

## The “Friends of the Florida Seminoles” Society: 1899-1926

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In the decades immediately following the Third Seminole War (1855-58) those Indians who remained in Florida were able to develop their culture in relative isolation from encroaching white settlement. Although from time to time there was agitation for their removal from the state, federal authorities displayed limited interest in the Seminole until the late 1870's.<sup>1</sup> The report of Lt. Richard H. Pratt, an Army officer who visited among the Seminole in 1879, convinced the national government that the Indians could be removed only at the risk of intervening with troops and rekindling the old bitterness of the Seminole Wars; the probable costs in lives and adverse publicity were deemed too high a price to pay for moving a handful of Indians, so the Seminole were left in peace—for a time. The decision of the government not to tamper with the Seminole allayed the threat of removal to the Indian Territory, but left them vulnerable to the vicissitudes of local justice as an increasing number of settlers poured into south Florida. Throughout the 1870's and 80's various incidents involving apparent mistreatment of Indians came to light, and there were calls for protection of the native population.

Much of the conflict between the Seminole and settlers grew out of disputes over livestock on the open range. The Pratt Report of 1879 mentioned the complaints of cattlemen that the Seminole annually killed beef worth \$1,500.00 to \$2,000.00, but he also noted that “like offenses are committed against Indians. Within a few months a man named Lightsey was charged by an Indian with having stolen sixteen of his hogs. The Indian brought the men who helped cut them up, as proof. At the time of my visit public opinion was so strong against Lightsey that he was expected to pay for the hogs. Another notable case was when an Indian named Streety Parker had bought from a white man named Collier fifty cattle which proved to be stolen. Parker had to give them up, and Collier was tried before the courts but escaped punishment. No restitution was made and the friends of the Indians wrote to the Governor of the State

who replied that an Act of the legislature was the only remedy, and there and there the case rests, with the Indians still indignant.”<sup>2</sup> In her account of life along the Indian River in the last century, Emily Lagow Bell recounted that her husband and his family had to resolve a case of cattle rustling where Indians were the aggrieved party.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, by 1888 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, acting on a report from his agent in the field, reported to Congress on the necessity of acquiring land for the Seminole because “...the increasing white settlements in Southern Florida are fast driving these people from their accustomed haunts and depriving them of their means of support. It is charged that they kill cattle belonging to the large herds in that section of the state, to the value of some \$2,000 or \$3,000 annually. In view of these facts, trouble between them and the whites is likely to occur at any time.”<sup>4</sup> However, not all white settlers were anti-Seminole, and many individuals interceded in their behalf with state and federal officials. Miss Lilly Pierpont of Winter Haven, a staunch supporter of the Seminole who later was to become the first woman Indian Agent in Florida, wrote directly to President Grover Cleveland’s wife protesting that “they are at present inclined to be friendly, though they are often imposed upon by white settlers. A short time ago a party of white men made a raid upon the property of some Indians stationed near Titusville and destroyed their hogs. The Indians, instead of fighting, appealed to the Mayor of Titusville, D.L. Gaulden, for Government protection; I have not heard if they received it.”<sup>5</sup> Miss Pierpont and others who were appointed to locate lands for the Seminole had little success in the face of local conditions and Indian reluctance to deal with anyone, even their friends, who represented the national government. Nevertheless, the time was coming when a permanent agency would have to be established in Florida to protect Indian rights and secure land for their use.

In 1891 the Women’s National Indian Association of Philadelphia purchased 400 acres of land and established a mission at Immokalee in what is now Collier County. The following year the U.S. Government opened a station on 80 adjacent acres, with a sawmill, store, school, and medical service available for the Seminole. A short time later the WNIA mission was taken over by the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the medical missionary Dr. J.E. Brecht ultimately became the government Indian Agent. Although the conscientious Agent Brecht made good progress in purchasing lands for the Indians, having acquired some 10,000 acres by 1899, he had no authorization to provide legal protection for the Seminole who consistently refused to move on to federal land and settle there permanently. The Indians were a semi-nomadic people who depended heavily on hunting and trapping for their livelihood, and their

range was the entire Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp region of the lower peninsula. If an Indian was cheated out of his hides and pelts by an unscrupulous trader, received bad liquor from whiskey vendors, or had his domestic animals taken in the night, Agent Brecht could only complain on his behalf to the local magistrates. Occasionally officials from the Indian Service in Washington, such as Col. A.J. Duncan, would come on inspection tours to advise about land purchases or the control of whiskey selling, but federal power was never interposed to settle Indian-white controversies in the state. Thus in his annual reports Dr. Brecht complained of an inability to prosecute whiskey vendors, crooked traders, and those who ran Indians off of lands that they had occupied for years. He did note, however, that a group of citizens living north of Lake Okeechobee was raising funds to purchase lands, provide education, and seek legal protection for the Cow Creek band of Seminole living in that region.<sup>6</sup> This newly formed organization known as the Friends of the Florida Seminoles was to become the first effective citizens voice for Seminole rights in the state.

