

# “Notes on the Passage Across the Everglades”

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This anonymous author tells the story of the raid led by Colonel William S. Harney from Fort Dallas to the Mouth of the Miami River across the Everglades to Chakaika's Island. The raid and the killing of Chief Chakaika who had participated in a raid on Harney's post on the Caloosahatchee River on July 23, 1839, are well known. (See: *Tequesta*, Number Nine, 1949, Oliver Griswold, "William S. Harney: Indian Fighter," and *Tequesta*, Number XIII, William C. Sturtevant, "Chakaika and the Spanish Indians".) This day by day report of the expedition's activities adds only a few details to the known story of the encounter with Chakaika's band. But it is possibly the earliest account of a journey across the watery wilderness by a modern white man. The Indians had long been able to navigate the shallow winding channels with the shallow draft dugout canoes. Harney used canoes and Indian guides to follow the red man to his last hiding place. The island is located just south of the Tamiami Trail on the western edge of the Everglades near the Dade-Monroe County line. (EDITOR'S NOTE).

Colonel Harney, 2nd Dragoons, with Capt. Davidson, Lieuts. Rankin and Ord, 3rd Artillery, Dr. Russell, and myself, started from Fort Dallas with 90 men, and sixteen canoes. We left on the 4th of December, at night, and proceeded up the left prong of the Miami River. The night was very dark and rainy, and we met with considerable difficulty in ascending on account of the rapidity of the current and the shoal and rocky bed of the river. About a mile above the forks we came to a body of high saw grass, this continued for about a mile and a half, when we came in open view of the Everglades, and the grass became more scattered. The pine barren was kept close on our left, until we came to a small island on our left, when our course became more westerly; thus we continued until distant about eight miles from the mouth of the river, when Capt. Davidson becoming separated from us we halted to the leeward of an island which was entirely overflowed, and waited until he came up, where the night was passed in our open boats. It continued to rain nearly all night, and our situation was anything but comfortable.

Dec. 5 — By daylight this morning we were up and at it with our paddles; our course was generally West-South-West, but this we varied according to the direction of the channels, and our depth of water, till about 1 o'clock; the men being very much fatigued, having had to pull their boats through the mud and grass a greater part of the way, we insisted on

John, our guide, carrying us to some high land, where we might encamp and give the men a little rest. The officers had almost lost confidence in his knowledge of the country, as at one time he could not tell us in which direction the sun rose; and as we concluded not to follow him in the direction he was going any longer, he insisted that he was right, and that his object was to carry us where he could find the greatest depth of water, and that he could carry us a nearer way, but it was very shoal; which proved in the end to be correct, as he had not gone more than a few miles when it was with the greatest difficulty, we could move the boats. The Colonel called to him to stop, as he would go no further in that direction; but he insisted that the island was not more than a mile distant, and the Colonel suffered him to proceed. Sure enough, contrary to the expectations of us all, he in a short time halted at a low tuft of bushes, about half a mile in circumference, which seemed to us all to be entirely flooded with water, but after penetrating about 300 yards, we came to a magnificent little spot in its centre, about 150 yards in circumference, here we found an old Indian camp which evidently had been deserted for some months. It was encircled by a number of shrubs of the wild Pappaw; and two large and curious wild fig trees, about ten feet apart, decorated its centre. This is a remarkable tree; it first makes its appearance as the creeper, and seizes on the largest tree it can find, continuing to encircle it in its meshes until it deprives it of life, when it feeds upon the decayed matter and becomes a beautiful tree. These had each attacked a palmetto and one of them was dead, but the top of the other was still blooming in the centre, although completely surrounded. We hailed, with a great deal of pleasure, the touch of dry land, as we were wet to the skin; it having rained all day, and the wind blowing from the North. As soon as it became dark, we kindled a large fire-dried ourselves-got a good supper, eat it with a great deal of gussto-talked over what we had undergone, and what we intended to do-stretched ourselves on our blankets and slept soundly and sweetly, till daylight warned us to be up and a doing.

