

# The Louisiana Redbones

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to pull together the scant writings on the Louisiana Redbones and to present from those materials an account of their arrival in Louisiana, where they settled and how they lived. A definition of Redbones will be offered and it is hoped that their relationship to the Melungeons of the southeastern United States will be evident. The Melungeons have been called the mystery people, but their mysteriousness pales beside that of the Redbones. In order to properly understand these mystery people it is necessary to look first at the state into which they came.

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## THE STATE

To say that Louisiana is culturally diverse is to state the obvious. What is not so obvious is the extent of the diversity. Louisiana has nurtured more cultural and ethnic diversity than perhaps any other state. One usually thinks of Louisiana as having two cultural groups: French Catholics in the south and Protestants in the north. That division is only a fraction of the picture. It omits the Germans, Irish, Spanish, Cubans, Mexicans, Italians, Czechs, Hungarians, Croatians, Canary Islanders (Islenos), Guatemalans, Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, Laotians, Thais, Vietnamese (largest population of Vietnamese in the U.S.), Africans, Haitians, Jews, Greeks, Romani (Gypsies) and Native Americans. Louisiana has more than thirty Native American groups. 1

Louisiana has had its share of demagogues, discriminatory laws and practices, scandals, and racial and ethnic abuses (especially in regard to African Americans and slavery); but it has fostered, more than most southern states, a milieu in which ethnic groups could survive. The state has avoided large scale massacres, deportations or forced migrations of its ethnic groups such as that which led to the "Trail of Tears." Reasons for this relatively benign treatment of minority groups are varied and speculative. Among these reasons are that the French generally practiced a rather peaceful co-existence with the Native Americans, they were more tolerant of interracial marriage and they adopted the Napoleonic Code. The geography of the state has favored the preferences of some minority groups which could remain isolated from the main culture, cut off from it by rivers or swamps. None of the above is to suggest that survival for these groups has been easy or without interference from the state; it has not been easy.

Today, there are Native American groups in the state still speaking their own language, practicing their religion and maintaining their tribal governments. In Tangipahoa Parish, Hungarian is taught in some elementary schools.<sup>2</sup> There was a period in which spoken French was prohibited in public

schools; now it is encouraged.

The Louisiana Territory was owned at sometime by England, France and Spain until it was purchased by the United States in 1803. Louisiana became a state in 1812. Ancestors of the people we now know as Redbones first came to the area when it was still a territory. They first came to the south (Lafayette area) and then moved to the west and central part of the state.

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## THE AREA - THE NEUTRAL ZONE

Following the Louisiana Purchase, the United States and Spain disagreed over the western boundary of the territory. Spain owned Texas and the territory to the west of Texas, including Mexico. The U.S. argued that the western boundary of the Louisiana Territory was the Rio Grande River, and Spain claimed it was the Red River. Both sides knew these claims were exaggerated and both gradually compromised but not to the point of reaching an agreement. Spain eventually settled on the Arroyo Hondo (and by extension the Calcasieu River as the boundary) and the U.S. claimed the Sabine River as the boundary. Thus, an area from the Calcasieu River on the east, the Sabine River on the west and from near Natchitoches in the north to the Gulf of Mexico in the south, containing approximately 5000 square miles, was in dispute.<sup>3</sup>

The area was designated by the 1806 treaty as the "Neutral Strip" or "Neutral Zone." In 1806 both the United States and Spain were prepared for battle over this boundary when the generals in the field reached an agreement. The agreement stated that neither side would send troops or peace officers into the disputed area until the two countries could settle the issue peacefully. The issue was settled in 1821 when the Sabine River was formally agreed upon as the boundary. Earlier, in 1819, there had been an informal understanding that the Sabine River would be the boundary.

When word of the agreement to create a neutral zone spread, outlaws and anyone else who wished to avoid the law flocked to the Neutral Zone. Since by treaty law officers could not enter, it became a haven for outlaws. The area became notorious and both Spain and the U.S., by popular demand, violated the treaty by sending troops into the area in an effort to remove the outlaws. It was too late. The outlaws knew the canebrakes and swamps too well. It was dangerous for any outsider to enter the zone. Those who wished to cross it had to do so in large, armed parties.

Among the many who smuggled contraband goods, ran slaves, murdered, robbed, counterfeited, raped, and pillaged in the Neutral Zone was the infamous land pirate from Tennessee, John Murel (Murrell). His men in the Louisiana contingent included some familiar Redbone names such as Beverly, Baley, Robinson, Miller, Johnson, Willis, Parker, Ray, Coper, Boalton, Jones and Phelps.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that not all persons with these names, indeed all names referenced throughout this paper, were Redbones or Melungeons.

In 1808 a law was passed prohibiting the importation of slaves. The Neutral Zone became a main corridor for smuggling slaves into the country. The privateer Jean Laffite used the Calcasieu and Sabine Rivers to smuggle contraband goods including slaves into the United States. The filibusters (private paramilitary invasions) against Spanish held Texas were outfitted in the Neutral Zone. There was so much illegal activity in the Zone that John Quincy Adams called it the "backdoor to the United States."<sup>5</sup>

In 1836, when Texas was revolting against Mexico the people of east Texas would escape the attacks by coming to the Neutral Zone. Still later when the Civil War was raging, the former Neutral Zone became a haven for Jayhawkers -- those who refused to fight in the war. In the beginning of WWII, the Neutral Zone was the scene of the largest military maneuvers ever held. Fort Polk at Leesville, La. was built in the former Neutral Zone following these maneuvers.

In 1803 the area was a vast wilderness of swamps, canebrakes, and hills clad with virgin timber in unimaginable beauty and abundance. The yellow pine timber on the Calcasieu River set the standard for yellow pine lumber. The white oaks in the Sabine River bottom were sought after by the wine industry of France for use in the making of wine casks, and the Cypress trees on both rivers were unequaled in beauty, size, and abundance. These forests were largely undisturbed until the 1880-90's when logging became a major industry. By that time Redbones were well established there.

