

The Seminole Women of Florida

By Mary Barr Munroe

Introduction

By Arva Moore Parks*

Mary Barr Munroe was one of the most interesting and influential women in Miami's early days. She and her husband, Kirk Munroe, renowned author of boys books, moved to Coconut Grove in 1886 where she continued to live until her death in 1922.

Mary Barr Munroe was the daughter of Amelia Barr, who was a famous and prolific writer of romantic novels. Mrs. Barr who penned eighty-eight books, undoubtedly influenced her oldest child's development into an independent and outspoken woman. Feisty and fearless, Mary Barr Munroe was never neutral. She cared deeply about many things and once a supporter never waived in her zeal to convince others to her point of view.

She worked tirelessly to protect the environment. In 1915 she founded the first local chapter of the National Audubon Society in Coconut Grove and became its first president. She helped lead the fight to protect plume birds and went so far as to snatch egret plumes from women's hats and lecture the startled women on what a whim of fashion was doing to the birds of the Everglades. In 1916 she was one of the leaders of a group of women who led the effort by the Florida Federation

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of Women's Clubs to create Royal Palm Park (the first effort to preserve the Everglades).

Mary Barr Munroe also worked diligently to better her community. As a charter member of the Housekeepers Club of Coconut Grove (founded 1891) she was responsible for many important civic projects. She founded the Pine Needles Club for young girls in the community and along with her husband, helped them to establish the first public library in the Miami area.

Kirk and Mary Barr Munroe had a warm, close marriage. She shared his enthusiasm for the outdoors and frequently accompanied him on his trips into the wilderness and around the world. Although she too had writing talents and published many articles under her own name, her chief occupation was as a helpmate to her husband. Although the Munroes never had any children of their own, they were favorites of local children. Every Sunday all the children from the Coconut Grove black community came to their house for storytelling and ice cream. Often she cared for black children while their mothers worked.

The following article is taken from a handwritten manuscript found in the Library of Congress. It is part of a larger work she was probably preparing for publication. Her first hand contact with what Kirk Munroe called "The Forgotten Remnant" gives us a warm and personal view of the Seminole culture. This manuscript, along with forty years of her diaries not only illuminates the late 19th and early 20th Centuries but also reveals the personality of an extraordinary woman — a woman ahead of her time.

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By Mary Barr Monroe

The name Seminole means wanderer or runaway and that explains what they were, although they call themselves "the red men of the peninsula or Long Land." Their history really begins with their separation from the Creeks of Georgia in 1750. When they came to Florida and were joined by other runaways, or wanderers from various tribes, principally the Miccoosoocus, Creek and Tallahassee, they formed a confederacy of Florida. Today there are the Tallahassee, the Big Cypress, the Okeechobee and the Miami bands all known as Seminoles. Living in groups apart, each independent of the other but on friendly relations and with family connections.

The Miami band is the one I know most about, and except for a few tribal differences, principally in form of speech — the result of having descended from various tribes — the bands are all alike in customs.

The Miami Indians of today are the descendants of some half dozen families who escaped to the Everglades at the end of the last Seminole War. At that time, 4,420 Indians were sent out west (370 in one party) and are said to have done better than any other tribe there.

Those refusing to go made a treaty with General Worth to remain South of the Caloosahatchee River. The Miami band is part of those who accepted General Worth's treaty, although their ancestors had at the time escaped to the vast untrodden wilderness of the Everglades and had become in a way a "Forgotten Remnant." They have led an almost ideal life of back to nature until civilization in the form of railroads and land agents took possession of the Long Land.

Some thirty years ago it was estimated that there were about 700 all told. Today there are certainly many less. Whiskey and sickness playing sad havoc among their ranks. Also, their food supply is greatly diminished; the deer is scarce.

Much of the land where they gathered coontie roots is now under cultivation and set in orange groves (not theirs, of course). The fields where they raised corn and potatoes and pumpkins have been homesteaded by the white man and the Indians told to move on. Alligator hides, once a great source of income to them, are no longer fashionable and the white plume hunters had almost monopolized that work even before the law forbid the killing of plume birds.

These Indians have kept their bond with General Worth and have troubled no one — taking care of themselves and living an honest peaceful life with a form of government that recognizes the rights of women, honors old age and family ties. Up to within very recent years there have been no white half-breeds among them and black blood is but one of the gens. As far as is known there is only one black slave, a woman belonging to the Tallahassee group.

Of course a great deal that we know about the Seminoles has been gathered bit by bit and from many sources for very few white men have ever really been in their home places. What may be perfectly correct about the Tallahassee group may not tally with something someone knows of the Big Cypress camps or the Miami band.

The gens of the tribe or confederacy are the Tiger, the Wolf, the Wind, the Bird, the Snake and the Otter. The Alligator gen, a large and powerful one, went at the end of the war to the western reservation and are among the most successful tribes there.

