Seminole Indians in the Florida War: the Soldiers’ View

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The Second Seminole War brought large numbers of whites into contact with the Florida Indians for the first time, and provided them considerable opportunities to observe Seminole life. Not surprisingly, soldiers' descriptions of Indian customs and ways of life made their way into letters, diaries, newspaper articles, and official correspondence. Sandwiched between and often intertwined with battle reports, geographic observations, and administrative details, several of these reports have been largely overlooked by students of Seminole culture. Soldiers' views were often limited, frequently colored by misconceptions, and sometimes uncritical in accepting information provided by "friendly" or captive Indians and blacks, but they provide a unique and descriptive source of information on a crucial period in Seminole history.

Although the Indians inhabiting the Florida peninsula had by the 1830s clearly gained a common identity as "Seminoles," they remained geographically and politically fragmented, despite the attempts of some contemporary writers to define them as a nation. In 1837, nearly two years after the outbreak of the war, an artillery lieutenant stationed in Florida outlined five distinct groups of Indians inhabiting the territory: the Mikasukis under Osceola and Arpkeika ("Sam Jones"), numbering approximately 300 warriors; the "real Seminoles" under Coa-Hajo with about 200 warriors; the Pease Creek and Kissimmee bands of approximately 200 warriors commanded by Cloud and Al-
by the Indians, who had had their belongings and crops confiscated, and were beaten if they resisted.

Despite the relatively recent arrival of the Seminoles in Florida, and the fondness of nineteenth-century whites for repeating "Indian legends," few tales explaining the origins of the Seminoles have been recorded in military records. According to at least one observer, the Seminoles knew little about their own past except that they were "a remnant of the tribe of the Muscogees (Creeks), which formerly inhabited Georgia and Alabama." The same observer also noted that the Seminoles knew nothing about the history of Florida or any of its former inhabitants.

The "towns" in which the Seminoles were reported living were almost uniformly composed of a cluster of chiefties or "lodges," an open space, and gardens. Even in the early years of the war, and in the northern and central portions of Florida, the transformation of the typical Indian shelter from the closed Creek-style lodge to the chieftain was almost complete. An army surgeon, describing Sam Jones' village on the St. Johns in 1837, stated that:

Their buildings consist of no more than four upright posts supporting a bark or palm roof; some time they are made of hewn logs, but I have yet met only one of this description and that unfinished. Half way up, or about four feet from the ground is a platform supported by crutches, on which they sleep.

Osceola's nearby town was made up of thirty to forty chieftains. Even after they were driven into the Everglades, where they lived on hammocks or "islands," the Seminoles maintained their basic village structure. Chitto-Tustenuggee's island, described by a contemporary observer, contained eighteen to twenty acres, "two towns, two dancing grounds and one council lodge." Sam Jones' Seven Islands in present-day Broward County contained pumpkin, melon, and corn patches. On the largest island, which measured 150 yards in length, were "three villages and dancing grounds."

The corn, pumpkins, and melons grown in the Indians' patches provided much of their nourishment, and were mentioned frequently in military reports. The Seminoles also cultivated squash, lima beans, and sugar cane. Soldiers invading the wilds of south Florida usually destroyed these foodstuffs when they discovered an Indian "town." Despite their ravages, the soldiers often remarked that the Seminoles could not starve in south Florida because of the abundance of food growing wild there, particularly the "inexhaustible quantity of coonties," a Seminole staple. An army assistant surgeon, describing the Seminole food situation in 1839, referred to coontie as the Indians' "principal and favorite food," and described how, "by a very simple process," they extracted "a fine white flour, but little inferior to the Bermuda arrowroot." He further commented that the Seminoles "not only possess the necessities of life, but also the luxuries," selling large quantities of green corn, huckleberries, and wild fruit to the officers at Fort Russell on Key Biscayne during the Macon campaign in the spring of the year. In addition to making full use of both wild and cultivated plant life, the Seminoles took advantage of Florida's plentiful game. Coastal Indians also enjoyed oysters, clams, saltwater fish, and sea turtles, while those along the inland lakes and rivers used wooden spears to procure freshwater fish and softshell turtles.

Few references to Seminole family life appear in the various accounts written by military men, apparently because soldiers rarely had the opportunity to view the Indians in a family setting. General Thomas S. Jesup attempted to explain the family structure when he wrote that "according to the laws and customs of the Indians," children belonged to their mothers rather than their fathers. An account of Colonel William S. Harney's 1841 expedition into the Everglades recounts that Seminole warriors flying Harney's troops loaded their families and all their household possessions into their canoes. The same account also tells of one Indian with far less family feeling, a Seminole squaw who, after her husband was killed, drowned their child to prevent its cries from betraying her hiding place to the soldiers.

Physically, the Seminoles were usually described as hardy specimens, well-formed, athletic, and dignified. Some, Sam Jones for example, were noted for their longevity. One rather common physical deformity, described by an army surgeon at Fort Jupiter, was a malformation of the foot, resembling clubfoot. The surgeon remarked in his diary that he had seen the same deformity among the Indians of the Northwest, and inquiring of a Negro who lived among the Seminoles, was told that it was caused by "their being bitten by snakes and their feet had rotted off in consequence."

One aspect of the Indians' appearance which almost universally merited comment was their style of dress and ornamentation. In the days before they had developed their now-traditional patchwork garments, Seminole warriors typically wore a plain cotton or buckskin shirt, and a handkerchief or turban as a headress. Although the Seminoles may not have suffered a shortage of food as a result of the war, they did find it increasingly difficult to clothe themselves. Toward the end of the war, women and children were particularly poorly dressed. Captain Sprague described them as being "nearly in a state of nudity." Those who were covered, he noted, "were wrapped up in old grain bags picked up near abandoned posts."

Despite the simplicity of their basic articles of clothing, the Indians were particularly fond of jewelry, feathers, and other ornamentation. Sam Jones, visiting Fort Lauderdale in the summer of 1839 during the Macon campaign, was described as "dressed out in all his toggery," with a girdle of crane feathers, Finger rings, ear-bobs, pendants, gorgets, and breastplates were also popular. One officer recalled watching an Indian silversmith near Fort Jupiter. With only a punch, an old chisel, a hammer, a pair of scissors, a stem from an old pipe, two or three matrixes, and a file, he fashioned these ornaments from silver coins. Some of the ornaments he etched with "rough engravings of various objects, particularly animals." Some of the Indian women were "nearly covered with these ornaments, having two or three strings of them fastened on their breast which must be worth $20 to $30 alone in silver."

As might be expected from their geographical distribution, the various Indian bands were not united under any strong central leadership. Individual Indian leaders such as Sam Jones, Jumper, Osceola, and Coacoochee, exercised authority primarily among their own bands. Although the word "chief" appears frequently in white accounts from the Seminole War, no clear picture of an Indian hierarchy emerges from these reports. "The government of the Seminoles seems to be a sort of democracy with unlimited powers," wrote one observer, "there is no such thing as King of the Seminoles, controlling the movements of the whole tribe. The nation at large is divided into parties, each of which has its own sub-chief, and occupies its own section or district of the country; and though there is nominally a head chief or king of the nation, he has positively no power as such.
except in a particular way." This same observer reported that even the powers of the "sub-chiefs" or individual leaders were limited to the wishes of their band. In true democratic fashion, they executed the will of the majority or were deposed. These leaders, in turn, had the same power over the head chief.

This loose form of government significantly affected the course of the "Florida War." Part of the failure of Macon's Treaty of 1839 can be attributed to that general's misunderstanding of Seminole hierarchy. Lack of centralized authority also explains a degree of hostility between various Indian bands, most notably the Mikasuki of the Everglades and the "Spanish-Indians" of the west coast. Considering their political and geographic fragmentation, it is perhaps surprising that the Seminoles were able to unite in a common cause at all.