However, in the early 1800's there were few people other than Native Americans living there except those in the Natchitoches area to the north. It was in the Neutral Zone that most of the Redbones eventually settled.

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## WHO ARE THE REDBONES - DEFINITION

A Redbone is a person of mixed racial heritage who is a member of a group which defines its relationship to the dominant culture in a certain way.

The racial mix may be any combination of two or more of the following: Native American, European Caucasian, Asians (ie. English, French, Irish, Welsh), or Portuguese, Spanish, Moor, Turk), and any of the various Negroid sub-groups.

Physical characteristics are varied but typically include a dark skin, often with a copper hue, high cheekbones, dark eyes, dark straight hair, and no single body type. Less often they are of

lighter skin, blue eyes, and blond hair. In those persons with some Negroid genetics Negroid features may be evident, such as darker skin, curly hair, wide nose, and thick lips.

The cultural milieu is one where the group members band together for protection against a perceived hostile dominant culture. They often, in times past, have isolated themselves from the dominant culture taking a physical stand to protect their territory and discourage intermarriage with members of the dominant culture and prohibit or try to prohibit intermarriage with persons of African heritage.

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## DISCUSSION

This definition is offered to stimulate us to define and describe the people we are discussing so as to not become so inclusive that our search for roots and origins is meaningless. Who in America does not have some combination of the genetic factors alluded to above? Dr. Brent Kennedy offered a definition of Melungeons in his book, *The Melungeons: Resurrection of a Proud People*, and he has stated many times that he hoped his book would stimulate thought, discussion and research.<sup>6</sup> In that spirit, this definition offers a challenge to his definition of Melungeon and by extension Redbones. The challenge is to broaden the Caucasian element to include others than Mediterraneans - the gene frequency distribution research of James Guthrie notwithstanding.<sup>7</sup> Bonnie Ball argued that some Melungeons had English ancestry.<sup>8</sup> In a more recent statement Rhonda Robertson wrote that the Turks and Portuguese intermarried with various Indians and "much later with the northern European settlers; primarily the Scotch-Irish (sic)..."<sup>9</sup> Most definitions of Melungeons omit references to the English or northern Europeans. We need to rule them in or out.

A further challenge is to add a sociological element to the definition; namely, that one must have experienced being a Redbone or Melungeon with the stigmata, mind-set, orientation to life and attitude toward the dominant culture that such experience brings. Since the publication of *The Melungeons: Resurrection of a Proud People*, this author has learned that he may have genetic ties to Louisiana Redbones. And although he grew up near the Redbone country and has always had a keen interest in them, he did not grow up identifying with the group nor experiencing the pain its members experienced. His resentment at the treatment Redbones received from the dominant group is, therefore, less personal, more removed, and more academic than it would be had he grown up as a Redbone..

People in America who are a mixture of American Indian, Asian, Caucasoid, or Negroid genetics are ubiquitous -- perhaps in the majority. People who have lived as a Redbone or Melungeon are relatively few.

To be a member of an ethnic group one must, as Elliott Oring says,

"... claim an identity with a historically derived cultural tradition or style, which may be composed of both explicit behavioral features as well as implicit ideas, values and attitudes. Furthermore, membership in an ethnic group is acquired primarily by descent."<sup>10</sup>

One hears of Redbones/Melungeons as being a separate race, and they may be; that is yet to be determined. A modern definition of race, given by Richard Goldsby, follows:

" A race is a breeding population characterized by gene frequencies different from those of other populations of the same species."<sup>11</sup>

However, as stated above, membership in such a race is made much more meaningful when accompanied by an ethnic identity that matches it.

Finally, are Redbones a sub group of the Melungeons or did they develop parallel to Melungeons? The author believes they are a sub group, but the question is still open.

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## LOCAL THEORIES OF ORIGIN

Let us review of some of the other groups who are not Redbones but have been confused with them. The United Houma Indian Tribe embraced French whites and Africans. From this amalgamation came the "Sabines." Occasionally, one hears Redbones referred to as Sabines. Perhaps the confusion is because so many Redbones live in the Sabine River area. The Sabines, however, live in Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes. They are historically French speaking fishermen and trappers who live along the Gulf Coast.<sup>12</sup>

The Clifton Choctaw Tribe is a group living in a closed community in Rapides Parish. They are Choctaw, Chatot, Creole and African. The tribe has failed to receive federal recognition as an Indian tribe but has received state recognition. It maintains a tribal office. The Clifton Choctaw Tribe has not accepted the Redbones nor have Redbones accepted it. One student of this group relates that some of the families from the Clifton group may have come originally to Louisiana from North Carolina where they were members of the Lumbee Indian Tribe.<sup>13</sup> This has not been documented.

Bonnie Ball in her book *The Melungeons* says the "Cane River Mulattoes" near Natchitoches are Redbones.<sup>14</sup>

This is an error. She relied upon the writings of William H. Gilbert, Jr., who was wrong in almost everything he said about Redbones in Louisiana. He did not correctly identify a single group which was Redbone. Gilbert apparently relied heavily upon Lyle Saxon's novel *Children of Strangers*, which was not about Redbones at all, but about the Cane River Creoles.<sup>15</sup>

Gary Mills, in his otherwise excellent book, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* says some slaves owned by the Cane River Creoles ran away to join "redbones" whom he refers to as "marauding groups" of racially mixed people.<sup>16</sup>

Mills makes clear that the Cane River Creoles of Color (a mixture of Spanish or French and Negro) are not Redbones. Whatever else Redbones are they are not Creoles and are not marauders.

Ball also suggests that Melungeons may be related to the Gypsies (Romani). She lists some common Gypsy names, two of which, Stanley and Boswell, were common among Louisiana Redbones.<sup>17</sup> Since Gypsies were

present in the Redbone country from the early 1920's to 1960, the author has been exploring the possibility of a relationship between the two groups. The Romani originated in India before the year 1000 and have spread over much of the world including many countries from which Melungeons, and through them the Redbones, may have derived, but no evidence has been found thus far to establish a common heritage. Certainly there are physical similarities between the two groups and both groups have a history of being skilled metalworkers, but their lifestyles are otherwise quite different.

