Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Three Transcript, Episode Four: Ron Carson

Lis Malone: Welcome to the Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, and I'm here with the president of the fine organization, the MHA. Heather, Andolina. Good hump week, Heather.

Heather Andolina: Yeah, we're about midway through this.

Lis: Yep. Episode Four is always our hump episode which means we are right in the middle of our season. And I have to say, I know we're in episode four. Is it just me or is this going by pretty fast. Like every season, it seems like Right?

Heather: Oh, yeah.

Lis: So, getting back on track. Let's talk about what we have going on for this week's episode.

Heather: Yes, Lis this week we speak to Ron Carson. And let me tell you a little bit about Ron. Ron Carson is the founder of the Appalachian African American Cultural Center. He has dedicated his life and work to the collection and preservation of the narratives, experiences and artifacts of historical import to the black people of Appalachia, along with his wife till he prevented the demolition of an old one room schoolhouse he attended as a child, and in 1987, created the Appalachian African American Cultural Center within its walls. And this week's episode, we welcome back Ron Carson. He was a guest speaker at this year's my luncheon Heritage Association Union Conference. We further discuss the African American experience in Appalachia, and how the Melungeon people are a part of Black Appalachian history. And his important work advocating for the diagnosis, treatment and benefits for coal miners with black lung.

Lis: Ron's presentation from this past Union conference was dynamic. It was certainly a crowd pleaser, a lot of information, a lot of heart. So, I am truly looking forward to hearing what you and Ron discussed this week.

Heather: Yes, Lis. And that's why we chose Ron to be the connection between the conference and the podcast season this year.

Lis: Well, as they say you chose wisely. Thank you, Ron, for speaking at the conference, and of course, being on the podcast and let's all listen in.

Heather: Hello, Ron, how are you today?

Ron Carson: Hello, Heather. I'm doing fine.

Heather: Good, good. So, I'm going to get right into it. This is usually how I always like to start my interview is having our guests tell us about their personal ancestry? And if they have any ties to the Melungeon people?

Ron: Oh, okay. Well, this is Ron Carson. The fourth and, and I was born in Pennington Gap in the early 1950s. Actually, I grew up in Pennington Gap until the age of 17. Then I moved away. But growing up and Pennington Gap, I grew up during the segregated era. And my great great grandmother, Rachel

Scott saw the need for a building for the Black children to go to school. And so, she actually provided the resources had the color elementary school built in 1939. My great great grandmother, Rachel, my mother, I'm sorry, my mother was the first group in 1940 to enter that building. And I was in the last group in 1965 when we integrate it. So, my roots run very deep in Southwest Virginia, we actually came to this area. What I found was in the early 1800s. I would have been a fifth-generation coal miner, if I had stayed in the coal mines, but it just wasn't meant for me to work in the mines. So, I lasted maybe two or three months and then I left grad after high school.

Heather: Would you please share some insight into what is the African American experience in Appalachia?

Ron: I'm not sure if it's any different than any other place in Deep South, I guess during, during the area that I grew up in, during segregation. We weren't allowed to, to go into any establishment, I'd be called going to the movie theater. You know, I had to slip into a balcony, I couldn't sit down on the Auditorium floor with my wife, friends. So, we played together every day. You know, softball, basketball, but we could not go into the drugstore and have a milkshake together. We couldn't go to the movies together. So, the first 12 years of my life, I was born in 1953. And we didn't integrate into 1965. So, the first 12 years of my life, you know, were segregated. So, I'm not sure if I answer your question, then the Appalachian African American experience, we just didn't know any better, because we were there in the mountains. And we really didn't know how the other side of the country would live in during this time.

Heather: You definitely answered my question Ron, which leads me into my next question. Let's talk about the Appalachian African American Cultural Center, which celebrates, preserves and teaches Black Appalachian history. Ron, tell us about how it came to be and what is the work of this organization?

Ron: Well, the, as I mentioned earlier, Heather, my great great grandmother, built this building in 1939, and it served as an education center for Blacks from 1939, up until 1965. From 1965, up until 1986. It served as a head start center with the Lee County School Systems. In 1986. I had lived in Boston for a great number of years, and I had moved back to Pennington Gap, Virginia. And at that particular time that the County school system was consolidating schools, they adopt a new school, and they were going to tear down all the other little schools that didn't serve any purpose. So, I knew that my great great grandmother had built this building. And there was never a reversion clause in the deed that it would revert back over to the family after it stopped being used as an education facility. So, we knew that we had a battle ahead of us fighting the school system.

