Federal And State Relations With The Florida Seminoles 1875-1901

By James W. Covington*

This account concerns the Seminole Indians of Florida who fought the United States Army and Florida militia to a virtual standstill during the Third Seminole War (1855-1858) and, after part of the tribe had agreed to the favorable terms which were offered and migrated to Oklahoma, the remaining Indians were allowed to stay in Florida. The terms of a very favorable treaty plus the payment of considerable sums of money had induced the band led by Billy Bowlegs to surrender but efforts to contact the other bands were of no avail. Finally, the Federal authorities decided to ignore the Indians, allowing them to stay in Florida without the benefit of a treaty which would safeguard a reservation area. The granting of asylum for the Seminoles in Southern Florida was not an extremely generous offer on the part of the White authorities, but it was just too much an effort to capture all of the more or less one hundred Seminoles roaming throughout the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp. The presence of the few Seminoles in Southern Florida did not disturb the settlers for they believed the unexplored Everglades to be fit only for alligators, reptiles and the Indians.1 When railroads were extended near the area and some of the land was drained, the value of the land increased and real estate speculators and railroad companies began to purchase or claim much of the area. Such actions posed a threat to the Indians for they did not have any land they could call legally their own.

At the close of the Third Seminole War (1855-1858) the Seminoles had been so scattered throughout Southern Florida that it took some time for the bands to regroup and establish themselves within definite territorial bounds. The band led by Chipco did a considerable amount of moving about the Florida wilderness during this period. Chipco's band lived in the cypress swamps north and east of Lake Okeechobee until 1866 when it moved to the Kissimmee River Valley. The band moved again in 1872-1873 to Catfish Lake (Lake Pierce) located northeast of Lake Wales in Polk County, but migrated from there in 1885 to Lake Rosalie.²

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1Fort Myers Weekly Press, September 25, 1890.

2See article by Albert DeVane in "Pioneer Florida," Tampa Tribune, July 15, 1956, and Tampa Tribune, April 2, 1950. Chipco died in 1884, but his nephew Tallahassee had assumed his place as leader in 1877-1880 period.

During the post-war period of consolidation and migration some contacts were made with the neighboring settlements of Kissimmee, Bartow, Fort Ogden, Fort Meade, Tampa and Fort Myers to trade and to sell skins and feathers.3 One example of such traffic took place in 1889 when three male Seminoles carried a load of alligator skins by canoe from the shores of Lake Okeechobee along the Caloosahatchee River to Fort Myers where Charley Tommy sold 84 skins, Billy Motley 75 skins and Tommy 88 skins at Blount and Company.4

In 1879 Lieutenant Robert H. Pratt was requested by the Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs to make an investigation concerning the state of the Seminole Indians in Florida and to see if they could be persuaded to move to Oklahoma.⁵ During June and July, 1879, Pratt visited Fort Meade, Chipco's village and Fort Myers but, with the exception of Chipco and his people, was unable to make satisfactory contacts with the other Indians. A break-down of the several bands included the following estimated figures:

Chipco (near Fort Clinch)	26
Tustenuggee (near Fort Center)	90
Old Tiger Tail (near Fort Shackleford)	80
Young Tiger Tail (near Miami)	20
Possible oversight	20
	2926

Pratt believed that removal to Oklahoma would be best for the Indians but since they could not be induced to make such a move, it would be best to establish a boarding school for the Seminoles and to encourage them to follow agricultural and stock raising pursuits.7

Pratt has been called the "Moses of Indian education" for it was he who realized that there was a great desire on the part of young Indians to adjust to the White man's way of life. From 1875-1879 seventy-two Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche and Caddo warriors were placed in captivity at Fort Marion, Saint Augustine, Florida. The man who was in charge of the prisoners lodged in the old Spanish fort was Lieutenant Pratt who hoped to transform the savage warriors into young men who

³Mr. D. B. McKay, the pioneer historian, mayor and newspaper editor, recalled the visits of Tallahassee to Tampa.

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4Fort Myers Weekly Press, November 14, 1889.

5Commissioner E. J. Brooks to Pratt, June 9, 1879, in William C. Sturtevant presented and annotated, "R. H. Pratt's Report on the Seminole in 1879," Florida Anthropologist IX (March, 1956), 3-4.