Melungeons/Redbones are not nomadic nor are they wanderers. They are wedded to their property and the Redbones defend their real estate with a vengeance as we will see later. The author found that in one instance a Redbone (Droddy) married a Gypsy girl and they settled down in the Redbone community rather than travel as Gypsies.

The Ebarb Choctaw-Apache Tribe is a state recognized tribe which has lived in Sabine Parish since the 1700's. They maintain a tribal office in Zwolle and a pow-wow ground at Ebarb, both in Sabine Parish. They are of Choctaw and Lipan Apache heritage. The Spaniards brought Apaches into Louisiana as slaves in the eighteenth century. One may keep an Apache a prisoner but one does not easily make a slave of him. The Apaches caused so much trouble for their captors they were finally freed. Webster Talma Crawford has stated that Redbones are related to these Apaches. It is quite possible that there was intermarriage between these two groups especially during the mid-nineteenth century. The Ebarb Choctaw-Apache already lived on the northern edge of the Neutral Zone when the Redbones arrived. Crawford, an early writer on Redbones, believed that as these Apaches were freed they went south and married into the Redbone group.

He wrote that it was the Apache who provided the "noxious blood" to the Redbones. While there may well have been a mixing of these two groups, Crawford's timing was somewhat off as the Apaches had already been released when the Redbones arrived. Crawford did not believe that Redbones arrived from another state or territory but that they developed in the local area. He also thought the Redbones had mixed with the Koasati (Coushatta) and Choctaw, which is more likely.

Webster Talma Crawford, who was reared near the Louisiana Redbone community, wrote a monograph in approximately 1932 which was popular in the Redbone community, being circulated as a typescript until its publication in booklet form in 1993.<sup>18</sup>

The Crawford material is one of the few writings on Louisiana Redbones. Crawford managed to preserve some of the language and a description of the lifestyle and attitudes of the 19th century Louisiana Redbones. His material is in two parts; part one is a history of the origins of the Redbones, and part two is an account of the Westport Fight -- a successful effort of the Redbones to defend their territory from outsiders.

In reading Crawford's theory of the origins of the Redbones, one must keep in mind that he was writing at a time when research resources were more limited than they are today and that much basic research has been done since his writing. Nevertheless, he conducted extensive research including interviews with local residents some of whom were descendants of participants in the Westport fight, and he reached some remarkable conclusions.<sup>19</sup>

Regrettably, he included no documentation and, as far as is known, left no research notes.

Crawford concluded that the Louisiana Redbones were unrelated to the Melungeons or to any other group in the eastern part of the United States, but rather that they developed in the Neutral Zone of southwestern Louisiana and that the 19th century was, in his words, the "incubation period." He stated:

"In brief, I have found the Redbones to be a brave, proud and independent clan into whose province they have permitted no invaders. They maintain the proposition that socially, all Redbones are equal; they recognize no nobility in the clan. In their own ranks there is frequent warfare, yet they quickly band together to fight a common enemy. They are clannish, guerrilla warriors. Their promptitude to avenge any insult has been proverbial. Industrious and home loving, they have steadfastly refused to be amalgamated with the outside world. And yet, they are not village-loving people. The Redbones have built no villages. The population dwells in lonely scattered habitations and the individuals do not fear solitude. Their name, "Redbones," serves as a convenient label for a people who combine in themselves the blood of the wasted tribes, the early colonists or forest rovers, the runaway slaves, and the stray seaman of the Mediterranean stock from coasting vessels in the West Indian or Brazilian Trade.

From the very beginning of my study of the Redbones, it seemed almost a foregone conclusion that these bold people were of Mediterranean stock, for it had been said that Hannibal was a "Redbone." One may more correctly conclude that the Redbones are of the stock of Hannibal. Hence, in the veins of these people there may be found the blood of ancient Carthage; of Crossus perhaps and of Sidon and Tyre. Part Semitic, part Hamitic, Berbers, Mauretanian (sic) Arabs, Nubians, Phoenicians and true Carthaginians are perhaps all represented among their ancestors. And having very little of either Aryan or Ethiopian stock in their ancestry, we may call those people most properly, "Moors."<sup>20</sup>

Crawford further states:

"The hair of the Redbone...is straight, wavy or strongly frizzled; rarely or never woolly. Yet, it appears that a few Redbones carry the blood of some Negroid people; possibly perhaps most likely Nubian.... In both racial and physical characteristics the Redbone appears to be akin to that mystery people of the Pyrenees, the Basques.

The Redbones of the Sabine Frontier are a homogeneous element of people, unrelated to the Delaware "Moors," the "Croatan" of North Carolina, the so called "Melungeons" of eastern Tennessee, or any other clan of mystery people...."21

In *The Historic Indian Tribes of Louisiana*, Fred B. Kniffen, et. al. listed Redbones as an Indian tribe. They discuss them as follows:

"A large new Indian population had begun to develop in southwestern Louisiana in the mid-nineteenth century. Apparently, immigrants from the Carolinas and Georgia sought areas where there were Indian or mixed Indian and black-and-white families. Today, these early Carolinians and Georgians would nearly all be from families bearing surnames associated with the non-tribal groups in those states with the strongest Indian identities, such as the Lumbee, Haliwa, and Westoes. These were the people who came to be identified as "Red Bones." ... A scattering of Louisiana Indians, including Biloxi, Choctaw, and Panana, sometimes called "Seminole" in error, was clearly associated with the Carolina and Georgia immigrants, reinforcing Indian genetics. Whites and blacks, in some instances, are said to have become part of this mixture of races and cultures. Indian identity remained strong in the Red Bone communities, and cultural behavior reflected Indian roots. Artifacts were placed on graves, fires were often lighted for the dead, matrilineal residence was common, and a forest economy with such material traits as basketry and blowguns persisted....many communities became isolated, both geographically and socially. Many excluded blacks owned no slaves and wished no association with either group, and in so doing invited discrimination from powerful land-holding whites. ... Even today, the Red Bones often prefer social isolation to interaction with outsiders."22

In the once popular novel *Red Bone Woman*, author Carlyle Tillery, has his main male character, Mr. Randall, pursue the heritage of his Red Bone wife, Tempie, until he concludes she is not a mulatto, nor "Spanish white" as her people claimed but "Indian white" as opposed to "regular white".23

Redbones have never maintained a tribal government. Since this is a main prerequisite for winning tribal status it is unlikely that they will ever receive recognition as a separate tribe. Indeed, this writer is not aware that they have ever petitioned for such status or

that they consider themselves a tribe in the usual sense of that term.

