

The Seminole's Christmas

By J.W. Ewan*

To the Editor of the *Metropolis*:

*Ye, who love the haunts of Nature,
Find that e'en in savage bosoms
There are yearnings, longing, burnings,
For the good they comprehend not –
Listen –*

– Longfellow

I had met a few of the Indians from time to time during the fall and winter of 1874, but on Christmas Eve quite an assembly of them had met at Brickell's Point, with a view of celebrating the "White Man's Christmas," when, as they affirmed it, they would "all shake hands, white men, Indians, all the same good friends, drink plenty, shake hands."

It was about 7 P.M., when a party of us crossed the river from Fort Dallas and landed about half way between Brickell's Point and what then

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was known as the Barnes place. We saw about thirty Indians, of all sizes, from babes at the breast to "Old Halleck," about 90 years of age. We were formally introduced to the grown men, among them Key West Billy, Billy Sunshine, Miami Doctor, Miami Jimmie, Cypress Tommie, Johnnie Jumper, Big Mouth Tiger, Young Tiger Tail, etc.

The men were grouped around their sof-kee kettle, eating supper. The women stood by to serve them and replenish their lightwood fires, of which there were several, to give light and heat, and keep the pot boiling. Sof-kee is a combination of coontie starch and green corn, making a course gruel. A large brass kettle stood in the center of each group, and one large spoon was used to dip with, a wooden spoon made of cypress, with a very long handle. This single spoon was shared by all. They were also eating young alligator tails, terrapin and garfish barbecued, to which were added sweet potatoes and bananas. Coffee was also served, and occasionally a cork was drawn from a quart bottle and whiskey offered.

Little Tiger was there in full force, flourishing a flat quart bottle, which he informed us his great-grandfather had given him. It was of very ancient pattern, and he was very proud of it. Some years after this he sat with me on the piazza at Fort Dallas enlarging on the qualities of the bottle and its contents, when it slipped from his hands and broke into many pieces. He was amazed with grief, bottle and contents both gone. As he expressed it – "Bottle, whiskey, great-grandfather – all gone big sleep; no come back no more," in broken Indian, Spanish and English. Once as he elevated his "fi-las-co," as he called it, Big Mouth Tiger reached it from behind, took a large, quick drink, and said: "Little Tiger talk too much; lie plenty – holiwagus." To which Little Tiger responded: "Un ga alltakea drink – good friends."

The picture was soft and beautiful. It was moonlight; a light western breeze blowing, and the river flowing with a gentle lap-lap. The flickering lightwood flames brought out the bronze figures to perfection; the squaws standing partially draped, their outlines were softened and they became statuesque; the profiles were unusually fine in that light. Then there were groups of children playing with rattles made from palmetto leaves woven together and having shells inside; some had the shells of the box terrapin filled with sea shells. They were all bright-eyed and happy. Some few of the girls from the Big Cypress were there – three there were in a group, being about 16 years of age. They were lighter in color than our coast Indians. Their well-rounded busts and well-turned arms and ankles, sparkling eyes and fine heads of hair, snowy white and regular teeth made one think of "The Judgment of Paris," and wonder what these wood nymphs would like best.

We were offered eatables and partook of terrapin cooked in the shell, venison, sweet potatoes and bananas. After the men had finished eating, the squaws and pickaninnies, as they called their children, feasted, the men grouping themselves and talking over their adventures, not forgetting the bottle; and as they warmed up they would speak in a monotone of the past, bring in deeds of Osceola, Cophineo McIntosh, Arpiaka, Billy Bowlegs, and others – remembering Jackson, Worth, Taylor, Dade, Harney, etc. As the glow increased, dancing commenced. Ere I was well aware of it, Miami Doctor, to whom I was talking, had gathered me to his bosom – he is over 6 feet tall; my feet were off the ground and I was wriggling in space. The men were all dancing and singing, the chant was their music. When the Doctor got out of breath, I was “landed”; he gave me a withering glance and said: “White man dance good; Indian all the same; unguh.” He settled down with me to a cigar; told me how at one time all the trees in the hammocks north and south of the river were cut down, so the soldiers could see the Indians if they came near the Fort. He said: “Indians not fight nomore; soldiers plenty, too much, big officers Washington, [three worlds illegible] not make big fight; all good friends now; fight no good, pickaninnies no eat, no make fire, all go to Arkansas.” I left him; he had the right idea.

I found Big Head Tiger interviewing a pretty Indian girl. I asked Young Tiger Tail what it meant. “Big Head Tiger want to catch young squaw?” “Whose squaw is that?” said I, indicating a woman standing by. “Big Head Tiger’s old squaw; no like it,” he said. Now here stood a pathetic group in bronze. The maiden and the man, and the unwilling squaw looking on. The firelight flickered, the hearts throbbed, love’s arrows shed, and the serpent, jealousy, inflicted its fangs. Ah, woman! Red, or what color you may be, you must suffer. Well may Kipling write, “Mary, pity women!”

