

Episode 7: Transcript

Guest Wayne Winkler- Season Finale - Author, Public Radio Station Manager and former MHA President, Wayne Winkler, discusses his book "Beyond the Sunset" about the Melungeon outdoor drama, Walk Toward the Sunset, and its significance on the Melungeon people back then, as well as today.

Lis Malone (Co-Host):

This is the Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone and I'm here with the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Heather Andolina. Heather, this is the last episode of our first season of this podcast and I am heartbroken.

Heather Andolina (Host):

I know Lis. I am very sad right now.

Lis:

Well, I just wanted you to know that this has been an incredible adventure for me and I can't thank you and the executive committee enough for inviting me to participate in going down this new journey with you.

Heather:

Lis, we can't thank you enough for everything you have done for us and helping us put this wonderful podcast together. Without your help and professionalism, we wouldn't have been able to do this so thank you so much.

Lis:

Well, it's been my pleasure. And before this love fest brings us both to tears, let's talk about the Melungeon Heritage Association and US president have a message to deliver to everybody. So without further delay, let me turn the floor over to you.

Heather:

Thank you, Lis. On behalf of myself and the executive committee of the Melungeon Heritage Association, we thoroughly enjoyed bringing this podcast series to you. If you are new to the Melungeon Heritage Association, we would love to have you join our organization. And if you are already a member, it is through your support and donations that this podcast series was made possible. If you enjoyed it, remember to renew your membership so that we can continue to bring you more engaging content in the future. If you would like the podcast series to continue, we want your feedback. We will be putting together a survey and a summer edition of the Melungeon Heritage Association's newsletter as well as sharing it online. Your feedback is very important to us and we hope we can continue this informative and amazing podcast series.

We look forward to seeing many of you at next year's 25th union, which will be held June 18th and 19th of 2021 in Berea, Kentucky. We want to thank you all again for your wonderful support of our organization and of our first season of the Melungeon Voices Podcast series.

Lis:

Well, thank you so much, Heather and for our final episode. And he is only last in order, not last in your hearts. You interviewed Mr. Wayne Winkler. Please share some information about Wayne.

Heather:

Wayne Winkler manages the public radio station, W-E-T-S-F-M in Johnson City, Tennessee. He is also an author and former president of the Melungeon Heritage Association. In our discussion, Wayne will give an inside look at his new book, *Beyond the Sunset* about the Melungeon outdoor drama, walk toward the sunset and its significance on the Melungeon people back then as well as today.

Lis:

Well, you and Wayne definitely proved that past and present presidents can get along.

Heather:

Indeed, Lis.

Lis:

Awesome. Let's listen in.

Heather:

So Wayne, tell us about your Melungeon ancestry. When and how did you discover you were a Melungeon descendant?

Wayne Winkler (Guest):

Well, it's when I was 12 years old. I was spending part of the summer with my grandmother in Hancock County. And I was looking at an issue of the Hancock County Post, kind of a special 4th of July issue. And they were talking about the idea of putting on a Melungeon outdoor drama the following year. And they were talking a little bit about the Melungeons in this paper. And I was reading this and I thought I had a pretty good vocabulary for a 12 year old, but I had never heard or seen the word Melungeon before. And I asked a couple of my relatives, "What is the Melungeon? Who were they talking about here? Why have I never seen any of these people?"

And my mother finally told me, "Well, your grandmother's a Melungeon which means your dad's a Melungeon, which means you and your brother are Melungeons." And I said, "Okay, what is that?" And she didn't know. When I got back home, I went to the library and I found a book from Brewton Berry entitled, *Almost White*. And it talked about not just the Melungeons, but all the so-called tri-racial isolates that were all over the Southeastern United States. And that just got my interest going and I've been a Melungeon researcher ever since.

Heather:

Your first book, *Walking Towards the Sunset*, the Melungeons of Appalachia. What is it about and what inspired you to write it?

Wayne:

Well, I had gotten involved with the very beginnings of the Melungeon Heritage Association after your first and second union. I covered first union for national public radio and I was just getting

interested in the subject. And of course, I'd read Brent Kennedy's book and there were other books that came out, but all of the books seem to be promoting a theory of origin of the Melungeons. And what I wasn't seeing was something that was comprehensive. The entire history of the Melungeons as such as it's known and I didn't see anything that placed the story in any kind of historical context. So I thought there was a market for a general information look about the Melungeons one that wasn't trying to take a position on who the Melungeons were, where they came from. This is just what is known about the Melungeons.