6Ibid., 13.

7Ibid., 14.

could enter the White man's world. In line with his philosophy, teachers were hired to teach English and the prisoners were encouraged to develop any usable skills.8 Within a short time some substantial progress had been achieved — so much that Pratt was encouraged to establish at a later date Carlisle Institute — a boarding school for Indians located in Pennsylvania.

The transformation of the Western tribesmen from nomadic savages to civilized persons caused some Florida people who had contact with the Saint Augustine experiment or who were interested in Indian education to think that the Seminoles might benefit from such an experience. L. B. Darrell who operated the Cookman Institute at Jacksonville suggested to the Indian Bureau that some Seminoles could engage in learning mechanical arts or agriculture at his institution.9 The suggestion received serious consideration at Washington until it was ascertained that the Eastern Seminoles had no rights as specified in treaties and, in addition, Cookman Institute was neither an agriculture nor industrial school.10 Henry Caruthers. M.D., had observed the work of Pratt at Saint Augustine and had been so impressed that one Kiowa was invited to stay at his home and he followed the progress of the young man with great interest when he returned to Oklahoma. Mrs. Caruthers had taught a class for two years at the fort and was certain that such a school would be very beneficial to the Seminoles.11 When nothing tangible developed from his letter, Caruthers offered to take ten or twelve Seminoles to his summer home on the Hudson River at no expense to the Government and educate them. Once again no action at all was taken regarding Caruther's suggestion.¹²

In order to base a Federal decision concerning the Seminoles upon reliable evidence, Clay MacCauley was requested to visit Florida in 1881 and as a result was able to determine enough facts to write what could become a classic account of Seminole life. MacCauley ascertained that the Florida Seminoles were composed of thirty-seven extended families living in twenty-two camps grouped roughly in five distinct areas - The Big Cypress Swamp, Miami River, Fish-eating Creek, Cow Creek and Catfish Lake.¹³ He discovered, as so many Federal investigators were to do, that the Indians did not want to leave Florida or have anything to do with the

 ⁸E. Adamson Hoebel and Karen Daniels Petersen, commentary A Cheyenne Sketchbook by Cohoe (Norman, 1964), 7.
 9L. D. Darrell to Commissioner Hiram Price, September 16, 1882, 16908-82, Letters Received, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C., hereafter cited as BIA.
 10Secretary of Interior Teller to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, September 16, 1882, 16908-82 BIA.

¹⁶⁹⁰⁸⁻⁸² BIA.

11Caruthers to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, October 24, 1882, 6764-82 BIA.

12Caruthers to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, March 10, 1883, 5011-83 BIA.

13Clay MacCauley "The Seminole Indians of Florida," Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology (Washington, 1887), 447-78. MacCauley's figures are considered more reliable than those estimated by Pratt.

White man. As a consequence of MacCauley's report, any talk of moving the Seminoles to Oklahoma was forgotten and Congress began appropriating the annual sum of \$6,000 to purchase homestead tracts of land for the Indians.¹⁴

In December, 1884, Special Agent Cyrus Beede was ordered by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to determine the number of Seminoles who would be willing to take a homestead tract and become "farmers." Beede was able to interview a few of the Indians representing Seminoles living at Big Cypress, the Miami River and Lake Rosalie, but found a great reluctance on their part to have anything at all to do with the White man. 15 In addition, he discovered that it was difficult to secure suitable vacant land for the agents of the State of Florida were continually making selections under provisions of the Swamp and Overflowed Land Act. 16 Tallahassee, who had succeeded Chipco as leader of one band, had consented to take homestead land and three Seminoles went with Beede to file a claim for land. When Beede was able to reach a telegraph office he found that the desired land had been taken by other parties. Beede recommended to the Commissioner that the United States Government purchase for Tallahassee and his band of twenty persons the land on which they had resided for some time.

