

# The saga of the Carmel Indians

*Crossroads town once was home to a proud people of mixed heritage*

By CRAIG SPRINGER

I'm standing in front of a tall, steepled church. Shadows of its eaves angle across white plank siding as the sun moves toward midday. The paint flakes and peels in the hot sun; the air is close with humidity. I'm enveloped in a summer stillness, hemmed by the gentle hills of the Appalachian Piedmont that rose up before me as I drove from the till plains west of here.

The clip of pony hooves on pavement pulling a pack of Amish boys in a buggy breaks the monotony of sounds. The lulling sound of rubber on the road grows louder as an occasional car comes closer, and then speeds on westward toward Hillsboro, or points elsewhere. Unless you live here, there's not a lot of reason to stop. The church shows some wear, and you can't help but hear and wonder of the footsteps that have passed over the threshold.

It's one of those crossroads where the cliché about blinking applies. Drive too fast and you'll miss it, figuratively. Drive too fast and you might plow into an Amish wagon, quite literally. The Amish folk are recent arrivals to the Carmel, Ohio, area. The little crossroads community sits quietly at the intersection of two highways near the Highland-Pike county line.

The Amish weren't the first group of people to stand out as "others" in the area. The history of the settlement in that region reaches back at least 400 years, well before Ohio was surveyed in dices of square-mile blocks, on paper anyway. This history predates Ohio's settlement by European descendants and first-generation immigrants, the Welsh and Germans, the Presbyterians and Quakers. This sleepy rural area once was home to the "Carmel Indians," a little-known and little-studied ethnic group whose history turned ethnographers and genealogists into real pathfinders. The story of the Carmel Indians is a generous helping of Americana; they exemplify the alloy poured off the great melting pot of American culture.

The Carmel Indians were a collection of a few family groups that landed in Highland County immediately after the Civil War. They migrated from Magoffin County, Kentucky. Kentucky's influence on

southern Ohio isn't any mystery. Although the greatest influence on Ohio's demography from the Bluegrass State occurred from a mass exodus circa 1920 to 1970, the Carmel Indians were well-established in Ohio by a couple of generations before the greatest influx of Bluegrass blood to the Buckeye State had happened.

The Carmel Indians were a concentration of Kentucky migrant families who landed where they did probably for the same reason people always get up and move: economic opportunity. According to Highland County native son, John Kessler, co-author of *North from the Mountains: A Folk History of the Carmel Melungeon Settlement*,



*A Carmel Indian family living near the Highland-Pike county line, circa 1945. Courtesy Ohio Academy of Science. Photo taken by Edward Price, a geographer from the University of Cincinnati, who studied the people.*

there's some indication that the vanguard families came to the area to work for a particular farm, the Cartwrights, circa 1865. But people stay tethered from whence they came. That tether connected on the other end to Magoffin County, from where more families migrated to the Carmel area. Kessler's book tells the story of the Carmel Indians and his experiences as a youth, and his perception as an adult looking back through the lens of time.

The "otherness" of the Carmel Indians was typified by their dark complexion. But they weren't necessarily all Native American. They were locally rumored to come from stock of remnant Shawnee, those who stayed behind when other Ohio Indians were removed to reservations. But that's not warranted, or so says Kessler's co-author, anthropologist Don Ball. According to Ball, the Carmel Indians were a unique community in Ohio, and coiled in the double helix of their DNA was a history of enslavement, indenturement, opportunity — and ultimately, freedom and assimilation.

While locally known as "Indians," Ball says their blood was much richer; ethnographers called them "tri-racial isolates." They descended from much older American families ethnically known as melungeons; the melungeon population centered in the mountains along the North Carolina-Tennessee state line. They were part white, part Indian, and part black. Backtracking census records shows that over time how they identified themselves changed; they were variously categorized by census takers as

mulatto, white, Indian, or Negro. Their heritage is rich and varied.

Ohio State University history professor Dr. Thomas Ingersoll, author of *To Intermix with Our White Brothers*, a history of Indian-mixed bloods in the U.S., believes that the melungeon population owes part of its origin to the Spanish settlement of Santa Elena in today's South Carolina, dating to 1566. Spanish soldiers there intermarried with Native American and black women.

According to Ball, intermarriage between freed black slaves and white indentured servants, as well as intermarriage with Native American tribes on the Atlantic coast during colonial times, explains the origin of the melungeons, among which were the Carmel Indians. The dispossessed tended to be pushed away socially and geographically in colonial society, and that lends itself to Ball's understanding of how the melungeon population came to be centered in southern Appalachia, well outside the immediate sphere of colonial plantation society.

The answers to questions about ethnicity aren't always black and white. There is some gray area when it comes to understanding genetic purity, if there is such a thing. You probably can recount immediately having heard others say they had distant Indian blood. Family lore, was it? Perhaps there could be some melungeon blood. In the marrow of our history lies the blood of our origins; blood-history knows no revision.

Ball and Kessler say the Carmel Indians have moved on. As a concentrated viable community, the Carmel Indian families have since disbanded, assimilating, stitching themselves further into the American fabric. Some of the local folks I talked with in the Carmel area say they'd heard of the Carmel Indians but spoke of them in an historical sense. Ball says that post-World War II, when the sons came back from the war, they rode the economic wave of opportunity, and like their ancestors who had come from Kentucky, they too moved on away from Highland County.

One person I spoke with said a few members of the old families remain, but there were sensitivities to racial prejudice. Anthropologist Ball says this notion is regrettable, that every individual should be proud of who and what they are, but this pride first requires knowing from where they came.

While I paused at the crossroads of Carmel, I reflected on the long link to the past that the local population once embodied, living relics the people are. Inquiring minds wouldn't have to go off to farflung places to research the arcane and unusual. That could be had right here. This little parcel of Piedmont seems all the richer.

For more information on the melungeons, go to <http://www.melungeon.org/> □

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