I will here add that Tiger eventually caught the young squaw, marrying her some months later. That night he became awfully loaded, terribly jagged, and when I next saw him his old squaw and some of her sympathizing friends had him down and were sousing him heavily with river water, which he seemed to enjoy. I will say here that I always found him one of the best-natured and most honorable Indians of the tribe. He really enjoys a joke.

About this time most of the men were at Brickell’s store trading, leaving the women. We tried our blandishments on these dark-eyed bronzes, gave them some ribbons and candy. We noticed one of the lot, an ill-favored squaw, going hurriedly “across lots.” I thought it would be well to follow her. She made straight for the store and told a tale of woe to

the men. Then there was a powwow. But I "seized Time by the bang" and told the dealer to "set them up," and commenced to vigorously shake hands with the braves. Then I got Young Tiger Tail a pint, told him to come quick and we went back to the squaws. He told them "it was all right; we good men and did not want to steal squaws; only wanted to please the 'lydies.'" I learned afterwards that the female who reported us was the only old maid in the nation and she was always left as a chaperone.

The night was growing old, clouds had risen, and at 12 o'clock quite a heavy shower came on. The squaws and younger Indians had cut brush and palmetto leaves, and made quite a substantial shelter. So all the elderly people present, red and white, were sheltered. The Seminoles are a thoughtful and kind people to their aged and young, manifesting the greatest love and affection for them.

During the entire night Old Halleck and one of our oldest citizens, an ex-Confederate warrior, were assigned a position of honor, side by side, and were the recipients of all courtesies, so much so, that these heroes of two nations, became hors du combat: they were overcome by King Bourbon, and were laid peacefully side by side to sleep and dream of past battles.

The show over, a final dance was held, interspersed with the Seminole rallying call and war whoop. As the day star rose, we shook hands all around; they asked us to come to their Christmas, or "Green Corn Dance," and we parted that Christmas morn, having been hospitably entertained by the Seminoles. And my thoughts as I crossed the Miami river, turned to a lone grave on the right hand side of the sally port as you enter Fort Moultrie, Charleston Harbor, where you will see a marble slab with these words on it:

OSCEOLA
Seminole Warrior,
Chieftain, Patriot.

And these we read of are his people, and their heritage are these traits, for they are "honorable men" in the light they have.

A Seminole Reminiscence

Some Interesting Facts about Old Tiger Tail

In 1875 while enjoying the hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. John A. Addison at what was then known as The Hunting Grounds – now Cutler – and their hospitality in those days was a thing “sui generis” and not to be despised, as their menu consisted of mullet roes, venison, home-cured bacon, 5 varieties of bananas, pawpaws, baked sweet potatoes, guava jelly and coontie pudding, all of which Mrs. Addison would prepare in a way that would make an ordinary chef turn billious. While sitting on the piazza sniffing the menu my attention was attracted to a tall – yes gigantic figure – passing through the scrub and moving rapidly toward the bay landing. I followed and recognized “Old Tiger Tail,” Seminole Chief, on his shoulders, knapsack fashion, was the entire carcass of a large buck whom Tiger had “met up with” as we Crackers say. The entrails were removed and the burden was about 80 pounds. Near the water were camped his two squaws and little Wel-ke, his daughter, then about 8 years old – a little sloe-eyed beauty – the pride of his old age, for Tiger was then over 80 years old, and royally descended on both sides, for her mother was a sister of Emathla, commonly called Mottlo, one of their finest war chiefs.

Tiger dropped his burden at the feet of his squaws, little Wel-ke ran to him and he gave her some soft pretty talk in Seminole – a Semelah, as they call it – then he turned to me, gave his hand, said “et-se” (tobacco), then threw himself on some palmetto leaves, filled his pipe, after removing his double-soled hunting moccasins, and commenced smoking. His squaws had taken his moccasins, placed them to dry, he had tramped through wet glade, and they soon commenced work on the deer, preparing the meat for sale, removing the antlers and getting the hide ready to turn

into buckskin. Little Wel-ke came to him like a little “red fawn of the flowerland” and nestled in his arms, looking at him with grave wonder. His sinewy hands stroked her bright black hair and he looked at her wistfully. Oh, it was a pretty study in human savage bronze!

He talked: “Me old too much; eyes no good; see little bit, see etcho plenty; rifle old, no good; git one etcho.” I looked at his gun; it was an old Kentucky rifle, muzzle loading, percussion cap; the stock was broken and wired together. He wore a ragged red turban, his calico shirt was in rags and his buckskin breech-clouts were much the worse for wear. He was then “Tiger Tail the Hunter” – tired – hungry, but affectionate. Wel-ke knew this and with her fingers she felt his veins and looked into his dim eyes.

Mrs. Addison called dinner and Mr. Addison came and asked Tiger Tail to join us. He rose and said: “John Addison, my friend long time; some time long time Addison cowboy fight, kill Indians plenty; now all good friends. Little bit me come, eat, you hiapus (go).”

