

## THE RED MAN OF THE EVERGLADES

An Interview With Jane Brown, the First White Woman  
that Ever Went Among These Indians

(By Lillian Woodworth Robertson)

"I thought they were the best people in the world in their won way when I first came among them--no bad language, no stealing or profanity, busy industrious people--but now, I scarcely know what to say! They, have descended the scale till they have become a people as low as any humans could be." So spoke the quaint little old lady as she sat on her porch and gazed into her old fashioned flower garden, her thoughts going back along the path of the years.

Jane Jernigan Brown, who will be sixty-five in May is of low stature and cheerful mein. She is a mere slip of a woman. There are faint lines in her face that in themselves tell a story. Almost from youth, her life has been a fight in the fastnesses of nature and the fight has left its scars. She bears the distinction of being the first white woman who ever went among the Seminole Indians and up to the present time they come to her and her sons when sickness or trouble overtakes them. Any week and you may find a group of these aborigines camped somewhere near her place. The largest part of her life has been lived in the heart of the Everglades. She knows the Indian of the Big Cypress as no other living person and tell her experiences with the charm of one who has lived them and is happy in her memories. "Mrs. Brown is a native Floridian. She came to Ft. Myers when but eight years old. Her people and three other families composed the citizenship of that now beautiful little city. "Only two families," says Mrs. Brown "could see each others houses and the entire view was weed and underbrush. Later my grandfather grew corn and water-melons in a field that is now the business center of Ft. Myers. We got our supplies by sail boat from Key West, ground our own meal and grits on a hand mill."

Her association with the Indians began with her marriage at the age of fifteen, to W. H. Brown who at that time was beginning to make trips into the Everglades and Big Cypress country trading with the Indians. They continued to live at Ft. Myers until she had become the mother of two children, but in 1835, with a four ox team and wagon moved their belongings to within two miles of the place now called Immokalee, where they built a palmetto camp and later a log house. From this point they would go to the Indian settlements, buying alligator and otter hides and trading them food, blankets, beads, etc. These trips would consume about eight or ten days. Some of the Indians would always follow them home and two or three stayed around them most of the time.



### The Red Man of the Everglades (Cont.)

Later and for a period of seven years they camped right among the Red Men, at a point called Boat Landing some distance below Immokalee. There they built a little store and camp which were high from the ground because of the water that covered the Everglades in rainy season. The oes up under the little platform which answered for a porch. It took five days to go from here to Miami in a dugout canoe, the only possible mode of travel, and the Indians frequently made the trip to bring back salt or other necessities for their white neighbors. Mrs. Brown showed me a picture taken back in the eighties, all saw grass with little hammocks here and there and through it a "path" of water. "That" said Mrs. Brown, "was the canoe trail. It was like that all the way between Boat Landing and Miami, tall saw grass and sloughs, and the canoes made those paths through."

"The Indians," she continued smilingly, "were always very kind to me, almost reverential in their manner. They would not allow the children to make noise, used to bring me honey and sugar cane and from the children even to the big men all called me "Mamma". They would follow us around the camp and would walk miles to bring us game, wild meat or anything they knew we cared for. I recall one old Indian named Billie Cornapatchie bringing me a beautiful bunch of bananas one day so large we could just get it into a two hundred pound flour barrel and then it reached out of the top. "My wife wanted it he said. I thought you like it. I tell her bring it you. She say 'Alright'".

"Were you ever afraid?" I asked.

"Only once" she confessed, "did I feel in danger. The Indians had all been drinking and fighting that day. One remained sober and he stayed around me continually declaring he would not let them hurt me. As night came on they gathered around their camp fire. My husband and the sober Indian were keeping watch. Old Motlow, one of the rulers who fought in the Seminole War and an Indian who had never lost his hatred for the White Man skipped away without being noticed. It was perhaps midnight--the children and I were sleeping on scaffolds covered with palmettos. I heard a noise and looked just in time to see Old Motlow climbing up the scaffold to us: in the firelight I could see the gleaming knife in his hand. One scream brought Mr. Brown and the other Indians to our rescue and protection."

Mr. Brown traded the Indians their first sewing machine--it was the one she brought with her--and taught them how to use it. They were quick to learn. Mr. Brown sold them their first shot gun. "They were afraid of it at first" she went on, "but when he showed one of them how to shoot a crow it tickled him to death. They liked it and would



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select their repeating rifles and guns from pictures in catalogues. Would choose cloth from samples--always wanted good things--often one Indian would buy twenty-five or thirty dollars worth of cloth at a time. Beads we secured from New York by the keg and sold in large quantities. Many an Indian would purchase thirty dollars worth at a time for his squaw. We kept eight yoke of oxen on the road hauling supplies from Ft. Myers in the winter season.