But anyway, years couple of years fighting the school system for the building, we finally got the building. And we really didn't know what we wanted to do with the building. We had no idea I just knew that my great great grandmother, provided the resources for it could be built. And I didn't want to see it tore down. My wife and I, we got a fellowship to the Highlander center in Newmarket, Tennessee. And if your listeners are not familiar with the Highlander center, it's the place where during the Civil Rights era that that groups of people would go and meet and plan strategy. Actually, it was where Dr. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks met several times to plan the Montgomery bus boycott. So, we got a fellowship called the south fellowship to southern Appalachian leadership training, scholarship. And it was there that we discovered that very little has been written or documented on African American in the coalfields of southwest Virginia. Nothing had been written.

Dr. William H. Turner had written a book earlier called blacks in Appalachia, but it really didn't focus a whole lot in the coalfields of southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and Southern West Virginia. We knew that we wanted to start documenting the stories of this forgotten area, I heard a quote by Dr. Carter G. Woodson. And I always paraphrase him where he said, perhaps the most important element to any given people is the documentation and preservation of their history. If a race has no history, it has no worthwhile tradition. And it stands to be lost in the eyes of society forever. And that just stuck with me over the years where because I knew nothing has really been documented, like Blacks in the coalfields of southwest Virginia. So, we started this process back in the 80s. We had this big old camcorder the first one that came out so we got a couple of young kids to carry the camcorder around and we knew that we had this started gathering the stories because we were an aging population in Lee County and the surrounding counties of southwest Virginia. So, if you think about it 1987 8687, when we started this, you still had people who was born in the early 1900s, or maybe even 1890. And they could tell stories of their parents or their great grandparents. So, we started documenting all these stories. And gathering this information. We had what was called story swaps. We were trained by the Apple shop, to facilitate story swaps. And once again, we knew that these stories had to be gathered quickly because of the aging population.

We just started looking at memorabilia of people who brought items to the little one room school that were that was in the school and the 1950s and 1960s, like the original teacher desk, some of the desks that the students said in pictures and different artifacts. And so, we just started gathering this, this information. And in 1994, October 1994, we had a very suspicious fire, and we lost everything. Everything that the original desk furniture, pictures, the old tin-plated pictures, back in the 1800s. You know, we lost everything. So, we really didn't know what we wanted to do. Do we continue? Or do we just stop and forget about it? Well, you know, going through the rubbish at the farm, we found one thing that wasn't birth, it was scotch. But it was my great great grandmother, Rachel Scott, their certificate of birth, or funeral arrangement and a lock of her hair. And Jelena there? Well, you know, I think Rachel Scott is trying to tell us something called this about a bar, and we just need to move on.

So, we started back over again, we decided to have what was called memorabilia night again, where people brought things in, into the school. And we had what we call story swap sessions, where we would choose a theme. And we would have people come in and talk about the things one of the some of the things were one room schools. Other things were herbs, remedies, we had this one lady Hazel who was the name for puppies Creek, Virginia, elderly white lady who could identify any plant or herb in the woods. And everything. So, what our story swaps in memory, we started over again, we did the story swaps. And so, we started, you know, gathering information again. And we just continued to move forward, we had what was called holiday tradition in the mountains. Actually, it was so large that we had to move it from the little one room school to the how the United Methodist Church that could hold on, you know, 100 people.

So, from then we just started, you know, gathering stories again, and history, but we actually branched out we branched out of southwest Virginia, and started reaching out into extreme Kentucky, northeast Tennessee, even up to southern West Virginia. And today, we have what is called the Appalachian African American Cultural Center located in Canton gap for India. Now, restoring history is just one of the things it's the main thing that that's our vision and goal is to capture the history of this population of people. But we have branched down in the in the past years to walk what is called the anti-racism workshops that my wife and I and another white couple do. We are here to get people to talk.

One of my quotes, my original quotes is we must reveal before we can heal. And so, we get people to start talking about race relations. And we have found out that it's really, really been very successful over the years to the point that we have had it with Congress, members of the Congress, and I think what makes our discussion so What's different is we approach it from a grassroot standpoint, and not so much from an academic standpoint. And don't get me wrong. I think the people who are doing these workshops on a national level from an academic standpoint is wonderful. But sometimes you have to break it down. And as the old saying, Go put it to where the goats can get it, to understand it. And I think we have a way of breaking it into a safe environment and a very comfortable environment, to get people to start talking about race relations.

Heather: Yes, I agree, Ron. And I had the pleasure of visiting the Appalachian African American Cultural Center, and it's just wonderful what you and your wife, Jill is doing.

Ron: You put 30 plus years of work into it. And hopefully, you know, we can continue, we are getting older, of course, we really don't know, the future of the other center, you know, I do have, we have two children, but Kevin and Alexis, but they don't live here. Our son is an attorney up in the DC area, and our daughter is a school psychologist, living over in the Bristol, Virginia area. So, I don't see them coming back and running as soon as I hopefully I go is to try to find a university that will, you know, work with us and is see the importance of what we have captured over the past 30 plus years.