On the seventh day of January, 1899, the Friends of the Florida Seminoles was organized as "a humanitarian, benevolent and charitable Society or unincorporated Association" in Kissimmee, Florida.<sup>7</sup> The group which met at the Kissimmee Hotel to adopt a Constitution and By-Laws for the society was comprised of well known and articulate spokesmen for the Seminole cause; the membership which ultimately rose to over eighty persons included many prominent Florida business leaders, journalists, politicians, and clergymen, as well as concerned citizens.<sup>8</sup> The slate of officers named at the first meeting was a veritable roll call of those who had been fighting for the establishment of a Seminole reservation in Florida. The first president was the Rt. Rev. William Crane Gray, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church's Missionary Jurisdiction of Southern Florida, who had been instrumental in sustaining the mission work in the Immokalee region. Vice President was the Rev. D.A. Dodge, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Kissimmee. The position of Treasurer went to Senator C.A. Carson who represented the district in the state legislature, and would be invaluable in future legislative activities of the society. James M. Willson, a local realtor and perhaps the closest confidant of the Seminole in that part of the state, was elected Secretary—a post he was to occupy until his death in 1943. An equally prestigious Executive Committee was soon appointed which included: George W. Wilson, editor of the *Times-Union and Citizen*, Jacksonville; Dr. J.E. Brecht, United States Indian Agent, Fort Myers; Francis A. Hendry, a leading cattleman and member of the legislature, Fort Thompson; P.A. Vans Agnew, an attorney editor-publisher of the *Kissimmee Valley*

*Gazette*, Kissimmee; and R.H. Seymour, a prominent attorney and mayor of Kissimmee. And always in the background but a driving force in the deliberations of the society was Minnie Moore-Willson, wife of Secretary J.M. Willson, whose book *The Seminoles of Florida* had brought national attention to the plight of her indian friends.<sup>9</sup>

In most respects the Friends of the Florida Seminoles was similar to other benevolent societies of the period which were devoted to alleviating the "Indian Problem" in the United States. This issue had been brought into sharp focus in the last quarter of the nineteenth century primarily through a number of journalistic exposés such as Indian Commissioner G.W. Manypenny's *Our Indian Wards* (1879), and Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* (1881) and *Ramona* (1884) which had seared the national conscience and brought outcries to redress some of the injustices done to native peoples. The outstanding federal response to this movement was the Dawes Act of 1887, which proposed to turn Indian families into freeholders of individual farm allotments rather than having tribal lands held in common as provided for by treaty; this was brought about by the Dawes Commission of 1893. Although the Dawes Act was hailed at the time as a step in the direction of assimilating the Indian into the social and economic life of the nation, its great cost in terms of loss of personal and tribal identity, as well as the siphoning off of millions of acres of Indian lands through chicanery, is today recognized as a national tragedy for the Indian peoples.

Nevertheless, the American altruistic spirit responded to this new *cause celebre* in typical fashion: Private associations were formed to assist the Indian. National organizations such as the Women's National Indian Association and the Indian Rights Association took the lead in establishing missions, sending educational and medical workers into the field, and acting as watchdogs against attempts to further usurp Indian lands. Both of these national societies would ultimately become active in Florida with the WNIA establishing the original mission station at Immokalee in 1891, and the IRA adding its support to the drive to establish a state reservation after the turn of the century. The publication of Minnie Moore-Willson's *The Seminoles of Florida* (1896) and Charles Coe's *Red Patriots* (1898) catapulted Seminole mistreatment to national visibility and it became an emotional issue around which reformers could rally; thus it was only a matter of time until local societies would be formed and the battle joined in Florida.

The press of the state generally lauded the society's founding as a progressive step forward in protecting the Indian. As might be expected the Jacksonville *Times Union and Citizen* and the *Kissimmee Valley Gazette*, the editors of both being officers in the society, took the lead in

publicizing its work. Throughout the spring and summer of 1889 — a period of intense activity for the society — practically every issue of the weekly *Gazette* carried some report of the activities of the Friends. The *Gazette* openly functioned as a clearing house for information about the Seminole appearing in other newspapers throughout Florida. The Friends also received attention at the national level during this period. Extensive editorial comment in *The Indian's Friend*, published in Philadelphia as a house organ of the Women's National Indian Association, hailed the formation of the Florida group; however, the WNIA did not hesitate to take credit for being first in the field: "Our readers will need no reminder that it was our Association which inaugurated the present movement for the granting, in due legal form, their Florida homes to the Seminoles...the advent of the new association above named will we trust grandly aid in gaining the end desired, viz, permanent homes where their dead are buried, where they have lived for many years, and where their hearts are."<sup>10</sup> Throughout the year the same journal had made a strident plea for federal action on behalf of the Seminole, asking: "Will Congress see and regard the justice and force of this, or will it listen to those who, caring nothing for the Indians or their rights, would have them removed from the State altogether, or, what is equivalent to a temporary reservation only?..."<sup>11</sup> "Is it possible to stop these robberies? Is there no power anywhere, to give to enforce protecting orders for these Indians who cannot protect themselves? And if not, are not some of our troupes needed to protect the homes of our own home-born oppressed race..."<sup>12</sup>

The mere suggestion that federal troops might be used quickly aroused the ire of southerners still smarting from armed occupation during the Reconstruction Era. The editorials in *The Indian's Friend* were answered by the strongly pro-Seminole editor of the *Times-Union and Citizen*: "No, the troops will not be sent here — the Indians do not count at election time, and their wrongs are little regarded. But it is a reproach to the State of Florida that these things are so — just as it is a reproach to the nation that the same wrongs are constantly inflicted on the tribes in the West...But, usually, the injury done to the Seminole here is not by Floridians, but by the new and irresponsible immigrant. The sin of Floridians is mainly confined to laxness in punishment, but this evil seems to cling forever to our skirts and mark us out as most patient of the wrongs of others. Governor after Governor has talked and failed to do anything; perhaps we shall continue on the same path to the end of time. Yet our Governors are usually amenable to gentler influences — where we fail utterly perhaps the ladies might win. Might we suggest that the ladies who publish *The Indian's Friend* express themselves forcibly and freely in remonstrance to our State authorities instead of threatening us with an

