SEMINOLE SURVEY OF 1930

By Roy Nash

CHAPTER I

A TYPICAL CAMP OF 1930

The starting point in time of this 1930 survey is the year 1880. Just half a century ago Clay MacCauley, of the Bureau of American Ethnology, sojourned in the camps of the Florida Seminoles; in the fifth annual report of that bureau appears the record of the first study of these Indians made without political bias. Two points 50 years apart may indicate the trend of a slowly moving body with some accuracy.

The starting point in space is Miami. From the gold coasts of pleasure the Tamiami Trail runs west across the Everglades. Within 30 miles of the city hall one encounters an astounding anachronism: In the canal a dugout canoe; standing in the stern, a man with poised spear. He wears neither shoes nor hat. He wears nothing that is worn in the city 40 minutes away. His only garment is a knee-length shirt, belted at the waist. Like Joseph's coat, it is of many colors, bright, vivid, marking the wearer as a man apart from the metropolis of 110,000 which has sprung up like magic on the edge of his wilderness. A primitive hunter 30 miles from a center of industrial civilization where airplanes purr and ocean-going liners dock and a hundred thousand idlers bask in the sun—the Seminole.

At the junction with the north and south road from Everglades to La Belle we turn from the pavement to a gravel road that parallels the rails of the Atlantic Coast Line, and motor north through the Big Cypress Swamp to Immokalee. Two stores, a hotel, a filling station, a boarding house, two or three bootleggers, and an Indian camp out beyond the railroad station.

Guava Camp, our immediate destination, lies 35 miles southeast of Immokalee. No proper appreciation of the camp, however, can be had without mention of the 45 miles to be traversed after one leaves anything that might be called a road. We load an Indian bull cart with camp duffel and get it started by 3 in the afternoon. Young Ivey Byrd has come in from the Hendry County Reservation in a Ford truck, but as the month is August and hot he waits until evening to make a start in order to spare the litter of pigs which are to share the vehicle with us. In the wet season four-fifths of the trail from Immokalee to the Reservation is covered with from 2 to 6 inches of water. Byrd belongs to the school of marsh drivers that holds chains

and ropes worse than useless, because of the tendency of rear ends to bury themselves in the mud. Our normal mode of progression was for me to ride on the running board until the wheels began to spin, then jump off and push before the car lost momentum; sit down for 200 yards in high across a hammock; jump and push across half a mile of water and mud. Then stop for 15 minutes to let the engine cool. As luck would have it, we overtook the Indian just west of Okaloacoochee Slough, where the water runs 2 feet deep. So we transferred certain precious perishables to the bull cart while navigating the Ford across. Thus leisurely progressing through the mud and the moonlight, we arrived within half a mile of the reservation at 3 in the morning, when we bogged down completely, abandoned the Ford and the pigs, and waded to the reservation buildings which perch on half an acre of comparatively dry land.

Wading back at daylight, we pried up the Ford with poles, crammed palmetto and brush into the ruts, and brought the load home under power—a typical wet-weather trip, nine hours to cover 37 miles. At midnight of the second day the ox team arrived. Beyond the reservation buildings the water deepens and the ground softens so that even an empty Ford, at this season, could not traverse the last 8 miles. We footed it, the water being 8 to 10 inches deep a large part of the way. Three hours for an automobile to cover the 110 miles from Miami to Immokalee; three days for an ox team to negotiate the 45 miles from Immokalee to Guava Camp.

Section 1. Guava Camp

Guava Camp lies precisely on the western margin of the Everglades, 50 miles northwest of Miami. With the camp fire as a center, a 50-foot radius would inscribe the dry land at the height of the wet season. No circle of equal size in Florida can yield more interesting facts.

Section 2. Seminole Fire

I have made camp in Luzon and Negros, in Bahia and Matto Grosso, on the Lievre River in Ontario and beside the Salmon in Idaho—the Seminole makes the best camp fire I have ever seen. He takes 8 or 10 dry logs, of any length that a man can conveniently carry and any diameter he can conveniently cut, and arranges them as the spokes of a wheel. At the hub he kindles his fire. To brighten it, he pushes in a couple of logs; when it grows too hot he pulls them apart. Three points to support pan or kettle may be arranged by the merest touch. The elements of the fire themselves furnish a seat for whomever stirs the pot, let the wind blow whither it will. Dogs, chickens, pigs, lie between the logs at night sheltered from the wind and warmed by the embers.

Above this fireplace the Seminole erects a roof supported by four uprights say 10 feet apart, thatched with palmetto leaves. From the rafters the squaw hangs her pots and pans, her drying venison, her condiments and herbs, out of reach of the livestock. The whole arrangement is one of those perfect adaptations of means to end which characterize a competent people.

SECTION 3. SEMINOLE HOUSE

About the fireplace, here at Guava Camp, are grouped four dwellings, the nearest one 15 feet from the fire, the farthest extending to the very edge of the 50-foot circle of dry land. The largest is perhaps 12 by 20 feet. It is essentially a plaftorm 3 feet from the ground covered by an overhanging roof, the generous eaves of which, curved wide about each end, extend down to within 3 feet of the platform. The roof is supported by 10 or a dozen durable hardwood posts set in the ground, notched at the top to receive the girder. Upon a frame of light poles thus supported is thatched an exquisite roof of palmetto leaves, the thatch weighted by logs tied together and slung across the ridge. A separate set of short posts supports the platform, which is floored with hand-hewn planks leveled and smoothed to a degree worthy of honest workmanship. In this particular long house there are three sections to the platform, one for dining and two for sleeping, with narrow alleys between.

