

Jewish-Indian...Who'da Thunk It!

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A turn-of-the-century Jewish Austrian insurance clerk named Franz Kafka wrote some rather bizarre fiction. You may have come across one of his pieces which is heavily anthologized and which is called "The Metamorphosis." It tells the story of a man who wakes up one morning to find that he has been changed into a gigantic cockroach. His mother and sister come after him with a broom and drive him out of the bedroom.

When I first learned that my family was Jewish – and what is even more fantastic, Jewish-Indian – I felt like I had entered one of Kafka's surrealistic short stories. I felt like the cosmos had played an enormous joke on me. I was mad at my mother, father, aunts, uncles and grandparents for not cueing me in. After hearing from Kevin Jones and Beth Hirschman many of you are probably in the same boat.

I'm going to speak to you today on the subject of early intermarriage of Sephardic Jews and Indians and the contributions Jews made to Indian society and, through Indians, to American civilization as a whole.

I *could* say that I believe my family history – incredible as it is – is typical of many others. I *won't* say that it is indicative of ALL Melungeons, or of ALL Southeastern Indians, or of ALL Jews, not by any means. I *will* say though that I think it is instructive, and that I feel comfortable sharing these things with you here at 4th Union as part of a great, big family. We are perhaps the largest extended family in history to wake up one day with a new genetic identity. It is exciting to be part of this moment of destiny, one that forces us to rethink our individual identities, our family's traditions and our roles as Americans.

About five years ago, I wrote a genealogy essay for an e-mail discussion group I moderated on Rootsweb called "Indian Tribes Southeast." The title of the piece was "Seven Generations of Cherokee Blood." One of my findings was that part-Cherokee had consistently married part-Cherokee, even when the marriage partner came from rather far away and outside the other's locale, effectively conserving the bloodline. Rather than being thinned down by out-marriage, my Cherokee heritage on both my mother's side and my father's – the Coopers and the Yateses – remained fairly constant at about one-quarter from generation to generation. For instance, a quarter-blood Cooper would marry a quarter-blood Blevins and their children would all be quarter-bloods. I postulated that the effect was not accidental, though I could not explain the motives behind it. Well, I was right and wrong.

The phenomenon I observed was cousin marriage among crypto-Jews. It is why there are only about 200 Melungeon surnames and we are all multiply related. The purpose was to keep business affairs and religious practices safely concealed within the family—free from the imputations and exposure of outsiders who might jeopardize the family's standing and rights in

the community. Since our ancestors lived in closely knit communities, the degree of secrecy and forgiveness for speaking out of school was extremely strict and severe. Remember they had been at this for 500 years or more, staying one step ahead of the Spanish Inquisition by a combination of tried-and-true policies and exacting discipline! In medieval Spain, often only one child in the family was told of the Jewish heritage, and sometimes there was not one son or daughter deemed worthy of keeping the secret.

The book *The Jews of Georgian England* has an illuminating story about a London tradesman who appeared before a court of law. The judge was completely exasperated because the man would admit to being neither a Jew nor a non-Jew. Since different laws applied to Jews, it was important to know. It is unlikely that the man was ignorant that he was a Jew, yet later on instances abound especially in America where people only find out about their Jewish background more or less by accident. In Appalachia, there came a point where a generation gap occurred. Either the parents and grandparents did not think it necessary to tell or the children did not think it necessary to ask. There was wide-scale neglect of traditions. The Melungeons became mysteries even to themselves.

In the meantime, families explained their “differentness” as Black Dutch, Black Irish, Indian or Portuguese – anything but what it truly was. In my family, the exotic looks were explained as coming from a great-grandmother Shankles’ Indian blood. She didn’t even have a first name. She was supposedly three-quarters Cherokee Indian. Sometimes the story became overtly illogical, as when the children of Nancy Cooper were said to be “two-thirds” Choctaw in one of my family’s Bibles. Everything was put on my mother’s side of the family, though I later discovered my mother and father had practically the same gene type. My mother’s father said all the Indian blood was on his wife’s side. I later found out they both had about the same amount of Indian genetics and were in fact fourth cousins. I kept trying to push my lines back to reach the fullbloods but never quite succeeded. Have you ever noticed how many people only have ONE Indian in the family? Well, I don’t believe Indians come that way. They each must have two Indian parents. I also reject the notion that Indian genes entered a predominantly white bloodline by some sort of aberration, an occurrence of rape or an adoption or a kidnapping. Our mixed ancestor couples formed successful marriages of mutual choice and love, often producing ten or eleven children.