invasion from outside at the instance of Federal authority?"<sup>13</sup>

Just how difficult it would be to secure the legal rights of the Seminole in Florida became apparent in the first venture of the Friends society known as "The case of Tom Tiger's Horse." Tom Tiger was a well-known and respected member of the Cow Creek Seminole band who figured prominently in the accounts of many visitors among the Seminole during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, especially those of Ober,<sup>14</sup> Pratt,<sup>15</sup> MacCauley,<sup>16</sup> Wilson,<sup>17</sup> and Willson.<sup>18</sup> In many respects it was this incident, in which a white man had apparently cheated one of the most respected Indians of the period, that impelled many of the founders of the Friends to form an organization which could exert a unified influence in behalf of Seminole rights. Many of them were already involved in the case long before the society was formally organized and had laid the groundwork for the trial that took place in April, 1899. Tom Tiger alleged that Harmon H. Hull had taken a horse from his camp near Fort Drum, and wrote his promise to return same in two months on the top of a cartridge box; however, a rainstorm soaked the box making whatever was written there illegible, so the Seminole had no proof of his claim. Nevertheless, after the time passed Tiger wanted his horse returned, and brought his complaint to his friend Jim Willson in Kissimmee. Willson corresponded with Hull to no avail, the latter claiming that he bought the horse and held "...some white man has put him up to claim that and get me scared up best that he can do. All the Indians in the South can't do that."<sup>19</sup> Faced with Hull's refusal to either return the horse or pay for it, Willson sought financial and legal aid in bringing the Indian's case to court. His initial contact with the Commissioner of Indian Affairs brought the response that the government had no right to intervene; "...there being no authority of law for the appointment of counsel," and it was suggested that "if he cannot regain possession of his horse in any other way about the only thing for him or his friends to consider is the advisability of suing the white man before a Justice of the Peace. This can better be determined by persons conversant with the local conditions than by this office."<sup>20</sup> Although federal authorities at the national level disclaimed any responsibility in the matter, Dr. J.E. Brecht, the Special Agent working with the Seminole at the Immokalee station, offered his personal unofficial support for the effort to bring Hull to trial, and pledged funds to help hire a lawyer.<sup>21</sup>

During the summer of 1898 a lawyer, R.H. Seymour of Kissimmee, was retained to represent Tom Tiger. He and Willson contacted all parties familiar with the horse transaction and presented this information to the States Attorney in Titusville, the county seat of Brevard County where the offense was ostensibly committed. All of this took time, and Tom



Tiger was growing increasingly impatient with white man's justice which moved ever so slowly. A series of letters written by white traders such as R.A. Swearingen,<sup>22</sup> P.P. Cobb,<sup>23</sup> and James Gray<sup>24</sup> of Fort Pierce, and Ben Doster of Jupiter<sup>25</sup> kept Tom Tiger in touch with Jim Willson and his lawyer. When the Friends of the Florida Seminoles was organized in January, 1899, the society made Tom Tiger's case their primary concern and provided additional financial support. Of course Willson and Seymour, who were founding officers of the society, worked for expenses only in traveling about the state gathering evidence. Ultimately, charges were brought against H.H. Hull and he was jailed awaiting trial at the April session of the Circuit Court meeting in Titusville.

The case of *The State v Harmon Hull* came to trial on April 28, 1899 with Judge M.S. Jones presiding.<sup>26</sup> States Attorney J.D. Beggs, assisted by Seymour, presented the case for the prosecution, and W.H. Jewell of Orlando represented the defendant. Actually, the case rested on the testimony of Tom Tiger and another Seminole, Billy Ham, who had been sworn as witnesses for the prosecution; R.A. Swearingen served as their interpreter when needed. After hearing testimony and cross examination, Judge Jones directed the jury to acquit the defendant as there was no proof of a crime. As one of the newspapers covering the trial reported "It was vital to the prosecution that the instrument in writing by which the fraud was committed should be proved to have been signed by the accused, and the two Indian witnesses, Tom Tiger and Billy Ham failed to testify satisfactorily to the actual signing in spite of the assistance of the interpreter, R.A. Swearingen [sic], who accompanied the Indians to Titusville."<sup>27</sup> Immediately following this unexpected conclusion to the trial a fund was raised in the courtroom to buy the Seminole another horse, and even the members of the court reportedly contributed. The Indians and their interpreter then returned home as guests of the Florida East Coast Railroad which had arranged their trip at the request of Jim Willson and the Friends society.

Although the society had scored a limited success in its legal defense of Tom Tiger, the major thrust throughout the spring and summer of 1899 was toward acquiring land for the Seminole. Specifically, they hoped to purchase certain tracts which were occupied by the Cow Creeks, those Muskogee speaking Seminoles who lived north of Lake Okeechobee. The Indians were actually without legal title to the land, most of it belonging to either railroads or land development companies which were selling the acreage to white settlers. As late as the 1880's the Cow Creek band had lived and hunted in the upper reaches of the Kissimmee River basin in the vicinity of present day Polk and Osceola Counties. Gradually, however, they were pushed southward by cattle and agricultural interests

until by the turn of the century most of their camps were located near Lake Okeechobee in the Hungryland-Bluefield district, and in the vicinity of Indiantown in Brevard (now Martin) County.

The Friends set a goal of \$1,000 for their solicitation campaign which was first announced in April, 1899; unfortunately, by June little had been collected despite the best efforts of J.M. Willson who headed the fund raising effort. Then the society received tremendous national exposure for its work through E.W. Martin's column in *Harper's Weekly* which noted in part "A pathetic appeal comes from Florida in behalf of a band of Seminole Indians, for whom a thousand dollars is wanted to secure them in the possession of their present home. This band is known as the Cow Creek tribe, and contains about twelve families, numbering about seventy-five persons...Mr. Willson, writes that the only way to protect these Indians to the possession of their homes is to locate their camps, buy the land, and hold it in trust for them. A thousand dollars, he says, will serve the purpose amply, but he wants that thousand dollars very much, and he says he can't raise it in Florida. The society therefore 'earnestly appeals to humane people in the North to subscribe the amount necessary to protect this remnant of a brave and historic people from robbery.'" <sup>28</sup> From that point the tempo of contributions picked up appreciably, with small dollar amounts coming in from throughout the nation but primarily from the northeastern states. Weekly the *Kissimmee Valley Gazette* published a listing of donations of the "Cow Creek Fund" as reported by J.M. Willson. The last published report on October 20, 1899 showed that the sum of \$595.85 had been received.

