

The Blue People Of Troublesome Creek

Answer Key

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Adapted from an article in Science 82, November 1982 by Cathy Trost



Luna Fugate and John Stacy (figure from © Science82: November, 1982)

It all started over 6 generations ago after a French orphan named Martin Fugate claimed a land grant in 1820 and settled on the banks of eastern Kentucky's Troublesome Creek. No mention of his skin color is made in the early histories of the area, but family lore has it that Martin himself was blue. The odds against it were incalculable, but Martin Fugate managed to find and marry a woman who carried the same recessive gene, his red-headed American bride, the former Elizabeth Smith. Elizabeth Smith, apparently, was as pale-skinned as the mountain laurel that blooms every spring around the creek hollows. Martin and Elizabeth set up housekeeping on the banks of Troublesome and began a family. Of their seven children, four were reported to be blue.

The clan kept multiplying. Fugates married other Fugates. Sometimes they married first cousins. And they married the people who lived closest to them, the Combses, Smiths, Ritchies, and Stacys. All lived in isolation from the world, bunched in log cabins up and down the hollows, and so it was only natural that a boy married the girl next door, even if she had the same last name.

"When they settled this country back then, there was no roads. It was hard to get out, so they intermarried," says Dennis Stacy who counts Fugate blood in his own veins.

Martin and Elizabeth Fugate's blue children multiplied in this natural isolation tank. The marriage of one of their blue boys, Zachariah, to his mother's sister triggered the line of succession that would result in the birth, more than 100 years later of Benjy Stacy. When Benjy was born with purple skin, his relatives told the perplexed doctors about his great grandmother Luna Fugate. One relative described her as "blue all over" and another calls Luna "the bluest woman I ever saw". Luna's father, Levy Fugate, was one of Zachariah Fugate's sons. Levy married a Ritchie girl and bought 200 acres of rolling land along Ball Creek. The couple had 8 children, including Luna. A fellow by the name of John Stacy spotted Luna at Sunday services of the Old Regular Baptist Church before the turn of the century. Stacy courted her, married her, and moved from Troublesome Creek to make a living in timber on her daddy's land. John Stacy still lives on Lick Branch of Ball Creek. Stacy recalls that his father-in-law, Levy Fugate, was "part of the family that showed blue. All them old fellers way back then was blue. One of em - I remember seeing him when I was just a boy - Blue Anze, they called him. Most of them old people we by that name - the blue Fugates. It run in that generation who lived up and down Ball Creek".

"They looked like anybody else, cept they had the blue color," Stacy said.

"The bluest Fugates I ever saw was Luna and her kin," said Carrie Lee Kilburn, a nurse at the rural medical center called Homeplace Center. "Luna was bluish all over. Her lips were as dark as a bruise. She was as blue a woman as I ever saw."

The blue people of Troublesome Creek are a fascinating chapter in American history, representing a unique genetic condition that led to their distinctive blue skin. Originating in the early 20th century in Kentucky, the story of the Fugate family and their descendants captivates researchers and curious minds alike. This article delves into the origins, genetic aspects, and cultural impact of the blue people, while also discussing the scientific explanations and the legacy they left behind.

Origins of the Blue People

The blue people of Troublesome Creek trace their lineage back to Martin Fugate, a French

man who settled in the region in the 1820s. Martin married Elizabeth Smith, who also had a blue hue to her skin, and together they had several children. The couple's descendants inherited this rare condition, which became more pronounced due to the isolated nature of the community and their propensity to intermarry.

The Gene Behind the Blue Skin

The blue skin of the Fugate family is attributed to a rare genetic disorder known as methemoglobinemia. This condition affects the blood's ability to carry oxygen effectively. In patients with methemoglobinemia, hemoglobin is altered to methemoglobin, which has a bluish tint. Factors contributing to this disorder include:

1. Genetics: The condition is inherited in an autosomal recessive manner. Both parents must carry the gene for a child to exhibit symptoms.
2. Environmental Factors: While genetics play a significant role, environmental factors can also influence the severity of symptoms.
3. Diet and Lifestyle: Certain dietary components and lifestyle choices can exacerbate or mitigate the effects of methemoglobinemia.

Scientific Investigation

In the mid-20th century, medical professionals began to take a closer look at the Fugate family. In 1960, Dr. Edwin Allen, a hematologist, studied the family and concluded that the blue discoloration was due to methemoglobinemia. His findings confirmed the genetic basis for the condition and brought attention to the family's unique story.

Dr. Allen's research led to increased interest in the genetic makeup of the blue people. He found that the Fugates were carriers of a specific mutation in the enzyme diaphorase, which is responsible for converting methemoglobin back to hemoglobin. When this enzyme is deficient, the accumulation of methemoglobin leads to the blue appearance.