For months at a time the Brown children saw no white people other than their parents. Mrs. Brown is the mother of ten children, all but the two oldest having made their appearance into the world right in the heart of the Everglades. Probably they bear the distinction of being the first white children born in this vast fastness of nature. Not until the youngest child was eight years old did Mr. and Mrs. Brown settle at Immokalee and build their present home and store; the town then consisted of six or eight families and is one and a half miles from where the Atlantic Coast Line later built through and where the present town site is located. Mrs. Brown was widowed last July; she with her single daughter, Miss Catherine, and two unmarried sons live at the home place. And by the way these sons are twins, named Sampson and Dewey. Would it be difficult to guess their age?

She tells many interesting incidents of frontier life and with the fascination of a real story teller. One can sit in her presence, and listening, almost lose the trend of time. "They used often to bring me their children to doctor instead of taking them to the medicine man, and once, when the medicine man failed to help, the brother of a sick Indian woman came for me in his canoe. I hesitated. He begged, so pitifully, I finally consented to go and in his joy he threw his bed right out of the canoe onto the sand to make room for me. Another Indian went along as interpreter. The sick Indian was apparently paralyzed. I cured her with a patent medicine, she is living and well today, the mother of six children."

"During the seven years we lived at the Boat Landing the Indians ate dinner with us every Christmas. They would come from the Everglades and East Coast, seventy-five or eighty of them and camp around us for a week or more. We would kill beeves, our boys would hunt wild turkey and deer and we would bake pies and cakes for a wee. And do you know, she said in her motherly fashion, "I made just as good mince and apple pies for those Indians as if I had been baking them for my own family."



### The Red Man of the Everglades (Cont.)

"How many of the Seminoles are left in the Everglades at the present time?" I asked.

"Oh, some people say five hundred but that is wrong--there are not more than seventy five in the Big Cypress and Everglades country. I know, because I could call each one by name. Including those on the East Coast there may be two hundred Seminoles in all, but by the rate they are mistreating themselves there will not be an Indian left six years from now.

She went on to compare the thrifty Indian of her day and the indolent one we have now, and to tell much of their laws and customs. The Indian used every March to plant fields between here and the Glades--on the high places or little hammocks--fields of corn, peas, sugar cane, lima beans, sweet potatoes and pumpkins. It was a law that every Indian who had a squaw must plant a field in the Spring. They also raised hogs and in the winter time hunted wild game. "We have," says Mrs. Brown, "bought as many as fifty hogs at a time from one man." It was also a rule that an Indian must buy his prospective bride blankets, beads and cloth before he could claim her. The picturesque costumes of the Seminoles have always struck my fancy--they are so different from anything else under the sun.

"Tell me," I interrupted, "have they always worn these most unusual dresses?" The men's "shirts" more nearly resemble dresses than any article of apparel. However the styles are in reverse to those of the white race--the men wear theirs to their knees with their bare feet and legs showing, while those of the women sweep the ground. All go barefooted.

"Yes," she smiled, "from my first recollection of them they have dressed just that way. The women wear those full skirts and a tiny short waist with sleeves. To this waist is attached the cape like shawl that they wear and this arrangement leaves bare that narrow strip of skin about the waist which can be observed with all Indian women. This they claim is a law--a punishment for sin handed down to woman from the time of the garden of Eden."

The Indian has always drank whenever he could obtain "fire water" but in these remote sections it was hard to get. Now he has learned to make it and can easily obtain the stuff from bootleggers, who are numerous in this section. He will spend his last cent for liquor, they will all get drunk at once whereas some used to stay sober to take care of the others. When they used to come whooping and yelling

into the Everglades it was only necessary for Mrs. Brown to tell them some of the children were sick and they would go quickly and quietly away. Civilization does not seem in any sense of the word to appeal to the Seminole Indian, he will choose the vices of the white man and refuse to accept his virtues. Their fondness for an old automobile, their indolence and love of liquor is making the Indian of today anything but a desirable citizen.

At the time of the first Lee County Fair, when the red men were invited to go there to feature their native "green corn dance" they sought out Mrs. Brown to inquire if it were alright for them to go, but refused unless her sons go with them. After that they went each year and five years ago drove home their first car; now they can drive an automobile anywhere, drunk or sober, and have among them eight or ten worn out Fords.

Asked if she thought civilization were aiding the Seminoles, Mrs. Brown replied, "To be honest, I do not. He will not accept the worth while things and the others are to his undoing. Where he was humble, industrious, kept a clean camp, was honest and patient with his family and oxen, now he is impudent, lazy, slothful, profane and will steal anything he can get his hands on. He is not an aid to civilization and in the opinion of one who has lived shoulder to shoulder with him for fifty years, the Seminole Indian was better off in his native state than he is today."