I wanted something that could even be used as a textbook in case somebody did a class on mixed ethnic people. That was the inspiration of it. And as I got into it and learned more, of course, I saw the story taking shape in a different way than I set out to write, but that's the way stories go sometimes when you get into it. You find it leads you in a slightly different direction than you originally intended to go. But that was what I was trying to do is make a general history of the Melungeons and put it into historical context.

Heather:

I've read your book Wayne and found it very informative and an excellent source on the history of the Melungeon people. In the book, you talk about the one-drop rule and Walter Plecker. At last year's union, you did a brilliant presentation on Walter Plecker. Can you tell us a little more about Walter Plecker's role in the passing of the role and how it impacted the Melungeon people?

Wayne:

Well, the one-drop rule is a concept that anyone who has, and they always use the term blood in terms of ancestry. Anyone who had even one drop of African blood was an African and there was nothing in-between and the whiteness was a cherished thing and could not be sullied with the blood of anyone else. And in the case of Walter Plecker, Walter Plecker wanted to make that definition legal in the state of Virginia. And with the passage of the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, that concept of the one-drop rule was codified. It had been not so strictly defined in some states. At one time in Tennessee for example, if you're African ancestry was more than three generations back, you were considered white. But Walter Plecker and the Racial Integrity Act changed all of that.

Any non-white ancestry and they included Indians in that as well, anyone who was not 100% white was deemed colored. There were only two categories, white and colored, and Walter Plecker was pretty much determined to eradicate any non-white ancestry in the record books and even in schools, in public transportation, even in cemeteries. Walter Plecker arranged to have bodies exhumed from cemeteries if he found that that family was not what he considered white, that they were in a white cemetery. He was going to correct all that. And it had an impact on a lot of different people. People who had any mixture of ancestry could suddenly see their rights taken away, they could see that their entire family history could be rewritten to fit the one-drop rule.

And it left people wondering who we are and what do you have to do to get your rights in the state like Virginia? Because a lot of the people that he was accusing of being non-white, they did not know their own ancestry, they didn't do genealogy, they didn't know anything about this. And all of a sudden, here's somebody saying, "Hey, you're not who you thought you were." It had a really powerful impact not just on Melungeons, but on people of Native American ancestry, people of any ancestry that was not considered 100% white. It was actually very disruptive to the lives of a lot of people.

Heather:

In terms of the disruption it caused for those individuals and families, what did that mean for them back then?

Wayne:

Well, Walter Plecker had sent a list to County clerks of surnames that he said were people, as he put it, trying to pass as white and they should not be considered white and should not get the same privileges as white people. So, County clerks were the people you went to for a marriage license. You're going to get married, you found the person that you want to spend your life with, you go there and you find that your name is on some list and the County clerk says, "We can't marry you because you are not white." That would be a big shock to someone and that calls into question the legitimacy of that person's parents' marriage.

It might lead to them being expelled from the school they're going to because if they looked Caucasian and everyone had assumed that they were and then all of a sudden here's a County clerk saying, "No, you're not. You are tainted. You are considered legally not white." That could change your entire life. It could change the school that you go to, the church you go to might decide that, "Oh, we're a white-only church. You can't come here." Your entire position in local society would be different just because somebody said that your ancestors weren't who you thought they were.

And so, people who had been your friends, your colleagues, your schoolmates, even maybe your fiancé, now they looked at you differently. You were not the same as you were before. I would think that would be a terrible disruption for people if they had no idea of their ancestry. Now, some people did. Some people thought they knew that their families had some mixture in there, but they figured that was long ago, it shouldn't be considered anything but a white person now. But of course, if Walter Plecker had you on his list, you were at least suspect if not completely condemned as being non-white. That was a very big deal. I mean, in a society where only white people have certain privileges, to be taken out of that group would have a serious impact. It would really cause a disruption in your life and even who you thought you were.

Heather:

I did not know about that, Wayne. That is quite sad. I mean, that it caused so much disruption in people's lives like that. Let's talk about your latest book, *Beyond the Sunset: The Melungeon Outdoor Drama, 1969 to 1976*. What made you decide to write a book about *The Melungeon Outdoor Drama*, which was called *Walk Toward the Sunset*?