Early this year a new Indian group has been approved by the Louisiana state legislature. The Four Winds Tribe of the Louisiana Cherokee Confederacy is open to Indians of any tribe and many Redbones are joining. This is not a true tribe but more properly an association or, as the name suggests, a confederacy.

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## ORIGIN OF THE TERM "REDBONE"

These mystery people of Southwest Louisiana have been referred to as Red Bone or Redbone. A group, perhaps the parent group, in South Carolina was similarly known. The origins of the term is no less elusive than the term Melungeon. The search is still on for answers to the meaning and origin of the term.

Shortly before leaving to come to this meeting the author heard an account that must be explored further. More than thirty years ago a Texas college Professor, Louis Varney Lieb, told one of his students, who lived in the Louisiana Redbone country, that he had lived for two years among the Redbones and had learned the origin of the term. It seems that many years ago, perhaps even before Columbus discovered America, there had been a great famine among the Indians of Southwest Louisiana. It was so great that they had to mix red clay with their scant food in order to survive. They ate so much red clay that the marrow in their bones turned red. Professor Lieb supposedly wrote several articles on this subject while at Columbia University. It is not known whether he put this forward as a legitimate theory or as folklore. It may be that the Redbones, as the saying went in rural Louisiana at that time, were "loading the professor's wagon."<sup>24</sup>

Local Redbones today say they have most often heard that the name derived from "redskin" or "redman" as applied to Indians or to a likeness to the red bones of squirrels.

Kniffen, et al offers the most reasonable explanation of the origin. Citing Joey Dillard, an authority on black English, Kniffen says that the term likely came from the West Indies where the term Red Ibo pronounced Reddy Bone meant a mixture of races.<sup>25</sup>

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## REDBONES COME TO LOUISIANA

The earliest known progenitor of Louisiana Redbones to have come to the area was Thomas Nash, who was in the Mississippi Territory by at least 1781 when his son William was born on June 6 of that year.<sup>26</sup> He was in a area of the Mississippi Territory, known today as the West Florida Parishes of Louisiana.

Jane Parker McManus, a descendent, states that "When Thomas Nash left North Carolina, he probably traveled down the famous Natchez Trace into the Mississippi Territory. It has been said that he came down the Trace with Tapley Dial, another early Louisiana progenitor."<sup>27</sup> Nash was mentioned in the Natchez court records in 1788, but by 1815 he was in Natchitoches Parish.<sup>28</sup>

Among the earliest Protestants in the Mississippi Territory and early Louisiana were Baptists. The Baptist churches in that area were almost all established by people from South Carolina, many of whom were no doubt Redbones. The first Protestant church in what is now Louisiana was the Half Moon Baptist Church which was founded on the Bogue Chitto River in 1812. It was established east of the Mississippi River and east of Kentwood, Louisiana. One of the founders and probably the first pastor was Joseph Lewis.<sup>29</sup> One month later the second Baptist church was established on the west side of the Mississippi River at Bayou Chicot in what is now Evangeline Parish by Joseph Willis, Sr. He had started developing his church much earlier but had been delayed over questions regarding his racial heritage. Nevertheless, his was the first Protestant church west of the Mississippi River.<sup>30</sup> Willis may have been in the Louisiana Territory as early as 1799-1800 when it was still owned by Spain. He was certainly there in 1804 when he came to Bayou Chicot now in Evangeline Parish about thirty-five miles south of Alexandria where he had friends.<sup>31</sup>

In the 1830's he moved to Rapides Parish--which at that time covered most of central Louisiana and a large part of the former Neutral Zone. He established many Baptist churches most of which were in the region now dominated by Redbones. He assisted in developing the Louisiana Baptist Association and attended the first association meeting with Johnson Sweat.<sup>32</sup>

Willis was the father of 19 children. In the Redbone region the name Willis is common and the Baptist faith is predominant. He was born in North Carolina in 1758 to an English father and an Indian slave mother. Thus, by North Carolina law he was legally a slave. The story of how he got his freedom is a fascinating tale. He served in the Revolutionary War under General Francis Marion. Marion, known as the Swamp Fox, perfected guerrilla fighting at which Redbones are reputed to be masters. Some of Joseph's Louisiana friends also fought with Marion. Today, the names Marion, Francis and various combinations of those names are prevalent among names for men in the Redbone community.<sup>33</sup>

The earliest Redbones to come to Louisiana came into the southern portion of the state in the Orleans Territory. By 1830 a definite movement north had begun. Dr. Tommy Johnson, using as criteria the list of Melungeon and Redbone names in Dr. Kennedy's book and states

of origin including North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, examined the Louisiana censuses for 1810, 1820, 1850 and 1860 for certain key parishes. He found a definite movement to the north. In the 1810 census of Opelousas Parish (Territory of Orleans), 44 names of households were found which were consistent with the Kennedy list including such names as Collins, Perkins, Ashworth, Clark, Cole, Dial, Willis, Sweat, Bass, Johnson, and Nash. In Rapides Parish, farther north, he found thirteen names, such as Martin, Smith, and Thompson. In 1850 there were over 250 households with Melungeon/Redbone names in Rapides Parish.<sup>34</sup>

A wagon train from Georgia led by Alfred Franklin Mayo arrived in the Valentine area of central Louisiana in 1857. Over 100 families were included. Some of these families settled in the area including the following Redbone surnames: Cumba, Lewis, Nichols, Gray and Mayo. Since they came from a persecuted background and some had had difficulty with the law they held a secret meeting in which they vowed to never tell from where they came.<sup>35</sup>

The earliest settlement of Redbones in central and southwestern Louisiana was approximately ten miles from the old town of Hineston in a small community known as Westport. Westport consisted primarily of a general store and a mill for grinding corn. The largest group of Redbones lived in this area. The group is well known for the "Westport Fight" which occurred in 1881. This fight involved a shoot-out between Whites and Redbones in which several people were killed.

