewish heritage with my Melungeon heritage?*

The questions we ask and are asked about identity at their core inquire: *where do you belong?* And while inquiring most often does not come from a place of malice, learning how to ask questions respectfully is key. On the power of questions as bridges to relationship-building, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt”l emphasized that learning how to ask questions is foundational to bounding people together in community and through time and space.



*I am Melungeon.
I am Black.
I am Indigenous.
I am Jewish.*



*A replica of Laura B's pipe pictured with non-commercial, ritual-state, and Kentucky-grown tobacco Stacey Aviva Clark add to her **Havdalah besamim**.**

“

We are a unique mosaic of our intersecting identities. I am a unique mosaic of my intersecting identities.

As a Jew by Choice, I am inspired to weave my birth culture with my Jewishness. As Jews are a multiethnic, multiracial people. For me, tobacco was central to my people's lives in this country as a cash crop, medicinal, and ritual. I decided to add organic tobacco from Kentucky to my *besamim* (spices) for **Havdalah*** – to honor my birth and my chosen heritage. In this process, **In this way, I not only honor my ancestors, but I also model for my children how to continue weaving traditions.** Take a moment to ask yourself: How have you already woven in your origins and various identities?

GLOSSARY

Am Yisrael Chai: Translates from Biblical Hebrew to “The People of Israel Live.” It has served as a powerful rallying cry about peoplehood, shared ancestry and identity, solidarity, resilience, and continuity; today, it often affirms that despite centuries of persecution, hardship, and attempts at annihilation, the Jewish people continue to endure.

Havdalah: The Saturday evening Jewish ritual observed at the end of the weekly Sabbath. The ceremony includes multiple symbolic items, including the **besamim** – fragrant spices passed around for everyone to smell – which are meant to revive and invite joy, sweetness, and goodness for the upcoming workweek.

Mason Dixon Line: A historic boundary originally surveyed in the 1760s to resolve a border dispute, which later became famous as the cultural divide separating the free Northern states from the Southern states that upheld the system of slavery before and during the American Civil War.

Mulatto: The term Mulatto indicated mixed race people in the United States – often individuals who held both Black and white ancestry, with varying percentages. The “Mulatto” designation preserved as a racial classification on official records until shortly after 1920. The “**One Drop Rule**” then assigned individuals to a binary racial classification system, determining that ‘one drop’ of Black ancestry made someone Black, no matter their appearance or the diversity or multitude of ethnicities they inherited.

Sharecropping: An agricultural system where a farmer works someone else's land in exchange for a share of the crops, but the system often traps poor farmers in a cycle of endless debt.

Zt”l: A Jewish honorific abbreviation meaning, “May the memory of the righteous one be a blessing.” It is often used alongside the name of a respected, righteous, or scholarly deceased individual as a sign of deep respect. When reading a text aloud that contains this abbreviation, it is typically pronounced as “zatza.”