Apparently fearing to wait any longer for the thousand dollars to be raised lest all the desired Indian lands be taken, the society voted in June to send J.M. Willson, P.A. Vans Agnew, and a surveyor, J.E. Moseley, to the Indiantown area to see what was available. Their report to the society on July 7, confirmed everyone's worst fears: "Indian Town Taken" headlined the *Gazette*, and its columns reported that the three men had found "All of this tract has been bought from the railroad and land companies owning it mostly within the last few months. One purchaser had just built a house in the hammock within 300 yards of Chief Tallahassee's shack, on a piece that includes several Indian fields, and is fencing and preparing the place for cultivation. Another purchaser is temporarily camped on his hammock track. A store stands on one forty...The influx of the white settlers has disturbed them greatly as they do not know where next to go and are loath to leave the rich Cow Creek country."<sup>29</sup> Distraught over their inability to save any Seminole camp sites in the Indiantown area the society did manage to purchase an 80 acre tract known as "Polly Parker's Camp" in what is now St. Lucie



County, in essence creating a “private reservation” that was held in trust by the Friends of the Florida Seminoles until 1926.<sup>30</sup>

Thwarted in the attempt to save existing Cow Creek camps through outright purchase, individual Friends turned their considerable energies to the support of legislation establishing a state Indian preserve in Florida. This idea was not original with the Friends. Throughout the 1880’s and 90’s a succession of Special Agents of the U.S. Indian Service sought to buy land in south Florida for the Seminole, and by 1899 some 10,000 acres had been secured mostly in Monroe and Lee Counties. The 1891 legislature passed legislation setting aside some 5,000 acres of state land as a reservation, but this was never implemented. With the support of Governor W.D. Bloxham and several key legislative leaders who had taken up the Indian cause, the time seemed propitious to again seek state land. A bill to establish an extensive reservation was introduced in the House by Francis A. Hendry, representing Lee County, and a companion measure was authored by C.A. Carson of Kissimmee in the Senate. With the astute maneuvering of these veteran legislators the bill had little opposition in either house, and was signed into law by Governor Bloxham on May 29, 1899.<sup>31</sup> Again, however, legislative action was to prove futile as the sections of land named in the act had already been taken up by various companies and individuals. The Friends and their supporters would have to wait another 17 years before their goal of a state reservation could be realized.

A second piece of legislation passed in the 1899 session, though less dramatic than the ostensible donation of land to the Seminole, drew heavy support from the society and recognized an equally urgent need to help the Indians develop an economic alternative to the hunting-trapping economy that was beginning to play out. With a typical nineteenth century faith in the power of education and technical training as a means to bring the Indian into the mainstream of American life, the more aggressive elements among the Friends had Rep. J.W. Watson introduce legislation establishing a Seminole Industrial School. This measure, which completely disregarded both the Seminole attitude toward formal instruction and their ability to profit from it in their unsettled condition, was reminiscent of R.H. Pratt’s recommendations of 1879 which advocated using old Fort Brooke in Tampa as a Seminole industrial education center. The bill recognized the executive committee of the Friends of the Florida Seminoles society as a “Board of Seminole Educators” to oversee the school “to be located in the Cow Creek settlement of the Seminole Indians in Brevard County.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it specifically named J.R. Parrot, G.W. Wilson, and F.A. Hendry to these unremunerated positions, and appropriated a sum of \$500 annually for two years with which they

were to establish and maintain the “experimental” school.

The bill passed the legislature and became law on June 1, 1899.<sup>33</sup> Shortly thereafter the three man board met and organized itself for the task at hand; in a newspaper interview Capt. Hendry held that “We expect to spend \$500 each year, and to do such efficient work in the direction of making good citizens of the Seminoles that not only the State, but the general Government, will be so impressed as to continue what the Legislature has begun. The Seminoles on Cow Creek are not at all different from those in other parts of Florida. They are the same people, neither superior nor inferior in morals and ambition to their kindred elsewhere in the State, but they are nearer civilization, and it is more practicable to conduct schools among them than it would be among those in more remote parts of the State.”<sup>34</sup> Despite these good intentions the school project never got off the ground, none of the money was spent, and no annual reports to the Governor called for in the law were ever filed.

Apparently the visit of Willson, Vans Agnew, and Moseley to the Indiantown region had left them highly skeptical of possible success for an Indian school. A *Gazette* account of their report to the society noted “Regarding the industrial school the report recommends that no attempt be made in the present unsettled condition of the tribe to establish a regular school down there, but that the children there be taught in a simple way at first by a local resident, and that one or two bucks and squaws be persuaded to come to Kissimmee and learn how to tan skins and make salable articles out of them, how to do needlework, make barrels and other useful crafts.”<sup>35</sup> The Friends adopted this report, although it exploded another of their cherished goals for improving the Seminole lot, and appointed the white trader at Indiantown, Joe Bowers, as the society’s agent to do what he could to help the Indians there. No doubt the decision to forego formal schooling was a wise one, and in no way negated the impulse to educate those few Indians who sought to learn the 3R’s; this was carried out on an individual basis by members of the society and particularly the families of white traders in South Florida.