We left him. As we eat, in about 20 minutes, the dogs – Rock and Butler – barked and we saw Tiger Tail Chief coming; about 6 feet 8 inches tall, very erect, a bright red turban with a tuft of egret’s plume waving, a beautifully braided shirt draped with silver disks, fine mangrove-tanned buckskin leggings, an elegant sash of beadwork and side pouch to match, and at his side a long buck-handled hunting knife. He said: “Squaws fix um good; me eat.” He took his place and acted like a gentleman, showed no embarrassment, and there we were – John Addison, a cowboy, once the terror of the Indians, and Tiger Tail the chief. Mr. Addison told us how in the fights they often ran short of bullets, how they looked in the mouths of dead Indians and supplied themselves, for the Indian dropped his bullet from mouth to muzzle as he loaded, no time to reach for them by hand; how the Cracker cowboys fought for their stock, slaves and homes and how, when the regulars were repeatedly repulsed, the cowboys came to the rescue, fought the Seminoles in their own way, and to this day the Seminole respects the cowboy if he don’t admire him.

We talked of various affairs of the past. I asked Tiger Tail about the Peter Johnson killing; it occurred on a tract of land now mapped as Ewanton Heights. On the property owned by J.W. Little is a well, and here Peter Johnson made coontie. Tiger said: “Me tell him three days, little moon, Indians fight: you my friend go – go! Johnson laugh; three days me come; Johnson work, make starch; me kill him, he my friend; me kill him quick; Indians take him kill him little bit; me not like that; squaws

hurt him.”* He simply did not want Johnson tortured. After this occurred a detail from Fort Dallas was sent. Buck and another man reported the affair; they were Johnson’s partners; Johnson’s skull was found scalped and taken to Miami.

After this I established a trading post at Fort Dallas, Miami. Old Tiger was one of my best customers. I remember one evening as the sun was setting, he came down the river. I asked him to supper; we retired: I gave him a bed on the floor in my room; he talked with me very freely, told me much of the past; at ten o’clock he said: “Big star get up, chickens holler, me go.” When the morning star rose and the rooster crowed, he would go and he did, and I did not hear him. That night he told me his father assisted General Jackson to defeat Pakenham at the battle of New Orleans. Indians fought on both sides but the Seminoles were with us, he said they never wanted to fight again, squaws and pickaninnies starved, Arkansas too cold, no want to go.

On another occasion he visited me. I went near him and asked him for a piece of his hair; he scowled, was very angry. I told him I wanted it to send away as the hair of a great warrior and chieftan, wanted it to send to good friends. He said “one chalk” (25 cents), and after it made the trip north it came back to me and I have now a lock of old Tiger Tail’s hair—snowy white it is—and a precious relic.

Old Tiger had by his first or old squaw, a son like him in build, but in countenance resembling his mother. He was known as Young Tiger. In 1882, while sailing from Biscayne to Miami I saw a canoe put out from Buena Vista, then Dan Clark’s place; I ordered a luff; one Indian was in the canoe—it was Young Tiger Tail. I asked him aboard. He took my hand and said; “My father, my old man, Old Tiger Tail gone big sleep; no git up no more.” He was all broken up, told me his father had been struck by lightning at his big cypress farm. Soon after that Young Tiger Tail met his death in St. Lucie Sound, and since then, to me, the Seminoles have been different. Tiger Tail was much respected. His say so was conservative he knew the prowess of the whites and told his people of it. Emathlo who succeeded him, is vindictive, a different type from Tiger Tail. I never saw Old Tiger Tail and Young Tiger Tail in company, but I thought of Chinga-Chook and Uncas, Cooper’s heroes, they were the last of the

*Johnson had angered the Seminoles by selling them gunpowder adulterated with ground charcoal. Cecil Warren: “Miami Pioneer Recalls Fights with Seminoles,” *Miami Daily News*, March 29, 1931.

Mohicans and the Tigers are to me the last of the Seminoles. Robert Osceola resembles his uncle, Old Tiger Tail, and Robert was ambitious, but Robert was not popular – and Robert will never be to the Seminoles what the Tiger Tails were.

Old Tiger Tail owned and enjoyed the labor of his slaves up to the time of his death. Mr. Lincoln's proclamation by which he changed the color of many Federal office holders did not reach or effect Tiger Tail. He long after the Southern Confederacy ceased to exist, vindicated State's Rights. The Federal government has placed a monument to Osceola with these words – "Osceola, Seminole Chieftain, Warrior, Patriot." The ex-Confederate States should erect a monument to Tiger Tail. He was the best representative of State's Rights, and to the end defied the strong powers that existed.

About two miles south of Miami on the Brickell property, is a ledge of rocks, among these is a profile rock, and it is a good outline of Old Tiger Tail's face. It should be preserved; it was photographed many years ago. The old man was a type of what we shall not see again. The past of the Biscayne section is fading – as it was and is are quite different things.