Heather: Oh, yes, definitely. Because it does, it needs to continue. I agree. So, Ron, how are the Melungeon people a part of Black Appalachian history?

Ron: Well, you know, my, my first encounter, and I really didn't know this until several years later, I can recall sitting in that little one room school, and 19 and 64, I believe 6364. And the reason I remember that because it was around the same time that President Kennedy was assassinated, 1963/64. And these two white men and suit and ties come more often in that little one room school with about eight to 10 kids with them. And you know, I'm sitting there, and along with 20, plus other African American kids. And, you know, we knew very little about diversity, we knew very little about other ethnic groups, you know, we may know a little bit about Mexicans, but that's about it. But we knew these kids didn't look like us. And we knew that they weren't white. And so, we really didn't have any idea, you know why they were coming up to either the wandering school, but moving forward. Moving ahead, is that the school system, the Lee County school system wouldn't admit these kids to the, white school during that particular time. And it was because they didn't view them as being white.

I look at my great great grandmother, Rachel Scott, on her birth certificate, there's like three different things on there. They got mulatto, they have Melungeon, they have negro. So come to find out, after speaking to, after I moved back here in the 80s. And getting to know Greg Kennedy. And Brent was very instrumental in how we structured the cultural center back then he was one of the first advisory board members of the cultural center, and just listening to him and, the research that he had done, and made me want to go back and research and my family. And I found out that, yes, I do have my luncheon and my side of the family. And after becoming part of the 40 years African American history commission in this day and a little bit deeper, you know, it is my belief, and I'm not sure why you guys are the experts, but I'm under the assumption that that my dungeon could be I try racial group of people. And, you know, they can be white. They could be African American, could be Native American. And just have your, your genes I think picks up. Yeah, that was my first experience of seeing someone who I really couldn't identify as black or white. Back in the early 60s.

Heather: Yes, you're exactly right, Ron, the Melungeon people were multi ethnic, and multicultural. They were a mosaic of cultures. You know, very blended. Exactly. So, it was really hard to identify them in a racial construct, right. One of the things said about the Melungeon people is they were too Black to be white too white to be Black.

Ron: Yep, yep. No, exactly. I agree. 100%. Yes.

Heather: And I do know that during your presentation at the conference this past June, you mentioned a gentleman by the name of Walter Plecker. Now, the name the name Walter Plecker, has been mentioned throughout our three seasons of the Melungeon Voices Podcast.

Ron: We have his papers at the cultural center letter that he has written, totally, totally racist. In in 1930, we have an original letter was written to the wish I had it here with me at the beach, and I could refer to it. But the battle statistics, I believe, saying that there was a group of people in Lee County that's trying to oppose this white, they are definitely or not why they appear to be a negro origin. They come from Newman's Ridge, Tennessee, and they try to they obviously have a lower class of people. And we really need to put them in place. And it just goes on and on and on. So just reviewing his papers and his letters. I mean, he was a very, very mean, man.

Heather: Yes, he was.

Ron: Put it, you know, lightly. He was, he was someone that didn't believe in race mixing.

Heather: Exactly. I remember you did read. Carmen actually read one of his letters. And yeah, and yes. And I know when you mentioned the name, Walter Plecker. In any Melungeon communities, it's immediately they get upset, you know, it's like, oh, Walter Plecker, that evil man. Yeah, that's exactly what it is.

Ron: Yeah, so the reaction to people there and the audience that day.

Heather: Ron, can you tell the story about coal miners and the disease of black lung and your role in advocating for coal miners and the black lung cases?

Ron: Sure. Had, I spent over 30 years advocating for coal miners, actually, across the nation. It started that I opened this, this clinic up in St. Charles Virginia called the black lung clinic in 19, and NACME. Our goal at that time were to help coal miners to have a better quality of life from a respiratory or pulmonary standpoint. But at the same time, we wanted to try to secure benefits that the miners may be entitled to. Because during this time, it's still to this day, I'm told, attorneys will not take any federal black lung claims simply because they can't generate revenue from these claims as quickly as they do with social security claims and everything. So, I went on the path to learn as much as I could about black lung or the medical term from his coal workers, pneumoconiosis. So, moving forward now I will go back in 2019 2018. Um, so I will recognize on the, on the congressional floor of the Senate and that in the House of Representatives, by Congress for the work that I had done over the years for the miners, and they estimated that I've seen over 250,000 coal miners during that particular time. And right before I retired, my office discovers the highest concentrated rate of PMF, which is progressive massive fibrosis ever recorded in scientific literature.

