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Author(s): Minnie Moore-Willson

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## THE SEMINOLE INDIANS OF FLORIDA

[Through her book on the Seminole Indians<sup>1</sup> and because of her many years' work in their behalf, Mrs. Willson is well known to all who take an interest in the remnant of the tribe now living more or less precariously in the Everglades. She is looked upon as more than a friend of these people—she is their guardian; and as a result of her long and earnest efforts their lives and their prospects have brightened much in the past quarter of a century. Years of mutual respect and friendship have by degrees opened a way for her through the wall of reserve and suspicion built up by the misunderstanding and frequent injustice of generations of white men. This intimate contact, in her own home and in theirs, gives to her writings the genuine ring of authenticity, and through her knowledge of them we come to know much of the Seminole as he is today, with a clear glimpse now and then into the past of the race. This paper was prepared for, and read by Mrs. Willson at the last annual meeting of the Historical Society.—Ed.]

Looking backwards for nearly two centuries we see a band of red Americans, who are to become the Seminoles, separate themselves from the Creek Confederacy of Georgia and Alabama and cross the boundary into Florida. Subjects now of the Spanish crown, they become a nation to themselves, and under the sunny skies of the peninsular establish their golden-rule tribal government—characterized throughout by independence, kindness, and honor.

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<sup>1</sup>Minnie Moore-Willson, *The Seminoles of Florida*. New York, Moffat, Yard and Company. 1920. Revised, illustrated, 281p. This work was first published in 1896, and seven editions have appeared. Mrs. Willson has also written: *The Least Known Wilderness of America, The Everglades of Florida*. Kissimmee, Florida. 1917. Illus. 15p.; *Snap Shots From the Everglades of Florida, Jungle Life of the Seminole*. Tampa, Florida. 1917. Illus. 16p.; *The Birds of the Everglades, And Their Neighbors the Seminole Indians*. Tampa, Florida. 1920. Illus. 20p.; and magazine and press articles on these subjects. She has spoken before numerous organizations in Florida and elsewhere in behalf of the Seminoles.—Ed.

Here for three-quarters of a century these dusky patriots live and prosper—owning small plantations, slaves and cattle. Listen, and you may hear the tinkling bells of their little ponies as they travel, caravan style, carrying wares from village to village, and sometimes bartering with the Spanish inhabitants for their trade with the Cuban markets. Here in the secluded fastnesses of the wilderness this aboriginal people live in peace and prosperity—happy, red Americans!

A vision of them in the days so long ago would show the palmetto-thatched wigwams, the red wheel campfire, the ever-ready sofka kettle—the Seminole tribal dish—and a gathering perhaps of the braves and squaws, who with the faith of little children keep fresh the mystic religion of their fathers while they worship before the Great Spirit. Peace and happiness was the heritage of the Seminoles in those days when the “manna of the wilderness” never failed and they lived doing no harm, seeing God in the skies and hearing Him in the winds.

Then came that fateful day in 1821, when the Spanish flag was hauled down and in its stead floated the stars and stripes. With this transfer of Florida we read the death sentence of Seminole independence—an Iliad of tragedy.

The rights of the Seminoles to their lands was made a part of the treaty with the Spanish crown, and the Indian population came under the protection of the American government. All are familiar with the tragic, bitter days that followed for the helpless Indian; broken treaties, violated pledges, confiscation of their fields, the destroying of their homes, the shooting down of their cattle by American soldiers; men, women, and children pursued by bloodhounds, with a bounty for every Indian captured alive. Vessel-load

after vessel-load left Tampa with the heart-broken exiles torn from their homes, their hunting grounds, and the graves of their fathers.

A few small bands hid themselves in the Everglade fastnesses and these were the ancestors of the present Florida Seminole; so they occupy the unique position of never having been conquered nor subdued. Hence they have no legal existence, nor allegiance to the United States. Like their ancestors they had lived a troubled life, having been driven on and on by the encroaching whites with that merciless staccato cry of "move on, move on" ever ringing in their ears. There in the Everglades we find today seven hundred frightened people, pushed to the extreme southern part of the State, till they can go no further, eking out a pitiful existence, too proud to beg, too honest to steal.

This remnant of the old turbaned tribe is the State's most native and historic possession. We may lay aside the musty parchments of antiquity and in the heart of the Everglades study an ancient people through living records.

The Seminoles, through all their vicissitudes, have never relaxed in their ancestral teachings. The youth are constantly taught the stern tribal laws, while their joyous festivals and their religious ceremonial gatherings keep their unwritten, traditional history fresh in the hearts of the tribe.