At this time the majority of the Seminoles were certainly not interested in settling on a homestead and becoming farmers in an unproductive area which needed drainage, considerable fertilization, and excellent know how of Florida agriculture. One visitor to a village near the Caloosahatchee River described what he saw:

"The form of this camp was in a semi-circle fronting on a "slue" as they call it, (we could call it a canal). This camp consisted of three huts, built square and roofed in with palmetto fans, four upright pineposts, planked in roughly—and the home was complete. The other two shanties were simply covered with canvas stretched over four straight oak poles.

When we arrived they were fixing their camp. One swarthy looking Indian was busily engaged cutting a young pine in the requisite size for a tent pole, another was digging the hole for the post with a large butcher knife . . . all the women go bare-headed and bare-footed and wear their hair down their backs. Usually it grows thick and silky and long. They raise magnificent hogs and their flesh is rich and good. Their houses are about ten feet long by eight wide and have a platform running the length and breadth, about three feet from the

16Ibid.

 ¹⁴Alfred Jackson Hanna and Kathryn Abbey Hanna, Lake Okeechobee: Wellspring of the Everglades (Indianapolis, 1948), 332; 23 United States Statutes at Large, 95.
 15Beede to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, April 6, 1885, 7652-85 BIA.

ground, where the families eat, sleep and live . . . they live chiefly by hunting and fishing both of which they excell in. The chief trade with them is in March and April when the plume birds are in fine condition. They travel from place to place in canoes about fifteen feet long and three feet deep and one foot wide, made of solid tree and propelled by paddles.

The staple food of the Indians is corn but they eat homing and pork to a large extent as well as turkey and venison. Sugar cane is consumed by them very largely in the camp and it is rarely that you see the squaws without a piece between their teeth."¹⁷

The plume or feather trade was proving to be most profitable to the Seminoles. In fashion with the times, women's hats decorated with the white plumes or feathers of the American egret and snowy egret became very popular throughout the United States and the egret rookeries in Florida were a major source of supply. 18 With the settlement of areas to the north, the Seminoles were pushed away from the Atlantic coast and Polk County into more undesirable tracts further south or to the west. Accordingly, their visits to Tampa and Bartow became less frequent and enterprising businessmen established posts in the south where transactions could be made. Such outposts included the store of George W. Storter, at Everglades, Ted Smallwood's store at Chokoloskee, Bill Brown's store at present day Immokalee and later at Boat Landing, Frank Stranahan at Fort Lauderdale and the Girtman Brothers and William Brickell at Miami. In addition to the plumes which sold for thirty-five cents and the alligator skins which sold for fifty cents, the Seminoles traded sweet potatoes, melons, chicken, deer hams, bananas and starch made from the koonti root 19

The traders had developed a system which worked out very well to the benefit of both themselves and the Indians. A sum from ten to twenty-five dollars was advanced to each Indian so that he could purchase enough supplies for a hunt. When he returned from the field, he was paid in cash for the hides he had obtained and the Seminole hunter settled all or part of the amount of money which was owed. The Indians knew the price of hides and when they felt they were being taken advantage of, they went to another store. They refused to accept shoddy merchandise and, as a result, the Seminoles purchased only the best products which were available. When hunting was poor, some traders advanced credit from \$350 to \$800 to each Indian with his personal honor as security. Should an

¹⁷Fort Myers Press, March 31, 1889.

¹⁸ Marjory Stoneman Douglas, The Everglades: River of Grass (New York, 1947), 278. 19 Ibid., 267-277.

Indian who had substantial debts die, the trader marked the account closed and made no effort to collect the money from his family.²⁰

The visits to the towns and trading posts were not entirely beneficial to the Seminoles. Often they obtained a sufficient supply of liquor to keep them entirely drunk for some time and when they recovered, they worked hard to get enough money for another visit and period of alcoholic dissipation. Of course, in accordance with their usual custom, one Seminole stayed sober in order to protect the others. M. C. Osborn, a White who owned a plantation at Kissimmee, was concerned about the liquor problem and together with Chief Tallahassee was able to stop the sale of liquor to Indians at Kissimmee. Consequently the Indians from this band by-passed Kissimmee and traded at Bartow and Titusville where they were able to obtain all of the liquor that they desired.²¹