We had eight to 10 epidemiology epidemiologists from NIOSH, which is the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health come to St. Charles, Virginia and live there for months, if not a year to

conduct this study. So, they did X rays of all miners that in our service area and we particularly service, southwest Virginia, Southern West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky We had managed over the whole country come into our clinic because we were known by HERSA, which is the funding source federal government. As the premier black lung clinic in the nation, we had magnets on line, drive and a passionate van just to come to our clinic to be tested for black lung, and sand that we discovered this disease PML aggressive methods are Groasis and miners were dying at a much younger age.

When I first started doing black lung back in the 90s, the average age of a man with complicated coal workers, pneumoconiosis, or PMF, was put around 6065, maybe even 70. Because what it is, is the size of the lesions that grows in your lungs. And the smaller the opacity or nodular in your lung is called coal workers pneumoconiosis. But the large that it gets size of a nickel in some cases, size of a quarter, then is complicated coworker pneumoconiosis, or PML, progressive massive fibrosis. And we started saving money in the 20s 2530 years of age, being diagnosed by pulmonologist by B readers who are board certified radiologist diagnosing this so we knew stuff that was going on in our area. So, we got a hold of Burkus he did a story and the story just ballooned over the whole country that we had identified this terrible cluster PMF for coal matters. And I think I'll finish we identified a little over 1200. And that's unheard of for complicated black lung. Now simple coal workers pneumoconiosis, we would see those on a regular basis. But complicated was something that we started seeing in 2017. And it just ballooned in 2018. So, we got published in JAMA Journal American Medical Association for identifying this terrible disease.

Now, benefits are really hard to prove for coal miners. And this is why attorneys won't usually look at a black lung case, simply because it's so much work. There are three factors that you have to prove. The first factor is you have to prove that a minor is a minor within the meaning of the act. And the definition of a coal miner with Department of Labor is anyone who has worked and are round coal, or cold been extracted from the earth. And before this code is wash and clean, and placed in the stream of commerce, which means that your work had to be integral to the extraction of the coal coming out of the ground. It couldn't be at a code tempo after the code Washington claim railroad, moving the code to a to a coal yard, or anything, that's the first thing. The second thing is you have to show that the man of suffers from coal workers, pneumoconiosis, or black lung disease. And the way that we used to test that and still do is to chest X rays, CT scans or MRIs. And once again, you know, I'm not a physician. And I'm not an expert in saying this under no me. But your lungs are in three, three zones, the upper middle and lower lobes. And these nodules and opacities actually form on your lungs. And the third thing and this is the hardest thing to prove it out is that you have to prove Coda disability from a respiratory or pulmonary standpoint, which means that you are not able to go back and work due to black lung, not no back injury, not anything else, but strictly from black lung has totally disabled you. And the way that we measure disability is through the pulmonary function studies test and the arterial blood gas studies. And the pulmonologist and the respiratory tech would put the matter on the treadmill and they would do what is called ABG arterial blood gas study with they will stick the manner in the arm or in the wrist. And they will get the heart rate up to a certain level, then they will draw the blood. And it gives off this number on the PFT is to FEV one and a respiratory tech and tell you that that's the amount of air you can take in and push it back out the blood gas is totally different, you look at what is called a p O to that this number, give yourself and anything 60 And below is considered totally disabled.

Now you think 40% of your breathing has to be gone before you can be considered totally disabled. Now, if you have complicated black lung, or progressive massive fibrosis that automatically disable you.

You don't have to have those numbers in order to be disabled. But once again, our office started in Southwest Virginia. We started winning these cases left and right not being attorneys, we will just lay There are advocates, lay representatives going There are into the administrative law judge hearings, and actually federal court. The law states that you can do that and not be a licensed attorney. So, I was the only lay representative in the early 90s. And then I've trained people around the country I train. Linda Black Gold up in Washington, Pennsylvania, a trade couple, ladies and gentlemen out in Baton New Mexico. We train at Billings, Montana, Sheridan, Wyoming, Kentucky, Illinois. So, we became the guru of federal black lung benefits across the nation.

Heather: Ron, I just want to thank you for everything you've done for coal miners. My great-grandfather was a coal miner, and had black lung, so your work has touched not only my family's life, but many Appalachian families lives too. Would you like to share with our listeners how they can learn more about your organization and how to contact you.

Ron: Yes, Heather, you can learn more about the AAACC and contact me on our website at www.aaaculturalcenter.org or on Facebook under Appalachian African American Cultural Center.

Heather: Ron, it was an absolute pleasure having you on our podcast. Thank you so much.

Ron: Thank you, Heather, for having me.

Lis Malone: 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 www.melungeon.org. The information views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA.