

An Introduction to the Seminole People of South Florida and Their Plants

Part I: History and Ethnology

by Bradley C. Bennett

NOTE: Because of limited space, this article is being presented in two parts. In this first part, Dr. Bennett describes the arrival of Seminole people in Florida and their subsequent struggle to remain here. In the next issue of *The Palmetto*, the article will continue, providing a detailed description of how the Seminoles used various native plants. Stay tuned!

Florida's Seminoles, the indigenous people most often associated with the state, are relative newcomers. Our first inhabitants arrived about 12,000 years ago. When Ponce de Leon stumbled upon the state in 1513, the indigenous population numbered as many as 350,000. Epidemics probably began soon after the Spanish arrived (Milanich 1995). Warfare with the Spanish, English, and Creeks also took its toll. By the early 1760s, all Florida's pre-contact cultures had been decimated, including the Calusa, Tequesta, Ais, Boca Ratonas, Guacata, Hobe, Jaega, Matecumbes, Mayaimis, Santaluces, and Viscaynos cultures in South Florida (Milanich 1995).

While the state's original inhabitants were being decimated, the Creek Nation in Alabama and Georgia thrived (Covington 1993). Creek immigrants soon filled the void left by the extirpation of Florida's first people. During the U.S. colonial period, the British conveniently classified all Native Americans who were not Cherokee, Choctaw, or Chickasaw as Creek (Wright 1986). A loose confederacy, the Creek Nation comprised diverse ethnicities and languages. Mikasuki speakers who lived along the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers were known as *Lower Creeks*. Muskogee speakers who lived along the Alabama river and its tributaries were called *Upper Creeks* (Milanich 1995).

The Creeks were typical of southeastern peoples, cultivating corn, beans, and squash. They collected wild roots and tubers and hunted wild game, particularly turkey and

deer. When white traders encouraged commercial hunting (Covington 1993), the Creeks began to make extended treks into Florida. They permanently migrated to Florida in three phases. Between 1702 and 1740, they raided the Spanish and their Apalachee allies, but made no significant settlements (Covington 1993). Ancestors of the Seminoles reached the Central East Coast by 1703 and the Keys by 1708, attacking mainland indigenous people who had taken refuge there (McGoun 1993). Between 1740 and 1812, the Creeks established at least six villages in Florida. One branch of Lower Creeks, the Oconee, reached present day Gainesville in the 1750s.

President James Madison ushered in the third phase of Seminole migration when he secretly authorized Congress to take Florida from the Spanish in 1811 (Covington 1993). Between 1812 and 1820, colonization pressure in Georgia and Alabama forced many Lower and Upper Creeks to migrate to Florida. More Muskogee speakers arrived after the Creek War of 1813-1814. Escaped slaves also were welcomed by the Florida Creeks.

The immigrants to Florida originally maintained their Creek identity. But like the Creek nation itself, they were ethnically and linguistically diverse. The first recorded use of the name *Seminole* is found in notes accompanying de Brahm's 1765 map of Florida (Fernald and Purdum 1992). The name is derived from the Spanish word *cimarron*, which means wild or untamed. The Span-

ish had used the term to refer to Indians who did not live in missions (Milanich 1995). Since there is no 'r' in the Creek language, "Cimarron" became "Cimallon," then "Simallone" and eventually "Seminole" (Wright 1986). The term *Seminole*, however, had no clear linguistic or ethnic meaning.

At the beginning of the 19th century about 3,000 Amerindians lived in Florida (Covington 1993), which by then had been returned to Spain. The U.S. feared that the British might launch attacks from Florida with their former Seminole allies. Settlers coveted the land and plantation owners resented the sanctuary that the Spanish and Seminoles afforded escaped slaves. Importation of slaves had been banned in 1808, prompting slave raids against the black Seminole allies (Neill 1956). During the War of 1812, U.S. troops were sent to punish the Seminoles for bringing food to the besieged city of St. Augustine. In early 1813, an army of 400 horsemen from Tennessee joined with regular forces with the orders to "... chastise the Indians, plunder and burn their homes and property, and drive their cattle" (Neill 1956). A series of minor skirmishes ignited the First Seminole War in 1817. Andrew Jackson, with an army of 3,000 that included friendly Creeks, attacked Seminole and Spanish settlements. By mid 1818, he had subdued Florida's new indigenous population — for the moment. The following year, a treaty was negotiated, which transferred ownership of Florida to the U.S. When ratified in 1821, the U.S. acquired Florida and

5,000 Seminoles who were dispersed from the Georgia border to Tampa Bay (Milanich 1993).

President Monroe, under pressure from white settlers, recommended that all Seminoles be relocated to the West or be restricted to a federal reservation. In 1823, Seminole leaders and federal authorities agreed to meet on the northern bank of Moultrie Creek, five miles south of St. Augustine. Neamaltha, spokesman for the Seminoles, said that he was willing to accept a reservation in Central Florida, but had doubts about the land which "did not have hickory nuts, persimmons, acorns, or much fertile land" (Covington 1993). The Seminoles eventually agreed to relinquish their claim to 24,000,000 acres in northern Florida for nearly 6,000,000 acres in the central part of the state. They also were promised a cash annuity, supplies, and assistance (Covington 1993).

As the state's population increased, conflicts between Seminoles and settlers escalated. In 1827, the Florida Legislative Council decreed that any male Seminole found off the reservation would be whipped and have his gun removed. Two years later the council proclaimed, "The present location (of the Indians) is in the pathway of our settlers and has seriously impeded the settlement of the fairest part of Florida." As Neill (1956) accurately summarizes, the Seminoles were forced to live on a reservation and then condemned for being there.

Continued conflicts led to the Second Seminole War, which began in 1835. During its seven year tenure, no more than 800 Seminoles battled federal forces of 8,000 militia and regulars. The war cost the U.S. an estimated \$40,000,000 and more than 1,500 lives. Osceola, the most famous of all Seminole warriors, was captured under a flag of truce during this period. He was imprisoned at Fort Moultrie, South Carolina, where he died. Of all the tribes living east of the Mississippi River, the Seminoles offered the greatest resistance to western removal. But their opposition came at great costs. By 1842, nearly 90% of the 5,000 Seminoles had been sent West and fewer than 500 remained

in Florida (Covington 1993).

On January 12, 1853, the General Assembly of the United States declared it unlawful for any Indian to remain in Florida. The proclamation was an inevitable invitation to more conflict. The Third (and final) Seminole War, which began in 1855, was scarcely more than a series of minor guerrilla skirmishes. Billy Bowlegs and 123 members of his band eventually surrendered, and together with 41 captive Seminoles, left for the West on May 4, 1858. Four days later, Colonel Gustaus Loomis, commander of federal troops in Florida, declared an end to hostilities. The following year, 75 more Seminoles voluntarily left the state. Sam Jones, Chipco, and a few others remained (Milanich 1993).

The period from the end of Seminole

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Wars until the early 1900s is not well known. Fearful of continued efforts to deport them, the Seminoles lived in scattered camps throughout South Florida, particularly in the Big Cypress and Everglades. After 1860, the largest camp was on Pine Island in Broward County. The Seminoles raised pumpkins, corn, sugar cane, sweet potatoes, and rice, and hunted turkey and venison. White settlements in the 1900s created the opportunity to trade plumes, alligator skins, otters, huckleberries, grapes, sweet potatoes, bananas, coontie starch, and gopher tortoises (Covington 1993 and Kersey 1975).

The early part of the century failed to deliver the peace that the Seminoles had long sought. Drainage, which began in the late 1800s, transformed ephemeral wetlands to cattle pastures and agricultural fields. Dug-out canoe transportation was no longer possible during most of the year. Completion of the Tamiami Trail in 1928 created access to Seminole camps, formerly protected by the vastness of the Big Cypress. Finally, the establishment of Everglades National Park

forced the peripatetic Seminoles to relocate once again. The 150 or fewer recalcitrant, undefeated survivors of three wars and forced relocations have given rise to today's Seminoles.

Based on his work in the 1950s, Sturtevant (1960), described the Seminoles as "... the most isolated and conservative of the Indian groups remaining in the United States." His assessment is still largely applicable. The survivors of the Third Seminole War now number more than 2,000. They are represented by three groups: the Seminoles, the Miccosukees, and the Trail Indians (Covington 1993).

The Seminole Tribe of Florida formed in 1957. With its headquarters in Hollywood, the tribe has three major reservations: Big Cypress, established in the 1890s; Brighton, established in the late 1930s; and Dania-Hollywood, established in 1907. The Tribe recently created smaller reservations in Tampa, Immakolee, and Ft. Pierce. The Seminoles speak both Muskogee or Creek (Brighton and Tampa) and Mikasuki or Hitchiti (Big Cypress, Immakolee, and Hollywood).

The Miccosukee Tribe formed in 1962, choosing their name as an alternative spelling of their language, Mikasuki. They are smaller, but more traditional than the Seminoles. The two tribes represent political entities, not ethnic lineages. Both are governed by an elected tribal council and elected chairman. Nonetheless, the traditional authority of elders and women is strong. Matriarchal kinship patterns are still recognized. Several hundred Creek descendants live along the Tamiami Trail and are affiliated with neither tribe. These include some of the most traditional of all of Florida's surviving indigenous peoples.

In their short history in southern Florida, the Seminoles quickly adapted to the local flora. They learned about new tropical food and medicinal plants while retaining their knowledge of temperate plants used for construction, rituals, and fiber. For nearly 50 years, the Seminoles lived near coastal areas

— continued on page 24

The Seminole People ...

continued from page 21

and may have learned uses of tropical hammock species. Drainage and subsequent development forced them to retreat, once again, into the Big Cypress. The Seminoles also survived in scrub and in temperate forests. Today, they have little contact with upland plants and their knowledge of these resources is particularly vulnerable to extinction. Through efforts such as the construction of the Ah-tha-thi-ki Museum, the Seminoles are attempting to preserve the wisdom of their ancestors. Though much remains to be learned, much has been lost forever. ✨

EDITOR: Bennett will describe the Seminole's plant uses in Part II, to be published in the next issue of *The Palmetto*.

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*"A weed is a plant whose virtues
have not yet been discovered."*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Quote found in *SOUTHERN LIVING* magazine
by FNPS member Sharon Dolan.