#### HONOR AND RELIGION

The endeavor to show the Seminole what Christianity stands for and at the same time get into the depths of their own ancient religion has been the most complex problem encountered.

You may well appreciate the startled emotion experienced, when, after trying to tell a stalwart, honest

Indian something of civilization and Christianity, he, with all the deference of a chieftain answered: "Me no think me want to be civilized. Me think me get civilized, me lie, steal, cheat like white man. Someday big sleep come. Me want to go to Happy Hunting Ground. Me want to see Great Spirit. Me want to see my grandfather. Me no think white man go to heaven."

How would *you* answer such philosophy?

The Seminole does have a belief and it is sacred to him. He not only believes in the Great Spirit, but he believes in God's Son, who came to the Indians long ago, to live with them, to make them good Indians and to prepare them for the Big Sleep, when E-shock-ee-tom-e-see (the Supreme Being) calls him hence.

The Seminole tradition of Christ coming to live with the Indians is that the Son of God stopped at the most southern point of Florida, at which place he was met by three medicine men, who carried him around the peninsula on their shoulders while he sowed the koonti seed which is God's gift to the red man.

During the Seminole War, when starvation threatened many times, the koonti saved the tribe. This koonti is wild cassava, and is found only in the extreme southern portion of Florida.

With reference to the Bible, the Indian's idea is vague, because he understands it as the work of the white man. The Seminole says: "White man got book, him good one day, he steal, cheat, next day. Book, no like 'em. Injun no make book; him see no hunting ground, him no go and come back. Big Sleep no come back, Indian no lie about it. Me think good Injun find hunting ground all right. Me think me find it. White man, big sleep come, me think In-like-ta (heaven) no find it easy."

In some mysterious way the Seminole's conception of the Decalogue, "neither to lie, nor steal, nor cheat, and to think with God," is the foundation stone upon which he builds his character, principles and honor. It is taught to the race all through life, from the cradle to the grave.

The simple form of tribal government is held inviolate. Here is a community of seven hundred souls, living in the open palmetto camps, with no locks, no doors, no courts, no officers to keep the laws; here is a people who for centuries have lived pure in morals, with no thieving, no profanity—for the Seminole has no oath in his language and his reverence for the Deity will not permit him to take the name of the Great Spirit in vain.

To meet the Seminole in the white man's home is to meet a courteous guest, whose manners mirror those of his host. At the white man's table he conducts himself with an easy, faultless decorum. He listens to the returning of thanks with most reverent attitude, and with the question, "Billy, do Seminoles talk with God and ask him for food and homes?"—"Munks-chay" (no), replied the Indian, "No ask him." Then, as if a light dawned as to the nature of our query, he told of a hunting experience of a few weeks before, when he had acted as guide for a Northern tourist. For three days the red huntsmen had sought all the savannas for deer, but deer "hi-e-pus" (all gone). "Man feel sorry ojus (plenty). Night come; me wake two o'clock, moon shine bright. Me hear water laugh, me see big echo (deer) swim across the river. My gun me take, kill big deer, me tell Great Spirit 'Me thank you.' White man glad ojus (plenty); he go back to New York, take big buck antlers, he say he kill big deer in Everglades."

He thanks the Great Spirit for blessings received, but does not beseech favors.

The Seminoles regard honesty with such a commendable sacredness that during all the years of acquaintance with him not a single deviation from truth has been observed. Pertinent was the reply to the white hunter when he asked if it were safe to leave his gun in the wigwam. "Yes," replied the Indian, "there are no white men within fifty miles of this camp."

There comes to memory a visit that a chieftain, Tom Tiger, made to Kissimmee in the days when the open saloon flourished. Like many of his race, Tom had a love for whiskey and knowing this he was asked by his host to drink no whiskey while in Kissimmee; he promised, "Um-gah" (all right).

A day or two afterwards the white friend saw the tall form of the Indian passing into a saloon headed by three cowboys. Tom returned to the office, and his white friend, truly indignant, showed his displeasure by ignoring him. The Indian sensed the cause and becoming too uncomfortable to endure the silence longer, with some trepidation approached his friend "Jimme, Jimme, whiskey me no take 'em; lemonade me take. Cowboys my-o-mee take." The white friend's trust had not been betrayed.