A creek in the Westport area was known as "Ten Mile Creek" and Redbones in that area are still sometimes referred to as "Ten Milers." That was a safer title than Redbone in earlier times. The second group was located farther south and west near Bear Head Creek in Beauregard and Calcasieu Parishes, the third was across the Sabine River in Newton County, Texas.

Initially, they made a living as small farmers -- raising livestock in the vast open range available to them -- and trappers. Later, timber constituted one of the main industries and has remained so to this day.

Redbones retreated into physical and social isolation from the dominant society and protected their territory from intrusion by blacks or whites. Some Redbones did own slaves.

During The War Between the States some Redbones fought for the Confederate South and some were Union sympathizers. Geographically they were in an area ideally suited to hiding renegades and such was its history. The former Neutral Zone soon became home to Jayhawkers (Union sympathizers) regardless of their ethnic or racial identity. At the time of the Civil War "conscientious objectors" had no freedom to refuse service. Consequently, they hid in the canebrakes and swamps and if caught were often executed on the spot. Several groups

of Jayhawkers located in the Neutral Zone were reported to have among their members runaway slaves, mulattos and persons of "mixed blood." In at least three instances Redbones from the Neutral Zone who were officers in the Confederate Army, were assigned to lead groups of soldiers in hunting Jayhawkers - some of whom were no doubt kinsmen.<sup>36</sup> An account of one of these officers was recently discovered in a very rare book written by Dennis E. Haynes, a Jayhawker who eventually joined the Union Army. He described a resident of the Neutral Zone, Captain Robert W. Martin, who led a group of Confederate Home Guards, as a "quadroon Indian." Could he have been anything but a Redbone? He was feared for his ferocity.<sup>37</sup> The other officers were Captain William Ivey and Captain David Paul.

After the war Robert W. Martin was harassed and persecuted by the Federal Occupying Forces so he moved to Mooreville, Texas near Waco. He is the Great-Great Grandfather of comedian Steve Martin who was born in Waco in 1945.<sup>38</sup> Robert W. Martin married Eliza Smart who was the daughter of Nathan Perkins Smart.

Following the Civil War (1880-1890) with the introduction of northern capital and modern machinery the timber industry came alive. This time geography favored the Redbones; they lived in an area possessing some of the best timber in the world. With all the negative aspects of the clear cut policies and practices that accompanied this industry one aspect was positive; jobs were available. Redbones worked side by side with outsiders. Though this work was not without incident it was perhaps a beginning of reintegration of Redbones into the dominant culture. Then came the Great Depression in 1929. With it came federal work projects such as the WPA and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps. In the CCC camps, with their semi-military modus operandi, young men of both cultures were thrown together and generally learned to live in communal existence. This was excellent preparation for their next major socially integrating experience -- WWII. Again, geography played its part. When space was needed for military maneuvers the former Neutral Zone area was picked and the largest military maneuvers ever held before or since were consequently held there. As a result Fort Polk was located in the center of the former Neutral Zone and is still in operation today. Many local people of all ethnic or racial identities still work there. Many Redbones and others lost their land to the Government as it required thousands of acres for military operations.

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## REDBONES IN TEXAS

George Orr moved from Louisiana to the Atascosito District of southeast Texas in 1821. He had previously served as a captain in the Magee-Gutierrez expedition against Spanish held Texas in 1813, which was an attempt by a private paramilitary group to wrest Texas from Spain. He was born in Pennsylvania but he may have been a Redbone. He married into the Clark family which is likely a Redbone family in what is now Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana.<sup>39</sup> His background needs further investigation. His home near Liberty,

Texas was a favorite stopping place for travelers.

The Ashworth family was living in Jefferson County when Texas became a Republic in 1836. William Ashworth had moved there from Louisiana in 1831, and many friends and relatives followed him. The Ashworths immigrated to Louisiana from South Carolina in 1799.<sup>40</sup> During the Revolution against Mexico, William and Abner Ashworth paid Gipson Perkins and Elijah Thomas to take their places in the Texas Army.<sup>41</sup> The Ashworths were classified as "free blacks" and were land and slave owners.

Judith Linsley and Ellen Rienstra state that , "There is considerable doubt, however, that they were of black origin, as their features were apparently Caucasian. Thomas Jefferson Russell, writing in 1910, suggested that they were of Portuguese-Moorish descent, and Ashworth family research has indicated that they were of French and English extraction."<sup>42</sup> By 1850 Aaron Ashworth was the richest man in the (Jefferson) county. Several of the so called "mulattos," both men and women, married whites and were mostly unmolested for such marriages.<sup>43</sup> However, tensions resulting from the execution in 1856 of Jack Bunch, a cousin of the Ashworths and the convicted murderer of a deputy sheriff, caused most of the family to leave the area shortly thereafter."<sup>44</sup> The killing of the deputy and hanging of Bunch caused a feud between a group of whites known as Moderators and the "free blacks" who then organized as the Regulators. The Regulators included, among others, Sheriff Glover, Bennett Thomas, John C. Moore, Joel Brandon, and Burwell Alexander. Moore was caught counterfeiting money which did nothing to ease tensions. His reproduction of a St. Louis banknote was almost perfect.<sup>45</sup>

Of the 63 free blacks living in Jefferson County in 1850, 38 were Ashworths. The Republic of Texas passed, in February, 1840, a law which ordered all free blacks to leave the state or be sold into slavery. Three petitions were submitted to the Texas Congress by local whites protesting the removal of the Ashworths. Petitions were also submitted supporting Elisha Thomas and William Goyens. Other petitions from around the state were submitted. The result was passage of the Ashworth Act in December, 1840 which allowed all free blacks who had been in Texas when the Declaration of Independence was made to remain in the state and it exempted from expulsion David and Abner Ashworth who had immigrated after the Declaration.<sup>46</sup>

At least one Redbone, Daniel William Cloud, died at the Alamo.<sup>47</sup> Emily D. West, a mulatto, is reported to have greatly influenced the battle of San Jacinto, which resulted in a victory for the Texians and ultimately freedom from Mexican rule, by entertaining General Santa Anna in his tent at the hour of attack.<sup>48</sup> Was she a Redbone? Historians are divided over the account of her role in winning the battle.

