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EDUCATING THE SEMINOLE INDIANS OF FLORIDA, 1879-1970

by HARRY A. KERSEY, JR. *

IT WAS NOT UNTIL the 1920s that Seminole Indian children in Florida began to attend federal and public schools on a regular basis. The Seminoles were among the last tribes to accept the benefits of public school education. Much of the basis for this long resistance is found in the cultural and geographic isolation of the Seminoles. Following a series of devastating confrontations with the government between 1817 and 1858, collectively known as the Seminole Wars, most of the Seminoles who had not been killed were sent to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma. Those few Indians who remained in Florida withdrew to the wild interior swamplands of the southern part of the peninsula. They rarely ventured from their isolated camps in the deep Everglades except to trade at such frontier villages as Fort Myers, Miami, and Fort Lauderdale. They had little use for the settlers who had usurped their lands, and they kept contacts to a minimum. A few males learned enough English to facilitate their commerce in hides, pelts, and plumes, but beyond that there was no desire to become acquainted with white man's ways. Nor were there many positive overtures on the part of the white settlers to acculturate the Seminoles. Throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century there were isolated instances of informal efforts by missionaries and concerned citizens to teach the basic elements of learning to Seminoles, but there were few federal or state efforts in this direction.

The first person to investigate seriously the educational status of the Seminole was Captain Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School and one of the most significant figures in the history of Indian education. In 1875, Pratt was placed in charge of seventy-two Indians from the Southwest who were incarcerated at Fort Marion in St.

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Augustine.¹ He was sincerely interested in his charges and believed that training and education would help them to withstand their period of confinement; moreover, they would be a good influence when they returned to their tribes. Pratt believed that the most important element in educating Indians was to remove them from the reservations so they could learn the white man's culture and to teach them a useful trade. Thus equipped, the Indian's problem of assimilation into white society would be lessened. Four years would pass before Pratt was able to acquire the funds and facilities necessary to implement his revolutionary plan for educating Indians, but in the meantime, "women in St. Augustine, some of them school teachers, undertook to educate some of the Indians in a part of the old fort that was fixed up as a kind of crude classroom."² Reading and moral instruction were taught, and tools were introduced to help the Indians acquire carpentry skills. Quite a few, it was reported, blended artistic skill with their carpentry work. It was "this educational work," according to a teacher at the fort, "that was the beginning of the Carlisle School."³ The Indians at Fort Marion learned about the white world in numerous ways; many went into town and "served as guides to tourists, did all sorts of odd jobs, worked in saw mills, and picked oranges."⁴ Yet, this afforded little opportunity for the Indian to learn a trade, and Pratt continued to work for a regular school. His efforts were rewarded in 1879 when the Carlisle School opened with 147 students.

In the spring of 1879, Pratt was in Washington trying to obtain permission to open his school. At that time the United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs, knowing of the young officer's success with Indians, requested that he undertake an investigation of the Florida Seminole. It was hoped the Seminoles could be induced to join their tribesmen in Oklahoma,

1. Jessie Hamm Meyer, "Development of Technical-Vocational Education at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Florida, 1954), 12. Omega G. East, "Apache Indians in Fort Marion, 1886-1887," *El Escribano* (St. Augustine Historical Society), January 1969, 11-27; April 1969, 3-23; July 1969, 4-23; October 1969, 20-38. Fort Marion is the Castillo de San Marcos.

2. Meyer, "Development of Technical-Vocational Education," 19.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

and Pratt was to ascertain how the Indians remaining in Florida would view their removal. He agreed to go to Florida, and submitted his report in August and September of that year. The document gives a vivid account of his experiences in the Indian camps and provides one of the earliest studies of post-removal Seminole culture in Florida. The information gained on this trip enabled Pratt to draw a number of conclusions about the Seminole, and led him to make the following suggestions concerning their education:

It is probable that so long as the old Indians remain, who passed through the war of 1835 to 42 and the later wars of 1852-56 & 57 (who are justly suspicious of the United States Govt.) no great progress can be made in the education and civilization of these people. . . .

Their removal to the civilized portion of their tribe in the Indian Territory would more for their advancement than any other plan, but, except by some unworthy trick, they could not be procured to go there. . . .

Their spirit of independence and self help should not be destroyed.