Dec. 6 — After getting some hot coffee, again started on our course. The day has cleared off beautifully, and we are moving slowly and silently along, in momentary expectation of falling in with some Indian canoes. John can see from the top of a tree the field from which he escaped, and we expect to have a devil of a fight when we get there. Nothing now presents itself to view except one boundless expanse of saw-grass and water, occasionally interspersed with little islands, all of which are overflowed, but the trees are in a green and flourishing state. No country that I have ever heard of bears any

resemblance to it; it seems like a vast sea, filled with grass and green trees, and expressly intended as a retreat for the rascally Indians, from which the white man would never seek to drive them. We have plenty of water at present, and go along with a great deal of ease. We reached the island, as expected at about 12 o'clock. When we came in sight, the Colonel took four canoes, with Lieut. Rankin, and went ahead, having first painted and dressed himself and men so much like Indians, that they could scarcely themselves detect the imposition. He directed Lieut. Ord to follow with the rest of the canoes, and Capt. Davidson, as he was unwell, to remain behind with the large boats. I was in the next canoe to Lieut. Ord, who, as he was turning to give some order to his men, lost his balance, and such a pretty summerset "I never did see;" he carried boat, provisions, ammunition, and guns all with him. When his head appeared on the surface of the water, he said to me, "go ahead with the boats;" I inserted my handkerchief in my mouth and evaporated. The order was to keep just in sight of the Colonel, and, in case he should not be able to manage the force on the island, to come to his assistance; but the delay threw me behind, and I soon lost sight of, and with the greatest difficulty found, the island. We had to wade through mud and water three or four hundred yards, up to our waists, before we gained dry land; here we found a corn field of about an acre, and the richest land I have ever seen, being one black heap of soil of endless depth. This island is called from the Indian name of the wild fig, "Ho-co-mo-thlocco." It being early we did not remain here long, but pushed on to another island, about seven miles distant, the usual stopping place of the Indian, when they visit Sam Jones, or go from his camp to the Spanish Indians; we arrived early in the evening; and had to wade 200 yard before we gained a footing; we found here signs of a few days old, where they had been cutting bushes. I ascended the top of a fig tree with John, and he pointed out to me our course, and the direction of the different islands. We could see, far to the South, the pine barren skirting the Everglades, and the tops of the grass and bushes burnt to make out the trail. The island, Ho-co-mo-thlocco, bears about East-South-East from this, and the island where we go to-morrow, about South-West and by South. This island is called "Efa-noc-co-chee," from a dog having died which was left here; it contains about half an acre of cleared land, but has never been cultivated, and is used alone as a camp ground.

7 Dec. — Off again; our course for a short distance was about north, then changed it to north west, and continued in this direction until we reached another Island, which is called Cochokeynchajo, from the name of an Indian

who cleared and cultivated it. It is distant from Efanoccochee about six miles, and its course is about north west. We found on this Island, the figure of an Indian drawn on a tree, and the figures S and 9. Which is the first indication of a white man's being among them. Being early when we arrived here, the Colonel, contrary to the opinion of the guide, determined not to remain here until night, but took Lieut. Ord ahead with him, and two canoes, to surprise the next Island. Following on with the rest of the boats, we had not gone more than a mile, when we lost the trail of their boats, and continued to wander to every point of the compass until late in the evening, when we made out to reach the Island from which we started about sun-set, and found John, who had returned for us. Considered ourselves very fortunate to reach this Island again, as we could not follow with any certainty our trails for one hundred yards. To the westward of this Island, the main body of water seems to change its course, and flow with some current to the Northwest, which induces us to think we were in the centre of the Everglades. It was late at night when we reached the Island, where Lieut. Ord had gone. But not withstanding the thousand channels which flowed and wound in every direction, and although it was so dark that we could not distinguish land from water, John never once missed the track. Found on this Island, which is called by its owner Intaska, a large hut built of cypress bark, and under it a bed made of boards, coming in play very timely and was quickly appropriated. It is the largest and richest Island we have yet seen, and the various vegetables growing on it, such as pumpkins, beans, corn, &c.; and deer tracks were very numerous. Its course from Cochokeynchajo, N.N.West.