Jim Bowie and his party held off a group of Indians at the so-called San Saba Mines near Calf Creek in Texas. He was accompanied by Matthew Doyal. As a young man Bowie resided in central Louisiana near where many Doyals of Redbone heritage lived. Could one of them have accompanied him to San Saba?<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the greatest Indian fight ever staged in Texas was the Linnville Raid culminating at the battle at Plum Creek. Among the people fighting in that battle were those with the following Redbone/Melungeon names: Owen, Archibald Gipson, Watts, James Bird, Hall, Nichols and Joseph Wood.<sup>50</sup> These areas need further research to determine which Redbones, if any, were involved in these battles.

Cynthia Ann Parker, raised as an Indian captive, the mother of Quanah Parker, Comanche Chief, was the daughter of Parkers who came to Texas in the mid-nineteenth century from Georgia by way of Tennessee and Illinois.<sup>51</sup> Could she have been of Melungeon extraction? What of the Texas outlaw Sam Bass? Was he a Redbone? The name suggests as much. Should not these leads be explored for possible Redbone/Melungeon connections?

A large group of Redbones settled on the west side of the Sabine River in what is today Newton County, Texas. Some of the family names in that area were Adams, Bass, Bennett, Bond, Brack, Brown, Clark, Coleman, Cole, Collins, Davis, Droddy, Hall, Harper, Hart, James, Johnson, Knight, Lee, Lewis, Martin, Mattox, Moore, Nash, Page, Parker, Perkins, Powell, Smith, Taylor, Thompson, Weeks, West, White, Willis, Williams, Woods, Wright, and Young.<sup>52</sup>

Several members of the Goins family settled in Texas in the 1800's along the Neches River and indeed over much of Texas.<sup>53</sup> Many other Redbone names appear throughout early Texas historical writings in incidental mention.

The Cherokees had a tradition that when tribesmen disagreed with the majority on serious matters they were allowed to leave the tribe in peace. In 1721 such a group of Cherokees moved west to the Rocky mountains where they lost contact with their eastern kinsmen. Almost 100 years later Cherokees began appearing in the Neutral Zone and by 1820 they moved into Spanish held Texas. Among the names of the east Texas Cherokee settlers were Duwali, (aka Colonel Bowls) Gatunwali, Fields, Bowls, Bowles, Boles, Brown, Chicken Trotter, Corn Tassel, The Egg, Harris, Harlin, Cuktokeh Jolly, Kanati (Long Turkey), Nekolake, Oosoota, Piggion, Saulowee (Tsulawi), Tahchee, Talontuskee, Talihina (Mrs. Sam Houston), Toquo (Turkey), and many others.<sup>54</sup> Dr. Kennedy has identified Duwali as a Turkish word meaning "great leader. The Cherokee Duwali was a chief among the east Texas Cherokees.

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REDBONE CUSTOMS

Little has been recorded about the customs of earlier Redbones in Louisiana. A group has recently formed to study such matters. Hopefully, some of the old beliefs and customs can be retrieved and recorded. Meanwhile, a few such beliefs follow. It should be noted that not all Redbones followed all the customs or shared all the beliefs or superstitions. Likewise, many such beliefs were shared by local whites and blacks. Indeed some sound like African or West Indies voodoo.

An example of a voodoo tinged belief is the reading of the scripture Ezekiel 16:6 to stop bleeding. Only special people were supposed to know and practice this magic. The author has also heard this belief from whites and east Texas blacks.

One Louisiana Redbone man, Sam Stasby, was said to be able to prevent babies from dying from "Boll-Hives" a form of "infected heat". The process had to be implemented before the baby was 10 days old. The tools were a razor, a blue quinine bottle, a sulphur match, and a silver spoon. An "X" was cut on the baby's back with the razor then the match was struck and placed in the bottle. The mouth of the bottle was placed over the cut and the burning match created a suction which drew out a few drops of blood. This blood was put in the silver spoon with a few drops of the mother's milk and this was fed to the baby.<sup>55</sup>

Another man named Doyle/Dial/Doyal "cured" the asthma of his young daughter by putting a lock of her hair in the split branch of a willow tree. As the tree grew and healed she outgrew her asthma.<sup>56</sup>

Some words and speech patterns among Redbones are interesting. One word the author heard as a young man was b'live for believe. In the 1940's and 50's when a Redbone didn't know the answer to a query he may have responded with "now aah".

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## LOUISIANA REDBONES TODAY

Rivers, swamps, and limited occupational opportunities are no longer barriers to communication, commerce, socialization, and marriage between Redbones and members of the dominant culture. When the author was growing up in central Louisiana horses, wagons and buggies were more available than automobiles. He lived thirteen miles from Westport, the site of the famous fight, and where many Redbones lived. To make the trip to Westport would have been an all day affair involving strenuous labor. The two communities were separated by a river, bad roads, and poor transportation. Today paved roads, good automobiles, and telephones coupled with a more enlightened attitude on the part of both groups, an attitude tempered by a half century of being brought together by the whiplash of hunger during the depression, logging camp days, WPA and CCC programs, WWII and other

military conflicts, has resulted in greater integration of the two groups.

While many Redbones have moved to cities all over the state and indeed over the world and now have jobs from menial to "high tech" and from commercial to academic and professional, many still live in sparsely populated rural areas dominated by members of their clan. In the central Louisiana area the timber industry is still a main source of labor for many.

The primary religion among Redbones is Baptist followed by Pentecostal. Most are Democrats and many are politically active.

