

CONDITION OF THE FLORIDA SEMINOLES.

FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA.,
March 12, 1917.

The committee met at 9.30 o'clock a. m. at the Indian camp of Tony Tommy, near Fort Lauderdale, Hon. Charles D. Carter (chairman) presiding. Present, also, Congressmen Hayden, Sears, Tillman, Gandy, Hastings, Norton, and Ellsworth.

The CHAIRMAN. The committee will come to order.

This committee is composed of members of the House Committee on Indian Affairs who are members-elect of the Sixty-fifth Congress. They have come to Florida for the purpose of looking into the condition of the Florida Seminoles; of determining, if possible, what is the cause of their present deplorable condition and finding the reason therefor, and suggesting to Congress such remedies as they think proper.

The committee had expected to make a much more thorough investigation than they will be able to make. We had hoped to be able to travel over the Everglades and visit some of the other Indian camps, but on account of the session of Congress which is now called on the 16th of April, and the urgent necessity for visiting some other reservations, our trip will naturally be cut short and we will not be able to see a great many of the things that perhaps we should see in the State.

Mr. Coleman is a special representative of the Indian Bureau, detailed in charge of the Florida Seminoles, and I will be glad for him to make us a brief statement, making such suggestions as may seem proper to him.

Now we will be glad to hear any statement that Mr. Coleman desires to make.

STATEMENT OF MR. W. S. COLEMAN, INSPECTOR, INDIAN SERVICE.

MR. COLEMAN. Mr. Chairman and gentlemen of the committee, for your information and that you may understand me, I beg to say that I am one of the six inspectors in the Indian Service who are the confidential representatives of the Indian Commissioner, Mr. Sells. I was in the State of Oklahoma on the Cheyenne Reservation investigating the Government school and reservation when I was wired to come to Washington for a conference and sent here to take temporarily the place of the regular Indian representative, Mr. Spencer, who is chaplain of the Second Regiment National Guard of Florida, now on his way home to Jacksonville for demobilization; and I presume he will take charge regularly by the 1st of April.

I was requested and instructed by the Indian Office to make a complete survey and such reports as seemed proper to me to the Indian Office of prevailing conditions among the Florida Seminoles.

As you distinguished gentlemen are doubtless aware, until quite recently—two or three years, possibly—in a way official recognition of these Seminoles has never been taken by the General Government, the supervision of the Indian Office being very meager, and with very little provision.

The fiscal year ending June 30, 1917, was provided with an appropriation of \$8,000. This was for the relief of distress and for the cultivation and education of these Seminoles. On my arrival in Florida I immediately took up the work which was assigned me, discretion being largely vested in the representative of the Indian Office, being a new man, and they desiring to get my viewpoint from my angle, aside from any other representative formerly sent here.

I sought out all cases of distress that I could find, and gave immediate relief as to groceries and other provisions. I found all cases of sickness obtaining wherever I could locate them, got a doctor promptly and had the Indian Office pay these doctor and drug bills and supply this maintenance for these cases of distress. If I have overlooked any, it has been because of the meager means of communication with these Indians, but my desire has been always to exercise leniency and liberality on behalf of the Indians rather than restrict my expenditures to anything like economy.

At this particular city, Fort Lauderdale, the Government and these Indians have the distinction of having a corps of young Indians being educated in the white public schools, where there are 400 white children, Tony Tommy, the Indian just on my left, being the most educated and among the most ambitious of his entire tribe in Florida. He is just completing the seventh grade in the public school, and it is said to his credit that he has led every white child in every grade of the Lauderdale public schools, and it is but an evidence of the native intelligence and the mental resource and natural aptitude of the average Florida Seminole.

However, this tribe as a race possibly know less of the English language than any North American Indian, and this particular Indian, when he was first started to school—they had all kinds of trouble with his camp. They threatened to do all kinds of personal violence; the English language and the white man's ways being absolutely under the ban, and it was only much persuasion and the threat that the Government would intercede if they undertook to prevent this boy from going to school that resulted in the relaxation of the Indian ban on English education for the first time in the history of Florida. And they finally granted in counsel—or promulgated rather this unwritten law—that wherever the parents of a child consented thereto, they might go to school without interference or violence at the camp or by the Seminole Indians. And you see before you the most advanced representative of his tribe, who was sent at one time to Carlisle, but on account of the climatic condition and the boy's youth and inexperience he did not stay long. He became homesick; he was sick while he was up there, and I think that unintentionally an error was made in sending him to Carlisle or any other Government school without more primary equipment in the ordinary English language in any public school.

