

Mixed Heritage – The Jumble that We Are

Roberta Estes – Copyright 2007-2009

As a child, I vividly remember coming home from a powwow when I was 4 or 5 with my father and my mother furiously ripping the braids and braid ties from my hair. Her unusual reaction frightened me, and she would never tell me why she was so angry with my father.

I loved the powwow, the music, the dancing, even the smell...everything. To me, through my 5 year old eyes, it was the essence of happiness. I was too young to understand that the powwow was illegal in the 1950s, branded as a “religious event”, and my mother did not want anyone to know that I was of mixed race.

It wasn't my mother's fault. She wanted the best opportunities for me, just alike all mothers do, and I could clearly physically pass for white. However, as an exuberant 5 year old who now owned a beautiful fringed leather coat, a wonderful beaded belt and some braid wraps, I was extremely proud of my Native American heritage. Never had I felt more at home anyplace.

When I started school, in first grade, as we didn't have kindergarten or preschool then, I proudly announced that I was Indian. The teacher called my mother who had a chat with me and told me I should never tell anyone that secret again. I asked why, and she explained that white people didn't like colored people, and I was white, so I shouldn't say I was Indian. Even then, the logic escaped me, but I complied, most of the time.

The town where I grew up was segregated. The white people lived on one side of town and the black on the other and everyone knew where the dividing line was. Sometimes there was some intermixing a block or so in either direction, which is where we lived, on the white side, but not much. In the early 1960s, when I was 7 or 8, a new sign was erected outside our house. Normally it would be a “no parking” sign, but this one was different. My Mom seemed startled and shaken by it, and then she took me outside to see it. We stood in front of it and she asked if I could read the words. I slowly sounded them out one at a time, “colored”, “people”, “not”, “allowed”. She looked at me and said, “That is why you can never, ever tell anyone again that you are Indian.” My father had just died, and the thought of losing my home because I was Indian, or colored, terrified me. I came to understand that if you weren't white, you were colored. Standing there, that day, I put my Indian heritage away someplace safe, and became as white as I could be.

However, the questions didn't stop. “Where are you from?” was normally the question asked. People would guess Morocco, Spain, Mexico, especially people who hadn't seen my mother who was of German origin. I just laughed and as a teenager, I loved the mystique I could invoke. But I knew, or at least I thought I knew, my secret.

My Native American heritage never left me. I read about the culture and longed for that connection I felt at the powwow so many years ago. When I entered college, I was told that I might be able to qualify for a scholarship. I discovered at that point, that the government regulated who was and was not an Indian, as there were a few left after their genocide attempt called the "Trail of Tears" was not wholly successful, and that the Cherokee tribe didn't want me either. I was too Indian for polite white society, which I lived in, but never fit, and not Indian enough for anyone else. I found it incomprehensible that I had been robbed of my heritage by both sides, and I began to grow angry, vowing to remedy that loss.

The year my daughter was born, 1978, is also the year that the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed, finally permitting powwows, sweat lodges and other spiritual events in addition to speaking the native tongue again. Sadly, much of the culture had already been lost.

I had, by this time, embraced my Native heritage in whatever ways that I could, without leadership or mentoring of any tribe. 1978 was also the year I would begin my three decade genealogical adventure, quite by accident. Although segregation officially ended in 1965, employment discrimination against women was still widely practiced and accepted in 1978, and I lost my job when I became pregnant. My employer informed me that he was doing me a favor because I would need to spend more time at home.

Unable to find a job during my pregnancy, I went back to college and also decided to find out something about my father's family. Both actions would forever change the course of my life. After my father's death, we had little contact with my father's family who lived three states away, and eventually, no contact at all. I picked up the phone and made a call to an Estes in Claiborne County, Tennessee....and as they say, one thing led to another.

I found a half-sister, and eventually, a half-brother, and countless cousins who I never knew existed. And they too were dark like me. I had found my way home to the magnificent hills and hollers of the Cumberland Gap area of Appalachia.

