

Newspaper syndicate article

A bill is to be introduced in the Florida Legislature, when that body convenes on April 3rd, in which the people of the country are interested. The purpose of the measure is to redeem an obligation, long over due, to the Seminoles, by reserving for their use a sufficient amount of the so-called swamp and overflow land donated to Florida by the United States in 1850.

For years little was known of the Florida Seminoles, who live in the inaccessible Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp, aptly termed "the least known wilderness of America", but it was believed that they were in no danger of being disturbed for some time to come; and it was also understood that the State had made ample provisions for their land needs. As they had always been self-supporting and made no complaint, the policy of the Government was to let them alone.

In passing it may be said that the Seminoles are not decreasing, but are a little more than holding their own. There are 600 of them, all full bloods, scattered in thirty-two small camps or villages, living under very primitive conditions. They are sturdy and fine physical specimens, and are singularly free from tuberculosis and trachoma. Their morals are very high and their code is not to lie, steal or cheat. They have possessed for years practically all the virtues of the white race and very few of the vices. They will, however, indulge in the use of intoxicants when they can get a supply, but if they are going to have a drinking bout, one of them is always elected to be a total abstainer for the occasion.

The efforts being made to reclaim the Everglades (a broad expanse of prairie country covered with water) and the attendant "booming" by land companies and speculators, have materially changed the conditions under which the Seminoles formerly lived. The construction of the various drainage canals have made that part of the State more accessible, and thousands of people have either gone to Southern Florida or invested money in "well-watered" tracts that were offered for sale through the medium of alluring literature.

While the influx of these home-seekers and speculators had the effect of compelling the Seminoles to flee from the approach of the white man's civilization rather than risk a repetition of their bitter experience from previous contact with it, public attention has also been sharply called to the wrongs and neglect from which they have suffered and to the importance,--indeed, the necessity,--of all lovers of justice demanding that the miserable treatment of these "Red Patriots" shall be atoned for in some measure before it is too late.

"Why have the Seminoles of Florida been continually denied homes?" is a query that is being vigorously pressed by a small group of disinterested Floridians who are truly neighbors and friends of one of this most interesting primitive people to be found in any wountry of the globe, and they intend to press it until a satisfactory answer is given.

Beginning with the violation of a flag of truce by the U. S. Army in the capture of Osceola, which was followed by numerous instances of the Government's failure to keep faith with them, the Seminole has resisted the white man's civilization with an intense hatred, fleeing from it as though it were a plague. We

have it from Government sources (report of Inspector A. J. Duncan to the Secretary of the Interior, 1898) that the treaty of 1832 was not made in good faith or with the consent of the Seminole Indians; that it was forced, and "as an act of duplicity and perfidy perpetuated upon them, it will always stand more conspicuous." The same authority adds that "a bloody war followed, lasting seven years, and with the sacrifice of thousand of lives and at a cost of over \$40,000,000."

Following this war a "peace pact" was signed in 1842, and, "by order of the President," certain described lands were set aside for the Seminoles. The Indians were retired to that land. There soon began a series of white encroachments, when it was contended that the agreement of 1842 was only temporary, and the Indians had to move again. They kept their part of the pact, but apparently no permanent plan was substituted for the temporary agreement. When the United States gave to Florida some 5,000,000 acres of so-called swamp and overflow land, no specific provision was made for the Seminoles, although they had undoubtedly acquired a right of occupancy,--as is contended in the report of Inspector Duncan, above referred to.

Florida has admitted this obligation on several occasions, when bills were passed by the State Legislature, in response to public sentiment, setting aside some land for the Seminoles. One act gave them certain described area if "not otherwise appropriated," but it later appeared that every acre of that land was privately owned. Another act authorized the appointment of a commission to select 5,000 acres for the Seminoles, but curiously enough, no funds were provided to pay the expense of that Commission, and consequently nothing was done. Again the legislature

passed an act setting aside about 100,000 acres as a reservation for the Seminoles, but that was vetoed by the Governor because the land was alleged to be worth ten dollars an acre. A little later, however, a prominent citizen of the State bought from the Florida Internal Improvement Fund nearly 60,000 acres of that valuable land for 41 $\frac{2}{3}$ cents an acre.

One hundred thousand acres may seem at first glance, like a large tract for 600 Indians, but when it is considered that at least four-fifths of that land would be most of the time under water, very little is left for home-making and agriculture.

If a strong public sentiment throughout the United States can now be aroused and focused on Florida, with a demand that "bluffing" be stopped and an admitted obligation be satisfied, it is likely that some real and adequate provision will be made for the Seminoles. Of the land turned over to Florida by the Federal Government, about one million acres are yet undisposed of, and it is not too late to secure justice for these Indians.