I would recommend that the Department begin the work of redeeming these people from their savage state, by sending among them a responsible man as teacher, having special reference to gathering their children into school. That he be instructed for the present to visit and remain at least ten days in each village, once every three months, gradually inculcating educational ideas, instructing and encouraging them to enlarge their agricultural and stock resources. . . .

By these, and other means, he will gain their good will and so their consent to let their children attend school.

A boarding school with manual labor features would be the only school of real value, in which so far as possible the youth should reap tangible rewards for their labor. Old Ft. Brooke at Tampa is probably abandoned for military uses, and would furnish an admirable place for such a school, ready for immediate use.⁵

It should be noted that Captain Pratt's recommendations for solving the "Seminole problem" contained essentially the same educational ideas which he envisioned for Carlisle: an off-reservation boarding school was to offer basic education along

5. William C. Sturtevant, "R. H. Pratt's Report on the Seminole in 1879," *Florida Anthropologist*, IX (March 1956), 14-15.

with industrial vocational training. Such a program, he believed, was the essential first step in helping the Seminoles to help themselves in preparing for assimilation into white society. Judging by the rather negative response which he received from the Indians, it is surprising that he believed the Seminoles might welcome itinerant teachers in their camps, much less attend a federal boarding school. Nevertheless, Pratt was a humanitarian intent upon helping the Indians, and he evidently viewed his educational program as the starting point for all tribal groups, regardless of their state of acculturation.

Pratt's report "was finally printed in 1888 as one of the documents accompanying the report of special agent A. M. Wilson on his investigations among the Seminole."⁶ Perhaps because of this oversight, there were no further government efforts to contact and to educate Seminoles for another decade. However, informal efforts to facilitate Indian schooling did not cease after Pratt's visit. Captain Francis A. Hendry of Fort Myers, whom Pratt described as "one of the largest cattle owners in the state, a worthy and warm friend of the Indians, and one of the few in whom they confide,"⁷ had accompanied the young army officer to the Seminole camps and had aided in the negotiations. In August 1879, Hendry wrote to Pratt informing him of the first breakthrough in getting a Seminole into school:

Fort Myers Aug. 10/79

Dear Capt Pratt

Your esteemed favor of 22 July to hand glad to hear of your safe arrival home.

I am pleased to acknowledge the receipt of Indian Comm report, I read it with much interest. I am happy to state that little Billy Fewel (Tonapacho) is now stoping [*sic*] with me & going to school, our school having commenced since your departure.

Mrs. H having surrendered [?] the point & is quite willing to have him as her Guest. He has clothed himself in a decent suit of civilized clothing & looks nicely. I hope to keep him, although I am sure he must take his wild Indian Rambles⁸ he learns fast and attends promptly not missing an hour.

6. *Ibid.*, 2.

7. *Ibid.*, 6.

8. F. A. Hendry to Richard H. Pratt, August 10, 1879, *ibid.*, 17. Interpolations are those of Sturtevant.

Billy Conapatchee, the young Seminole whom the Fort Myers townspeople called by a combination of his anglicized and Indian names, lived with the Hendry family for three years. He attended the Fort Myers "academy," which opened in 1878, along with the Hendry children and other white students from the town. There are no extant records of his school work, these having been lost when the "academy" burned in 1886; however, it was thought that Billy had done creditable work and had been fully accepted by the people of the town. An article in the *Fort Myers Press* relates: "He is an exceptional Indian, havng, through the benevolent action of Capt. Hendry, received a fair common school education in Fort Myers. . . . Like most of his race he is reserved and taciturn, but by no means deceitful or a double dealer. He dresses, when he visits Ft. Myers at least, much more like the white men than do the others of his race. He has numerous friends here who all respect him and speak well of him." ⁹

When the Reverend Clay MacCauley conducted a survey of the Seminoles for the Smithsonian Institution in 1880, Billy Conapatchee served as his guide and interpreter. MacCauley noted in his report that the boy had been studying the white man's language and ways for more than a year, and "at that time he was the only Seminole who had separated himself from his people and had cast in his lot with the whites." ¹⁰ This decision to learn the white man's ways placed Billy Conapatchee in grave conflict with his own people; the tribal elders condemned him and only the pleas of his father saved his life. Even so, MacCauley reported at least one threat against the young man's life by another Seminole, and the need of Captain Hendry to intervene in the matter. Evidently Billy had just begun his schooling when he served MacCauley, and his limited English fluency occasionally caused frustration for both men. Billy often did not understand the ethnographer's inquiries concerning Seminole social and political traditions or family relationships; thus the main valve of MacCauley's investigation lay in the description of physical culture. Following one particularly taxing interrogation session on Seminole language, the

9. *Fort Myers Press*, March 7, 1885.

