

SEMINOLE INDIAN LIFE

In the Everglades and Big Cypress of
FLORIDA

So little is known of the life of the Seminole Indians of Florida, that additional information is very welcome. Capt. George W. Storter, who lived at Everglades, Florida, for the past thirty-five years, has perhaps, been in closer contact with the Seminole Indians (unless it be Mr. Brown of Imokalle) than any other person. The Seminoles have traded with Mr. Storter through these years. He perhaps knew more Seminole Indians by sight and name than any man now in Florida, and was greatly esteemed by them.

Capt. J. F. Jaudon of Miami, Florida, collaborates with Capt. Storter in this story, in which is briefly outlined some of the Seminoles' customs.

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"Seminole Indian girl is a charge. If her father and mother dies, then the nearest kin takes her. A girl marries sometimes at fifteen years of age, but generally from twenty to twenty-five; in the case of Charley Tigertail, his wife was about thirty.

Each male Seminole Indian who is the elder of his race--the camp is considered his camp. His own daughters live with him. They do not leave the camp. Brides live in the camp as long as the mother and father live. If the mother dies, the eldest girl stays with her father. The boys go into other camps and remain in the camp of the girls they marry. If the father and mother both die, then how does the camp disintegrate? It breaks up. They go out and establish camps of their own. Both have children coming along.

No Indian owns anything on the community plan. Everything is owned by some individual Indian. There is no collective ownership. Anything that you see is not owned by the Indians collectively, but by some individual Indian.

When an Indian man dies, the wife goes into mourning for one year. She takes off her beads and takes down her hair and wears no colors but black and she does not change clothing until it drops off. She wears her hair down during the entire year. After the year is up, she can trip up herself some more and get on the carpet again for another husband. During this time she shows dejection and looks sad. She stays in the camp and isolates herself. If an Indian woman dies, are her belongings buried with her?--which is the instance when the man dies. They prepare her for burial with three day's rations. An Indian woman owns only her clothing. When a wife dies, her husband goes into a spell of mourning but this does not last so long as when the husband dies--he only mourning for four months. He must not change shirts and he must not look into the face of a white man, nor go to the store for four months. After that he isolates himself as much as possible and has as little communication with others as possible. When a man dies, he has all of his possessions buried with him--knives, gun, etc, and three day's rations. They go back to the grave and weep and mourn for three days, then they never go there any more. The third day he rises and goes on--starts on his journey to the "Happy Hunting Ground", "Hopie" --way yonder across prairie. Over there there is a river to cross--this river is crossed by a slick foot log. If he has been a good Indian and lived right according to the rules and regulations of the camp, he goes across without any trouble. If he has not been a good Indian, then there is a big alligator there to eat him up, and if alligator does not want to eat up the Indian and he can swim across, a big bird comes down and catches him and he goes on to see "Happy Hunting Ground." When an Indian is asked what they do over there, he says "All same here-- skin alligators, coons, otter." Who buys them--"George Storter--he buy him--he be there." An Indian only prays for temporal things. When asked about hunting trip of two or three days an Indian will say "Echo no find him or find him ojus" as the case may be.

When there is little water in the Everglades, an Indian will say "little bit water--want to get my canoe out-- me talk big spirit. Get plenty rain ojus, get canoe out."

During the three days watch when an Indian dies, they can see smoke, as though it were spirit and they hear the dead Indian shout and he is "hyepus" to happy hunting ground.

No Indian is ever so old but that he is the head of his camp. No matter if all his children and grand children have died, he is still the head of this camp. There are--

Dr. Tigers camp. Tommie Jimmie. Billie Buck and Abraham Lincoln's camp. The latter named is about thirty years old. At these various camps--many of which you and I have visited, we found them equipped to live without any communication with the outside world for months and months. In other words, they have their store houses full of corn, pumpkins, potatoes, etc, and they have their cane fields, from which they make syrup.

When an Indian goes out to the Everglades hunting alligators, where there are no fish, game, nor deer, he starts from the camp with a quantity of kumptie flour and cabbage palmetto buds. These palmetto buds they soak in water and boil, and they resume their natural flavor and delicacy. In other words, the Seminole Indian developed dehydration hundreds of years ago. They dry sweet potatoes and other vegetables.