Marriage was once almost exclusively an in-group activity; now marriage outside the group is much more common. Employment and educational and religious activities are commonly shared between the two groups. Many religious leaders in central and southwest Louisiana come from the Redbone community, and that leadership is much wider than just in the Redbone community. Indeed, Redbone religious leaders were influential in the "regular white" religious community long before they were accepted generally in white society. Rev. Joseph Willis, discussed earlier, set the precedence for this acceptance.

In the 1940's and 50's church sponsored gospel singing schools and singing conventions enjoyed great popularity in rural Louisiana. The singing schools taught music in the shaped note style. Redbones were enthusiastic participants in these activities and some excelled at both teaching and singing. Rev. O.C. Thompson, a Pentecostal minister, taught singing schools over much of the state.

Redbones who have remained in traditional Redbone communities are not noticeably more impoverished now than their counterparts in other similar communities in the white rural areas; nor do they live a significantly different lifestyle, the still wary attitudes toward the dominant culture notwithstanding. The above generalizations are the author's impressions and not based upon established data.

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## IN CONCLUSION

While the term "Redbone" has been used in a derogatory manner in the past and its use was the occasion for numerous altercations, it is increasingly more accepted today and there is anecdotal evidence that Redbones are beginning to take pride in their heritage. Two books, *The Cherry Winche Country* and *The Melungeons: Resurrection of a Proud People*, have been popular with them in the past few years. Interest in genealogy is becoming popular among Redbones as it is all across America.

Louisiana Redbones have traditionally known little about their heritage. Social scientists have neglected studying or recording their folkways. Little has been written about them either from a positive or negative view point; they have been largely ignored in the literature. *Redbone Woman*, 57 a novel written in 1950, certainly does not describe the Redbone of today and perhaps presented an overdrawn picture of Redbones of earlier times. The only other piece of literature, except Crawford's account, known to this author is a short story entitled simply "Redbone."<sup>58</sup> It contains many inaccuracies and is somewhat divisive although it does have some redeeming features.

An informal group has been formed to study the central Louisiana Redbone community and to record some of its folkways and genealogy. Perhaps a report can be made at a later time on the activities of this group.

In the book *Red Bone Woman* Mr. Randall, the regular white husband of Tempie, his Red Bone wife, said to his son -- a son by his first wife now deceased.

"And after a while it came to me that I was becoming a little less prejudiced about them as I came to understand them better. But my prejudice doesn't go down as fast as my understanding increases." The son, George, said "Maybe if the race problems are ever solved it'll turn out to have been more a matter of forgetting than of understanding."<sup>59</sup>

At first blush this interchange seems profound and in a way it is, but forgetting raises the specter of ignorance of one's past assuring that one will relive it. Perhaps the son was using forgetting as forgiving which is easier and safer. Is not understanding the underpinning of both forgetting and forgiving? Regardless, once having understood one must move on to something else. Obsessing over the past is its own reward and its only reward.

In the fullness of time, perhaps we who are interested in the story of the Redbones/Melungeons can look beyond the history of prejudice, mistreatment, hate and lawlessness and the resulting hurt, poverty, suffering and ignorance to the resurrection of pride - as in *The Resurrection of a Proud People*.

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Endnotes

1. Maida Owens, "Louisiana's Traditional Culture."  
This was written for publication in the Folklife Program's upcoming publication by the University Press of Mississippi entitled: Swapping Stories: Folk Tales From Louisiana. [Return to text.](#)
  
2. Owens, Op. cit: p.15. [Return to text.](#)
  
3. The Calcasieu River, spelled in earlier times, Quelqueshue, is named after an Indian Chief, Calcathouch, which meant Crying Eagle. This account is given in "The Atakapa Indians of Southwest Louisiana," in Kinfolks, Vol. 17 No. 3 pp., 90-92. [Return to text.](#)
  
4. Augustus Q., Walton, The Life and Adventures of John A. Murel (Woodville, Texas: Dogwood Press, 1994), p. 55. [Return to text.](#)
  
5. Don C. Marler, The Neutral Zone: Backdoor to the United States, (Dogwood Press, 1996). [Return to text.](#)
  
6. N. Brent Kennedy and Robyn Vaughn Kennedy, The Melungeons: The Resurrection of A Proud People (Macon, Ga. Mercer Press, 1994). [Return to text.](#)
  
7. James L. Guthrie, "Melungeons: Comparison of Gene Frequency Distributions to Those of Worldwide Populations" Tennessee Anthropologist Vol. XV, No. 1, Spring 1990, pp.14-23. If the English are omitted from the definition a problem arises with at least one Redbone family. Joseph Willis came to Louisiana with perhaps more definite knowledge of his ancestors than most Redbones. He claimed his father was English and his mother an Indian slave. He was born a slave. [Return to text.](#)

8. Bonnie Ball, *The Melungeons* (8th Edition, 1984, no publication data. [Return to text.](#)

9. Rohnda Robertson, "The National Melungeon Registry." *The Wise County Historical Society*, no date. [Return to text.](#)

10. Elliott Oring, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986), p. 24. [Return to text.](#)

11. Richard A. Goldsby, *Race and Races* (New York: Macmillian Publishing Co.,1977) p. 25. [Return to text.](#)

12. Vernon J. Parenton and Roland J. Pellegrin "The Sabines: a Study of Racial Hybrids in a Louisiana Coastal Parish,"*Social Forces*, 29 (1950), pp. 148 - 154. [Return to text.](#)

13. Interview with Dr. Donald W. Hatley, Director, The Louisiana Folklife Center, Northwestern State University at Natchitoches, La. March 4, 1997. [Return to text.](#)

14. Ball, op. cit. p. 46. The term mulatto is derived from a Spanish term meaning mule which implies inability to reproduce and is therefore offensive. [Return to text.](#)

15. William H. Gilbert, Jr. "Race, Cultural Groups, Social Differentiation," *Social Forces*, (May 1946), pp. 438-447. And William H. Gilbert, Jr. in "Surviving Indian Groups of the Eastern United States," *Annual Report Smithsonian Institution*, 1948, pp., 407- 438. Gilbert apparently relied heavily on the classic novel, *Children of Strangers*, by Lyle Saxon, which is clearly about the Cane River Creoles and is not at all about Redbones. [Return to text.](#)

16. Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1977), p.119. [Return to text.](#)

17. Op. cit.: Ball pp. 21-22. These names were

omitted in the 9th edition. Return to text.

