

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Four Transcripts, Episode Five: Melinda/Mel Trueblood Stimpson

Lis Malone:

Welcome back to the Melungeon Voices podcast, presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Liz Malone, and I am here with Heather Andolina, who is serving as the board president for the MHA. Heather, always a pleasure to be with you.

Heather Andolina:

Yes, and you too, Lis.

Lis Malone:

She says with sultry eyes. Oh, I love to tease Heather. She's such an easy target and so easy to get a giggle out of her.

Heather Andolina:

Yes, I laugh very easily.

Lis Malone:

Easily amused.

Heather Andolina:

Yes.

Lis Malone:

So Heather, we are here at episode five for the season, and we are coming around the back end of the season, but we've still got some great episodes before we depart. But before we talk about our guests that we will have for this week's episode, you have, I guess, a bit of a public service announcement to make, so take it away and let's hear what you have to share with everybody.

Heather Andolina:

Yes, thank you, Lis. We do. It actually ties into last week's episode with Aaron Collins and the Vardy Community Historical Society. The Vardy Community Historical Society needs our help. They recently found out that Mahala Mullins Cabin needs to have some major repairs done in order to reopen. If you are able, please donate to their GoFundMe campaign. We will provide the direct link in the show notes below for this episode. You can also make a donation by check. Checks should be made payable to the Vardy Community Historical Society, and mailed to them at the address below, also in the show notes. Any donation will be greatly appreciated. Thank you all so much.

Lis Malone:

Yes, indeed. And thank you to anyone out there listening who can help with this cause. It is great that we have a platform where we're able to help other organizations, in addition to all of the great work that you do in raising awareness and elevating persons of mixed race and ancestry through the Melungeon Heritage Association.

So let's switch gears and let's talk about this week's episode. So Heather, tell us about who you spoke with and who we're going to be hearing from this week.

Heather Andolina:

Yes, thank you, Lis. I am very excited in introducing our next guest. This week's guest is Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson. They are Roma, Native, Jewish, queer, and autistic, and recently realized that they may be a Melungeon descendant, but they are still in the process of researching their Melungeon ancestry. Melinda is a scientist consultant with a co-operative called Ludar Animal Behavior, and the director of an animal 501(c) nonprofit called Adopt Ohio. They work in community healthcare, especially for the two-spirit and LGBTQIA+ communities. Their current fields of study in academia are neuroethology and neurodecolonization. They are currently working on their social work license, and plan to go on to medical school.

In this episode, Melinda and I discussed the possible connections of the Romani/Roma people to the Melungeon people, as well as highlighting diversity and inclusivity within Appalachia.

Lis Malone:

Well, Heather, great stuff as usual. Let's take a listen.

Heather Andolina:

Hi, Melinda, how are you?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Hi, I'm good.

Heather Andolina:

I like to start my discussions with the question of when was the first time you learned of the Melungeon people, or heard the term Melungeon?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

So, for me, it was somewhat recent, it was just a couple of years ago, and it was from one of my sisters-in-law had been really diving into our genealogy and trying to deduce how our family became so multicultural, multiracial, multilingual, trying to figure out how are we Roma Native, Jewish, we also have Black heritage, how do we have all these components going on in our family? And that's when we came across Melungeon and learning a lot about that heritage, so it's still pretty new to me.

Heather Andolina:

Melinda, please share with us the story of your personal Melungeon ancestry.

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

So since it's still new to me, I'm still matching up all these oral histories with the written documentation. The one story that comes to mind for me is my mom discussing the company towns, the mining towns in Appalachia, and when I started looking into those records and seeing some of the census reports where one year, my grandfather was listed as white, the next year, he was listed as caramel Indian, and some other not so nice terms, then there was also years where his father was listed as mulatto and then

white, and just trying to figure out these census records to make sure that I had the right person, to make sure that, no, this is my grandfather. I know these are his records, these are all the same names, all the same children.