10. Clay MacCauley, "The Seminole Indians of Florida," *Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, 1887), 492.

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following dialogue took place between MacCauley and Billy: " 'Doctor, how long you want me to tell you Indian language?' Why?' I replied, 'are you tired, Billy?' 'No,' he answered, 'a littly. Me think me tell you all. Me don't know English language. Bum-by you come, next winter, me tell you all. Me go to school. Me learn.' " ¹¹ In part because of the perseverance and alertness shown by Billy, the Reverend MacCauley made the following assessment of Seminole intellectual ability: "In range of intellectual power and mental processes the Florida Indians, when compared with the intellectual abilities and operations of the cultivated American, are quite limited. But if the Seminole are to be judged by comparison with other American aborigines, I believe they easily enter the first class. They seem to be mentally active. . . . Those with whom I particularly dealt were exceptionally patient under the strains to which I put their minds. Ko-nip-ha-tco, by no means a brilliant member of his tribe, is much to be commended for his patient, persistent, intellectual industry." ¹²

By 1885, Billy Conapatchee had returned to his home in the Everglades, and no other Seminole - not even his children - came seeking the white man's school. The tribal leaders had decided that education was not essential to their well being and discouraged any further incursions in this direction.

Nevertheless, there was renewed interest in aiding the Florida Seminoles after MacCauley's report was published in 1884. In March 1891, Amelia S. Quinton, president of the Missionary Committee of the Women's National Indian Association, accompanied by two other ladies and the ubiquitous Captain Hendry, visited the Indian camps on the western edge of the Everglades. By June of that year, the Indian Association had established a mission for the Seminoles just west of Immokalee. Shortly after Dr. and Mrs. J. E. Brecht, a missionary couple, arrived from St. Louis to begin their nine year apostolate among the Seminoles, the federal government purchased eighty acres of the land and appointed Dr. Brecht as Indian agent. His charge was "to draw the Indians from their swampy and scattered camps to this better location where they might be grouped more closely and thus more successfully drawn into industrial work, with school

11. *Ibid.*, 494.

12. *Ibid.*, 493.

facilities and the making of better homes.”¹³ To help Brecht accomplish this goal, a staff of six employees was sent to work at the station. The government also supplied a sawmill, farm implements, a millhouse, a planing mill, and several mules and oxen. The stage was set to provide industrial education for the Seminole as Pratt had suggested a decade earlier.

The plan failed however. From time to time a few Indians visited the station briefly and then returned to their camps in the Everglades. One observer later reported, “The Indians steadily refused to accept any of the freely offered benefits of the school and other material aid, even so far as refusing to accept a board from the mill or a handful of nails from the warehouse.”¹⁴ Excerpts from the agent’s reports during these years chronicle the Seminole’s deep seated resistance to change: “I am sorry to say progress is much slower than one could wish, but they are not standing still. . . . More of the younger men are putting on citizen’s dress. . . . The older Indians are holding back the young men and girls. Many, especially the boys seem anxious to learn to read, but have not the courage to break away from the influences brought to bear upon them. . . . No organized school work has been carried on at the station.”¹⁵ In his final accounting just prior to leaving Immokalee in 1899, Dr. Brecht set down his views on the educability of the Seminoles: “In conclusion, I would say that, although the efforts of the earlier years of this service to win the Indians to organized school work were not successful, the evidence of the good result of the camp work was sufficient to make us feel that persistent and continued effort in that line would accomplish the desired result, and I have such faith in these Indians as to believe that by a constant mingling among them of earnest workers they would be brought out of their aversion and stolid indifference to education and progress.”¹⁶

The failure of the government station and school at Immokalee to reach the Seminole could not be laid to any lack of effort on the part of the Brechts. There is ample evidence that they were well liked by the Indians who often visited in their

13. Roy Nash, “Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida,” February 28, 1931. 71 Cong., 3rd Sess., *Senate Document No. 314*, 62.

14. *Ibid.*, 61.

15. *Ibid.*, 62.