In the 1990s, on one of my annual journeys "home" to Appalachia, my old southern auntie finally took me into her confidence, knowing her days were numbered and one day leaned over, and even though we were alone, whispered behind her hand "we're Black Dutch, you know". Black Dutch? What is Black Dutch?

Black Dutch, it turns out, is a local (originally pejorative) term for Melungeons, a small group of tri-racial settlers who staked out their claims in the most remote mountainous areas of what would become Claiborne and Hawkins County, Tennessee in the late 1700s and very early 1800s. They, like the Scotch-Irish settlers, were very clannish and kept mostly to themselves, often intermarrying.

And they were dark. They were rumored to be part Indian and part Black, although they claimed for decades to be of Portuguese ancestry. How much of that claim was to avoid the devastating southern segregation laws is unknown. Others who were mixed race or “dark” also claimed to be “Black Dutch” to hide their mixed ethnicity.

Today, DNA testing is underway along with intense historical research to determine, if possible, the genesis of the group of people who came to be known as Melungeons in Appalachia. Preliminary results do include DNA of African and Indo-European ancestry, although much more testing is needed for a comprehensive analysis.

I struggled a bit to internalize Black Dutch, and set about another journey of research and discovery, not yet complete today, that would ultimately land me a decade later smack dab in the middle of DNA analysis. I’m surely glad I went back to college when I did.

As the millennium turned, many questions about my heritage remained. Stories surfaced about Lazarus Estes who would not let his wife, Elizabeth, file for her Head Rights because he did not want anyone to know she was Indian, although her brothers let the cat out of the bag it seems. Secrets were whispered about ancestors hiding in the hills and caves instead of marching on the Trail of Tears, but maddeningly, no names were ever attached to these rich stories. I would find that Lazarus’s father walked to Texas, much later, and when I visited after I finished retracing the Trail of Tears in 2006, I would discover that he lived in Oklahoma on Choctaw lands. My family continued to mystify me, and I desperately wanted to be able to unveil the mists that still surrounded my heritage that so stubbornly refused to yield its secrets.

In 2001, I discovered the infant science of DNA testing for genealogy. Initially, only the female maternal line could be tested, but in 2002, the paternal Y chromosome testing became available. Using these two tests, one could determine whether or not the paternal male line or the maternal female lines, only, were of Indo-European, African, Native American or Asian ancestry. My Mother’s maternal line was German, and I did not have a Y chromosome, being female, so I had to find a surrogate Estes male to test. Not surprisingly, the Estes line is from England and does not carry the genetics of Africans or Native Americans in the Y chromosome itself.

However, these two tests only represent 2 of my many ancestral lines as you look at my pedigree chart, and my native ancestry clearly sprung from my other ancestors. At 5 generations back, my 32 ancestral lines were born about 1800. Any or all 32 of those grandparents, except for the Estes male represented by the yline dna test and the maternal grandmother represented by my mitochondrial DNA, could be Native. However, DNA testing was still in its infancy and not well known or accepted. Cousins who I asked to test as

representative of those other lines were skeptical at best, when they could be located at all.

In 2003, a new kind of DNA test became available that tested specific locations in the balance of your DNA, which is most of what we carry, and it compared the results to population genetics result patterns from various parts of the world with the goal of providing you with an ethnic mix. This procedure is patented, so we know very little about the test itself or how the results are calculated, but as time and technology has evolved, the results seem to make better sense. The results were reported as statistically derived percentages and represented 4 categories, Indo-European, African, Asian and Native American. In this country, the Asian and Native American should generally be interpreted as a combined Native American score, given that the ancient ancestry of the Native American's is Asian.

