

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Four Transcripts, Episode Two: Dr. Kathy Lyday

Lis Malone:

This is The Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, I'm the podcast producer and I'm here with the president of the MHA, Heather Andolina. Heather, how is the hostess with the mostess?

Heather Andolina:

Aw, I'm doing very well, Liz, how about you?

Lis Malone:

I'm doing splendidly. For an episode two, we are moving.

Heather Andolina:

Yes.

Lis Malone:

There we go. We are in season four for sure. So before we roll into our guest for this week, you have an update from a past MHA Melungeon Voices Podcast guest and tell us who we are doing an update for.

Heather Andolina:

I do. I'm very excited for this one. Beverly Scarlett, our guest from season one, episode two wanted to let us all know that she is in the midst of writing and researching a new book. Stay tuned for more details to come on the MHA's website and Facebook page, as well as follow Beverly's Facebook page called Indigenous Memories for all the update latest.

Lis Malone:

Well, that is fantastic news. Congratulations Beverly, we await your new book. Good luck with your researching and your writing. It is quite the task and always have so much respect because as you know, I work in publishing in the publishing industry when I'm not doing all this wonderful, fantastic work with you here on this podcast. So I always have so much respect for people who are able to take the time and really come through with a finished book product. So good luck to Beverly. We know it's going to be amazing, and we will keep everybody posted once we learn more.

Heather Andolina:

Exactly. Very excited.

Lis Malone:

So onto this week's guest, what do we have lined up for episode two, Heather?

Heather Andolina:

Well, episode two is going to be a very fascinating episode. We have with us Professor Emerita Dr. Kathy J. Lyday, who has taught first year writing, linguistics, grammar, the history of the English language,

American literature, introduction to literature, literature of the Holocaust and Appalachian literature at Elon University for 41 years. Her research subjects include Appalachian authors, Melungeons in literature, Holocaust literature and language use in society. Dr. Lyday has been a member of the Melungeon Heritage Association since 1994 and is the current MHA board vice president. She is also the co-author of two historical novels and is currently researching the third book in the series.

In this week's episode, Kathy discusses the author Will Allen Dromgoole. We explore who she was and the reasons why she is perceived as such a controversial figure within the Melungeon community.

Lis Malone:

And as always, it sounds like it's going to be a very interesting dialogue between you and in this week's episode with Kathy, and my goodness, that is a lot of literature in one episode. I'm very impressed that you did not get tongue-tied on one literature.

Heather Andolina:

I am too.

Lis Malone:

Less editing for Lis.

Heather Andolina:

See, I'm looking out for you, Lis.

Lis Malone:

Thank you. Thank you. I'm glad somebody is. And without further ado, let's take a listen.

Heather Andolina:

Hi, Kathy, how are you today?

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

Hi, Heather. I'm fine. Burning up in North Carolina. How about you?

Heather Andolina:

Yes, I'm not too far from you, so I feel it too. Kathy, I always start off our episodes with this question, how did you learn about the Melungeon people or when was the first time you heard the word Melungeon?

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

It's an interesting question. I grew up in Knoxville Tennessee, so I guess when I was in middle school, the big article came out about the Melungeons and it was all over the Knoxville News Sentinel, and I read it, was fascinated by it. The play, the Outdoor Drama was when I was junior, senior in high school or so, and I always wanted my dad to take us up there to see it because I thought it was just really interesting. I was interested in this community and he said, "No, there's nothing up there. It's Sneed Bowl, it's too far to drive. It was during the gas crisis, there's no place to stay," blah, blah, blah. So I never got to see the Outdoor Drama, but I always, from middle school on, I kind of knew that there was this group of

people up there that had been maybe a little controversial. Most of the people that I knew had never heard of them, didn't know them. The ones that did sort of said, yeah, they're not such nice people, these kinds of things. And I thought, oh, that's not good. I don't like that very much.

And it wasn't until I got to school, I went to school at Tennessee Tech University and I was doing a folklore paper and I thought, I'm going to do a research paper on the Melungeons. So this was back in 1974, 75. So research then meant going to the library, looking at microfilm, doing all that kind of stuff. And I ran into these articles by William Allen Dromgoole and I thought, oh, these were kind of interesting. These were the Arena articles, not the earlier articles. And the second article that she published in the Arena was all about the genealogy, and I was fascinated by that.