In retrospect it appears that the year 1899 saw the zenith of the society’s activities on many fronts — organizational, legal defense, education, and land acquisition. After that first scintillating year the society settled into those routines associated with any charitable cause, providing largess for needy Indians, and within the limits of their coffers supplying Seminole representation at state and local affairs to build public good will. After the turn of the century, however, the society’s efforts centered primarily on the passage of meaningful legislation to establish a reservation. In the process it increasingly became a showcase for

the unique talents of James and Minnie Moore-Willson.

Usually provocative, often abrasive, but always interesting, the mercurial Mrs. Willson became synonymous in the state press with Seminole advocacy. She had initially reaped notoriety in 1896 with the publication of her book *The Seminoles of Florida*, which was the first full-length work dealing with the post-removal history and culture of the tribe. It was a poorly written, undocumented, maudlin creampuff, and almost totally unreliable for its ethnohistoric content — yet perfectly attuned to the national sentiment for reform of federal Indian policies at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it became a best seller which went through several printings, and Minnie Moore-Willson became a celebrity among the reform set. Even so, her outspoken, no-holds-barred push for redress of Indian ills, and especially land for the Cow Creek band, often alienated other individuals and groups working for similar ends. She occasionally seemed oblivious to the social and political ramifications of her activities, and apparently was prone to make unfounded allegations about state and federal officials who did not share her own single-minded devotion to the Seminole. This led to some fierce encounters with such prominent figures as Mrs. May M. Jennings,<sup>37</sup> President of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs, and Mrs. Frank Stranahan, Chairman of the Federation's Indian Committee, who diplomatically suggested that "I trust that you will receive this letter in the spirit in which it is sent. I really feel that your being connected with my committee does [sic] not give you the liberty you would have if you were free to act independently, you might accomplish more and I feel sure you desire to do...I am putting Mrs. Julia Hanson on my Committee."<sup>38</sup> Despite these rebukes Mrs. Willson persisted in her letter writing, speech making, and general clamor for action in behalf of the Seminole; she also refused to resign from the Indian Committee of the Federation of Women's Clubs and spelled out her views in a letter to Mrs. Stranahan:

"Your letter of recent date received suggesting that possibly my being on the Seminole Committee is a hinderance to me. I feel that we as a committee have a more serious responsibility than any of the Federation committees, because we are working for innocent and oppressed humanity, and for this reason my duty is with the Seminole Committee. I do not feel that being a member of the Seminole Committee is hampering me, nor interfering with any work that I may be able to do to further the cause of our Seminole Indians. Any work that I may do outside our committee work is just that much additional help toward the Seminole cause. I feel that during the present year we ought to make great strides for the future

good of the Florida Indians. As an additional member of the Seminole Committee Mrs. Hanson will no doubt prove beneficial as she has always shown an interest in the Seminoles. Wishing you a prosperous and happy New Year, I am sincerely yours. Signed (Mrs. James M. Jr.) Minnie Moore-Willson.”<sup>39</sup>

From one frustrating biennial legislative session to the next the Willsons and their loyal supporters, particularly the *Florida Times Union* and *Kissimmee Valley Gazette*, carried on the fight for a state reservation. In 1911 a bill providing 15 townships in Monroe County passed the House only to meet defeat in the upper chamber. Success was almost theirs in 1913 when the measure passed both houses of the legislature but was vetoed by the Governor as being too costly. In 1915 the anti-reservation forces in the legislature again prevailed, but time and public sentiment were running against them. Before the next session of the legislature the Willsons had entered into an alliance with a powerful national organization, the Indian Rights Association of Philadelphia, which threw the full weight of its prestige, funds, and able secretary, Matthew K. Sniffen, into the fray. In 1915, Sniffen and a director of the Association, Joseph Elkinton, had visited with the Willsons and the Friends of the Florida Seminoles at Kissimmee, and after visiting the Indian camps they decided to place their support behind the Seminole land effort.<sup>40</sup> The lobbying efforts of Sniffen, both in Washington and Tallahassee, did much to ease the way for passage of a bill in the following session. The federal Indian Service was also a party to the proceedings through the expert testimony of special commissioner Lucien A. Spencer before the various legislative committees. On May 18, the legislation cleared both houses and Governor Sidney J. Catts signed it into law two days later. As a tribute to her long struggle in behalf of the Seminole people, the Governor gave the golden pen with which he signed the bill to Minnie Moore-Willson.<sup>41</sup>

It was a time of personal triumph for the Willsons, and especially for Mrs. Willson who was lauded by the press of the state as the “mother of the Seminole Land Bill,” although her husband who had worked as long and vigorously was curiously overlooked except by those closely associated with the Friends society. Even the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Cato Sells, acknowledged only the distaff side of the family in his congratulatory telegram: “Being just advised that Governor Catt has signed the bill creating a hundred thousand acre reservation for the Seminole Indians I wish to congratulate you on the happy result of your long and effective campaign in their behalf.”<sup>42</sup> Similar accolades were accorded the Kissimmee pair from all quarters, and while most press ac-

counts recognized the role of the Friends of the Florida Seminoles society, the Willsons had somehow assumed a separate existence in the mind of the public which transcended their membership in the organization. In the exuberance of the moment little attention was given to the quality of the land acquired, or else it was chosen to ignore the fact that only 5% of it was tillable and all of it was outside the drainage district. In short, as the *Florida Times-Union* bitterly noted, the state had met its "...obligation by donating worthless, at least in an agricultural sense, swamp land to the Seminole."<sup>43</sup>

It is somewhat ironic that Jim Willson was shunted aside when the tributes were being passed out. As secretary of the Friends of the Florida Seminoles from its founding until it became defunct, he was a dogmatic and tenacious defender of Indian rights as well as a close personal friend to many Cow Creek families. He always seemed to have time to spend traveling to the Everglades, to the state capitol, or wherever he was needed to assist his Indian friends. This was generally done at his own expense as the society had limited funds for such activities, and there is some conjecture that his various business ventures perhaps suffered by these frequent and prolonged absences from Kissimmee.<sup>44</sup> Far less flamboyant than his famous wife, he nevertheless maintained an equally voluminous correspondence on all types of problems affecting Seminole welfare, and did not limit his efforts to securing a reservation. In 1907 he intervened, on behalf of the society, in an incident where a northern amusement park operator had desecrated the burial site of Tom Tiger and attempted to sell the Seminole leader's remains to the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>45</sup> When the Cow Creek band learned of this vandalism they threatened, although few in number, to take their revenge against surrounding white settlers unless the old warrior's remains were returned. Through the good offices of Willson and various state and local officials the issue was resolved with the return of Tom Tiger's bones to the burial site, thus averting what might have become a calamity for the Seminole.