Cultural Impact and Legacy

The story of the blue people of Troublesome Creek has had a lasting cultural impact, inspiring books, documentaries, and even artistic representations. The family's unique condition has fascinated both the medical community and the general public, leading to various interpretations of their lives and experiences.

Literature and Media

Several authors have chronicled the story of the Fugate family, weaving it into narratives that explore themes of isolation, acceptance, and the complexity of genetic heritage. Some notable works include:

- "The Blue People of Kentucky" by D. Scott Miller: This book details the history and experiences of the Fugate family, emphasizing their struggles and triumphs.
- Documentaries: Films and documentaries have been produced that capture the essence of the blue people, often focusing on their lives in the Appalachian Mountains and the societal perceptions they faced.

Artistic Representations

Artists have also drawn inspiration from the story of the blue people. Various forms of art, including paintings and sculptures, depict the Fugate family, often highlighting the contrast between their blue skin and the lush green landscape of Kentucky. These artistic interpretations serve to humanize the family's experience and provoke thought about the nature of difference in society.

Social Perception and Acceptance

The blue people of Troublesome Creek faced significant challenges due to their appearance. Social stigma and misunderstandings about their condition led to isolation and discrimination. The community's reaction can be summarized in several key points:

1. Fear and Misunderstanding: Many people were afraid of what they did not understand, leading to rumors and myths about the Fugate family.
2. Isolation: The family often lived in seclusion to avoid societal judgment, which perpetuated the genetic condition through inbreeding.
3. Acceptance: Over time, some members of the community began to accept the Fugates, recognizing their humanity beyond their unusual appearance.

Modern Perspectives

Today, the story of the blue people is often revisited through a modern lens. Advances in genetic research have provided deeper insights into the condition of methemoglobinemia. Increased awareness of genetic diversity has fostered a greater understanding of the Fugate family's experiences, emphasizing the importance of acceptance and inclusion in society.

Scientific and Medical Advances

The study of the blue people has contributed to the broader understanding of genetic disorders. Research into methemoglobinemia has led to:

- Better Diagnostic Tools: Improved methods for diagnosing methemoglobinemia and related conditions.
- Treatment Options: Development of treatments, such as methylene blue therapy, which

can help reduce methemoglobin levels in the blood.

- Genetic Counseling: Increased awareness of the importance of genetic counseling for families with a history of hereditary conditions.

Ethical Considerations

The story of the blue people also raises important ethical questions regarding genetic research and the treatment of individuals with genetic disorders. Key ethical considerations include:

1. Informed Consent: Ensuring that individuals are fully informed about the implications of genetic testing.
2. Privacy: Protecting the privacy of individuals with hereditary conditions and their families.
3. Stigmatization: Addressing the potential for stigmatization of individuals based on their genetic makeup.

Conclusion

The tale of the blue people of Troublesome Creek is not just a story of a unique genetic condition; it is a reflection of human resilience, societal perceptions, and the intricate tapestry of genetics. As we continue to explore the mysteries of genetics, the Fugate family serves as a reminder of the importance of compassion, understanding, and acceptance in a diverse world. Their legacy encourages ongoing dialogue about difference, identity, and the complexities of human genetics, ensuring that their story remains relevant for generations to come.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the historical context of the blue people of Troublesome Creek?

The blue people of Troublesome Creek refers to a group of people in Kentucky who had a genetic condition called methemoglobinemia, which caused their skin to appear blue.

How did the blue people of Troublesome Creek come to be known?

They were known as the blue people due to their distinctive skin color, which was a result of a hereditary condition affecting their blood's ability to carry oxygen.

What are the main symptoms associated with methemoglobinemia?

The main symptoms include a bluish tint to the skin, shortness of breath, fatigue, and in severe cases, it can lead to complications such as heart problems.

How did the community of Troublesome Creek respond to the blue people?

The community had mixed responses; while some were fascinated, others discriminated against the blue people due to their appearance.

Is methemoglobinemia treatable?

Yes, methemoglobinemia is treatable with medications such as methylene blue, which can help restore normal hemoglobin function.

What genetic factors contributed to the blue people of Troublesome Creek?

The condition was primarily due to a recessive gene inherited from both parents, which affected the enzyme that converts methemoglobin back to hemoglobin.

Did the blue people of Troublesome Creek have any notable descendants?

Yes, there are still descendants of the blue people today, and some have shared their stories to raise awareness about methemoglobinemia.

What role did isolation play in the blue people of Troublesome Creek?

Isolation in the rural Kentucky region contributed to the continuation of the genetic trait due to limited marriage opportunities outside the community.

Are there any cultural implications associated with the blue people of Troublesome Creek?

The blue people have become a part of local folklore and cultural identity, representing both the uniqueness and the challenges of genetic diversity.

What impact did media portrayals have on the perception of the blue people?

Media portrayals have often sensationalized their condition, leading to both increased interest in their story and perpetuation of stigmas related to their appearance.

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