And then later on I found out that he was a she and had gone up into the mountains when she was like 29 years old and I became very fascinated with this person. Jean Patterson Bible's book had also come out earlier, and I met her at the Museum of Appalachia, got a signed copy so I was just sort of building my Melungeon library from that point on. I had also encountered the book, the Hawk's Done Gone by Mildred Haun because she was a Nashville writer. She lived in Nashville, born in East Tennessee and I just thought it was the weirdest book I'd ever read, strangest book I'd ever read, and did not do a great service to the Melungeons either. So I started building my interest, and then my interest in the Melungeons turned into my interest in Dromgoole.

Heather Andolina:

You were the leading expert on the author Will Allen Dromgoole. Who is she and where is she from?

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

Wow, the second question is a lot easier. She was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee in 1860 in a family that was not rich and not poor. Her father was a lawyer. She comes from a long line of theologians. Her father married a woman, had four children, his wife died so he did what every other good man would do, he married her sister and proceeded to have six more children, all girls, and the sixth one was Dromgoole. He supposedly said, "This baby's going to be named William, whatever comes out." So, she was christened, William Anne Dromgoole, and she changed her name later, it's another story, when she was six.

She lived in Murfreesboro. Her father was very old when she was born and after her mother died, she was the only unmarried girl in the family so the responsibility went to her to take care of her father, and she started trying to find work in Nashville as a writer. She wanted to be a lawyer, but in the late 1800s, early 1900s, women were not allowed to practice law in Tennessee. So she did the next best thing and became an engrossing clerk in the state legislature.

And it is from one of the, I believe congressmen, possibly a state senator that she first heard about the Melungeons and in a very derogatory way, but she wrote a lot of things. She lived until 1934, and her Melungeon episode covers only about six months of her life. The rest of it was spent writing, gosh, over 5,000 poems, which honestly were not very good. Her most famous one was one called The Bridge Builder, which is widely printed and read, and it's always anonymous, but it's not. I'm here to tell people that she wrote it. There's proof of that.

She also wrote short stories of African-American communities outside of Nashville. I'll use the word poor because that's the way that she would describe it, the poor people of Nashville, kind of a la Charles Dickens style, lots of sentimental stories. And then she has a very small collection of stories that take place in the Cumberland Mountains and in the East Tennessee mountains, Smoky Mountains. So that's who she is. And I ended up doing my dissertation kind of as an addition of all of her mountain literature,

did an analysis of all the short stories, any of the columns. She wrote a column for the Nashville Banner for 30 years called Song and Story, and she's best known in Nashville for that I think. So I collected everything including the Melungeon articles that had anything to do with the mountains, and that became my dissertation.

Heather Andolina:

So Kathy, how did you become interested in Dromgoole in the first place?

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

I think because of that folklore paper and the fact that in 1890, it took a lot of guts for a single woman to travel from Murfreesboro or Nashville, Tennessee to Knoxville, I think she could have gotten a train probably as far as Knoxville maybe. I'm not really sure. She could have gone by carriage, but it's hard to get up to Sneedville and into the Vardy Valley with four wheels these days and a car and an engine. So I imagine she probably would've gone by horseback, and there are some allusions to that. She traveled supposedly with a male artist who was responsible for doing some of the drawings. People say it's from a photograph, the famous picture of the Melungeon sitting on the stoop with a pipe in his mouth.

Heather Andolina:

Yes.

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

I believe that was an artist's picture that was done, but I can't find any specifics about who this person was. It was probably a man. So you add that on top of traveling alone on a horse and then traveling alone, single with a man on a horse, two horses, I presume, to the wilds of East Tennessee in the 1890s and that's pretty adventurous. And I always thought that she had some chutzpah, this woman. She was very small in stature.

I had the good fortune to interview a woman who worked with her on the Nashville Banner before she died. In fact, she was hoping that Dromgoole would retire and that she could become the book editor of the Nashville Banner. And she pulled no punches in her interview. She said a lot of people didn't like her because she was very strong and independent. She apparently dyed her hair red up until the day she died. She was not a political person. She was not a soapbox suffragette as some of them were called during the time but she was very strong in her views, and she was not afraid to stand up to men. She just wasn't afraid of men. She never married. I can't find a lot of concrete evidence that she ever had any beaux or significant others, although there are some tiny little snippets here and there in a personal journal that I found that allude to a heartbreak, that something happened in her life that caused her not to get married.