Alligator hunts in Everglades. They hunt where they have to walk from alligator hole to alligator hole--which are in soft spongy places and in the sawgrass, where they sometimes find five or six alligators in one hole. They dry the hides and store them on trellis or scaffolds and in the wet season they follow the trails back and take up the hides. Each Indian keeps the pelts he collects. If one Indian kills one alligator and one kills ten, they do not divide up.

If a man--either Indian or white man, approaches an Indian camp while there are only squaws in the camp, and the Indian "boys" are gone hunting or elsewhere, the squaws behave in rather a novel manner. They will not even speak to a man unless they know him personally. They give no information as to the direction the Indian boys have gone, nor their expected arrival back to camp. In fact, they will give no information nor accept any information, and they resent anyone talking to them. Now, the reason for this is that the women must be isolated so much in camp and they must not even look upon or even talk to a man unless the men of their own camp are with them.

Camp life and cooking. Where there are as many as four families they have a thatched roof and have a scaffold about three feet off the ground, where they sleep, and have all their paraphenalia and household goods stored overhead. Then they have a common cooking arrangement. They cut the wood and lay it in the shape of a wagon wheel and where the hub would naturally be, the fire is started, which burns constantly with very little wood being consumed, as the wood is pushed in. There are some fifteen or twenty logs in the circle and usually they are logs from ten to fifteen feet long, and when the log is entirely consumed, it is replaced by a new log. They conserve on wood in this way and it makes a good place to set the pots. Each family cooks separately, all of the food except the "sofkee" which is made out of yellow corn meal which the Indian women grind in pestles which they make from wood, and also make the wood mortars. About one quart of this meal is placed in two gallons of water--sometimes three, and boiled until it becomes a paste. Often bacon and meat is added, but generally this is not done. The sofkee is eaten from a large wooden spoon, which is passed from one person to another. It is a large wooden spoon which holds about one gill.

Their sleeping arrangements are wooden benches hewn from cypress or pine timber built about three feet from the ground, on which are spread colored blankets. Over this they put up their mosquito nets. They more often sleep without mosquito nets than with them. When not in use the mosquito nets and other paraphenalia are neatly and carefully wrapped and stored in under the roofs of the thatched house. Many times you could go into camps where there are no Indians in sight and see hundreds of packages of bed and clothing wrapped and stored in the rafters, with absolutely no protection. Indians when they travel from point to point often "cache" their belongings by building up above any possible dampness from the ground and store their extra belongings and food and ammunition and cover them with tarpaulin or palmetto leaves, and leave them absolutely unprotected for weeks and in instances for months.

The Seminole Indian has not stopped using bows and arrows yet. They economize

on ammunition by using the bow and arrow whenever possible, especially when shooting fish in shallow water.

Indians are not afraid of snakes, and are many times bitten by snakes--particularly rattle snakes and cotton mouth moccasins, but seldom does a bite prove fatal. The more times they are bitten, the more immune they become. The first time is the serious time, and they are sometimes sick for four or five weeks. Second time, five or six days and the third time about two days. Fourth time just like bee sting. They do not fear snake bites. Indian said a long time ago that "old rattle snake not have teeth" and that bad Indian who met old rattle snake with some picanninnies and he kill 'em. "Old rattle snake cry ojus about three days and she tell big Chief bad Indian kill her picanninnies. Indian said to her "alright, I give you some teeth--you bite him next time. Indian no kill you, you no bite Indian". Charlie Tigertail was bitten. Some Indians have been bitten as many as seven times by moccasins. He was cured by Indian medicine man, Tommy Osceola, treating him.

Indians carry along a cork with some needles in it. He scratches his legs when he gets too hot and lets out the bad blood. He also carries a panther claw and scratches the affected place until it bleeds, then he uses some spittle and rubs it and immediately it gets well. Then he carries an owl's claw which he uses for head aches, and he carries squirrel claws which he scratches his back with for back aches, and he has claws for various other pains. Every one is for a particular remedy. One of the Indian doctor's methods is bleeding--he scratches about thirty places, sometimes letting out about a pint of blood. Scientific dieting and some wild fowl such as duck are used. He will not let them eat hog meat or beef or anything like that, nor will he let them look on a white man.