Jim Willson also pursued even the most trivial reports of wrongdoing where Indians were concerned. When it was reported that the Seminole were being charged a dollar to pole their canoes on the drainage canals which laced Southern Florida, he immediately confronted many officials and found it to be an unfounded rumor.<sup>46</sup> As a prominent Baptist layman Willson actively supported the work of Creek-Seminole missionaries from Oklahoma who had come to convert their brothers in Florida, and he led the movement for the Southern Baptist Convention to assume full financial responsibility for his mission work which it did in 1936.<sup>47</sup> One of his last acts as an officer of the society was to work with P.A. Vans Agnew in preparing a defense against a suit brought to acquire title to the

“Polly Parker’s Camp” land originally purchased in 1899. A prominent resident of St. Lucie County, J.G. Coats, brought suit to quiet title to the land which he had bought for taxes. The defense of the Friends was that as a benevolent and charitable institution holding the land in trust for the Seminole, it was exempt from taxation, and for that and other technical legal reasons the suit should not be allowed. Nevertheless, the land was lost.<sup>48</sup>

As the older members passed away the effectiveness of the Friends society rapidly faded.<sup>49</sup> In the development fever that gripped Florida during the “Land Boom” of the 1920’s, as well as the terrible years of economic depression which followed, the problems of the Seminole were forgotten except by a few staunch friends such as the Willsons, Stranahans, and Hansons. Ultimately, the social and economic salvation of the Indian in Florida came with the establishment of federal trust lands on which they could live in peace. This land base would provide the source for the tribe’s future economic well being, as well as a focus for federally sponsored health, education, and housing programs aimed at making the Seminole independent and self-sustaining once more. If the time had come when private associations or devoted individuals could no longer effectively meet the needs of their Indian friends, it in no way diminished the importance of their earlier aid and friendship.

It might be contended by latter day critics that organizations such as the Friends of the Florida Seminoles fostered a paternalistic and naive image of the Seminole people and their needs. If so, this was only consistent with the prevailing nineteenth century Christian, humanitarian reform concept of being thy brother’s keeper — whether he wanted to be kept or not. And in the case of at least one segment of the Seminole people, the Cow Creek band, there is good evidence that they did not shun the attention of their white friends and actively sought aid on a number of occasions. When society members and the state press spoke in glowing terms of turning the Seminole into a race of farmers and herdsmen, who would be “good citizens” and a credit to Florida, they were only echoing the most enlightened views emanating from national Indian welfare organizations of the day; it was also the official policy of the national government as expressed in the Dawes Act and other legislation.<sup>50</sup> Luckily, the Friends membership was liberally laced with Florida frontier folk like F.A. Hendry who had lived with and among the Seminole, and who despite their rhetoric tempered a reforming zeal with practical wisdom — as in the decision not to pursue a Seminole Industrial School.

The criticism that the Friends focused their efforts narrowly on the needs of the Cow Creek band, but did little for the other Seminole groups, is well taken. Certainly the Cow Creeks received the bulk of the



society's attention if for no other reason than they were the closest group to Kissimmee, were best known to the townspeople, and appeared to be most receptive to the overtures of friendship from people like the Willsons. Leaders of the Cow Creek band were frequent visitors in white communities, and the *Gazette* regularly reported the arrival of Billy Bowlegs, Chief Tallahassee, Tom Tiger, and members of their families. The Indians were welcome visitors and the town (or at least the newspaper) seemed genuinely proud of them. In 1917 the Kissimmee Board of Trade went so far as to make Billy Bowlegs an honorary life member in recognition of his being an enthusiastic "booster."<sup>51</sup> It is unlikely that any other town in Florida went to such lengths to honor Indians that early in this century, but then no other town had the Willsons in residence.

In all fairness to the Friends it should be pointed out that members such as F.A. Hendry, Bishop Gray, and Dr. J.E. Brecht were actively involved with the Mikasuki-speaking Seminole bands living south of Lake Okeechobee. Anyone familiar with the efforts of Gray to establish a medical mission in the Big Cypress region, or Brecht's nine years in Indian service, can not help but compare the hostility and suspicion which the Mikasuki held for most whites with the relative openness of the Cow Creek. Certainly the Friends considered themselves working in behalf of all Seminole people when seeking the establishment of a state reservation, although it is unlikely that the Indians of that day could have lived together in such a limited territory due to both language and socio-political differences. Interestingly, the 100,000 acre state reservation which now stretches across the western edges of Palm Beach and Broward Counties does belong to the Seminole Tribe (25%) and the newer Miccosukee Tribe (75%), but very few of their people live on it to this day.<sup>52</sup>