Religion was closely tied to government in the Seminole culture. The many forms and ceremonies which accompanied all negotiations, Sprague reported, were considered "gratefully received by the Great Spirit." White observations on Seminole religious life were few and speculative at best, since — as the observers themselves freely admitted — the Indians were extremely reticent about this subject. One of the few accounts available, possibly written by Fort Lauderdale commander Lieutenant Christopher Thompsons, tells of the Indian view of the afterlife in "that part of the world where the sun goes down," where the departed Indian hunted, fished, and enjoyed himself. If he had been a good warrior, he found plenty of game; if he had not, he found none. Apparently not all spirits passed into the land "where the sun goes down," since Thompkins also reported the Seminole belief in ghosts.

Another account touches on religious beliefs in describing the Seminole treatment of the dead. Bodies, sometimes suspended in a stretched hide a short distance from the ground, were surrounded by a pen made of pine logs, and covered by bark. The body of Tuskennee, a brother of King Philip, was buried in this fashion, ceremoniously dressed and supplied with a pot and bottle, both containing liquid, a knife, and a copper powder flask. Tuskennee had committed suicide, as did many Seminoles upon learning that they suffered from an incurable disease.

The centerpiece of Indian religious life was the "Green Corn Dance," then as in later generations, a mystery to outsiders. The only accounts of this ceremony from the Seminole War period were second hand, passed on to whites by black interpreters who had lived among the Indians and witnessed the ritual. According to one such report, each Indian fasted for two days, contemplating alone both public and private matters, and counting his heroic exploits in war and hunting. Prisoners were then supposedly tortured at the stake, although this assertion is questionable, since systematic torture was rare among the Seminoles. On the third day, according to this report, the dance itself took place. At this time, the men would build a new fire, cook together, and "feast and dance, drink and carouse to such an excess as to become in a state only to be equalled sometimes by the anaconda and boa constrictor." Another account, while not detailing the ceremony, related that the Seminoles were especially warlike following the Green Corn Dance.

Fear and superstition also played an important part in the nineteenth century Seminoles' view of the world around them. Superstition, like religion, was a subject rarely discussed with outsiders. Lieutenant Thompsons asserted that the Indians were "the most practical people in the world," but admitted that they were mystified by the supernatural. Superstition colored the Seminole view of the natural as well as the spiritual. When told of such technological advances as astronomical telescopes and trans-Atlantic sailing ships, they simply replied that they did not believe in such things. One Seminole, given a tour of a steamboat, was astonished by the intensity of the fire, but "could never conceive of admiring the work as a whole . . . he neither knows or cares how." Summing up the Indian attitude toward technology, the author of this passage commented:

There is this difference between them and us they think their fathers wiser than themselves, we call the wisdom of our grandfathers foolishness . . . The Indian will not add a sail to his canoe; with us every day brings its improvement; hence we progress, they retrograde.

Indian recreations and diversions were also considered simple by whites. Seminoles danced for recreational as well as religious purposes. In 1837, a group of army officers stationed slightly south of the St Johns region were invited to a Seminole dance. After watching the Indians join hands and dance around a fire, many of the officers, "at their solicitation and from the spirit of fun, joined in the dance, which in fact required a little skill to follow." A member of this party also described a ball game played by two teams, each of which was composed of approximately twenty Indians.

The game resembled the stick-ball games played by other Indian tribes, with each player attempting to catch and throw the ball with two sticks. This same band of Seminoles also played another game in which they threw and caught a large ball with their hands, and attempted to pass it through a goal made of two crossed sticks. The soldier who described this game wrote that it was played between the men and the women, and that, in the instance he witnessed, the women won.