8 Dec. — We shall remain on Intaska until 4 o'clock this evening, when we will proceed to another Island which bears north  $10^{\circ}$  West from this, where we expect to surprise some Indians, as we can now see a large smoke in that direction. When we visit this, our course will then change to the southward, and we will make for their strong holds on the sea board.

9th Dec. — Yesterday about 12 o'clock when some were asleep and all silent, awaiting the time of starting, the Colonel called out from the top of a tree, that two canoes were approaching the Island on the south side. In a moment, all were up with their guns in hand; the boats were silently approaching, and we being on the other side, Lieut. Rankin was immediately ordered to man four canoes, and move slowly along to meet them. The grass was so high that the Indians did not discover him until within a few hundred yards, when they immediately wheeled their canoes and made off with all their strength. But there was no eluding our snake-like boats, and our tried

soldiers. They made the boats fairly jump out of the water. When within short distance, and seeing the Indians approaching a deep body of saw grass, our soldiers commenced a running fire, and soon disabled one of the men and overhauled him. The boats halted at the saw grass and the Indians leaped out; but our men were as quick as they were, and pursued them through it for some distance to a pond, where they disabled another, and accidentally wounded a squaw, who was endeavoring to escape with her child on her back. In another direction, they overhauled a squaw with a girl about 12 years old, and two small children; making in all, eight persons. None of them were killed; and as soon as we could get them through the mud to the boats, we returned. Col. Harney was looking on at the race from the top of a tree, and made the Island ring with his cheering. As soon as Lieut. Rankin started, I got a canoe and followed on and joined in the pursuit, but did get up before they had got into the grass. When we returned to the Island, the Colonel ordered rope to be made ready, and swung the two warriors to the top of a tall tree, where they now hang, "darkly painted on the crimson sky." The Indians report that Chakika is on an Island five miles from this with a strong force, and we will start about dark to attack him. Captain Davidson has been sick ever since we started, and he is now so ill that it is feared we will have to return on his account.

10th Dec. — The squaw is dead: she died about 12 o'clock, and we buried her on the Island. Shortly after, the other squaw reported that another party was coming on the same tract that they came. The Colonel sent out Lieuts. Rankin and Ord, (I accompanying,) to intercept them, but after waiting until nearly sun-set, we had to return without meeting any of them. As soon as the sun went down, the camp was broken up, and we were again on the water. The night was very dark and rainy, and the guide could, with the greatest difficulty, keep in the trail. When we were within a few miles of the Island, the Colonel sent Lieuts. Rankin and Ord ahead to surprise the Island. They did not reach it until some time after sun-rise; but such was the confidence of the Indians in their own security, that our party were not discovered until they had crept up into their camp, and commenced firing. One warrior was shot dead, and two warriors, one boy, and five squaws and children taken prisoners. Chakika, who was chopping wood, threw down his axe and ran off howling; but his hour had come; notwithstanding his herculean strength, he could not escape. Hall, one of the Dragoons, pursued him alone when all the men were exhausted, fired and killed him, took his scalp, and returned. Two warriors escaped, and Lieut. Ord discovering their trail, pursued them