She was extremely close to the Sisters of St. Cecilia's Academy and the nunnery, the cloisters in Nashville, and that still exists. I've visited up there. She had a niece who joined the order, and one of her very best friends was the Mother Superior there, and she wrote a beautiful epitaph for her in the Nashville Banner, and they kept a room for her there. So when she wanted to come and stay and get away, that's where she went. She was not Catholic. I believe she was Episcopal because that's kind of what her family was, but she was not Catholic. So she had these interesting ties to all these different people in Tennessee and also in the Tennessee legislature as well. And some of her stories reflect that relationship.

Heather Andolina:

It sounds like she certainly had a fascinating life. So the question our listeners want to know, why is she so controversial within the Melungeon community?

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

Well, there are these articles. The first ones that I encountered were in the Boston Arena and Drumgoole went to school at the New England School of Expressionism in Boston, very progressive school for women. The Arena was a very progressive northern Yankee publication during the late, late 1800s, early 1900s. And they would publish articles about women's suffrage, about abolitionist, political treatises, religious treatises. And for whatever reason, the editor who actually became a good friend of Drumgoole's, wanted to publish some of her stories. And so she had almost all of her stories published in the Boston Arena.

So when she wrote these Melungeon articles, they were interested in publishing them, and the articles are quite different. The first two, she went up into the mountains for two weeks, we think in 1890, in the summer of 1890. We're not sure exactly who she stayed with because she uses first names and we're not sure she actually uses real names. In fact, for sure I know she doesn't use all real names because no one that I've talked to who would've had relatives back then recognize any of these names. So either she didn't go there at all, which is doubtful, or she's changing the names, and that's probably what she would do.

So she stayed there for two weeks and she submitted these articles to the Nashville Sunday American, which it was a forerunner of the Banner. And the first one was pretty awful. I mean, I think she thought she was doing a journalist job. She wanted to be a journalist. She put in facts, but she had no tact whatsoever. She was brutally honest. But although I think people during that time probably would've said the same things, a lot of them, in fact, I think based on what I've read in papers during that time period, people would've been even harsher than she was.

But when she got up there, and you have to keep in mind that she was trained in the law by her father just couldn't practice. When she got up into this community, she makes comments about finding dark skinned people with white skinned babies and white skinned women with dark skinned babies and that was against the law in Tennessee at that time. And it was against her sensibilities. It was against the way that she had been brought up as a late 19th century woman in the Reconstructed South. So that doesn't excuse what she wrote, but it may explain some of the things that she wrote.

She also made some kind of, I think, mean spirited comments about physical appearance, especially of the women and things like that. This article appeared late August 1890, and then it was followed up by another one in the first weekend of September. I've heard that there was a third one, but there's no evidence of that. It's hard to find microfilm of this particular publication, and the second one does kind of end on a way that you think there might be another installment, but as of yet, I just haven't been able to do that. This paper is not digitalized at all. You can't access it. It's really difficult and hard to find. So you have to go to Nashville to find it, and the copies are awful. The one that I needed was not even there. It's not existent anymore. So I left it at that.

The second articles in the Arena, the first article was the damaging one, and again, the daily, the Sunday American would've been seen by a lot of people locally in Tennessee, but not really too far out. The Boston Arena was a different publication altogether so it was read up and down, up and down the East Coast. It was a very popular magazine. So here, out across the pages goes this article about this weird kind of exotic to a lot of people because this is the whole time of regional literature and the exotic other,

and let's go find out who these strange people in Appalachia are, that kind of stuff. And so everybody was entranced by that.

Now, I will say that many people before Drumgoole wrote disparaging things about the Melungeons. There's no lack of that. There are tons of them. And there were people, a lot of people afterwards who wrote things about the Melungeons. And then we have the One Drop Rule with Walter Plecker of Virginia and all these other things. But I think because this was so unusual in a national, nationally read periodical and a very respected periodical that people latched onto that.

The second article that appeared that spring in 1891 was actually a genealogy article, and it's very interesting, and it kind of mirrors the way a lot of people feel today. She goes back and she interviews people and she asks them where their people come from and things like that. There was no genealogy in the Sunday American articles at all. So I think it's that first article in the Arena that says all the really ugly things. And I think she felt pressured to write some of the things that she did. She never apologized for these articles. She didn't ever want to talk about them, apparently. There's no mention in her columns or anything like that. She doesn't really mention the Melungeons much in her columns at all. And of course, she didn't start writing her column until 1904, so it was a long time after this trip. I think she just wanted to sort of erase that summer in the mountains.