In much the same way that the Friends society was formed to assist the Indians living in the area north of Lake Okeechobee, later groups would come into being to work with the Seminole of the Big Cypress region, as well as those living along the lower east coast. The first of these was the Seminole Indian Association founded in Fort Myers in 1913.<sup>53</sup> It was initially formed by the Episcopal missionary Dr. W.J. Godden, and W. Stanley Hanson, Jr. who was perhaps the closest friend of the Indian people living on the west side of the Everglades during the first half of this century.<sup>54</sup> An equally impressive organization would emerge in the 1940's at Fort Lauderdale, dedicated primarily to carrying on the work started by Mrs. Frank Stranahan, and named "The Friends of the Seminoles."<sup>55</sup> Both of these organizations are still in existence, although for all practical purposes they provide only token assistance to the Seminole and Miccosukee people. All significant functions affecting the Indian people

in Florida today are handled by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, the tribes themselves through their own institutional structures, or by other state and local agencies. Nevertheless, the private associations, of which the Friends of the Florida Seminoles was the first, filled the gap at a time when none of these services were available to the Indian people. Those individuals dedicated to the work accepted the challenge and did what they could within the limits of their abilities, often achieving remarkable results in the process, and they must be accorded a prominent place in any definitive history of the Seminole people.

## FOOTNOTES

\*Dr. Kersey is a Professor of Education at Florida Atlantic University.

- 1 U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, Exec. Doc. 55, 40th Cong., 3rd sess., 1869, p. 4. In this communication the Secretary referred to the "remnant of the Tribe of Seminole Indians now living in or near the Everglades in South Florida," and presented letters from white settlers in the region requesting that action be taken to remove the Indians. However, another decade passed before any effort was initiated to investigate the condition of the Florida seminole.
- 2 William C. Sturtevant, "R.H. Pratt's Report on the Seminole in 1879," *Florida Anthropologist*, IX (March, 1956), 12-13. The Seminole whom Pratt called Streety Parker had apparently adopted the name of a well known white settler in the Bartow region, Streety Parker. See D.B. McKay (ed.) *Pioneer Florida*, Vol. III (Tampa, 1959), pp. 192-193. Also Vol. II, p. 565. McKay uses both spellings of Parker's given name.
- 3 Emily Lagow Bell, *My Pioneer Days in Florida, 1876-1898* (Fort Pierce, 1928), p. 43.
- 4 U.S. Congress, Senate, *Message From the President of the United States Transmitting a Letter of the Secretary of Interior Relative to Land Upon Which to Locate Seminole Indians*, Exec. Doc. 139, 50th Cong., 1st sess., 1888, p. 3.
- 5 *Ibid.*, P. 5.
- 6 U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, Exec. Doc. 5, 56th Cong., 1st sess., 1899, p. 179.
- 7 Coats vs. Gray et als., Circuit Court of St. Lucie County, July 5, 1926. *Answer of Friends of the Florida Seminoles, Defendant*, p. 5. Record File 1270, St. Lucie County Court House, Fort Pierce, Florida.
- 8 *The Indian's Friend*, March, 1899, pp. 7-8.
- 9 Minnie Moore-Willson, *The Seminoles of Florida* (New York, 1896).
- 10 *The Indian's Friend*, March, 1899, p. 7.
- 11 *The Indian's Friend*, January, 1899, p. 6.
- 12 Editorial comment from *The Indian's Friend* (undated) quoted in the *Kissimmee Valley Gazette*, June 9, 1899, p. 2.
- 13 *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, June 28, 1899, p. 4.
- 14 Fredrick A. Ober, "Ten Days with the Seminoles," *Appleton's Journal of Literature, Science, and Art*, XIV (August, 1875), 173.
- 15 Sturtevant, "R.H. Pratt's Report," 8.
- 16 Clay MacCauley, "The Seminole Indians of Florida," *Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, 1887), p. 518.
- 17 U.S. Congress, Senate, *Message From the President . . . Lands Upon Which to Locate Seminole Indians*, p. 8.
- 18 Minnie Moore-Willson, *The Seminoles of Florida*, pp. 148-154.
- 19 Letter, H.H. Hull to J.M. Willson, May 29, 1898. Unless otherwise designated all correspondence is located in the Willson Collection of the University of Miami Library, Coral Gables, Florida.
- 20 Letter, Commissioner of Indian Affairs to J.M. Willson, June 18, 1898.
- 21 Letters, J.E. Brecht to J.M. Willson, June 13, 28, July 8, August 15, 1898.
- 22 Letter, R.A. Swearingen to J.M. Willson, September 6, 1898.
- 23 Letter, Tom Tiger to J.M. Willson, June (no date), 1898. Written on P.P. Cobb stationery.
- 24 Letter, Tom Tiger to J.M. Willson, June 30, 1898. Signed as written by J.T. Gray. Also J.T. Gray to J.M. Willson, August 4, 1898, confirms his role as an intermediary.
- 25 Letter, Tom Tiger to J.M. Willson, July 23, 1898. Written on B.H. Doster stationery.
- 26 *Circuit Court Minutes*, Vol. I., Brevard County, Florida, April 28, 1899, pp. 471-472. The case was tried before a six man jury and ended in a directed verdict of not guilty.