In January, 1887, Mrs. Lily Pierpont of Winter Haven wrote to the wife of President Grover Cleveland telling about the problems of the Seminoles and, in consequence, she was appointed to a position which might be called "Honorary Seminole Agent." In her letter to Mrs. Cleveland, Mrs. Pierpont told about the visits of the Seminoles to Winter Haven and a consequence of the settlement of the country would be the driving of the Indians into the Atlantic Ocean or Gulf of Mexico.²² She related the account of how a band of desperadoes was killing hogs and cattle belonging to the Indians, but instead of resorting to warfare the Indians protested these acts to the Mayor of Titusville. Mrs. Pierpont served for one year, but little has been known concerning any lasting contributions or whether she received any Federal funds at all.²³

Although since 1884 the United States Government had appropriated the annual sum of \$6,000 for the purpose of placing the Seminoles on homestead tracts, little interest was expressed either by Federal representatives or the Seminoles in making use of that money and it reverted to the Treasury. In 1887, E. M. Wilson, Special Agent appointed by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs made two trips to Florida to determine the readiness of the Seminoles to accept a homestead arrangement. Although Wilson made a great effort to meet the leading Florida Indians in his May and October visits, he encountered a great reluctance on the part of the Indians to have anything to do with the White man. Wilson concluded his report with the following observations:

²⁰Lorenzo D. Creel, Special Agent to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, March 20, 1911, 24816-1911 BIA.

²¹M. C. Osborn to Daniel La Mont, December 24, 1886, BIA. 22Lily Pierpont to Mrs. Grover Cleveland, January 1, 1887, 1858-87, BIA.

²³ Hanna, Lake Okeechobee, 332.

This was the most tedious, laborous and disagreeable trip that has ever been my lot to make and I fear has not been very fruitful of results. I talked with many Indians upon the subject of homesteads; most of whom expressed a willingness to locate provided always that other and older ones would do so themselves . . . I met two Miami Indians who stated that if their people would secure the lands upon which they live, they thought then there would be no trouble about locating them. And I think according to the maps, their lands are embraced in an unsurveyed territory in which case I presume there would be no trouble because of the present proprietorship of the land.24

In 1891, the Missionary Committee of the Women's National Indian Association under the leadership of Mrs. Amelia S. Quinton from Philadelphia, Penn., purchased four hundred acres located some forty-five miles southeast of Fort Myers for two thousand dollars with the objective of dividing the land into small tracts: each with a home for one Indian family. In March of 1891 Mrs. Quinton and two other women accompanied by Francis A. Hendry visited one Indian village and several prospective sites for the enterprise and selected one which was part of the William Allen settlement.25 The Women's National Indian Association, composed mostly of Eastern women, had the policy of erecting chapels and missionary stations at the various reservation areas and presenting the going establishments to one of the several denominations that carried on missionary work among the Indians. The United States Government purchased eighty acres of the tract and assigned Special Agent Chapin to a project which involved the erection of necessary office and storage buildings, a school building and living quarters. Although the site was situated twenty-five miles from the nearest Indian camp and most supplies had to be hauled forty-five miles from Fort Myers, the general location seemed to be suitable for the purpose.

During May of 1891 Doctor Jacob E. Brecht of Saint Louis, Missouri, was appointed Seminole Agent by the Women's National Indian Association (WNIA) and he entered into a situation where conditions were indeed most primitive and the Indians were friendly but untrusting. A rough two room pine log house was erected to house the Women's National Indian Association workers and Doctor Brecht and his wife, but life in it was described as being "in greatest discomfort."26 Six men were hired to erect fences and buildings and to do farming which would

²⁴Wilson to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, November 3, 1887, 30447-87 BIA.

²⁵ Annual Report of Women's National Indian Association, 1891, 15. Although the Women's National Indian Association had auxiliaries scattered throughout the Eastern part of the United States, the Winter Park, Florida, Kentucky and Philadelphia auxiliaries made special contributions to the Seminole mission.