The epidemic of measles, which covered a period of ten years. This disease has been more fatal to them than any other disease excepting flu. Measles affected the Indians so seriously until it cut down the birth rate and consequently the population of the Seminole Indian has decreased rather than increased. Some people also attribute the decrease in population to the bad effects of measles, but Capt. Geo. Storter is of the opinion that the Seminole Indian has had his home in former years on higher and more elevated areas around Devil Garden, Immokalee and the Caloosahatchee River and the higher areas on the east coast border, but as the white man has populated the state, he has retreated to lower and more insanitary areas.

Each Indian camp has a number of oxen, which they use if the country will warrant transportation by that means. They also have pigs, hogs, chickens, etc, and each camp is fully supplied--in fact, I venture to say that no Indian camp in Florida, that has been established for a longer period than a year, but has a full supply of live stock; and they usually have a well in some place that is insanitary, consequently fatalities have been great among the young, especially among the girls; being less among the boys, as when they get large enough they accompany the father or brother on the hunts, where conditions are more sanitary. More fatalities have occurred among Seminole Indians of Florida from influenza in the Fall of 1918 and Spring of 1919, than any other class of population of the United States, for the reason that they did not know how to combat this terrible complaint, as it appeared to them to be a combination of pneumonia and diphtheria, and an Indian affected seldom survived more than three or four days. The influenza epidemic left as its mark, dozens of Indian graves around Turner River, Allen River and the Big Cypress country. As one visits the Indian camps now they notice more Indian babies and small children than at any period for the past twenty years, which perhaps, you can attribute to the sanitary conditions becoming better by reason of the country being drained and more elevated than in former years.

The dress of the Seminole Indian is so distinctive that it needs no explanation, but the shirts worn by the men, as well as the skirts worn by the women are made from bright colored calico--which is purchased by Mr. Storter, and from other traders whom they know supplied the very best quality of goods--calicoes which would not fade. The predominating colors used by the Indians are red, yellow, orange, black, blue and white. Seldom do they use modifications of these colors. Each camp has its distinctive dress and Indians from one camp to another can easily distinguish to what camp each Indian belongs. Each camp belongs to a clan--Bird, Otter, Panther or some beast or bird, and each order is patterned along lines of secret societies. They are able to know what clan each belongs to. The women, in addition to wearing a skirt, wear a blouse which is open at the waist, but over which a hood reaches from the shoulders to below the waist line, which gives freedom to the arms. The beads worn by the Seminole Indian are not of their own make. They are purchased from the Indian traders in large quantities and are traded to the various women and children of the camps; but Indian women cannot wear beads except as described by their station in life.

The beads worn by the Seminole Indian indicates the prosperity of the woman wearing the same. The colors no doubt the clan to which she belongs. Although this over-abundance of beads is often noted on squaws much younger--which clearly indicates prosperity.