18. Marler, Don C. and McManus, Jane P. eds.  
The Cherry Winche Country. (Woodville, Texas: Dogwood Press, 1993). This book was circulated in typescript until edited and published in 1993. The main part of it was written by Webster Talma Crawford in approximately 1932. It was entitled: Redbones in the Neutral Strip or No Man's Land, Between the Calcasieu and Sabine Rivers, in Louisiana and Texas Respectively, and The Westport Fight Between Whites and Redbones, For Possession of This Strip on Christmas Eve, 1882. The editors mercifully shortened the title. Return to text.

19. Mr. Glenn Walker of Caryville, Florida, a nephew of Mr. Crawford, accompanied him on trips to interview local people who knew of the fight. Return to text.

20. Op.cit: Marler and McManus p.2. Return to text.

21. Ibid.p., 4-5. Return to text.

22. Fred B., Kniffen, Hiram F. Gregory and George A. Stokes The Historic Indian Tribes of Louisiana, (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1987). Return to text.

23. Carlyle Tillery, Red Bone Woman (New York: John Day Co.,1950). Return to text.

24. Telephone interview with Donald "Pete" Robinson June, 1997. Return to text.

25. Fred B., Kniffen, Hiram F. Gregory and George A. Stokes The Historic Indian Tribes of Louisiana, (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1987)p., 92. Return to text.

26. Jane P., McManus, A Backward Glance (Pineville, Parker Enterprises,1986), p. 471. Return to text.

27. Ibid: p. 467. Return to text.

28. Ibid: pp. 468-69. Return to text.

29. Glen Lee Greene, House Upon A Rock (Alexandria, La.: Executive Board of the Louisiana Baptist Association, 1973), pp. 47-49. Return to text.

30. Ibid: p. 55. Return to text.

31. Ibid: p. 53. Return to text.

32. Ibid: p. 57. Return to text.

33. Don C. Marler, The Neutral Zone: Backdoor to the United States (Woodville: Dogwood Press, 1996). Return to text.

34. Tommy G. Johnson, They Came West (Privately printed, 1996). 184 Moss Hill Terrace Rd. Natchitoches, La. 71457 Return to text.

35. Ibid. Return to text.

36. Don C. Marler, The Neutral Zone: Backdoor to the United States (Woodville: Dogwood Press, 1996). Return to text.

37. Bergeron, Arthur W. Jr. "Dennis Haynes and His Thrilling Narrative of the Sufferings of ...the Martyrs of Liberty of Western Louisiana". Louisiana History (Winter 1997 Vol. XXXVII No. 1). The book Bergeron reported on is very rare. The title is: A Thrilling Narrative of the Sufferings of Union Refugees, and the Massacre of the Martyrs of Liberty of Western Louisiana: Together With a Brief Sketch of the Present Political Status of Louisiana, As to Her Unfitness for Admission into the Union. With Letters to the Governor of Louisiana and Noted Secessionists in That State, and a Letter to President Johnson on Reconstruction. Return to text.

38. Smart Papers located in the public library in Leesville, La. Return to text.

39. Jean L. Epperson, *Lost Spanish Towns*, (Woodville: Dogwood Press, 1996). Return to text.

40. Johnson, op. cit., p. 11. Jefferson county has since been divided and the primary area in which the Ashworths lived is now Orange county near the Sabine River. The largest city in Jefferson county today is Beaumont. Return to text.

41. W.T. Block. *A History of Jefferson County, Texas From Wilderness to Reconstruction* (Nederland: Nederland Publishing Co., 1976), p. 26. Return to text.

42. Judith Walker Linsley and Ellen Walker Rienstra *Beaumont: A Chronicle of Promise*. (Woodland Hills: Windsor Publications, 1982), p. 24. Return to text.

43. Op. cit: Block, p. 95. Return to text.

44. Op. cit: Linsley and Rienstra, p. 24. Return to text.

45. Op. cit: Block, 79. Return to text.

46. *The New Handbook of Texas*, Vol. 1.,1996. Return to text.

47. Bill Groneman, *Alamo Defenders* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1990). Dr. Tommy Johnson has interviewed members of the Cloud family who are members of the Louisiana Redbone community. They verify that this family member was at the Alamo. Return to text.

48. C.F. Eckhardt, *Texas Tales* (Plano: Wordware, 1992), pp. 103-114). Martha Ann Turner, *The Yellow Rose of Texas* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1976). See also James Lutzweiler, "Emily D. West and the Yellow Rose of Texas," paper presented at the Texas Historical Association meeting in Austin March 8, 1997. Lutzweiler is at North Carolina State University. Return to text.

49. Ibid: p. 161. Return to text.

50. Ibid: 87-102. Return to text.

51. The New Handbook of Texas, Vol. 5., pp. 57-62. Return to text.

52. Thomas A. Wilson, Some Early Southeast Texas Families (Austin: Nortex Press, 1986). Return to text.

53. The Gowan Manuscript, p. 2404 ff. Return to text.

54. Dianna Everett, The Texas Cherokees: A People Between Two Fires, 1819-1840, (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1990). Return to text.

55. Interview with Doris McMain Vaughn, a relative of Mr. Stasby. Mrs. Vaughn is now deceased. This practice was reported in Historic Hineston by Don C. Marler. Return to text.

56. Interview with Mary Cleveland of Leesville who witnessed this act. Return to text.

57. Op. cit. Tillery. Return to text.

58. Mary Dell Fletcher, The Collected Works of Ada Jack Carver (Natchitoches: Northwest State University, 1980), pp. 62-81. Return to text.

59. Op. cit. Tillery,p.103. Return to text.

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[Papers](#)

Smart Family Files. Vertical files Vernon Parish Public Library,  
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