Geneology is traced through the mother, the children belong to her and to the gen or clan she represents. The mother rules the household and where there is more than one squaw, it is the old one whose word is law. The older squaws do all they can to protect the young prospective mothers. The children are taught strict obedience and respect for parents, and for the aged people of the camp.

Two women once spent the morning with me: both had children and although one saw the other's little one destroying some flowers that she had corrected her own for touching a few moments before, not one word would she say to either the children or their mother, who happened to be attending to a cut foot, (as they wear no shoes and had walked many miles that morning). The men would have interfered, but not the women.

I have seen the most perfect delight in a mother at any praise bestowed on her baby, change at once into dignified resentment at the mention of herself or anything she had on. They dislike to be touched, and they never touch anything without permission, but would point to it.

When a squaw is too old to work she is taken care of first by one camp for so long a time and then by another irrespective of family ties and she is provided with every comfort possible. This is the case also with men. I remember seeing "Old Alec" when he was said to be over a hundred years old and no human being could have been better cared for. I also saw the signal smoke announcing his death to the various bands.

It is only a few years ago since "Big Charlie" and his family camped on our front lawn. They were on their way to the Big Hunting Ground, now called Cutler, and stopped for the night to deliver some deer skins Mr. Munroe had ordered from Charlie's squaw the year before. I watched them make camp. Big Charlie and his eldest son cut the wood for the fire and pumped the water and carried some of the outfit up from the wharf where their canoes were. Then Big Charlie took the baby from its mother's arm and crooned to it as he walked back and forth while she cooked supper. After supper they all came into the house to spend the evening during which Big Charlie discovered among other curious things decorating our sitting room wall a long bladed knife of some western tribe. Taking it from its rattlesnake sheath he stepped into the middle of the room and delivered a speech or recited some tradition of the tribe that kept us spellbound for nearly half an hour, although we understood not a word of what he was saying. Suddenly, he stopped, his squaw giving a sign as he returned the knife to its sheath, and turning to me, he said "Thank You."

His squaw surrounded by her children listening to him made a

picture never to be forgotten. I noticed the next morning that the squaw carried away a small piece of one of the burnt logs of their campfire of the evening before.

The boy who helped his father cut the wood and carry things was killed in Miami in 1907, by the train and was the first of the Miami Indians to receive white man's burial. His father, when talking of him, spoke with the greatest pride and tenderness of his "good boy."

A brave may not marry in his gen but he may have as many wives as he can provide for. An old settler tells the story of Big Head Tiger. "I found Big Head Tiger talking to a pretty young Indian girl. I asked Young Tiger what it meant and he answered, 'Big Head Tiger want to catch young squaw.'"

"Who's squaw is that?" I said, pointing to a woman standing near.

"Big Head Tiger's old squaw, not like it."

There stood a pathetic group in bronze — the maiden and man and the unwilling old woman. It is needless to say that Big Head Tiger got the young squaw.

Old Jumper, one of the war chiefs, told me that he had "old squaw, half-old squaw and young squaw." But there is no intermarrying. The young people must be of different gens or families. Last summer one of the Big Cypress men seduced a near relative. When it became known a council was held and he was ordered shot after the green corn festival. There are two other important cases but the men in both instances were white. In the first the squaws of the women's gen killed both mother and child. In the second, which happened only a few years ago, the squaws of the gen pulled out every hair of the girl's head, thereby disgracing her for life. They threw the poor little half-breed baby into the palmettos for the buzzards to eat. A white woman living near Fort Myers told me that this squaw whom she knew, was allowed by the gen to marry again and that she now has two children but that she is the most unhappy looking creature. Perhaps the cry of her baby still haunts her and it was not her fault.

The domestic life of these people of the Everglades is a very busy, happy one. Their permanent or established homes are (or have been) on the keys or islands in the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp where there are several villages, and the very few white people who have seen them say they are well kept according to the Indian's means. The women pride themselves on their cooking and are just as much slaves to wash day as their white sisters.

Four or six families form a camp under one head as for instance

“Jimmie Doctor’s Camp,” “Tom Tiger’s Camp,” or “Miami Billy’s Camp.” Each family in the camp has its own palmetto thatched hut although some of them are now shingled. The floor is always raised some two or three feet above the ground and covered with deer skins. Three sides of the hut are left open for light and air but provided with canvas or bagging curtains to keep out the wind and rain. Once a day in their permanent homes every member of the camp indulges in a bath in the pool which is always to be found in their Everglades established homes.