So let us survey the different Southeastern Indian tribes, or nations, and try to answer the question when the first intermarriages occurred. That first generation would have been exactly half Indian. The first tribe I will talk about is the Chickasaw. From the earliest English contact with them, which dates from the end of the 17th century, this powerful tribe of Muskogean-speaking Indians that dominated the bluffs on the Mississippi around Memphis was called the Halfbreeds. This name was used in preference to Chickasaw by the Board of Commissioners of Indian Trade in Charleston and the Lord High Commissioners in London. Among present-day Indians the Chickasaw are rumored to be the most highly mixed, “virtually white,” as one Indian put it to me. About 1735 the tribe was invited to settle in the hinterland of the new colony of Savannah where they owned thousands of acres on both sides of the Savannah River around Augusta complete with plantations until after the American Revolution. The Chickasaw were resolutely anti-Spanish and anti-French, and it is likely that the first white people among them were Jews. The French finance minister, the Scotsman William Law (whose name is Hebrew,

“levite”) introduced paper money and government bonds to that country. One of his schemes was the Mississippi Bubble of 1718. It involved rounding up the poor of Paris and Jews of Alsace and sending several shiploads of colonists up the Mississippi. The land agent was Elias Stultheus, a Jew. These were essentially “dumped” among the Indians, and they later disappeared. It may be this colony that the Choctaw chief Apunkshunnubbee referred to in the 1790s when he told the Indian agent concerning the upper Natchez territory:

“You Americans were not the first people who got this country from the red people. We sold our lands, but never got any value for it.”

Alternatively, this may be a memory of the “gentlemen who came to view Mississippi lands from the Yadkin River in North Carolina,” as mentioned by Adair. The infamous Yazoo Land Fraud and Aaron Burr conspiracy did not occur until after this.

The Indian trader James Adair moved his operations to the village of Piomingo in north Mississippi around 1745. Most of his arguments involving similarities between the Indians and Jews were based on information he received in Chickasaw country when he later wrote *his History of the American Indians* there in the 1760s. He says on page 447, “I have the pleasure of writing this by the side of a Chikkasah female, as great a princess as ever lived.” Here we have explicit mention of the first Jewish American Indian Princess! Adair noted that there were already adults who were octoroons, or one-eighth Indian. This would necessarily mean that the first Indian-white intermarriage occurred three generations before about 1680, allowing 20 years per generation.

By 1800, after the area had returned to the Spanish, there was just one town of Halfbreeds left. It is mentioned in the memoirs of a steamboat captain below the fourth bluffs on the Mississippi:

“Fort Pickering...stands on the left side of the river, in the Mississippi Territory. The United States have a factor here, but the settlement is very then; it generally consists of what is called the half breed, which is a mixture of Indians and whites” (The Navigator, by Zadok Cramer, 1811).

The author of the article on Jews in the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture says that the oldest Southern communities were not on the Atlantic or Gulf coast but in the middle Mississippi river valley on the St. Francis and Arkansas River in outposts that were originally Spanish or French like Natchez, New Madrid, Kaskaskia, Cape Giroudeau and Memphis. These are all Jewish ghost towns now, like so many of the Caribbean Islands where the first synagogues in the New World were built. Today there are only 25 Jews in the city of Natchez and the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in Utica, Mississippi, is a lonely tribute to the state’s Jewish pioneers.

What about white surnames among the Chickasaw? The Colberts had tremendous influence over the Chickasaws and practically ruled them for many years. They owned land, had plantations, slaves, ferry operations, credit in Pensacola, Cadiz, Amsterdam and London, their women wore the latest fashions from Paris, and they maintained libraries and wine cellars. The first was William Colbert, a British Indian trader from the Carolinas who visited the Chickasaw as early as 1722. His son was Chief James Lachlan Colbert, one of whose three wives was a halfbreed

woman. Chief James's sons were Chief William who married a Moniac and lived among the Creeks; Chief George, who operated Colberts Ferry where the Natchez Trace crosses the Tennessee River (he became very wealthy); Levi, who lived nearby at Buzzards Roost (Franklin Co., Ala.); and Joseph, who was the family historian. Colbert became a famous boy's name among Jewish Indians in the South. I leave it to you to decide whether the Colberts were Jewish, and if so, how much. If we look at the names of the operators of the first stands on the Natchez Trace – in other words the first white men in that part of the country – the majority of them can be suspected of being Jewish by background, including Stephen Minor, Louis LeFleur, John Gordon, Robert Griner, Levi Kemp and Noah Wall. Significantly, perhaps, the earliest name given to this region by the Cumberland settlers in Nashville was Moro District – the “Moorish District.”