And so, going through all of that, that's when I first started figuring out, when I was Googling all of these weird terms to me, terms I had heard growing up, but not terms that you really hear in academia, like mulatto, Melungeon, red bone, yellow bone, all those different terms that I had heard, but never really knew the background of them. And of course, some of these words are not so great, they're a little insulting now, but when I was going exploring all that, that's how I came across to figure out that this is Melungeon, this is all Melungeon heritage.

Heather Andolina:

Oh, yes. I've had some of the same stories in my family as well. Let's talk about the Roma people and the possibility of Roma ancestry being a part of the Melungeon roots.

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Yeah, so that one's really fascinating for me, and I know some people may get upset with me saying this, but I wonder how much of the Appalachian experience that I had, being Roma, or being called Roma, I wonder how much of that is Melungeon and vice versa, how much is Melungeon is actually Roma?

So when I was going through a lot of these old news articles, particularly about Gypsies, which is the pejorative for Roma, but you most commonly hear that, but when I was going through and looking at all these records about the different Gypsy encampments throughout Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, Virginia, all of Appalachia region, I was finding that a lot of these stories about Melungeons, there was one news article in particular, it's quite old, I think it's from the early 1900s, but it talked about a peculiar race of people, and they were discussing Melungeon, and a lot of the things they were saying about the Melungeons of the area matched Roma culture. So I was wondering, what is Roma, what is Melungeon? And I still don't have a solid answer for you, but I see a lot of characteristics for the Roma people within that heritage.

Heather Andolina:

Yeah, that's interesting. I've definitely myself have heard about a possible Roma connection with the Melungeon people, so that's very interesting. Can you give us an example of the similarities between the Roma people and the Melungeon people that you have found?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Yeah. In some of these new articles, I found it talked a lot about the Melungeon people traveling and moving and being nomadic, and that is identical to my Roma family's experience. We always moved between Ohio and Kentucky and West Virginia, largely those three states, but sometimes we would go down to the Carolinas for work. And a lot of it does seem economic driven, but a lot of it was also the growing season, so being farmers, it had to do with just the seasonal changes. So a lot of those articles really stuck out to me.

There is one term in particular that I've seen a lot of Melungeon scholars use, Melungeon floaters, that term has been in a lot of news articles. They called the Melungeon people floaters because of the moving around, and I thought that was really fascinating, because Melungeon floater, to me, well, that screams Roma. Everything about our culture, our wanderlust, our always wanting to be moving. And the encampments too, the stories of different Melungeon settlements and encampments, not in the city,

but outside the city, and not in the company towns, but on the outskirts of the company towns, so a lot of that, I'm like, that is identical to the Roma stories in my family.

Heather Andolina:

That is very true of the Melungeon people, yes. When some people think of Appalachia, they might think of its people as being mostly white and living in poverty. In your opinion, what is a more reflective depiction of Appalachia?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

I think a more appropriate way to describe Appalachia is resilient. Resilient is always the word that comes to mind to me. Survival, we've survived against all odds. It's not just the company towns, but it's all of the oppression that people have endured in Appalachia, and we're still here, we're still going, we're still around. And seeing a revitalization of Appalachia heritage and culture has been something that, if you were go back in time and tell me as a kid that one day I would be proud to say I'm from Appalachia, specifically Louisa, Kentucky, I wouldn't believe you. Again, no offense, I love Louisa, I don't want to get some angry phone calls, but I would never have experienced that. I never would've thought that would be my future one day, and I just find that really beautiful.

And there's a quote that really comes to mind when every time I encounter someone who has that stereotype of Appalachia being white and homogenous, it's by Tony Male Jr., he's a Melungeon scholar too. He said, I'm going to paraphrase this, but he said, what's so great about Appalachia that we all have these stories, not just Melungeon or people of color in Appalachia, but even the European white folks in Appalachia, it's a storytelling region, don't let these stories die. And I've just always loved that from him, because it really is a storytelling region, and I feel storytelling is what unites all of us, aside from the trauma and the oppression and everything, all the battles we're still having to this day, that is the one thing that I feel, even if you're white, Black, Native, Roma, what have you, the storytelling aspect of Appalachia really unites our people.