to another Island, about four miles distant, where there were a number of squaws and three or four warriors. On his approach, the Indians hoisted a white flag, and called to John to come up and talk; but while he was approaching with Lieut. Ord, he was shot through the thigh, and at the same time one of the Dragoons, (Allen) was dangerously wounded in the thigh, and Turner in the leg. A great number of balls were fired at Lieut. Ord, but none struck him, In approaching, the men had to wade about two miles in water and mud up to their hips; and when they came up, were so much exhausted and the guns nearly all wet, that they had to retire under the cover of a small scrub, about four hundred yards distant. When Col. Harney heard the firing, he sent Lieut. Rankin and myself with two canoes, to his assistance, and when we had got in about a mile of Lieut. Ord, we met John all bloody, who reported that one man was killed, and that they were firing rapidly, and that we could not approach with our canoes. We immediately jumped out and hastened forward as rapid as we could through the deep mud and water. When we got up. Lieut. Rankin attempted to charge with his men, but three of them were wounded at the first fire, and he was forced to retire and await the arrival of Col. Harney. The balls flew thick around our heads, and the Indians behaved with a great deal of coolness. Their object of firing was to give the squaws time to escape. When Colonel Harney came up, we charged the Island, but they had all escaped from the back part, and taken off most of their plunder. The circumstance was very unfortunate to the expedition, as the Indians who escaped communicated the intelligence to the other Islands, and put them on their guard. Shortly after our return to Chakika's Island, a canoe was seen approaching with two Indians in it. The Colonel immediatley despatched Lieut. Rankin with two canoes, to pursue them; but, before he got up they had got up. They had approached and taken an Indian or Spaniard, who was concealed in the high grass and hastened off. — Lieut. Rankin pursued them closely for about three miles, and gained on them so closely that a rifle was fired by the Indians, and the ball passed very near Lieut. R. Unfortunately the boat disappeared, and the guns all got wet, and the pursuit was discontinued. We are now laying here to give the men some rest, as they have almost all given out, having been in hot pursuit for several days. Col. Harney went out about half and hour ago after Chakika's body, and discovering a sail approaching, he hid his canoes in the grass until they came up, and captured one warrior and six squaws and children — which makes our whole number of killed and captured, twenty-five. We have now crossed the long fabled and unknown Everglades, at least as far as we can go in boats in this direction. A large cypress swamp

extends for many miles along the border, running north-east and south-west the great resort for the Indians, where they build their canoes. This evening, the Colonel had our two prisoners exalted to the top of one of the lookout trees, with the body of Chakika by their side. We found in Chakika's camp a large quantity of plunder, consisting of cloths, linnens, calicoes, ready made clothing, all kinds of tools, powder, &c. &c.; and had an auction of them which amounted to upwards of \$200. The articles were stolen from Indian Key at the time of the massacre. We also got a fine barge, and a great quantity of coonti.

11th Dec. — Our tent or shed was pitched last night within a short distance of the tree on which Chakika was suspended. The night was beautiful, and the bright rising moon displayed to my view as I lay on my bed, the gigantic proportions of this once great and much dreaded warrior. He is said to have been the largest Indian in Florida, and the sound of his very name to have been a terror to his Tribe. We have among the captives, his mother, sister, and wife. Left Chakika's Island about 10 o'clock this morning and are now returning as far as Intaska, in a south-easterly direction, when we will change our course to the south-west and make for the sea.

12th Dec. — we continued our course to the South-East until we passed Intaska, when we changed direction one point to the West of South, and encamped, at sunset, on an island of about three acres in extent. Met with nothing here except an innumerable host of mosquitoes. The sister of Chakika informed us that there were three Spaniards in the Everglades, Who supplied the Indians with salt and ammunition; one of them, Domingo, advised them to attack Indian Key, and insured their success. Started about 11 o'clock this morning in a South-West direction, and had not gone more than five miles when we approached a small island, on which we had no idea that there were Indians, but on coming up we found a large yawl boat, killed two Indian men, and took one squaw and seven children prisoner. Lieutenants Rankin and Ord hurried on to an island about two miles distant, where they found a great number of palmetto huts, very well thatched, and a number of plantins and banana trees, but the Indians had gone some time before. The squaw could talk English very well, and informed us that 4 women had gone to an island, a short distance off, to dig potatoes, and the Colonel sent a Serjeant with a few men after them, but could not find them. We remained until 4 o'clock in the evening, when we saw a boy approaching, who had been fishing; the boats laid in the grass until he came near, when they came out took him without any resistance. Left a Sergeant, with two boats, at this island,

to wait until the women came up, and we are now on our way to the next island, which is four or five miles distant. The island has turned out to be the town Lieut. Rankin visited this morning, and not more than two miles distant.