16. *Ibid.*

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home, and the couple occasionally attended the Green Corn dance as guests of the Seminoles. Moreover, from the mention of their work in the camps it would seem that the Brechts took seriously Pratt's admonition to send teachers out among the Seminoles to lay the ground work for formal schooling. Even so, this relationship could not overcome the general resistance of the Seminoles to accepting the white man's ways. Two factors militated against the success of the station: it was too far removed from the Indians it was to serve, and it promoted a lifestyle they were not ready to embrace. The Seminole camps and hunting grounds were some twenty to forty miles distant from Immokalee and traders were closer. As long as there was a demand for the products of hunting, the Seminoles did not find it feasible to take up industrial pursuits. But perhaps even more important was the existence of the large number of older Seminoles mentioned by Pratt, who still harbored great animosity toward anything connected with the United States and this foredoomed the success of the venture. Thus, the first substantive attempt by the government to entice the Seminoles into a more domesticated way of life ended in failure. For the next quarter century the greatest educational headway would be made, not by organized governmental efforts, but through the earnest endeavor of dedicated private citizens who, like Captain Hendry, were acknowledged friends of the Seminoles and were accepted as such by the tribe.

The first white person to have notable success in befriending and educating small Seminole children was Ivy Julia Cromartie Stranahan, who came to the frontier village of Fort Lauderdale in 1899 as the first school teacher. Her school opened with nine students attending a small clapboard building which the townspeople had erected in a clearing among the palmettos; the enrollment reached eleven students by the end of the term - but none were Indian children. The following year the young school teacher resigned her position to marry Frank Stranahan who operated a trading post and stage coach stopover on the New River. Seminoles from camps in the Big Cypress swamp trusted Stranahan and frequented his post to trade their pelts and hides, so over the years his wife came to know and respect the Indian people, and she gave unstintingly of her time and energies in their behalf. She was instrumental in establishing the first

permanent reservation for the Seminoles. She also ministered to their health needs, promoted education for their children, and served as their spokesman with the white community at large for over half a century.

Mrs. Stranahan has often recounted her experiences in attempting to teach Seminole children their ABC's early in this century.¹⁷ For the first year or so the Indian children would not come near the white woman at the trading post, but ultimately a rapport was established, and the small Seminoles roamed the Stranahan household freely during their frequent visits. At this point Mrs. Stranahan felt that it was her Christian duty to work with the youngsters so that they might be better prepared to cope with the ever encroaching white culture. Shunning the traditional school materials such as the Webster blueback speller and McGuffey readers, she used large brightly colored religious posters supplied by the Presbyterian church in Fort Lauderdale. These posters contained pictures of saints, apostles, and other scriptural figures with their names printed underneath. The Seminole children learned their letters by examining such materials as they gathered on the Stranahans' back porch, or around her Model-T Ford when she drove to nearby camps. These visits became more frequent when a number of Indian families settled in the Fort Lauderdale area.

The educational forays by Mrs. Stranahan were not always well received. "The parents frowned upon education," she recalled, and the "Medicine Men detested it."¹⁸ Therefore, she concentrated on the children and did not attempt to change their elders' mode of living. Moreover, she realized that the ways of the white man were not necessarily the best for Indians, and she always told the children, "we don't want to make you like us. We just want to give you education, so that you can make the best of what you are."¹⁹ Despite the resistance of some tribal elders and the hardships involved, Mrs. Stranahan continued her informal teaching for over twenty-five years, ceasing only when a federal day school was opened on the Dania Seminole Reservation in 1927. Even so, she continued to offer aid

17. Interview with Mrs. Frank Stranahan, February 12, 1968. See also August Burghard, *Watchie-Esta/Hutrie (The Little White Mother)* (Fort Lauderdale, 1968), *passim*.

18. *Fort Lauderdale News*, September 29, 1968.

19. *Ibid.*

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and counsel to her Indian friends and organized a group known as Friends of the Seminoles to carry on her work. Today, in her late eighties, Mrs. Stranahan is recognized as "the first lady of Fort Lauderdale," and has received numerous accolades for her humanitarian work among the Indians of Florida.