At another Indian ball game, the officers from Fort Jupiter near Jupiter Inlet contributed 200 pounds of tobacco as a prize for the victors. Seminole men, women, and children all smoked tobacco, both in pipes and rolled into cigars. Smoking also played a part in various Indian ceremonies.

The Seminoles were equally fond of alcohol, and Seminole War era accounts abound with descriptions of Indian indulgence. One Indian at Fort Jupiter was reported to have made the rounds of the officers' tents, "raising a contribution of brandy, whiskey, gin or any other liquor, apparently disregarding the practice and advice of old drinkers not to mix your liquors." A commanding officer at Fort Pierce reported a visit from Coacoochee in 1841, during which the Seminole leader bartered for gifts until he "finally got drunk and went to sleep." The following day, Coacoochee and his party departed, taking with them a gift of two and a half gallons of whiskey. The Indians had been gone less than three hours when several of them returned with a message from Coacoochee demanding more whiskey. Not wanting to offend the influential Indian leader, the commander gave them three additional gallons.

Drunkenness was only one trait ascribed to the Seminole character by numerous white observers. Evaluations ranged from "noble," "hardy," "a Spartan race," to "deceitful" and "treacherous," from wise and diplomatic to rude and lazy. This wide range of assessments reflects the inconsistent public attitude toward the Seminoles. On one hand they were hated as enemies, who had killed white settlers and were waging war against the armed forces of the United States. On the other hand, they inspired
considerable sympathy as a race of people who were being hunted down and forcibly removed from their homeland.

A number of more specific character traits were attributed to the Seminoles by various observers. As Coacoochee's bargaining for whiskey illustrates, the Indians were shrewd and forceful traders. Several soldiers characterized them as "beggars". "Ask a girl," an officer stationed at Fort Lauderdale wrote in 1839, "which of two handkerchiefs she will take, she will invariably answer both."

The Seminoles also appeared remarkably free to come and go as they pleased, unhampered by prearranged schedules or appointments. A contemporary newspaper reported their "universal excuse" of illness when they failed to appear at meetings with the whites. Despite this informal attitude towards negotiations, Captain Sprague reported, the Seminoles had a great fondness for ceremonies which had been handed down from generation to generation, and contained a measure of religious significance. When not engaged in warfare, one witness remarked, they were a peaceful and quiet people. This, however, was a facet of their character which few military men in Florida saw.

Although whites appear divided in their support of the war and their attitude toward the Indians, there was no such difference of opinion among the Seminoles once the war was underway. Almost universally, they attributed the struggle to white aggression. Most vowed to fight until the end. Although most had never left Florida, many had formed distinct impressions of the Arkansas Territory, to which they were to be removed. They described it as a cold land, where they would have to wear shoes, stockings, and thick clothing. They believed that subsistence was scarce there, and knew that they would be deprived of their coontie. They also feared the journey across the Gulf by ship, believing that they would be separated from their families and perhaps blown up or drowned. Several small bands of Seminoles, Choctaws, and Creeks had located along the coasts of south Florida before the war erupted, but the majority of the Indians did not wish to move south of the Kissimmee prairies. Except for the Atlantic coastal ridge and the west coast river estuaries, they found southern Florida "wet, low, and marshy," and sparse in subsistence. But the Everglades was still preferable to Arkansas.

What negotiations and fighting could not accomplish, a seven-year war of attrition and open bribery did. Between June 30, 1841, and June 1, 1842, General Worth paid Florida Indians a total of $99,963.07 to emigrate westward. Prominent chiefs and war leaders, whose examples had a great influence over their followers, commanded high prices, Worth paid Coacoochee $8,000, and several "sub-chiefs" $250. Typical warriors received between $5 and $30.

The end of the war, the removal of 3,824 Seminoles to the Arkansas Territory, and the retreat of the small remnant of approximately 300 Indians into southwestern Florida ended an era in Seminole history. The same events that destroyed a way of life for Florida's Indians, however, also made it possible for that way of life to be observed by army officers and recorded for posterity.

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