All the sewing on the clothes worn by the Seminole Indian is done by the women of the camps on up-to-date, modern sewing machines. There was a time, when travel from place to place was difficult that they purchased hand sewing machines. In other words, the machine was placed on a table and worked by hand power, but as methods of transportation have improved, one can go into almost any Seminole Indian camp and find a standard Wilson, Singer, King or any of the modern sewing machines. The work done by these women is extremely neat and in the instance of making a skirt that flares from the waist line to the hem, the pieces must of necessity be cut longer and longer, as you leave the waist line to the hem, and many modern seamstresses would be at a loss to make a skirt or Indian dress with lines so precise as in the instance of the Indian dress. The bodice or hood is usually made of any material which is durable--sometimes being plain pieces of colored calico. The Indian women are very careful of their hair--washing same frequently and braiding same carefully at all times. The Indian men have their hair cut almost "Buster Brown" fashion--in front it is long but trimmed closely from the neck up to the ears. It is a remarkable fact that the Indians are as a race, comparatively free from vermin--showing that they must exercise extreme care of their persons or such would not be the instance. Even bed bugs are seldom found in the camps, and when found the camp is immediately moved. Mr. Storter says that he has never known them to have vermin except fleas, which of course breed in the sand. The Indian is very careful not to expose his person. A great many people have the idea that because the Seminole man wears a one piece shirt which reaches to about the knees and that the Seminole women wear bodices reaching only from the neck to the waist line that they are inclined to be immodest. Mr. Storter and myself both say that from our many visits to numbers and numbers of Indian camps, we have never seen a naked Seminole man or woman. This of course does not apply to the Indian children. There may be some instances where they have been observed but the Indian was certainly unaware of the fact that the eyes of anyone were upon him. They carry this practice so far that those who have traveled with Indians in the Everglades and into Big Cypress country, say that when taking a bath in a river or canal or stream, they go overboard with their shirt and clothes on, and make a dual operation of washing their clothes and themselves at the same time. Few of the Seminoles have adopted the white man's wearing apparel. Willie Willie, being a noted exception with headquarters at Mimi. Indians have when making long walks and tramps with white men, sometimes adopted the blue or brown denim shirt or overalls, but still wears the native shirt. The Cow Creek Indians which are really tribes of the Seminole, if you can call the Seminole Indians a tribe at all, for they are descendants of the western Indians who were deported into Florida or who migrated here--being off-shoots of the Choctaws, Cherokees and Muskogees, first settling at Appalachicola, and were designated by their parent tribes as "Seminoles" -- which word means "run away". This Cow Creek Indian tribe has adopted wearing the hard derby hats and vests, although they still retain the typical Indian shirt. The Cow Creek Indians unquestionably have communications with the Big Cypress Indians and they no doubt have representatives at the Green Corn Dances from each of the branches of the tribes. The Cow Creeks speak the original Seminole language or Muskogee language. The Green Corn dance of the Seminole Indian is hold every year during little moon in June; on which occasion the Indians who have prepared new dresses, shirts and other raiment gather and give thanks to the "Great Spirit" for preserving them during the year past and by their council which is presided over by their medicine man, adjust wrongs, pay tribute to those who have died during the preceding year, celebrate such marriages as may have been consummated during the interval, by proper ceremonies, punish those Indians who have violated camp rules and laws. In many instances they have condemned men and women to death who perpetrated crimes which were not permitted by their laws. Individual instances could be given of these, but with the general public advised of such instances, they would no doubt make reference to them around Seminole Indians, and it is a custom that they resent the white man's interrogation or question of their laws.

The Seminole boys and girls have very few playthings. The boys early in life leave off playing with toys; the girls have few play things. About twenty years ago, a Convention of Doll Land was held in New York City and Capt. Geo. Storter was requested by the lady who was conducting same, to furnish specimens of dolls made by the Indians (Seminoles) and upon inquiry from them, they said "sometime we make 'em, but think so make 'em dolls, Indian get sick" but Mr. Storter prevailed upon them to make specimens of Indian dolls, which were exhibited at this Doll Land Convention and they are still on exhibition there. There are only two Seminole Indians who are making these dolls--specimens of which were brought back by visitors to the camp. The body of the doll is made of a piece of cypress or other soft material and the face is sculptured out with an ordinary pocket knife.

The black dye illustrates the hair, eyes and ears of the doll, and are dyes which cannot be easily removed. It would be well for the dye makers of the country to investigate their process. Mr. Storter succeeded in having a Seminole Indian make a small canoe with the Indian chief standing erect therein, properly gowned in his vari-colored shirt, with his squaw seated in the bottom of the canoe, each of whom are dressed in typical Indian garb. A specimen of this product has been on exhibition at Knights and Walls store in Tampa.