However, it is the hope of the Indian Service that he and his brothers and sisters, as we can persuade them to go to school, may have the advantages of large Government Indian schools elsewhere.

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Now, I will not detain you by a lot of detail which I could go into. You see this camp, gentlemen. It is a typical representative of the Florida Seminole Indian in his native habitat. On democratic equality the chicken and the pig and everybody else has a right to this domain, and there is no exclusion, as you very well see. When they leave camp to go hunting or to visit, the dog and the pigs and chickens are carried with them. That condition obtains in every camp in the State of Florida, and they are scattered from the northern part of Lake Okechobee—Okechobee meaning "big water;" "oke," water; "chobee," big—clear on the east coast down below Miami, across the great watery wastes of the Everglades—everglades is the Indian word meaning "water grass"—to the big cypress country across on the west coast, which is one of the great natural phenomena of America. Conditions over there are exactly as you find this camp, which is a prototype of the Florida Seminoles. You recognize the meager surroundings; the squalid conditions; the need for change and betterment in every respect, and those of you gentlemen who have the honor of living in the great west and come in contact with the Indian can understand the advancement of those tribes there as distinct from the Florida Seminole, the least known, the most uneducated, the longest neglected, and the most deserving by reason of his poverty and neglect of all American Indians.

And I want to say parenthetically just here that you gentlemen, who stand for Indian progress and for the position of this great Government as supervising the Indian in America, have come to the place most deserving of help indeed, and the greatest opportunity for good may arise as an outcome of this congressional visit to Florida of any investigation of Indian conditions on the American Continent; and the hope is with every man in Florida, especially all in Fort Lauderdale, where they come in contact with these Seminoles, that from your visit may grow substantial and lasting results which could not come from any official report, but must be had from you gentlemen who are responsible for the appropriation for the American Indian.

The CHAIRMAN. How many Indians are there in the school at Fort Lauderdale?

Mr. COLEMAN. At Fort Lauderdale we have had six.

The CHAIRMAN. How many are there now?

Mr. COLEMAN. Temporarily only two—Tony and his sister Eulah. Eulah is in school this morning. She is 17 years old.

The CHAIRMAN. Are there any Seminoles in any other school in Florida?

Mr. COLEMAN. This is the sole educational institution in Florida for the Indian.

The CHAIRMAN. Here?

Mr. COLEMAN. Available for them, the Fort Lauderdale public school. I would say in explanation that four members of another camp, known as the Jim Gopher Camp, an Indian town some 40 miles from here, came down to this camp and made it their temporary habitation, Tommy and Wild Cat Tiger and Ada and Tutie Tiger, of the Tiger family of Indians, brothers and sisters of De Soto Tiger, the well-known Indian murdered by John Ashley, the outlaw whose trial has been a matter of interest to the Indian Office

as well as to the public generally in Florida. Those Indians at that place are from what I consider among the best and most reliable camp of all the Florida Indians.

The CHAIRMAN. How near to any school is Indiantown?

Mr. COLEMAN. Indiantown is a settlement way out there 25 or 30 miles west of Stuart. There is a white settlement there, and immediately around that are two or three Indian camps. In that region north of there are four or five other camps. Now, there is a white public school maintained by the State of Florida in that settlement known as Indiantown.

The CHAIRMAN. Is it accessible to all the Indians there?

Mr. COLEMAN. It is. At one time a few of the Gopher camp went to the school for a few weeks.

The CHAIRMAN. How long have you been here?

Mr. COLEMAN. I came here for duty the 1st day of October, 1916.

The CHAIRMAN. From your observation, what would be the better way to educate the Seminole Indians—in a separate school or in the public schools with the white children?

Mr. COLEMAN. Now, obviously there are two views of that. I take this position, Mr. Chairman: That on account of the hostility in feeling against the white man generally, and especially the Government in particular, these Seminoles at first are suspicious of anything you undertake to do for them. They have held the Government at arm's length; they have no intimate communication with any white people except those that they know by long residence and acquaintanceship, trading or otherwise. Naturally they are very much averse to having anything to do with the white man, and you recognize the difficulty of getting him into the white school, this Lauderdale case being a bright and shining exception, and this one at Indiantown, the only two in the State of Florida where a Seminole ever had his foot inside a white man's or any other school. My recommendation is this, in brief: I do not believe that the administration will ever derive or obtain any substantial progress in the education of these people by trying to first put them into white schools anywhere, for the obvious reason of hostility in feeling and nonassociation. I have recommended to the Indian Office that Indian schools proper be established at suitable and well-selected places; that educated Indians be brought from Oklahoma or some other State who have been educated in the Government schools; that they be brought here as teachers, preferably female, because of the well-known difference between the sexes. All Florida Seminoles are educated, and it is instilled from infancy for the women to have nothing to do with white men. You can obviously see at maturity, when they become women, the difficulty of breaking down that schooled and traditional hate and of exclusion from white men. Therefore I say educated Indian women will make the best and most practical teachers, and those who will first get hold of the confidence of these Indians, which is the barrier now which the Government has to meet.