And I've had one person tell me that according to their family history, they had heard that she had been jilted up there. And that's why she was so nasty in her articles. I can't find any evidence. I'm a fact-based researcher. I like to know these things. If there are family histories out there, I would love to know them because I'd like to know what her interaction was with the people. There's not much evidence to that. She kept a little journal that I found parts of, and she is scared when she goes up there. She's very frightened. She's frightened of the mountain. She's frightened of the people. She talks about one time when she had to hide her notes that she was taking because the children, she felt the children of the people that she was staying with were spying on her, and she was staying out in a stable. She wasn't even staying in the house.

She makes some very pointed comparisons between the Melungeons that she met in Blackwater Valley and the Appalachian Mountaineers that she had met throughout her life because she spent a lot of time traveling, sort of like Mary Noailles Murfree but Drumgoole actually went into these places and met with people in the Smoky Mountains, for example. She was a great outdoors person, and she draws some real differences between their hospitality, their code of honor, their cleanliness, all these things that in polite society, you would never say today, never like, oh, I'm not going to go see her because her house is dirtier than my neighbor down the street. You wouldn't say these kinds of things back then.

So what prompted her to be that person? I don't know. I mean, she doesn't seem to be that way and I'll give you an example. The short stories that she writes about the African-American community near Estill Springs are really interesting stories for the time, for the 1890s.

A lot of people in the Melungeon community have called Drumgoole a racist. I think by our standards today, she could very easily be considered that although the Melungeons are not a race, they're a group of people. Anthropologists will tell you that race is just a construction, that it's not something that's really true. So the word racist didn't even come into our dictionaries until in the 1919 or 1920, something like that. That doesn't mean that people didn't think that or use that word, but that's the first time so Drumgoole would not have been aware of that. Was she prejudiced towards these people? Oh yeah, she was.

But all you have to do is read the letters to the editor after her articles came out in the Sunday American, and they will make you cringe because of what was printed in the newspaper, racial epithets, horrible, horrible things said, not just about Melungeons, but about people whose skin color is different.

And it's not unusual to go through papers at any time, especially in the South from the end of the Civil War up until the 1930s and find these kinds of printed comments in the paper. So I'm not making excuses for her.

She was definitely prejudiced about these people. She shows absolutely no prejudice against the African-American people that she writes about. She's patronizing because being a white educated woman of class in the 1890s, she would've been patronizing because that's the way society thought, at least a lot of people in society thought at that time. And honestly, a lot of people today think that, and not just about people of color, but people of different ethnicities, different religions. It's just not okay to write it in the paper publicly anymore, at least not until a few years ago. Now it's been okay to broadcast it on social media, but back then there was nothing like that. There were no penalties. People could probably just, if the editor was okay with it, they printed whatever it was.

In summary, the reason that she's so controversial is that she said ugly things about people, and there was no one there to come back and say, don't do that and we can't excuse that. I just think that there's a lot more to her life. She was 74 years old when she passed away, and she had a very full life. So the Melungeon summer and spring was six months of her life. And I study her because I think there's a lot, many more contributions that we could get from her through her literature and through what she did in her life other than just the Melungeon articles.

Heather Andolina:

Kathy, how difficult has it been to portray Drumgoole in an honest way in the 21st century?

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

It's been really hard. It's been really hard. I get pushback every time I go to the Melungeon Heritage Association meetings and I present about her. I don't present on her anymore for that reason. I choose to do other things. There are a lot more people doing damage to the Melungeon community like Alex Bledsoe, for example, in his Tufa series. I think that she was a product over time.

As you know, I've been compiling research for a biography for the last 40 years, and I've never written it because number one, I've reached a lot of dead ends. I'm going to backtrack just a little bit. She had this cabin in Estill Springs, which is a little middle Tennessee mountain, sort of plateau community. It's not really mountains, but she had a cabin there, and she bought it with her own money. That's the first purchase that she made. And she brought her father there, and it looked like it was in a really beautiful area. She used to have big press parties there so people from Nashville, all the people from the newspapers, all the journalists would come out and they would have tea parties and it was a big do. I mean, you can read in the newspaper about how people went and they loved it and all these kinds of things. But in 1970, right before I got to college, it burned down.

And the people, I talked to, the historian in the county Historical Association office, and he said, we think there were manuscripts in there and letters and journals, there were trunks and trunks of things. But after she died, all of her, well, a lot of her estate was left to a niece and a nephew, both of whom died really early. So the person who owned the cottage died in 1953, and nobody did anything with it and I feel in my gut that there was stuff there. And as a researcher, you always want to find this mother lode of things. And I have found things here and there, but there are a lot of things I don't know about her. And I think if you write a factual biography, then you have to have the facts. I could probably do a creative nonfiction and talk about who she is and what she does, but that's not really who I am. That's not what I want to do.