- 27 *Kissimmee Valley Gazette*, May 5, 1899, p. 3.
- 28 E.S. Martin, "This Busy World," *Harpers Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 2215, (June 3, 1899), 3.
- 29 *Kissimmee Valley Gazette*, July 14, 1899, p. 3.
- 30 *Deed Book FF*, St. Lucie County, Florida, p. 510. The records show that Bishop Gray purchased 80 acres (SE¼ of NE¼ and NE¼ of SE¼ of Section 8, Township 35S, Range 37E) from Frank Q. Brown, Trustee for the Florida Southern Railroad. The deed was recorded on July 19, 1900.
- 31 *Acts and Resolutions Adopted by the Legislature of Florida at its Seventh Regular Session Under the Constitution of A.D. 1885*. Ch. 4765, No. 104. (Tallahassee, 1899), p. 149.
- 32 *Ibid.*, Ch. 4764, No. 103.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Florida Times-Union and Citizen*, June 12, 1899, p. 5.
- 35 *Kissimmee Valley Gazette*, July 14, 1899, p. 3.
- 36 Minnie Moore-Willson, *The Seminoles of Florida*, (Kingsport, Tenn., 1928), p. 148. It should be noted that this source is held in low repute by some authorities on Seminole history and culture, most notably W.C. Sturtevant who wrote: "It may be classified as an example of poor amateur ethnology. To sift the few useful facts from the mass of inaccuracies requires considerable knowledge of Seminole culture and Seminole personalities; and the book is not to be recommended for any purpose." William C. Sturtevant "Accomplishments and Opportunities in Florida Indian Ethnology" in *Florida Anthropology*, Charles H. Fairbanks (ed.) Florida Anthropological Society Publications No. 5, Tallahassee, 1958, pp. 20-21.
- 37 Letter, Mrs. May Jennings to Minnie Moore-Willson, May 12, 1915.
- 38 Letter, Mrs. Frank Stranahan to Minnie Moore-Willson, December 27, 1916.
- 39 Letter, Minnie Moore-Willson to Mrs. Frank Stranahan, January 7, 1917.
- 40 Letter, M.K. Sniffen to Minnie Moore-Willson, April 25, 1915.
- 41 *Florida Times-Union*, May 10, 1917, p. 8.
- 42 Telegram, Commissioner of Indian Affairs to Minnie Moore-Willson, May 14, 1917.
- 43 *Florida Times Union*, May 10, 1917, p. 4.
- 44 Nevertheless, as a realtor J.M. Willson was instrumental in the development of Osceola County, and particularly the City of St. Cloud. In 1906-07 he was owner-agent for sizeable land holdings, the remnant of Hamilton Disston's empire, in the vicinity of current day St. Cloud. This acreage was advertised in the *New York Tribune* where Raymond Moore, a Washington, D.C. promoter, saw and filed it for future reference. Then the *National Tribune* of Washington, an influential paper among Civil War veterans, began to look for a Florida site for a Union retirement colony. A group headed by Moore made a deal with J.M. Willson for 55,000 acres, and formed the Seminole Land and Investment Company which platted modern St. Cloud—appropriating the name originally given to the Disston Sugar Mill on East Lake Tohopekaliga. For a complete historical account of this transaction see: *St. Cloud Tribune*, December 6, 1934.
- 45 Harry A. Kersey, Jr., "The Seminole 'Uprising' of 1907," *Florida Anthropologist*, Vol. 27, no. 2 (June, 1974), 49-58.
- 46 Letter, Gov. Cary A. Hardee to J.M. Willson, November 4, 1922. Also, L.A. Spencer to J.M. Willson, November 15, 1922.
- 47 Letter, J.M. Willson to J.C. Morrison, April 29, 1921. Also, J.M. Willson to Alice B. Davis, December 10, 1920. These letters to Indian missionaries from Mounds and Wewoka, Oklahoma, spell out Willson's concern with the Baptist missionary efforts among the Florida Seminole.
- 48 Coats vs. Gray et als., Circuit Court of St. Lucie County, July 5, 1926. Record File 1270, St. Lucie County Court House, Fort Pierce, Florida. Records reveal that J.G. Coats acquired a tax deed to the 80 acre parcel on February 16, 1923. Apparently he felt the need to quiet title on the property before he sold it so the suit was initiated on May 1, 1926. The Friends filed their answer on July 5, 1926, taking the position that the land was exempt from taxation due to its unique status of being held in trust for the Seminole people. The court records reveal no further proceedings and the case remains technically open. However, Mr. Coats later sold the land.
- 49 Actually, the Willsons were among the last surviving members who founded the Friends Society. James Mallory Willson was born at Somersset, Kentucky on August 4, 1860; he died at Kissimmee on August 5, 1943. Minnie Moore-Willson was born at West Newton, Pa. on August 14, 1859; she died at Kissimmee on August 8, 1937. Both are interred at Rosehill Cemetery in Kissimmee. Interview with Mr. Ed Grissom, Kissimmee, July 25, 1974.
- 50 *U.S. Statutes at Large*, Vol. XXIV, p. 338. The attempt of the Dawes Commission to transform the American Indian into yeoman farmers through a series of acreage allotments, all but destroyed the traditional tribal patterns of communal land ownership. It also opened some forty million acres of former Indian lands for settlers.
- 51 *Kissimmee Valley Gazette*, March 30, 1917, p. 1.
- 52 Florida, *Statutes*, 285.061. Some 28,000 acres of this state reservation land in Palm Beach and Broward Counties was recently transferred to the federal government to be held in trust status for the Seminole Tribe. Legislation was also enacted allowing the tribe to develop the land without interference from the various counties.

- 53 Postcard, W. Stanley Hanson, Jr. to Dr. Hamilton Holt, September 3, 1933. This was part of a mass mailing to announce the "Reorganization meeting of the Seminole Indian Association...Tampa...Sept. 8th, 1933." In the message it was noted that "the Seminole Indian Association, a corporation not for profit, was chartered in 1913, with headquarters in Fort Myers." Mr. Hanson served as secretary of the organization.
- 54 The work of W. Stanley Hanson, Jr. in behalf of the Seminole is detailed in numerous newspaper clippings spanning almost half a century, and in books such as: Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers* (St. Petersburg, 1949), pp. 285-286. Allen H. Andrews, *A Yank Pioneer in Florida* (Jacksonville, 1950), *passim*.
- 55 In Fort Lauderdale the "Friends of the Seminoles" was chartered as a Florida Corporation on November 28, 1949. *Corporation Book 13*, Broward County, pp. 616-622. Office of the Comptroller Broward County, Florida.