The CHAIRMAN. If they could be induced to go to the white man's school, don't you think that the association with the white man would be a great advantage to them?

Mr. COLEMAN. Undoubtedly your position is sound; but I was coming to that point. My idea is that your primary and rudimentary

inroads on the Seminole opposition must naturally be through their own people as a beginning, just as they are taught to know the English alphabet and language and can in a way speak English; then through their primary training they will naturally take their place in the Indian schools taught by white people, or in the public schools of Florida taught by white people, just as you understand they come in contact with the white people in the West.

The CHAIRMAN. I understand your idea is that the primary, the rudimentary, grades should be taught in separate schools. Then as the Indian child becomes advanced and learns to speak English, he might be merged in the public schools.

Mr. COLEMAN. My idea is that in order to get him to go to any school the best way is to reach him through Indians first; then, as he gets advanced, take him into the white schools, just as you said, for the obvious benefit of association with the whites in learning all of our customs and ways.

The CHAIRMAN. How many Indians are there about Indiantown?

Mr. COLEMAN. About Indiantown—oh, there's the Billy Stuart camp and Gopher camp—I don't recall. I took the census of the camp carefully when I was there and there are some reports, but I haven't the exact figures. It will run anywhere from 15 to 20 in the ordinary camp.

The CHAIRMAN. Would there be enough Indian children there of school age to maintain a school?

Mr. COLEMAN. I have had that matter up with the Indian Office. There is a vacant building which we have gotten a price on and tentatively all the organizations are ready so far as getting prepared to open a school, and it lacks only promulgation by the Indian Office. There are about six at the Gopher camp and a number of young Indians, say an equal number—maybe larger—at the Stuart camp, which is closer to that settlement. There are other Indians within a reasonable distance, anywhere from 3 to 10 miles, who could easily transplant their camp somewhere close or available to a school at Indiantown, if you could only persuade those Indians to go to any school.

The CHAIRMAN. I wanted to ask you another question or two, then perhaps some of the other members of the committee will want to interrogate you. What are the agricultural opportunities of the Seminoles of Florida, if any?

Mr. COLEMAN. Well, it is so meager that it is a travesty upon the word "agriculture." A camp like this, as you see here, may not have anything. Tony, to his credit, has gone to school instead of hunting and trying to garden a little patch. There is not a stalk of anything, as I understand it, produced by this camp. At places you will find a few bananas planted and a few orange or other trees. They raise a little patch of sweet potatoes; they have cane—they have more cane than anything else. They will have a little patch of corn. It depends solely on how rich the hammock is or the little pin island on which you find a camp. If it is rich land and can be cleared, they will clear up a little patch. If it is too much work—you understand their disposition is not to work, and, as a matter of fact, no pretense is made to do anything that could be dignified with the word "agriculture" or industrial work, for the reason that it is dependent

solely upon the whim of that local camp, which has no law or requirement of any kind.

Mr. NORTON. Mr. Coleman, you say there are about 600 Seminole Indians in Florida?

Mr. COLEMAN. The Census Bureau reckons that there are not over 600, and possibly between 500 and 600.

Mr. NORTON. Widely scattered?

Mr. COLEMAN. Yes; they are scattered all over the country.

Mr. NORTON. How do those Indians maintain themselves chiefly?

Mr. COLEMAN. Well, this camp simply goes on the hunt. They kill alligators and sell their hides. They trap for the otter. That is the largest possible source, the otter pelt, which is sold. They catch coons and they sell their hides. They kill deer and sell that. They catch wild hogs, they tame them, and they slaughter them. They have tame hogs. They own very little cattle. In fact, they own no cattle except an occasional yoke of oxen. There is not a cow owned and milked by a Florida Seminole camp for the preservation and raising of the Seminole baby.

Mr. NORTON. Do they have any horses or work animals?

Mr. COLEMAN. Occasionally you will find a pony at a camp. Sometimes two or three or four, but that is the exception.

Mr. NORTON. Are they migratory or are they permanent in their settlement?