Meals are served as a rule at regular hours and the members of the camp are sometimes called to dinner by ringing of the camp bell. But the sofkie pot is always full and ready for the belated ones. The men are served first then the women and children and then the dogs. One of the best stews I ever tasted I got in Cypress Tiger’s Camp made by his young squaw. It was Indian sofkie and was made of sweet potatoes, venison, onions, rice and I do not know what else — seasoned to a turn. I was enthusiastic enough then to follow Indian custom in eating it, so I did not hurt my Seminole hostess’ feelings although she insisted on my eating when my husband did. In another camp we were served with little cakes made of coontie root and mashed sweet potatoes fried to a turn. No white housekeeper could have shown more anxiety to please or have been more pleased than Miami Billy’s squaw was at our appreciation of her sweet potato biscuit.

I have a corn sifter made of seeds which was bought from the squaw who was using it when we reached her camp, and who very reluctantly let me have it in exchange for two dollars and a new wire one that I had provided myself with as a possible gift. The corn is broken first by pounding and then sifted for either flour or grits.

Once on a visit to Miami Billy’s Camp—as proud a young Indian as ever wore a turban—we found him busy doing work which he knew was his squaw’s. He did not stop, or seem the least embarrassed. “My squaw sick,” was his courteous explanation.

Some years ago a little girl said to me when she heard I was coming to Florida and would see Indians, “Won’t you be afraid of squaws and Indian chiefs?”

“Why?” I asked.

She answered, “They are so wild.”

But I said, “Would you be afraid of a little Indian girl?”

She thought a moment and said, “No, I would talk to her.”

Remembering my little friend’s advice I talked to the first squaw I saw as hard and fast as I knew how and although she listened to me most attentively, I never got one word from her in reply.

A year later I met her again in her own home on the bank of the Miami and found out that she had never seen but two white women before. I was a curiosity. The first time we visited the camp where this squaw was, every woman and child disappeared into the bushes. That was many years ago. The squaw was a handsome woman with the most musical voice and really fine manners. She was killed while trying to protect her husband from the attack of a crazed Negro by putting herself in front of her chief and receiving the stab that was intended for him. I have a basket that she made for me and a silver ornament she sent too.

"My squaw, your squaw, no money." The words came in clear silvery tones and glancing through my open window to the far corner of the piazza I saw that the speaker was a tall and fine looking young Seminole brave who was in the act of handing to my husband a silver ornament of the kind I had seen the Seminole Indian women wearing. I knew better than to appear upon the scene as much as I wanted to, until I was called. That would not have been Indian etiquette, besides which I was enjoying the picture that these two Americans were making for me as they stood exchanging courtesies in the blaze of the afternoon sun as it sifted through the branches of the pomegranate and guava trees near by. Both tall, straight and fine looking, the Indian wearing a costume that would have rivaled the most brilliant of tropical sunsets in fine contrast to the white clothes of the other American.

In a few moments I was called as I knew I should be to receive the gift that my squaw friend had sent me in return, I suppose, for a lot of odds and ends from my work basket that I had given her a few weeks before.

The young chief smiled at my very clumsy attempt to fasten the trinket to my waist and finally offered to show me how but waited for my permission to do so. I do not wear the gift everyday but I always try to appear with it when any of our Indian friends visit us, and it always commands attention, especially from the women and some of them can tell me who sent it to me.

I heard a pathetic story the other day of a squaw who had allowed her baby to be photographed by a young woman at whose home the squaw had often visited on the way from the camp to Miami. The baby died last summer and the girl who took the picture offered it to the mother to keep. But she would not take it but instead makes special trips to look at it long and lovingly.

The women are treated unusually well. They work, it is true, but they are always considered and in many cases dearly loved. The young Indian boy who was sent a few years ago from Florida to the Indian

school at Carlisle gave his chief excuse for deserting and coming back — his great longing to see his mother and sister. These red men have a great affection for their sisters and have been known to really sacrifice a good deal for them. They are proud of them and never lose a care for them. One handsome young Seminole drew my attention to his sister, a girl of sixteen with fine eyes by saying "Heap pretty, my sister."

Perhaps as good an illustration of what's mine is my own in connection with each one's possessions was told to me by a friend who was present. An Indian called at a wayside cottage and asked for dinner which he wished to pay for. The mistress of the house asked him where his squaw was and if she was not coming for her dinner. "No," he answered, "my squaw, no money, no eat get camp." He had fifty cents for his dinner but she had spent all of her money in town and was waiting patiently by the roadside until he was ready to continue their journey. It is needless to say that a plateful of dinner was furnished by the white woman for the squaw in spite of her saying, "No money, no got."

The money a squaw makes by tanning deer skins, raising vegetables or chickens to sell is her own and she may do as she pleases with it. I have been told by the merchants of Miami that the squaws are far more prudent in how they spend their money than the men.

The squaw's principal bit of household pride is the wooden sofkie spoon and each gen has a different shaped spoon. Some have a long bowl, some a short round one, and often the handles are carved. It is used not only to stir the sofkie stew while it is cooking but to eat it with. Each member of the family taking his or her turn. Etiquette demands that only one helping be taken at a time and then the spoon is passed to the next on the right. Many of the spoons now used are manufactured ones coming from Connecticut but the real Indian sofkie spoon is made of guava wood.