Wayne:

I had written a little bit about *The Outdoor Drama* in my book. In fact, I borrowed the title of *The Outdoor Drama* for my book. I made mine *Walking Toward the Sunset*, but I thought *The Outdoor Drama* was an important point in Melungeon history. And as other people had written books about it and talked about the Melungeons, I didn't see really anyone else mentioning that. And the way I saw it, *The Outdoor Drama* was very significant in that it allowed Melungeons to identify themselves. Now, this didn't happen right away. It didn't happen as they were planning *The Outdoor Drama*, but it had the impact of freeing people to say, "Hey, this is who I am. This is who my ancestors were." Melungeon was a term that people did not use to describe themselves or their families. Melungeon was a word that other people used to describe you and your family.

Usually they didn't use that word to your face. It was considered very derogatory and it didn't just refer to your ancestors, it referred to your socio-economic status. Melungeons were supposedly lazy, untrustworthy, uninterested in making a better life for themselves. And of course at that same time, there were young people going to school at the Vardy Mission who were making something of themselves. When they did, somebody like Claude Collins for example, who grew up on Newman's Ridge, went to the Vardy School, did some service in the army, went to University of Tennessee, became a school administrator in Hancock County. By the common definition of Melungeon that was used in Hancock County, he was no longer a Melungeon. He was a hard-working professional person and the term Melungeon didn't really fit him and he didn't really even think of himself as a Melungeon. Nobody had ever called him that, he didn't ever hear the word or see the word until he saw it in Life Magazine in 1947 while he was in college.

So, the whole concept of Melungeon was something that was used to describe someone else. And that's the way the Melungeons felt about it. They're not talking about us because it's a nasty word. It has a meaning that we would not want attached to ourselves or our families. But when The Outdoor Drama started, the drama was not meant to salvage the reputation of the Melungeons or do anything other than to bring tourism into Hancock County. Hancock County was an extremely poor County at that time in the mid-1960s. I believe it was the eighth poorest County in the United States. And they just wanted something that was going to provide job opportunities and give people a reason to stay in the County. Hancock County had lost nearly half its population from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. Some of the people in the community thought that maybe tourism would be a viable option for the County, some way that they could generate some cash flow, some jobs for the local people.

And it was an interesting story and it was something unique about Hancock County that other counties didn't have. They had the Melungeon story in Hancock County. But when they started to put the play on and they were getting publicity for it, when reporters would come to write about the story, they wanted to talk to a Melungeon. And so Claude Collins became the designated Melungeon who would talk to the press. And after a little while, [Coreen Boleyn 00:17:04], who was a college student at the time but was involved in the drama committee. She was also a spokesperson for the Melungeon people. And Claude Collins was the first person I ever heard of saying, "I'm a Melungeon. I am proud of it." That opened up that feeling for a lot of people. They were a little bit wary of it at first. Some people thought, "Oh, this is going to be some way of making fun of the Melungeons or talking bad about them or making them look bad."

And it turned out not to be that. The play as written was actually pretty complimentary toward the Melungeons. It showed them as hard-working people who had been treated badly. And as the play went on as I talk about in the book, the director of the play, John Lee Welton, talked about how people were making jokes about Melungeons at the beginning of that first season as they were helping him work on the amphitheater. But by the middle of the season or at least by the end of the season, people were coming up to him nudging him and saying, "Hey, I'm a Melungeon too." Obviously, people were taking pride in something that they had not really thought about talking about before. And the long-term impact of that is I think that probably if it hadn't been for that, the Melungeons would have just assimilated and disappeared and being just a little footnote in a few little history books about this mixed-race people.

But because of The Outdoor Drama, there were people who were willing to stand up and say, "That's me." And that opened the door for future researchers to talk to individuals themselves about their experiences and what their lives had been like. So I think it was a defining moment for the Melungeons in that it allowed people to, if you will come out of the closet and acknowledge who they were and to be proud of their families. Yeah, I think it was a very significant event that has not really

been publicized. It hadn't been recognized as something that was really important to the future of this people. The identification people have with Melungeons now, I don't think would be happening if it hadn't been for The Outdoor Drama.

Heather:

Do you think that The Outdoor Drama also helped lead to the burst of interest in the Melungeon people like say with Brent Kennedy's book and some other books in the mid-1990s?