Mr. COLEMAN. They fix a camp like this, usually on a pin island or a good rich hammock and stay there three, four, or five years, maybe. If a notion strikes them between the rising and setting of the sun, they clear up and pitch another camp somewhere else. They have no idea of fertilizing or raising anything by artificial means. When they think that this island soil is giving out they move, so that they can get to new rich ground and cultivate a corn patch, cane, etc.

Mr. NORTON. Speaking as a matter of fact, the male members of the Seminole Tribe in Florida have the full rights of citizenship in Florida, have they not?

Mr. COLEMAN. It has been a question long mooted, legally speaking, as to when is an Indian an American citizen. Here in Florida they have simply roamed unobstructed, without any lasso or other legal means of restraint. They go when they please and where they please and come as they want to. None of them vote. They have, in a way, as a tribe absolutely no conception of law or the white man's system, except the few who understand the English language, come in contact with traders, buy a few groceries, and get out of town. They do not know anything about voting; they do not understand our laws except as somebody else tells them.

Mr. NORTON. Do you know of any legal adjudication that might have occurred to determine whether they were under the jurisdiction of the Federal Government or under the jurisdiction of the State government?

Mr. COLEMAN. Personally I am not advised as to their legal status further than the congressional statute or provision setting aside an appropriation, and whatever condition of that original act assuming jurisdiction is a matter which I presume you gentlemen are familiar with.

Mr. NORTON. That to which you refer is a gratuity that was recently provided for them?

Mr. COLEMAN. This last appropriation in the general Indian act, as I understand it, amounts merely to a section providing for an appropriation, which is a very small clause, as I understand, simply outlining how this appropriation shall be spent. The last act does not take into account whatever the legal recognition or authority that the Federal Government assumes over the Florida Seminoles.

Mr. NORTON. In matters of criminal procedure heretofore these have been conducted against them by the State—solely by the State of Florida, as I understand it, and they are under the jurisdiction of the State courts.

Mr. COLEMAN. It is a case of a bootlegger or something of that kind.

Mr. NORTON. That would indicate that they are not wards of the Government?

Mr. COLEMAN. As I understand it, the State maintains criminal supervision, the question of rights of property never having been adjudicated before any court, as I understand it, the Seminoles not having any conception of individual property. There is not a foot of land owned by an individual Indian in Florida that I am advised of. He has only had in his mind a large and vague idea that the whole State of Florida, originally belonging to the Seminoles, should rightfully belong to him now. And when a camp like this, which is a squatter on some man's private property—if he comes out and orders him to get out, that he owns it, I do not know where Tony would go to, and he does not know.

Mr. NORTON. Now, Mr. Coleman, do you think it would be feasible for the State of Florida to provide a reservation and segregate these Indians; or would it be feasible for the Federal Government to do that?

Mr. COLEMAN. Well, that involves the question of Federal and State supervision and jurisdiction as in possible conflict.

Mr. NORTON. Well, answer the first question. Do you think it would be feasible for the State to provide a reservation for them?

Mr. COLEMAN. That is feasible and entirely possible. As to whether or not this State would ever assume that attitude is a question which I am sure I am not in a position and would not assume to answer. I would not presume to say.

Mr. NORTON. Well, you are investigating this matter. Do you think the Federal Government would have a right to take these Indians and place them in one locality—all the Indians in the State?

Mr. COLEMAN. Well, I assume that they have that undoubted right, so far as superior authority or jurisdiction from congressional enactment is concerned. Following the lines of policy heretofore observed by the Federal Government, the assumption naturally follows that they will include the Seminoles as well as every other Indian within the jurisdiction.

Mr. NORTON. Now, I take it that you understand the policy of the Government to civilize and educate the Indians. In the civilization and education of the Indians the aim is to have them take on the ways of the white man, to distribute them among the white men, so that they may take on and carry out the white man's way of living and to reach a time when the jurisdiction of the Federal Government may be done away with as far as the Indians are concerned.

Now, in this case the Seminoles have been among the white people down here for several hundred years, particularly the last hundred years, and, distributed as they are, are they not rather more in an ideal condition, considering the Government's relation with other Indians, than to have the Government now come down and take charge of them again?