13th Dec. — The morning has come, and the Sergeant returned without finding the squaw. The Colonel sent Lts. Rankin and Ord ahead, this morning, to an island which is almost in our course, and we are now following in a Southerly direction. The day is rainy and disagreeable. We arrived in the evening at another, where we encamped; and also passed one on our way.

14th Dec. — We have started again on our journey, and expect to reach the head of Shark River to-day; and to-morrow get a sight of the big water, Thank God, we won't have to wade to another island, although there are several in our way. The Indians may assault and give us a crack before we get out, which would annoy us very much in our present incumbered state. This is the prettiest day we have had since starting. I forgot to notice the death of poor Allen, who was wounded, he died on the evening of the 11th, and, on the morning of the 12th, was buried on Chakika's island, with the honors of war. He is the only one of our party we have left in the glades as yet.

15th Dec. — We reached the head of the river which the Indians call Poncha about 4 o'clock yesterday evening, and hailed it with three cheers. We have now accomplished what has never been done by white man. The head of the river was at first choked up with cane and weeds, but we had not gone more than a mile when it opened out most beautifully into a broad and navigable river. Continued down it till late at night, but the guide losing his way, we encamped in our boats and waited till morning, when we went ashore on a high bluff, and got out breakfast. We shall reach the sea by 12. We have been twelve days and twelve nights crossing, Reached the mouth of the river about half after twelve. Its course was about West, and empties into the sea by two or three mouths. The bars are very shallow, and not navigable for steamboats. This is the only outlet of the water of the Everglades on this side of the Peninsula. We did not remain long at the mouth, but rigged our sails and went on about sixteen miles and encamped on a point of the beach; here we caught a number of opossums, which seemed to be the only inhabitant. The sun set on the sea most beautifully, and threw its variegated rays over the dense forest of mangrove, which bounds the whole coast.



16th Dec. — We remained here until about 12 o'clock today and I amused myself collecting the beautiful shells which cover the beach. We reached Cape Sable, the most Southern point of the Territory about 5 o'clock, and the men are busied in building fires and forming the camp.

17th Dec. — Here at Cape Sable, is the site of Old Fort Poinsett, established by Surgeon Genl. Lawson. The breast works are made of sand. The prospect is very pretty, as you can see a number of Keys to the Southward. Chakika's wife informs me that this used to be the great resort of the Indians when on their fishing and turtle excursions, as well as among the neighboring Keys. We have been laying here all day in the sand; the day has been very warm.

18th Dec. — Lieuts. Ord and Rankin went to an island yesterday, about seven miles distant, and they have not yet returned. The officers have returned, and we left the Cape this evening (18th) and travelled on until late, when we anchored under the lee of some nameless Key, and fastened onto an old turtle crawl. We spent here the most disagreeable night we have had since starting; having to sleep in the open boats, piled up with squaws and children, and the wind blowing very cold from the north-west. However we weathered it out, and started very early on the 19th, and at night encamped on Matacumbra in sight of Indian Key, where we are now encamped. On starting from the camp, Lieuts. Rankin and Ord were sent ahead with the small canoes on a nearer tract. We hear they have reached Indian Key, as the Colonel sent a boat there last night. He has now gone up himself to charter a vessel, or make some other arrangement for our conveyance to Key Biscayne. — The labors of our expedition, I think, are over, and we will soon have accomplished the most arduous, dangerous, and successful expedition that has ever been undertaken in Florida. Every thing seemed to operated favorably towards us. We invariably had a dark night to aid us. whenever we intended to surprise an Indian camp.

20th Dec. — We are now on board the sloop Reform, on our way to Key Biscayne. Well, we are once more safe at our post.