And then there are the Melungeon articles and that whole Melungeon aspect about her life and what do you do? How do you reconcile this behavior from the 1890s with all of the Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movement and all of these things that are going on, and especially all of the things that have been going on in the last five years. It's just, it's hard and I'm not sure I have the energy to do that. I might someday.

I'd still like to do maybe an article about her relationship with St. Cecilia's. She had sisters that moved out to Texas. In 1894, she established the Waco Women's Press Club in Waco, Texas. And I've been out there and she taught school down there. But then there are big gaps of time where we don't know anything about her, where she was. We know she went to California because of some things that she wrote. But I'm the kind of sort of an OCD person who likes to fill in all these blanks, and I'm just afraid that I'm not going to be able to do that. And you still have to reconcile the Melungeon articles, and that's hard. You can't excuse those.

Heather Andolina:

Exactly. Kathy, is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners about Will Allen Dromgoole?

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

Well, I would say wait till the book comes out, but I'm not sure that's ever going to happen. I love to talk about her. I have a lot of information about her. Another thing that people don't know is in addition to her service in the state legislature, this was an elected position so she was elected twice and not elected another time. And I thought it was because the Melungeon articles that she wasn't elected, but the dates don't work out. And I think it's because of a short story that she wrote called Fiddling His Way to Fame, which talks about these two warring brothers who were both running for governor of Tennessee. And one of the senators in the state legislature stood up and said, "She wrote against the mountains, and we don't want her here anymore, because she wrote again, the mountains." And the date did not coincide with the Melungeon. It happened before she wrote and published the Melungeon articles. And I think it was because of that defeat that she wanted to do something different with her life.

When World War I came in 1917, she volunteered to the U.S. Navy and she became a yeoman in the U.S. Navy. She was stationed up in Maryland, and she ran the library there. She did patriotic talks. She wrote her column from up there for a year and a half but it was all about the war effort and how wonderful our soldiers were and our sailors were and she was just kind of an uplifting voice. And there's a very fuzzy picture of her in her naval uniform. She's saluting, it's very cute, but it's very fuzzy so I can't find the original. But I have found the paperwork and her discharge papers and things like that.

So she had a really interesting life, and she was very, very popular in Nashville, Tennessee. A lot of people knew, when I was initially doing my research, a lot of people had parents who knew her and loved her poems and took the paper every Saturday or Sunday because that's when her column would come out and all of her poems were published in the Nashville Banner. She had huge, almost a whole page of columns there. And she wrote novels, and she wrote a play, and she started a literary society. She just did a lot of different things. And she wrote editorial pieces for the Nashville Banner as well.

I said earlier, she wasn't a suffragette. She was. I think she was a passive suffragette. She wrote a story in 1898 called A Humble Advocate. And the main character is beaten by her mountain husband, and she finds where the men are going to vote. So she walks down the mountain and she goes in and she says, "I want to vote." And they say, "No, you can't vote," blah, blah, blah. And so she gives this talk about why

she wants to vote, and she wants women to be able to vote to pass laws so that men don't beat them. And that was 1898.

And she has another story, forget exactly, I can't remember the title of it, but the woman is, her family has been allied politically with this one group for a long time, and she decides that if she could vote, she would vote for this other candidate and she ends up campaigning for him. It's called The War of the Roses. So you've got the red rose and the white rose, the Lancaster and the whole British War, the Roses thing. But it's about a young woman who takes responsibility for her own beliefs, and she's going against her family, and she's roundly criticized and ridiculed for it. So I think in her literature, she tries to uplift women in a really positive way.

Heather Andolina:

Yes, definitely, from what you've been telling us.

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

Unless Melungeon and then not so much.

Heather Andolina:

Yeah, unfortunately.

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

Unfortunately, right. I'd like to get her by the shoulders and say, go back.

Heather Andolina:

Right? Yes. So Kathy, what is the best way for our listeners to reach out to you to learn more information about Will Allen Dromgoole?

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

Heather, the best way for people to reach out to me is through my email, which you have, and if they'll just contact the MHA directly, I'm happy for you to give them that address.

Heather Andolina:

I can do that. Kathy, we want to thank you so much for being on our podcast and for sharing your wealth of knowledge on Will Allen Dromgoole with all of us.

Dr. Kathy J. Lyday:

You're very welcome. I've enjoyed it and I'll see you around.

Heather Andolina:

Thank you, Kathy.

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 Melungeon.org. That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-

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