MR. COLEMAN. In answer to that, I should make this additional statement as to information which doubtless you are aware of. The Federal Government owns about 26,000 acres in Florida in separate and scattered tracts—rather they are in two main divisions, one northeast of Lake Okechobee, between 1,900 and 2,000 acres in a body. On the west side is something like a whole township, which is 6 miles square—quite a township, I think, entirely, as I recall the Government map. Near Fort Lauderdale is what is known, locally speaking, as Pine Island, between two prongs of some irrigation or drainage ditches. I do not know how far out. Mr. Stranahan can tell you. There is another small tract—there may be very small local tracts scattered, aggregating, as I said, about 26,000 acres. Up to date no Indian has ever been induced or persuaded to live on a single foot of the Government land, bringing up the old question of a traditional hate and hostility in spirit against Federal authority. It may be for natural reasons. I should assume that 95 per cent of every foot of land bought by the Federal Government for these Seminoles is covered with water nine months out of the twelve. It is wholly impracticable in its present condition for any practical utility without a certain amount of ditching and drainage, either with the local system as now started and maintained in Florida, or with additional drainage and other canal systems, necessitating some roadways before these Indians can ever practically inhabit these reservations already purchased and set aside for the Florida Seminoles by the Federal authorities.

MR. NORTON. Have you observed the methods of living of the whites and negroes in the State?

MR. COLEMAN. Well, how do you mean—in the interior?

MR. NORTON. The poorer classes and the well-to-do classes.

MR. COLEMAN. Well, purely incidentally, with no special view; to be specific, no. I have, in a way.

MR. NORTON. Would you say there are 600 negroes in Florida living in as poor a condition, or in as deplorable a condition, as the 600 Seminole Indians in the State?

MR. COLEMAN. I would say there is not the equal of the squalid or meager bad condition existing on this continent comparable to the Florida Seminoles. No 600 negroes live in all Florida under the same conditions, as bad and as needful as the Indian, so far as sanitary conditions and the means of subsistence are concerned.

MR. NORTON. You have been through some of the Southern States—Mississippi and Alabama?

MR. COLEMAN. I am a Georgia cracker, if you will permit me to locate my native habitat, and I am thoroughly familiar with the negro population and ordinary conditions prevailing in the South among negroes.

MR. NORTON. That is all.

THE CHAIRMAN. I wanted to ask you just one question, What is the condition of the health of the Seminoles?

Mr. COLEMAN. Well, that is a question a little difficult to answer, but as a layman I would say that the grown element of the Indians show a remarkable strength, in a way. The children show evidences of their climatic conditions and general environments. You take it in this country, naturally swamp conditions are general; environments of water and the presence of mosquitoes make largely the conditions. I find in every camp I have been to general anemic conditions. I believe that hookworm obtains with every Indian camp to a certain extent, and I have the authority of what doctors I have consulted in cases of sickness backing up that view.

The CHAIRMAN. Do you find tuberculosis?

Mr. COLEMAN. I do not know of a single case. I have read of two cases.

The CHAIRMAN. Any trachoma?

Mr. COLEMAN. None whatever. They are remarkably immune from that. Not a single case, so far as I have been advised, of trachoma in the Florida Indian.

STATEMENT OF HON. WILLIAM J. SEARS, MEMBER OF CONGRESS FROM FLORIDA.

Mr. SEARS. Mr. Chairman, just briefly I want to thank the committee for coming to the State, and I trust before you get through you will find that I have not overdrawn, but rather underdrawn, the picture. My good friend, Mr. Norton, raised the question as to whether the State of Florida or the Government should take care of the Seminoles. In reply to that I will simply say that the State of Florida in a way—not the State of Florida, but the citizenship—have been taking care of them, and while I regret to put it in print, when you remember that under a flag of truce Osceola was captured you can realize and appreciate why the Seminoles distrust the whites. I realize further that practically the entire State of Florida belonged to the Seminoles, and that the treaty of 1832, which was repudiated by those of the Seminoles who are now before you and their forefathers, was signed by Indians, making their mark, and signed by the white man, writing out his signature; I believe you will agree with me that under the statute of frauds in every State in the Union, that treaty would be null and void. There is no transfer of land to-day that would be permitted to stand where the man makes his mark and you sign your signature, unless there are witnesses to that signature. That being the case, approximately \$250,000 from the State at the signing of that treaty and accrued interest to the present time is still being held by the Government, and is due the Seminoles of Florida.

I have made my fight for the Seminoles because I believe they are entitled to relief. My fellow members of the committee will say that I have more than once stated before the committee that no ulterior motive could be charged to me in that, because for once, regardless of any of my other acts in Congress, I was working for a band of people who neither voted nor cared to vote, and perhaps would never appreciate the work I was doing for them. I simply did it because I felt they were entitled to it, and that some day the Government would wake up and pay to the Indians what they really owed them, and regain in part their confidence.

You find here a typical camp. I have known the Indians for 36 years, and I will say this for them, in reply to another question from one of the members of the committee when he asked if the State courts