Let us go now to the Choctaw Indians. Chief Greenwood Leflore (1800-1865) was one of the signers of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek that cost the Choctaws their homeland. Ironically, he promoted removal to his people (for which he became unpopular), but he remained in Mississippi, an immensely wealthy man, even serving on the Mississippi state senate 1841-1844. He also built a magnificent home Malmaison near what is now Teoc, Mississippi. Greenberry's father was Louis LeFleur, a French Canadian trader who married an “Indian princess” by the name of Rebecca Cravatt and is responsible for the fact that the capital of Mississippi is in Jackson, where his trading post and plantation was situated.

Another of the first white traders among the Choctaws (as early as 1767) was Hardy Perry, father of Chief Isaac Perry. Hardy Perry operated a trading post near present-day Tupelo, Mississippi after coming into the territory, so it is said, from Georgia. Reportedly he was the first to introduce oxen into the Choctaw Nation, bringing the animals north from Mobile. He had a Choctaw wife named Anolah, who lived near present-day Grenada, Mississippi, and also a wife in the neighboring Chickasaw Nation. Here we are obviously dealing with crypto-Jews. The Perrys were a Sephardic family whose name (Perez) originally paid tribute to the pear tree of Eretz Israel. Probably they are the namesake for Parris Island, where the last of Juan Pardo's settlers were found. Anolah, we can be sure, was not a fullblood. At any rate, her name (whose origin is obscure) later became famous with the “Enola Gay,” the jet fortress that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Perry is the same name as Perryman. The Sephardic features are, I think, very striking in the portrait of Benjamin Perryman, a Creek warrior.

In 1898 a famous case was brought before the Choctaw supreme court in Oklahoma, Nancy Cooper v. The Choctaw Nation. This was followed by an even more famous case, William C. Thompson et al. vs. The Choctaw Nation. Involved were the Indian citizenship claims of hundreds of mixed blood descendants of the earliest traders among the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians. After the cases were accepted by the Indian courts they were overturned by the BIA. The Thompson case went as high as the U.S. Supreme Court, but none of the plaintiffs ever got any satisfaction. The Thompson Choctaws of East Texas are still today a viable tribe. Among the names in the Cooper case – all considered Melungeon – were Boen or Bowen, Campbell, Martin, Brown and Nichols.

My earliest named Cooper ancestor – leaving out guesswork and speculation – was Henry Labon Cooper. He is said to have been a Choctaw Indian, speaking the Choctaw language and having

typical Choctaw Indian looks in these court papers. One of his sons, Capt. John Cooper signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek and went on the Trail of Tears, forfeiting a large plantation in Perry Co., Tennessee. Another, Houston Cooper, managed to remain on his plantation outside Nashville, although married to an octoroon woman (that is, one-eighth Indian). Another, my 3rd great-grandfather, Isaac Cooper married Nancy, the daughter of Cherokee supreme chief Black Fox and ended his career by becoming the first rabbi of Wheeling, W. Va. – a story worthy of Franz Kafka. For many years, he lived in his grandfather William Cooper's place on Copper Ridge (which I think was probably originally Cooper Ridge) in Grainger Co., Tenn., near William Bean's lonely log cabin, the first west of the Cumberland Gap.

This brings me to the Sephardic Jews among the Cherokee Indians. William and Joseph Cooper, brothers with a shop on the harborfront in early Charleston, are the first known traders among the Cherokee, at least as early as 1698. They had a trading post in Keowee where their mother lived in 1730 when they accompanied the eccentric Scotsman Sir Alexander Cummings on his mission to win the “crown of Tennessee” for King George. Interestingly, Cummings' idea was to settle 800,000 European Jews in the mountains of the Cherokees! It was probably his Jewish connections rather than his aristocratic airs that made him persona non grata when he brought seven Cherokee Indians over to London in 1730—including Attakullakulla, my 5th great-grandfather. William Cooper was, like many Jewish merchants, a linguist or translator. It is thought that the Coopers were originally retainers who came over to England from France with William the Conqueror and went underground with their beliefs when the Jews were expelled from England in 1290. The most famous member of the family was Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 1st earl of Shaftesbury and Lord Proprietor of the Carolinas under Charles II. James Fenimore Cooper's ancestors were also a branch of this family in Barbados and Philadelphia.

About the same time, the Beamor family came from Barbados and Colleton Co., South Carolina (where they were allied with the Perryman family—the namesakes of the Purrysborough colony) and began to trade with the Cherokee. Brent Cox, the author of *Heart of the Eagle*, a study of *Dragging Canoe's* Chickamauga movement, shows that John Beamor married Quatsi (whose name means Patsy just like Qualla is Cherokee for Polly), the Wolf Clan mother of the entire Cherokee leadership for most of the eighteenth century, including Oconostota (“the Great Warrior”), the various children of Moytoy, Doublehead and Attakullakulla. The Cherokee hierarchy responsible for signing all the treaties with England and the United States was thus mixed from the beginning. A case can be made that all the well-known founders of old Cherokee families, from MacDonald and Ward to Ross and Gist, as presented, for instance, in Emmett Starr's work or James Hicks' Cherokee Genealogy pages on the Internet, were Sephardic Jews. A rather obvious example, in my opinion, is Col. George Lowery (see painting). Two others from my own family are Moses Looney and Melmuth Lackey.