When the National Editorial Association was making a tour of Florida the train made a stop at a small station on the East Coast. A few Indians had come into the town to trade at the stores. Tiger Tail had brought with him a load of sour oranges which grew wild in the region of his camp. The oranges were beautiful to the eye; but oh, how sour and bitter. The merry editors saw the golden fruit and immediately offered to purchase. The Indian was glad to sell, and

asked only one cent apiece for the fruit. But the editors would not take advantage of the Indian's ignorance of the price of the oranges, so they paid him twenty-five cents per dozen for them. At this the load of oranges was quickly disposed of and the chief with perfect honesty in the transaction, was the proud possessor of about twenty-five dollars. Those of the party who first tasted their fruit said nothing until all the oranges had been bought, then they were told to taste their oranges, and a laugh, long and loud, went up from one end of the car to the other; and as the train rolled away the good-natured but victimized passengers treated Tiger Tail, the chieftain of the Seminoles, to a shower of sour oranges. The Indian was dumbfounded. The wild orange is an article of barter in Florida, but not until the idea dawned upon Tiger Tail that the white men had mistaken his fruit for the sweet orange, did he awaken from his bewilderment.

Later, recalling the sale of the oranges, he said "White man no like Indian's orange—sour too much. Me tell white man one orange, *one* cent. White man tell me one orange *two* cents. Indian no cheat white man."

#### MUSIC OF THE SEMINOLES

Music is not a genius with the Seminoles. Their songs are monotone and rythmical, and to be complete they need the aboriginal setting, where life and love steal forth in fanciful ecstasy. Their tunes are full of a wild, weird melody that harmonizes with the forests and the wigwams and the shadowy flicker of the camp-fire.

The songs they sing are centuries old, and the Seminole does not seem to improvise nor add new



tunes to his ancient folio, but adheres to those of his fathers.<sup>2</sup>

An incident, linking old Seminole history with the present, is full of interest:

When the great chieftain Osceola was captured ninety years ago, near St. Augustine under a flag of truce, with him was another chief, John Jumper. Of Osceola's life and death we know. Of John Jumper's little is known except in government records. Jumper was taken, a prisoner, to Indian Territory. Many years after, he was converted by a missionary; and being a musical leader among his tribe, naturally grasped the white man's melodies. Later he composed a religious hymn in Seminole.

When the Seminoles visit Kissimmee, attending the church service is one of their great treats, for here it is that these visitors are greeted with a genuine, tender interest, and they receive this attention with the shyest but most childlike delight. So the ringing of the church bell always means church attendance.

Once at the close of the service, the minister gave a little talk to the Indians and then sang a hymn in the Seminole tongue. This was very rythmical, so much so that when once in the brain, the tune refused to be dislodged. The minister, Dr. A. J. Holt, of Arcadia, explained to the congregation and the Semi-

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<sup>2</sup>In 1916 Professor Albert Gale, a musician of training and experience, visited an encampment of these Indians and through Mrs. Willson gaining the confidence of the tribe, heard and recorded a number of Seminole melodies which, apparently, had been handed down unchanged for generations. Among them was a Hunting Dance, a War Song, The Quail Dance, and The Night Love Song. Upon the latter melody Professor Gale wrote a song with that title, dedicated to Mrs. Willson, which was sung at the last annual meeting of the Historical Society. These melodies, together with Professor Gale's Night Love Song, all taken from copies in the possession of Mrs. Willson, will appear in the next number of the QUARTERLY.

noles that he had learned the hymn, more than forty years ago, from Col. John Jumper in Indian Territory, when he was a missionary to the Indians there. This chieftain had enlisted in the Civil War, where he was promoted to the office of colonel under the Confederate colors.

Returning from the church service we were eager to know from the Indians if they had understood the Seminole song. One Indian, very musical, said, "Yes, me sing it good," which he did to perfection. It was an interesting moment. How did the Seminole learn the words and tune so quickly? He explained, "Me sing it in Everglades." Certainly a remarkable incident, but easily understood when we learned that an educated Oklahoma Indian missionary visited the Everglades the year previous and had taught the song to these Seminoles.

#### BILLIE BOWLEGS AND THE MUSIC BOX

A few years ago, in one of the trading posts near the Everglades, a storekeeper had purchased one of those old fashioned, paper roll organettes that played just five tunes.

Billie Bowlegs, always progressive and musical, listened to the "box of music" and was entranced with the melodies. Soon after, the organette refused to play and the trader told his friends that unless he could stick it on Billie Bowlegs he would be out thirty-five dollars.