Wayne:

I think so, maybe not directly. Before The Outdoor Drama, the idea of someone identifying themselves as Melungeon was unheard of. People just didn't do that. Now, I don't know that Brent had any particular knowledge of The Outdoor Drama. I think he knew that it had happened, but didn't really know that much about it. But I think the fact that he was interested in writing about the Melungeons in proclaiming himself to be a Melungeon and the reception that the book had in the mid-1990s where people were identifying themselves as Melungeons, I think all that was a result of The Outdoor Drama.

Again, not directly, but it set a precedent that this is something you could talk about, that there were people who proudly acknowledged their Melungeon ancestry and that this was something that people could look into, find this ancestry in their own family tree and be proud of it as they would be proud of just about anybody that they found in there. But particularly, people who had been through a tough time, people who had faced adversity, faced discrimination, I think people have to be pretty tough to get through things like that and our Melungeon ancestors definitely were. They were tough people. And I think The Outdoor Drama allowed all of us to acknowledge that, acknowledge who they were and some of the hardships they went through and to proclaim some connection to that.

Heather:

I would definitely agree with you. It does appear especially today, I have received so many emails from people just now learning about the Melungeons and emailing the Melungeon Heritage Association and they're like, "I might be Melungeon, I don't know. Can you tell me?" But it does seem to be more of an acceptance of the term and people wanting to know more. Would you agree?

Wayne:

I would. I think also The Outdoor Drama changed the definition of Melungeon in a very fundamental way. Before The Outdoor Drama, Melungeon as I said, had a socio-economic connotation as well as one referring to someone's ancestry. But after The Outdoor Drama, people who had obviously been educated, had jobs and were professional people, people who didn't fit that earlier definition of Melungeon, they had sort of changed the definition. It's like somebody for your whole life had called you some nasty names, the name that just hurt you, that you didn't want to hear. But all of a sudden, you take that, you make a t-shirt with that name on it and you say, "Yeah, that's who I am. I'm going to be proud of this. Rather than let you define it; I'm going to define it myself and it's who we are."

I think it had that impact that people may not know where that effect came from, they might not know that it really started with The Outdoor Drama. They just knew that this is now something that you could talk about, that you don't have to hide, you can look for it. Before The Outdoor Drama, people would have tried to hide that ancestry. If people didn't already peg you as a Melungeon, you wouldn't want people to know about it. Now people are trying to find it. There was a saying that went around

Hancock County at the time of The Outdoor Drama. It used to be, nobody wanted to say the word Melungeon, now everybody wants to be one. I must've heard that 50 times as I was growing up.

Heather:

And I agree, definitely. Even with my own family, we knew there was mixed ethnicity, but nobody talked about it. And you discover that with so many people, but now these generations, they want to know and they're proud of it and I think that is fabulous.

Wayne:

I think society has changed a lot. It wasn't just the Melungeons and The Outdoor Drama that made that acceptable, but that was a step along the way I think, especially for the Melungeons in particular. There was something that they could be proud of. And this outdoor drama was not historically accurate, there was no history for a Dr. Kermit Hunter to draw on. He pretty much had to make up the story. He used his best historical guess as to how things went in the first act when the first white settlers were coming into the area. The second act was completely fiction, but it did portray the Melungeons in a positive light and it showed that these were people who faced discrimination, who were looked down upon by their neighbors. That story was something that was uplifting to Melungeons.

And people came down off Newman's Ridge and came from all around to see this story. And for people who knew of their Melungeon ancestry, who knew that my dad or my grandmother or somebody was considered a Melungeon, this was something that was very empowering for them. Something that could make them feel that this is not something to hide, this is something to be proud of and to tell the world about it.

Heather:

Wayne, it's been great. And we want to thank you so much for taking the time and speaking with us on the Melungeon Voices Podcast.

Wayne:

Well, it's been a pleasure and I want to thank you for doing the work to make this podcast happen because for a lot of us, we were disappointed that the union wasn't going to happen. We understand why, of course, but we miss having that event and I think this is a really good alternative. One that has the potential to reach a lot more people. So thank you very much for doing this.

Lis:

You've been listening to the Melungeon voices podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA executive committee, we'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at melungeon.org. That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N. O-R-G. The information views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA. Melungeon Voices is presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. All rights are reserved.