My test results arrived by e-mail, and I sat staring at the little envelope on my screen before I clicked to open. It seemed that the truth of my heritage lay before me in a techno-Pandora's box and once I clicked, I could never unclick. Should I click? What if the results were that I was not Native American, a culture I had so strongly embraced and identified with since I was a small child? With the answer so close, I suddenly shied away from the answer to a half century of searching. It seemed such a mundane way to receive such a historic answer. Shouldn't there be fireworks and a drum roll? I closed my eyes, and clicked.

When I opened my eyes, I was quite surprised. Yes indeed. I expected, based on what I knew genealogically, to carry only a small percentage of Native American DNA and the balance Indo-European. Instead, I carried some of all 4 groups, with the combined Native score reaching more than 25% and African in the small percentage I expected to carry of Native American. Retrospectively, this does not surprise me, as I knew that physical features typically don't manifest themselves unless the individual has 25% or more of a particular ethnicity.

The African was a complete surprise to me. I began to analyze both historical documents and family photos with a different eye. Where did the Native and African heritage come from? Clearly, with this much non-white admixture, it had to be from more than one ancestral line, or I would clearly know which of my grandparents, who each contributed approximately 25% of their genes to me, was Native. With my Mother's German heritage, it also appeared clear that this admixture was on my father's side of that pedigree chart, reducing the number of candidates from 30 to 15.

At this point, given that we inherit half of our genes from each parent, I desperately wanted to test both of my parents. My mother was still living, but my father would have had to be exhumed for the test. I tried unsuccessfully to have DNA extracted from his hair and a postage stamp. Discovering that exhumation

was a long and involved legal jungle, I opted to test Mother with the assumption that she would be 100% Indo-European.

Never assume. My mother had a whopping 9% combined score between Native American (2%) and Asian (7%). I wasn't stunned, I was dumbfounded. Where did this come from? Very low numbers can sometimes be statistical noise, but when I asked my mother about this, she graced me with the information that she was not surprised, because of the oral history of her one non-Germanic ancestor, Anthony Lore, who was French and found in Vermont, then Pennsylvania. He did indeed have a very secretive and chequered life, but Native American? How could that ever be?

When interpreting non-American results, one cannot combine the Asian and Native American quite so readily. The Huns invaded Germany, and several of my Mother's ancestral lines were from the exact location of the Hunnic invasions and resulting settlement. Her mitochondrial DNA is also of Middle Eastern descent, possibly Jewish, confirming interaction with the peoples who could easily carry Asiatic DNA.

However, the Native American portion indicates that she too could have a small portion of Native heritage, suspected by her but completely unknown to me, and that is was 2-9%, it would likely be about 4-5 generations back in time. This equates to the parents or grandparents of Anthony Lore, born 1806 in Canada.

Another 5 years would pass before one single word at the right time and place would unlock the mystery of my mother's Native heritage, although it still sounds odd to voice those words together. A researcher working on the Lost Colony DNA project would comment about their ancestors in Vermont, which is where my mother's Lore ancestor was found earliest, bordering Canada. He referred me to an individual who had indexed many documents, and she referred me to Blairfindie, a small village in the middle of a small Acadian settlement in Canada between Montreal and the Vermont border. In Blairfindie, I found an Anthony Lord, also spelled Lore, and others of this same family with names that matched the children of my Anthony Lore. This isn't the ancestral family, but I'm close, and perhaps even more important, we discovered that the family is Acadian. The Acadian's frequently intermarried with the Mi'kmaq (Micmac) before and during the 1755 Removal when those that survived did so in the woods or were murdered or deported. This certainly potentially explained mother's Native American admixture and subsequent research confirmed it.

My simple phone call of 30 years ago launched me on the journey of thousands of miles and 3 continents to find ancestors I never knew existed. I am truly a citizen of the earth, a mutt, a true Heinz 57, a genetic cocktail. I am proud of all of my ancestors, black, white, red and yellow, for their tenacity in the face of adversity, but I am especially proud to be able to resurrect my ancestors and

ancestresses of color individually from the grave, beyond the veil of prejudice and hypocrisy.