A few days later Billie, with another Indian, came back to the store, bringing produce to sell. The storekeeper wanted the Indian's goods and suggested that Billie trade for the music box, telling the innocent Seminole that "music no more play—wake up by and by and play good—him tired now." Billie, with mechanical knowledge, looked the organette over and

making the trade, proudly left with the "tired out" music box under his arm. The next day the Indians returned, bringing with them the music box to show to the store-keeper.

"That box, him no more tired" and winding up the machine, which the ingenious Seminole had put into working order, played the whole five tunes, to the astonishment and chagrin of the trader.

"Him play good at Green Corn Dance down Okeecho-bee."

A few years later the organette was still doing service in the Seminole village. The picture recurs—a camp scene with its storm-beaten wigwams in the background, Billie sits in the center of the square, the brown-skinned people move hither and thither in the dim shadows of the camp fire, while the musician entertains the white friend visitors with the organette grinding out the melodies of Home, Sweet Home, Hail Columbia and Nearer My God to Thee. As these melodies floated out upon the stillness of the night, telling the story of the white man's inheritance—happy homes, a free government, and his ennobling religion, they contained no more sentiment to the Seminole than the murmur of a brook; for the Seminoles are a people without a home, without a country, and without a God in the sense of these songs.

#### LOVE OF HOMELAND

Love for his Everglade home has been instilled into every Seminole. He loves this land of his ancestors, this gift of the Great Spirit to his Florida children, with a love that is frenzied in its demonstration.

Even now the whites are continually encroaching upon the Indians' hunting camps. With the order to move on, and fearing the power of the white man,

the Seminole will do nothing to arouse his anger; he packs his little belongings and without a protest pushes on into other trackless wilds.

The century-long fear of removal is ever uppermost in his thoughts, for the Seminoles would choose death rather than exile.

The last Green Corn Dance, the annual Indian Festival, was held in the deep and almost inaccessible region of the "Big Cypress," a few months ago. In the stillness of the forest and beside the sacred festival fire, Cart-son-e-go-tee (Josie Billee), the newly elected head medicine man of the Indian Council, made his first judicial "talk" to his three hundred tribesmen, instilling into the band the age-old thought—fear of the white man, and avoidance of contact with him—saying in substance:

"The encroaching of the white man on our homeland means only that we shall push farther into the Glades. What the white man wants from the Seminole he will take. We have kept the pledge made by our fathers to the Great White Chief at Washington. We are still the unconquered Seminoles. We are a nation unto ourselves and we will so continue.

"We love this land more than all the rest of the world. An Indian who would not love the land that holds the graves of his fathers is worse than the beasts of the forest."

Shall the State of Florida deny these home-loving Seminoles their inheritance? For the Indians' priceless contribution to American history in his legends, his mythology and his ethnological secrets, we, his conquerers, have given him nothing in return. Instead we have taken his homes, his forests, his game, and life itself. The Seminole suffers and endures with-

out complaint, yet he still retains his old-time pride and independence.

The Seminole Indian is with us today. He is Florida's problem. He is not a lost hope. He is not a finished chapter. He is wholly in the hands of Florida's people to help or to exterminate. All that he desires is a safe abiding place, where he may place his wigwam without fear of molestation and where he may live in peace without fear of white intrusion.

When Florida accepted the gift of the Everglades country from the national government in 1855, she accepted the Indian as part of the possessions. Until Florida is ready to repudiate her title to this grant of "swamp and over-flowed lands" she cannot repudiate her obligations to her Seminole population. That gift was the most priceless of all the vast possessions of the government. Here were the retreats of the forest animals, and the homes and breeding places of millions of birds, not only Florida's native birds but the winter homes of the countless migrating birds of the North American continent. All was a prehistoric, scenic wonderland, a tropic jungle teeming with its wild life, mysterious and full of drama—the only one of its kind in the world—truly a priceless heritage.

During the centuries when the red inhabitants had been the custodians of this sanctuary no change had come to its primal beauty. Now development, with her great engines and blasts of dynamite has entered. Forests are destroyed, thousands of the drained acres have been burned, the crystal waterways with their millions of fish, the gorgeous butterfly colonies, the animals in their retreats, birds with their nestlings—all have been caught and destroyed by the flames.

But the State of Florida still owns a million acres

of the Everglade country, so there is still time to preserve a part of nature's primeval wonderland for ourselves and our posterity; and in giving it into the keeping of those who would use it without desecration, we should in part right a wrong done them and their ancestors by Florida and by the Nation.

MINNIE MOORE-WILLSON