²⁶Mrs. Quinton to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, March 21, 1892, 10792-92 BIA.

hopefully provide vegetables for the group but disaster struck when the sawmill caught fire and suffered a complete loss. After this disaster, the following buildings were erected: sawmill, granary, stable and living quarters. In addition, enough lumber was cut to provide for a school building and fencing about the place was provided. In the initial stage of contacts with the Seminoles the missionaries found the Indians to be very reluctant to hold any meetings with the Whites. The Seminoles would not accept gifts of nails or shingles made at the sawmill or accept a fee for hauling sawed wood to settlers. Although Mrs. Brecht opened a school for the Indian children, the only ones who attended classes were the children of nearby settlers.²⁷ After the departure of the Special Agent, Brecht left the employ of the missionary group and became Industrial Teacher for the Office of Indian Affairs.²⁸

Brecht realized that in order to win friends among the Seminoles he had to provide some services which would be available at the agency. Accordingly, a store was established in which groceries deemed useful for the Indian diet were sold to the Indians at cost and dressed deer skins were accepted as payment for the supplies. Some Whites, resentful of Brecht's attempts to reduce the traffic in rum, spread stories that he was encouraging the Indians to kill deer. Still, Brecht's efforts to attract Seminoles to the agency bore fruit, for by Christmas Day, 1894, a large number of Indians came there to hear the agent tell about the origin and meaning of Christmas and to receive presents consisting of combs, mirrors, soap, knives, saws and assorted items of wearing apparel.²⁹

In 1894, a joint program for the education and conversion of the Seminoles had been negotiated between the WNIA and the Episcopal church. In the partnership the WNIA representatives would teach the Indian women the elements of sewing and the Episcopal Church missionaries would convert the Seminoles to the Christian way of life.³⁰ Within a short time the Women's National Indian Association decided to withdraw from the Florida program and give the property and project to the Missionary Jurisdiction of Southern Florida Episcopal Church.³¹ Upon accepting the three hundred and twenty acres and one frame building, Bishop William C. Gray named the place Immokalee (his home).³² Christ Church was

²⁷Charlton W. Tebeau, Florida's Last Frontier: The History of Collier County (Coral Gables, 1957), 197.

²⁸John E. Brecht, "Report," Sixty-Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to Secretary of Interior (Washington, 1893), 356.

²⁹Fort Myers Press, January 17, 1896.

³⁰Brecht, "Report" in Sixty-Third Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to Secretary of the Interior, (Washington, 1894), 378.

³¹ Annual Report of Women's National Indian Association, 1896, 32.

³²Tebeau, Florida's Last Frontier, 72.

opened for services in July, 1896, at Immokalee, but it was a failure as a mission, for few of the Indians attended the services held there.

Industrial teacher Brecht experienced similar difficulties in attracting the Indians to his agency. The children would not attend his school and without gifts being attached, the adults would not make use of any agency services. Finally Brecht was forced to visit the Indians in their camp. He found that the death rate due to the "eating of trash and exposure to the elements" was the greatest among children below the age of six, but once past that age the Seminole had a good chance of living until seventy years of age.³³ Liquor traders did their best to discourage the visits of Brecht to the Indian camps by telling the Seminoles that the steam engine of the saw mill would be used as a signal to call the soldiers to capture the Indians. By 1896, Brecht was making some limited progress by employing Indians to work in the sawmill and plant pineapples. During the visits of the Seminoles to the Federal outpost, Mrs. Brecht attempted to instruct them in the art of reading and writing English.³⁴

Although the efforts of Brecht and the Women's National Indian Association were doomed to failure, the foundation for successful religious and governmental activities at a later date was laid at this time. In January, 1894. Congress authorized that one half of the annual six thousand dollars appropriations should be spent for the purchase of land for the Seminole homesteads. Although due to the reduced funds Brecht was forced to release several employees, he was in favor of the measure. He realized that much of the Everglades had been purchased by the land companies or acquired by the railroads and a stream of settlers was moving southward along either coast to seize quickly any overlooked land. Unless some lands were reserved for the Seminoles, they were in danger of being driven from their homes in Florida. In fact, settlers were already moving on the camp and cultivated grounds of the Indians and warning them not to return to the area. Accordingly, much of Brecht's efforts were shifted to the purchase of land for the Indians. In selecting the land Brecht chose tracts which were occupied by the Indians at the time or for which they had expressed a preference. As a beginning he purchased 644 acres from Hamilton Disston for \$418; 1920 acres from Frank Brown for \$1,344; 640 acres from Brown for \$448 and in the following years other tracts were purchased from the Florida Southern Railroad and the Plant Investment Company at prices which averaged less than a dollar an acre.

