

*Beyond the Sunset: The Melungeon Outdoor Drama, 1969-1976.*

By Wayne Winkler (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2019.  
Pp. 342, Paper \$25.00.)

It remains a well-established truism that there are times when we must contend with doing the best we can in the face of both less than ideal circumstances and minimal resources. So it was that in the late 1960s, civic leaders in mountainous Hancock County, (northeast Tennessee, were confronted with a number of challenges—the dubious honor of being one of the poorest counties in the United States, a deteriorating (or non-existent) infrastructure, virtually no employment or educational opportunities, little in the way of arable land, and a steady decline in population following World War II. The singular noteworthy and seemingly unlikely asset they did possess was being the home of a small and long marginalized population derisively termed the Melungeons.

And who were the Melungeons? Despite being the subject of rampant conjecture and unflattering speculation beginning in the early nineteenth century this reputedly “mysterious” group, who had dark skin and tightknit clannish ways, was culturally identical to any number of their “pure” Caucasian neighbors scattered across the length and breadth of Appalachia. What then set them apart? The succinct answer was their unknown origin. Not surprisingly, when hard facts are in short supply wild and creative guesswork is always ready to fill the void. Writers of an earlier era were quick to propose that their ancestry originated from (among other groups) Carthaginians, Portuguese sailors, the lost tribes of Israel, Spanish explorers, or any number of never clearly identified early European settlers who arrived at some unknown date on the North American shore. As tantalizing as these fanciful theories might have been, research conducted since the late 1940s has generally concluded that the Melungeons of Hancock County (and several adjacent counties in both Tennessee and Virginia) are but one of the many groups in the Eastern United States categorized by anthropologists as Tri-Racial Isolates formed by an admixture of white, Indigenous, and African American ancestors beginning shortly after the settlement of the Virginia and Carolina coastal region.

Marshaling the meager financial resources available to them, community leaders in Sneedville and Hancock County decided to take a bold—and in many ways unique—experiment. Beginning in the

late 1960s, they capitalized on the already well-established popular interest in the mystery surrounding the Melungeons by organizing and bringing to fruition a carefully crafted outdoors drama to entice much needed tourism in this isolated corner of Tennessee. To his credit, Winkler has admirably documented in great and unbiased detail the often times convoluted story of converting a good idea born of economic necessity into a viable reality. Granted that the volume is not oriented toward addressing the salient question “Who are the Melungeons?” it is a most informative and insightful study of the problems and prospects associated with promoting cultural tourism and should prove to be a worthy addition to the slowly growing series of Melungeon studies published by Mercer University Press.

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*Cas Walker: Stories on His Life and Legend.*

Edited by Joshua S. Hodge. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2019. Pp. 202. Paper, \$24.95.)

Cas Walker died more than two decades ago, but in East Tennessee his name still evokes a polarity of opinions. He was a major influencer in Knoxville and the region, and expanded his reach from one endeavor to another—from grocer to politician to music promoter to newspaper publisher—with characteristic brashness and apparent ease. Today, he is both celebrated for discovering a talented young Dolly Parton and blamed for opposing development in Knoxville during the mid-twentieth century. Incidents like brawling with a fellow city councilman in 1956 and booting the Everly Brothers off his *Farm and Home Hour* television show that same year added to Walker’s shrewd reputation and cemented his place in local lore. Walker served two brief stints as mayor, remained on the city council for over thirty years, and was worth millions when he died in 1998. But while his name appears in histories of Knoxville and even of country music, Walker was never the primary subject of a book outside of his 1993 self-published autobiography.

Editor Joshua S. Hodge, who died in 2019 just after receiving his PhD in history from the University of Tennessee and a few months before this book’s publication, sought to explore Walker’s significance



and legacy by combining previously published materials with new remembrances by those who knew or knew of Walker during his lifetime. Hodge interviewed twenty individuals with varying ties to the man, including family members, friends and associates, local politicians, journalists and historians, and even individuals who had publicly clashed with Walker. Ten other individuals contributed written recollections about Walker. Hodge incorporates local newspaper articles written during Walker's lifetime, as well as articles from Walker's own *Watchdog* newspaper. Later *Metro Pulse* articles by Betty Bean provide much of the narrative's momentum. Hodge also draws on Walker's autobiography throughout the text, providing topical commentary in Walker's singular voice. By compiling these resources into one volume for people interested in East Tennessee history, *Cas Walker: Stories on His Life and Legend* preserves the memories of those who knew Walker, and adds shading to the popular but simplistic portrayals of the man.

More oral or popular history than biography, chapters nevertheless cover the major phases of Walker's life: early experiences leading up to his first grocery business, marketing tactics and promotions he used to attract customers, experiences of his employees, his jump into music promotion on radio and television, his generosity toward the poor, his political career, his views on communism and civil rights, raccoon hunting, his *Watchdog* newspaper, and legal and health troubles that Walker faced later in life. An epilogue considers Walker's lasting legacy through the varied opinions of the book's interviewees and contributors.

The inviting text, with nary a footnote, reads much like a scrapbook of letters and newspaper articles, and its accessibility will appeal to a wide audience. Images include a flattering cover illustration of Walker and nearly forty photographs inside. Contributor bios, a bibliography, and an index make up the back matter.

The organization is broadly chronological, but because chapters are topical there are inevitable jumps in time within the narrative. This book contains many humorous stories (a few are quite salty), and through the juxtaposition of various sources readers often get multiple retellings of the same tale. One example is the "dullin' spray" story, where a crew member of Walker's TV show mistakenly left a can of non-glare spray on the set's display shelf of groceries, resulting in a comical on-air reaction from Walker. The story is told twice on pages 28-29, and a third time on page 185. Although each retelling

brings out new details, repetition like this seems more justified when sources disagree, as when Walker's story of young Parton winning a "greasy pole" climbing contest is immediately debunked in Larry Mathis's account. Hodge admits that the source material mixes "much truth" with "a dose of mythology" about Walker (p. 4), and that in some cases "no two stories are the same." (p. 39) Aside from the introduction, and explanatory paragraphs that open each chapter, there is little editorial commentary within the text, and Hodge mostly leaves readers to form their own opinions about Walker and the stories told about him.

Readers will certainly find their favorite Walker stories here, from his burying Digger O'Dell in a parking lot to throwing live chickens off the roof of his Vine Avenue grocery store. Hodges's volume also presents a more layered portrait of the man than was previously available. Anecdotes of Walker advocating for poor whites and Blacks and even supporting desegregation add nuance to the image of the fist-swinging hillbilly who was "agin" every progressive proposal that came before Knoxville's city council. While no single book could contain all the tales about such a colorful and widely known public figure, *Cas Walker: Stories on His Life and Legend* achieves its purpose by preserving Walker folklore for posterity and helping East Tennesseans better appreciate his importance in the region. It is an enjoyable read and a fine resource.

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*Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party.*

By Mark R. Cheatham. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018. Pp. 241. Paper, \$24.95.)

The Age of Jackson is one of the most written about period in American history, which makes it difficult to unearth new complexities and contradictions. Mark Cheatham's *Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party* skillfully maintains its interpretive cogency without sacrificing factual nuance. That Cheatham makes this task look easy is, no doubt, a testament to untold hours of research. He draws upon a wide array of secondary literature, generously supplemented with extracts from early national newspapers and