Not long since I saw two squaws cooking over an out of door fire and they were very much amused at me for wanting to know what was in the pots they were watching so carefully. One pot was covered with a large cabbage leaf and when I asked what was in the pot the older woman lifted the cover and showed me green bananas steaming.

At the death of a husband, the wife pulls her hair over her face and wears it in that way for a year. At the death of a squaw the husband can not hunt for four days and removes his neck handkerchief and his turban for four moons.

"Co-na-waw?" the question came in a soft musical voice as a small brown hand almost but not quite touched the string of beads about my

neck. The speaker was a Seminole Indian squaw who had been attracted by the bright red and gold string beads which I wore. They were nothing more or less than a native wild bush bean strung with gold glass beads that I had persuaded a black woman from the Bahamas to give me in exchange for a blue and white gingham dress. I took them from my neck and put them about the squaw's. They were long enough to hang outside of the yards and yards of glass beads that she wore. She never for a moment doubted but that I meant she should keep them as I did. She told me she was young Tigertail's squaw. I had once seen her in her Everglades home and while I had forgotten or did not know her, she remembered me.

"Okeechobee squaw?" she asked, that being the name given to my husband by his Indian friends.

We exchanged courtesies and then picking up the package of cloth she had been purchasing, for we had met in one of the department stores of Miami, she said, "Hie-pus," (I go), and was gone.

Why she coveted the beads was a question, for she owned and wore more beads—glass beads of many colors than I had ever seen at one time. I afterwards learned that "Ma-ki," for that was her name, had 200 strings that filled, when taken off, a six quart measure and these she wore most of the time.

"Heap beads, heap good squaw," so they say. So we know a Seminole woman's standing by her beads. They are in a way to her what a wedding ring is to the white woman. The primitive standard of value among the Seminoles is suggested by their word for money—"Teat-to-co-na-wa." "Conawa" means beads, and "teato," while it is the word for iron and metal, is also the name for stone. So teat-to-co-na-wa means stone beads and they were the primitive money.

Varnassi Jimmy had one string 80 yards long that weighed nearly twenty-five pounds. The women care much more for beads than the silver ornaments fashioned from silver 25 cent pieces and half dollars. There is also a fashion in the beads worn. One year they will be a majority of green and another blue but they must be of good quality and matched as to size and shape.

At the death of a squaw her beads are buried with her but her silver ornaments belong to her family. When a squaw passes middle life she begins taking off her beads and by the time she reaches very old age and has to be cared for she wears but one string made of the life beads, and this is buried with her. But the old squaws are of late years imitating their white sisters in demonstrating that there is no old age. I saw not long ago

a very old squaw with many strings that must have weighed pounds but she was not helpless therefore not old.

They do not wear all their beads at home but never appear without some. When a baby girl is a year old she is given a string of beads — among which is the life beads of a different color from the rest — usually white. Every year a string is added until the girl is going to be married then she takes off all but six strings and the discarded beads are put into a jar and buried — all but the life beads which have been taken from the strings. They believe that if the beads are scattered the girl will be ill and have no children.

Once when “Snake Creek Charlie” and his squaw came to Coconut Grove they were invited to see a two-day-old white baby and were told that it was a little girl. The squaw took from her neck a string of beads and presented it to the mother, this being the greatest mark of respect she could possibly show — as every Indian mother is allowed an extra string at the birth of a child.

I have in my possession a baby’s first string showing the life bead and one of the the last strings worn by an old squaw who took them off when she found the “long sleep” overtaking her. The Indian left them believing she would come for them and I expect their disappearance confirmed the belief. There must be something about a dead woman’s beads that they fear or respect for no squaw will touch them. Perhaps the life beads have something to do with the feeling.

The string I have is very old and shows years and years of wear. The beads are also old fashioned. It used to be that large beads were the ones mostly desired but I have noticed on several squaws lately that strings of small beads are worn on top of the large ones. Anyway, as long as the Seminole squaw owns and wears “Co-na-wa” she will be “Heap good squaw.”

The Seminole women of today are far more responsible for the good or evil in the tribe than ever and it will be through them that the government and church must reach the tribe. They are always taken into the council meetings and their advice is respected if not obeyed. A few years ago a young man stepped beyond the Seminole law and went to live with a white family. He was repeatedly warned to return. At length when all else failed to bring him back, he was promised the daughter of Charlie Osceola for a wife. No Indian girl in all the nation could boast of the beauty of “Nan-ces-a-wee” and who could refuse such a prize. He returned and is happy today in his forest home with the “Belle of the Nation,” who is also noted for her wisdom.