The United States Government has done very little for the Seminole Indian--in fact they resent any help from the government. Bishop Gray, while in cooperation with Dr. Brecht, established at Imokalee a saw mill and with the cooperation of Florida women, such as Minnie Moore Wilson, established what is known as "Glades Cross Hospital." This institution was maintained but they had so few patients, not having had the cooperation of the Indians, that it was deemed advisable to treat such Indian patients as might need help, at Fort Myers. The idea of the Department of Indian Affairs was in establishing a saw mill at Imokalee, that they could get the Indians to work at a stipulated sum per day sawing lumber for themselves for their houses, but the Indians much preferred their Indian huts and shanties, and would not use the lumber produced therefrom. This saw mill was abandoned and sold, and since the death of Bishop Gray, there has been more or less missionary work done among the Seminoles. Indian Commissioner Doan, Lucien A. Spencer, has his headquarters now at Fort Myers and is making an honest, conscientious effort to obtain the full confidence of the Seminole Indians which was also attempted by Commissioner Brandon who filled a vacancy created by Doan Spencer's absence as Captain of 124th Inft. when same went over seas. An effort was made to establish a community stock store at or near the Indian reservation east of Imokalee, but the government does not seem to understand that the Indian will not own anything collectively--that what he has is his own, and what he does not own is the property of someone else, and they religiously and conscientiously live up to this axiom. The Missionaries tried to establish churches in the 'Glades, but as fast as churches were erected in one locality the Indians immediately migrated therefrom. This is no criticism on the missionary work done for the Seminole Indians, but simply illustrates the prejudice of the Seminole Indian towards the things which civilization recognizes as essential to his spiritual and material welfare.

When Deep Lake Railroad was built from Everglades to Deep Lake Grove-- a distance of about twelve and one-half miles, Seminole Indians were employed to cut the ties and deliver same to the tract--which they did in a workmanlike manner. An instance was recalled by Capt. Storter, when seven or eight Indians were employed on this job, cutting a certain number of ties, one morning he found that the Indians had all disappeared except one, who on being questioned, said--"think one Indian boy go for squaw. Another Indian boy he go to kill echo (deer). Another Indian boy, think so, him go get..." and various and devious reasons were given for the absence of the rest of the camp.

The Indian's attitude towards whiskey or fire water is illustrated by a recent remark of a very prominent Seminole Indian who said "Think so white man many years make whiskey and sell 'em whiskey to Indian. Now Indian make 'em whiskey and sell back to white man. What white man think?"

The Indian's method of transportation is limited to three modes---1. The Indian

canoe, which is used among the Ten Thousand Islands and on the several and various trails through the Everglades, which in recent years are practically of no service to the Seminoles, as drainage operations have made same impassable by reason of lack of practically any water. 2. The ox cart, which the Indian uses in the country from the western border of the Everglades to Fort Myers and among the pine lands and prairies and cypress strands in southern Lee and northern Monroe County. 3. Walking, which is done by trail from camp to camp--which trails the average person would not notice unless he was familiar with Indian customs.

The Seminole Indian like all other American Indians requires the squaw or woman to carry the bulk of the burden when they are on a walk from camp to camp, or from trading point to their own camp. The men always carry the rifles, however, being ready to kill anything in the way of game that presents itself to his eagle eye.

The Indian boys or braves, when about fifteen years of age, are required to brand themselves on the fore-arm with a live coal and his shrinking from the pain is watched with keen interest by the Indians of his clan or camp. There

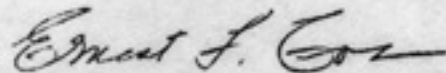
are instances where one will note the brands on each of the fore arms of Indians, which might indicate anything.

The punishment prescribed by the Council ranges from death down to a penalty so light as lacerating the limbs with sharp thorns or other sharp pointed instruments--claws, etc.

The Seminole Indians during the past years have a queer tradition of the great World war. They said "think so American boys go across ocean to France, bring back fight with them. Think so north wind blow fight down south to Seminole Indian." To off-set this scourge, the medicine man had all the Seminole Indian men called together and administered them a severe purge and three days later repeating this severe treatment until the medicine man was fully satisfied that the scourge of fight brought from the "fields of Flanders" by our soldier boys and wafted South by the winds had been entirely removed from the systems of the Seminoles in Florida."

The above descriptions are from the original notes recently loaned to this Association by Capt. J. F. Jaudon.

(Signed)



Ernest F. Coe, Executive Chairman
Everglades National Park Association
Miami, Florida.

September 16, 1935.
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