I will be brief about the Creeks and Seminoles. The most important founder of Jewish-Indian trading families among the Creeks was William Dixon Moniac (orig. Jacob Monaque), who married Polly Colbert, a cousin who was the daughter of Chief William Colbert and Jesse Moniac. Dixon Moniac was said to be a Hollander but was originally from France. He came to the Tallassee Creeks with a remnant of the Natchez Indians in 1756. His son was Sam Moniac, a plantation and innkeeper on the Alabama River in southwest Alabama called “a halfbreed of property” by the government, and his son-in-law was William Weatherford, or Red Eagle, the

hero of the Creek war. A granddaughter married William Sizemore. The Moniacs drew together the handful of names that became the Poarch Creek Band in the 1980s on the strength of a dusty Spanish charter preserved by the Pensacola firm of Panton, Leslie—Sizemore, Elliott (Ehlert), McGhee, Tate, Grayson/Grierson, Powell, Perryman, McIntosh, Barnard and Weatherford. The Moniac blood blended with that of another legendary founder, James McQueen, who lived to be 128 years old and was the grandfather of Tecumseh, Osceola and Josiah Francis (Hillis Harjo). McQueen was a British naval officer who jumped ship in Pensacola harbor in 1719. He married a succession of Creek princesses and most of the so-called Breeds among both the Upper and Lower Creeks were his children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren. McQueen is one of the oldest clans in Scotland and probably founded by a Cohen, as one of its septs is Cowan. So we see that the common denominator in Creek genealogies was Jewish.

(End with the Lumbees and Pamunkeys and Cheraws and other coastal tribes.)

(Main finding that the Sephardic-Indian trading and land-owning families were responsible for forming the overall pattern of white-Indian relations in the U.S., emphasizing a legal relationship founded on peace, trade and mutual self-interest, unlike Latin America where Indians have no rights even to this day. The meaning of “civilized tribes.”)

The story of white-Indian relations in North America has normally been told as one giant unfolding systematic theft. Angie Debo, Vine Deloria and A. Alvarez are some of its better-known chroniclers. Guilt, anger, deception and misunderstanding dominate among its themes. According to both the apologists and the revolutionists, European colonists took the red man's lives, land, livelihood, language and culture; they are even trying today to rob the Indian of his spirituality and identity. But the Sephardic Jewish colonists whose roots were in North Africa consistently went against this pattern. Where their English and Spanish counterparts did little more than take, the Berbers and Moors gave. They gave large families of children, leadership abilities, trading relationships, writing and computational skills, building and construction know-how, legal advice, spinning wheels, looms, forges, smithies, ferries, cows, horses, peach orchards, beautiful arts and crafts. In the case of Will Thomas, they even gave land and preserved a sovereignty that endures to this day.

The Five Civilized Tribes built an amazing legacy, one that endures to this day as strong as ever. After the 2000 Census, Cherokee constitute the largest Indian group in the U.S., with nearly 500,000 recognized and unrecognized members. Through genocide, military conquest, plague, starvation, captivity, dispossession, betrayal and endless government maneuvers, they and the other major Southeastern tribes fought back with cunning and conviction. These were the first Indian nations to have constitutions, courts of law, a press, police forces and schools. *Euchella v. Welsh* (1824) and the Cherokee case before the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1830s marked their arrival in the circle of nations. The ensuing public sympathy stirred up by converted Jews like John Howard Payne, the author of “Home Sweet Home,” secured a place in legend for them similar to the Founding Fathers of America and Davey Crockett. Families like the McDonalds, Adairs, Rosses, Coopers, Keyeses, Browns, Rogerses and Vanns mingled their bloodlines with the strength of the natives in the eighteenth century and before. Were it not for that leaven the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek and Choctaw could never have

survived as political entities. Were it not for that intermarriage, most Southeastern Indians would not have acquired immunities to disease and survived at all! Southern Sephardic Jews were the straw in a stubborn and determined bricklike material formed in the crucible of the Old Frontier. Flexible, down-to-earth, inconspicuous, they infiltrated and inspired the indigenous hierarchies. Seemingly all traces of them have eroded with time, but DNA is uncovering their amazing story.