Heather Andolina:

I love that, Melinda. Yes, I completely agree. How do we begin to deconstruct the stereotypical depiction of Appalachia, and highlight how truly diverse Appalachia is?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

For me, I'm a little bit biased, but for me, it's telling Roma history, telling Roma and traveler ethnicity histories in Appalachia, because I've always heard the stories from my grandma, who heard it from her mom and her mom and her mom, always heard stories of how we ended up in Appalachia, it was because the mountains there were similar to the mountains in Romania and Hungary. So, I've always heard those stories of how we got here was because of our ability to take care of horses, to mine, we already had those skills, metalworking skills, copper smithing, we already had all those skills from living in the mountains in the Balkan region over in Europe, and so we brought those skills straight over here.

Heather Andolina:

Yes, definitely. Can you discuss decolonial praxis and how it relates to the Melungeon narrative?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Yeah. So I'll start with what decolonization is, and everyone that's in the field of decolonization is going to have their own definition, but for me, there are three different facets I usually give. So decolonization is about being able to recognize colonialism and how it's affected all of us, and then it's also about returning or elevating indigenous ways of being with the earth and the land. A quote I use a lot is, the work of decolonization is for the benefit of everyone and everything, as decolonization to me means to do away with colonial falsehoods. And when we're discussing the Melungeon people, I think this entire field of research on the Melungeons is almost inherently decolonial praxis, if that makes sense, because we're tackling big topics, such as enslavement of Black and Native and Roma people, and then the other side of that, where Black folks were a part of rounding up other Native people and enslaving those Native people.

So we're seeing that it wasn't so clear as white folks enslaved these people, that was bad, it's very nuanced, and sometimes it's nuanced in some of the really uncomfortable ways. It's very uncomfortable for me to see in my family heritage that part of my family were Native that had Black slaves within their tribe, and then other parts where I see the Roma were enslaved. So it's very nuanced and complicated, and I think just evaluating Melungeon and researching Melungeon heritage, being a tri-racial group, we can see how there are so many different intersections.

Heather Andolina:

Is there anything else you would like to share with us and our listeners about your ancestry or Appalachia?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Definitely the biggest thing that I really like to tell people is get rid of this preconceived idea the Appalachia is a monolith, that it's just poor white folks. Yes, that is one facet, but there's so much more depth to it. I always like to remind people that the Appalachian Mountains are older than the rings of Saturn, because I just love that fact, and this area is so old and this area has protected people, whether we're talking about the Hollers or other remote areas. Appalachia has gone through a lot, but it's also been a way to protect people.

There's a phrase in my family, I don't know who originally said this, but we always said, when you're in trouble, go to the mountains, when you're in trouble, go to the woods. And when I say that, some people are like, oh, that's actually an ancient African proverb, oh, that's actually this and this, it's a Native proverb. I have no idea the origin, and I don't think anyone does, but when you're in trouble, go to the mountains, and I really love that, regardless of the origin, because I think about my childhood, whenever I was having a hard time, just hiking through the mountains, just being down at the creek, that really, for me, helped protect me in a lot of ways.

Heather Andolina:

That is so funny you say that because I've heard that in my family too, go to the mountains.

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Yep.

Heather Andolina:

Melinda, where can our listeners follow you on social media or contact you to learn more?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Yeah, the best way to contact me is through Ludar Animal Behavior, that's our cooperative. That's the best way to reach me, but you can also reach me, I have a public Instagram called Romaniscientist, you can follow me there, you can email me through there or direct message me. I'm in a lot of spaces online, but those are definitely the best two ways to reach me.

Heather Andolina:

Well, Melinda, it was an absolute pleasure having you on our podcast, and I just want to thank you so much.

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Thank you so much for having me. And then, Romanes, we could close out with...

Heather Andolina:

I love it. What did you say?

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Just to reiterate, my name is Mel, it was great to be here, proud to be a Roma, great to talk with you, and have a good day.

Heather Andolina:

That was awesome. Thank you, Mel.

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Or have a good weekend, yeah.

Heather Andolina:

Thank you, Mel.

Melinda Trueblood-Stimpson:

Yeah, absolutely.

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-O-N, dot, 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.