³³Brecht, "Report" in Sixty-Fourth Annual Report of the Commission of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior (Washington, 1895) 369.

³⁴Brecht, "Report" in Sixty-Fifth Annual Report of the Commission of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior (Washington, 1896), 66.

By 1909, land purchased by Brecht and others at a cost of \$15,265.75 amounted to 23,040 acres which was situated about seventy-five miles to the south and east of Fort Myers and extending to the Everglades. This land would be developed later into the Big Cypress Indian Reservation.

For eight and one half years Brecht served the Seminoles as well as he could, but on January 1, 1898, he resigned his position, moved to Fort Myers and the outpost was closed. The physician claimed that he could have made four times as much in another position but he wanted to help the Indians. The saw mill was sold to Wilt Tolles and he transferred the equipment to another site where it became a profitable venture. By 1900 all of the improvements had been sold and moved elsewhere and the eighty acres owned by the Federal Government was sold in 1904.

At the same time that White friends of the Seminoles were obtaining some future gains for the Indians by putting pressure on the national administration, some Florida citizens realized certain gains which proved to be rather delusive. The Florida legislature on June 8, 1891, authorized the trustees of the Board of Internal Improvements to set aside a tract of land no larger than five thousand acres for the use of the Seminoles.³⁵ Trustees for the proposed State Indian Reservation included the following appointments: James E. Ingraham, Francis A. Hendry and Garibaldi Niles. They were ready to make a selection of the site, but since no money had been appropriated and the need for a reservation for the widely scattered Indians was not apparent, no action was taken.³⁶

In 1898, an organization known as "The Friends of the Seminole Indians" was organized at Kissimmee and commenced some measures to assist the Indians. A tract of eighty acres was purchased for forty dollars for use of the Cow Creek band in Saint Lucie County, but the Indians would not use the site. When they tried to purchase the actual camping sites of the Indians, the organization found the price asked by land companies to be prohibitive. Acting under pressure from the Friends of the Seminoles, the Florida legislature on May 29, 1899, set aside a large tract of land for the use of the Indians, but since practically all of the land had already been deeded to corporations and individual citizens, the action was fruitless. Feveral days later, on June 1, 1899, the state appropriated \$500 to establish an industrial school for the Seminoles at Cow

³⁵Acts and Resolutions adopted by Legislature of Florida at its Third Regular Session under Constitution AD 1885 (Tallahassee, 1891), 216.

³⁶Report of James A. Ingraham, Chairman, to Governor W. O. Bloxham as copied in letter of Special Agent Lorenzo Creel to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, March 29, 1911, 27957-1911 BIA.

³⁷C. F. Nesler, U.S. Indian Inspector, to Ethan A. Hitchcock, Secretary of the Interior, February 23, 1904. With File 176F2-1909 BIA.

Creek in Brevard County, but since only a total sum of \$1,000 was appropriated, the school never progressed beyond the planning stage.³⁸ The passage of these two measures was intended to satisfy persons interested in the Seminoles that the State of Florida was doing something for the Indians, but such measures really were of no benefit to the Indians. In a third action the Friends of the Seminoles assisted Tom Tiger in his attempt to get his horse back from a White trader but when the evidence was destroyed, Tiger lost his chance to get his horse.³⁹

Over a short span of years the combined effort of the private and governmental agencies to aid the Seminoles was doomed to failure, for the Indians did not want to learn English, practice the Christian faith or farm extensively when they were free to roam throughout Southern Florida. It would be only when the land developers had taken over most of the available land and the drainage experts had changed the water levels that the Seminoles would realize that changes were necessary in their way of life. This moment of truth could not take place during the Nineteenth Century.

³⁸Acts and Resolutions Adopted by the Legislature of Florida at its Seventh Regular Session under Constitution A.D. 1885 (Tallahassee, 1899), 148.

³⁹ Minnie Moore Wilson, The Seminoles of Florida (New York, 1910), 148.