The suitability of this house for hot weather is manifest. Visibility is perfect. As a protection against a driving rain it is not so good; in very cold weather one would naturally quit it to sit by the fire. Its great merits are a floor that is out of the mud, that is high enough to sit upon and let the legs swing clear, a floor from which crumbs and dirt are easily swept; and an absolutely tight roof directly under which, upon the beams and suspended from the rafters, can be stored clothing, guns, food, buckskin, whatever it is desired to keep dry.

Two other houses are in nowise different except that they have undivided platforms and are somewhat smaller. But it should be noted that ridgepoles do not all run one way, so that if one building is flooded by a driving storm, there is likely another comparatively dry. The fourth is framed and floored, but not roofed; it is used for drying skins and cutting up meat; two days, work would convert it into a habitable dwelling.

Certain other structures deserve mention. There is a high table where dishes are washed and dried in the sun; a stockade around some banana plants; a movable pen 3 feet square for holding a pig or an alligator. The mortar and pestle, the former hollowed in the head of an 18-inch log, are highly important in the domestic economy, being used for hashing dried venison as well as for pounding corn.

The garden at this time of year is wet and full of weeds; inclosing it is a tight fence of palmetto stems and logs. The hole for drinking water is within 70 feet of the fireplace. Not much farther away in another direction is the depression where clothing is washed, with a post set in the ground surmounted by a broad board by way of a table. A high line of clean poles takes the place of a clothes line.

The construction of these houses is identical with the typical construction described by Clay MacCauley 50 years ago with one exception; nails are now so cheap and easily procured that they are used in fastening the thatch; formerly the framework was lashed together and the thatch tied on with any of half a dozen easily procurable fibers.

SECTION 4. THE HUNTER

Those who occupied Guava camp in August of 1930 were eight. Whitney Cypress is the head of the family, a position carrying more duties than rights. Six feet tall, lean, muscular, upstanding, he carries

his 50 years unmarred by abdominal deformation or fallen arches and with a vigor which the average white man of 30 well might envy. It is his custom to roll out of bed shortly after dawn, pull over his shirt of many colors a pair of cheap cotton trousers tied with cord about the ankles, stow shotgun and shells in the bow of his cypress canoe, and start off on his daily hunt without eating a mouthful of breakfast. In the wet season one can push a dugout most anywhere through the Everglades. Where the water is shallow, he wades; when it deepens to 8 or 10 inches he steps in and poles. Shoving a canoe through water all day is something that any man in good condition can do; shoving all day through the mixture of grass and water which is the Everglades is something which only a Seminole can do.

He poles across these infinite marshes until bent grass, perhaps, arrests his attention, telling him not only which way the deer went but how long ago. Only a clever hunter like the Seminole can stalk deer in glades which afford no cover. If no fresh signs of deer are seen, or if the camp be stocked with meat, Whitney shoves on to an alligator hole in the edge of a hammock. Water 4 or 5 feet deep, perhaps. He pokes about with a pole to locate his prey. Failing to find him that way, the hunter holds his nose and imitates the grunt of the beast. To amuse me, Whitney one day called an 8-foot alligator to the surface four times in the course of half an hour. It seemed a bit indecent thus to play upon reptilian passion. In the operation of skinning, his movements were swift, sure, clever.

Generally this Indian returned to camp around noon, for the midday August heat was intense. One day he brought home a buck, another a turtle and some duck eggs, sometimes nothing at all. Curlew and turkeys were abundant, but the food problem was so easily settled that he preferred to put in his time hunting for things with a cash value—alligator hides, buckskin, coon skins. I have known him to stay out all day without eating.

At whatever hour he returned to camp, Whitney would pull off his wet trousers, eat, then stretch out for a siesta. It is the mark of a man that whatever he does, he does with a will. The Seminole, after four or five hours of vigorous exercise, can loaf for half a day with zest. But usually the necessity to fetch firewood, or some puttering job about camp or garden, kept this worker fairly busy.

Section 5. The Squaw

Sally Cypress, the squaw, is a woman of 38, a tall woman 5 feet 9 or 10. Although she has given birth nine times, she still carries herself erect; generously fleshed, she yet moves with vigor and alertness.

Her costume consists of a skirt, a chemise with sleeves, and a cape. Neither shoes nor stockings nor hats are worn. The skirt sweeps the ground. The chemise slips over the head and hangs down just enough to cover the breasts. The cape covers the elbows and meets the waistband of the skirt. A costume dictated by a modesty veritably mid-Victorian. Its structure marks the Seminole as a human being altogether original and unique. In making a gown, or a shirt for her husband, the Seminole woman starts with cotton cloths of many colors, but for the most part solid colors, not patterns. These she tears into strips from a quarter of an inch to 3 inches wide. With