It was primarily through the exertions of Mrs. Stranahan that Tony Tommie, a Seminole lad of fifteen, entered the Fort Lauderdale elementary school in 1915. The reminiscences of his teachers and schoolmates, many of whom still reside in the area, show that Tony was an affable and intelligent youngster who was well liked by the townspeople. He cut a dashing figure in his brightly-hued Seminole shirt and long pants (this at a time when schoolboys still wore knickers), and was invariably barefooted even in school. He entered the third grade and made rapid progress. "He was a good student," one teacher recalled, "and he was very anxious to learn and especially did he want to learn how to read and spell. He learned to read and write and to spell down here . . . he went fast because of his age . . . he had the intelligence, he just hadn't had the opportunity."²⁰ Although Tony was older than his classmates there was no friction and the white children seemed to be proud of him. After two terms at the public school, Tony Tommie was sent to a federal boarding school for Indians in Oklahoma; upon his return he became the acknowledged leader of the Seminole people in the Fort Lauderdale area - although tribal leaders in other parts of the state disputed his claim to speak with any authority.²¹

The entry of this young Seminole into the white man's school marked a significant departure from tradition, as was pointed out in a report by the agent, Reverend Lucien A. Spencer: "Tony B. M. Tommie completed the work of two grades in the public school of Fort Lauderdale during the past year. The fact that we have one boy in school by tribal permission is an advance. . . . The time is not far distant when the tribal law forbidding education and providing that persons learning to read and write shall have their ears cropped will be repealed."²² There was apparently no serious repercussions from Tony Tommie's

20. Interview with Eleanor Boyd Miller, April 19, 1969. Tape in files of author.

21. *St. Petersburg Daily News*, February 15, 1927.

22. Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 34.

schooling, for by 1920 the agent could report, "Fort Lauderdale camp for several years has had representation in the public schools; the county school at Indian Town has also enrolled several Indian children."²³ These entries should not lead one to assume, however, that the tribe had totally reversed itself and had embraced white man's education *per se*. Sam Tommie recalls that his older brother Tony was ostracized by many of his people and won only the grudging permission of the tribal council to attend school. Only a handful of Seminoles cared about learning to read and write, and there remained a hostility toward schooling that would manifest itself in various forms when federal day schools were established on the reservations.

The first Seminole reservation in Florida was established west of Dania in 1926, and an elementary day school was opened in February of the following year. From the first all did not run smoothly. According to the agent's report: "On the Sunday preceding Tony Tommie, a self-styled chief of all the Seminoles, and certain white friends professing great friendship for and interest in these Indians, visited the camp in my absence and impressed upon the Indians that the children would all have to submit to vaccination as the first step when school opened. Thereupon all the Indians fled from the camp except one family and the school opened with but three pupils."²⁴ A Seminole woman, Mrs. Lena King, was the first teacher at the school. Enrollment rose to eighteen by the end of the year; however, there were twenty-five desks available in the school. Agent Spencer was determined to expose more Seminole children to the benefits of education, and he attempted to persuade a number of families living some distance from the reservation to move there. When he met with resistance from some of the headmen of the tribe, the agent proved to be tough and resourceful. In 1927 he reported: "The Indian Town camp which I was preparing to move here refused to come on account of the above interference, and I promptly cut off their ration supply. At the end of three weeks of starvation they moved here and placed their children in school."²⁵

In 1928 the day school opened for a second year with Mrs.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 2.

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John Marshall, Captain Spencer's daughter, as the teacher. The school under her care was described by Nash in his 1931 report to the United States Senate: "Two sessions were held daily, one in the morning for half a dozen children and two women; another in the evening for two men who are eager to learn to read but too old to make much progress. The school term is six months."²⁶ He also gave a frank appraisal of the educational status of the Seminole tribe: "The net result of all this education, formal and informal, is perhaps four Seminoles who can carry on a conversation in fairly fluent English, three who can write an understandable though ungrammatical letter and keep simple accounts."²⁷

Evidently this low level of attendance and achievement prevailed as long as efforts to educate Seminole children were centered exclusively in the reservation school. Most of the tribe remained apathetic toward schooling, and parents did not force their children to attend classes. The quality of the educational program was uneven, and there was a rapid turnover of teachers. The general atmosphere of the school can best be gauged from this account by a former student:

Some of them (parents) sent their children to school. We weren't forced to go. We could go if we want to, but we didn't have to go. They didn't tell us to go. But once in a while the curiosity got us so that we would get there. I think we were pretty loud or mean or something that they didn't stay too long, the teachers didn't. In those days we didn't know what school life was and we just won't cooperate, that's all. . . . I remember that they tried to make us sit down and teach the books and all that. Of course, our Grandmother told us that we were not supposed to go to school and all that. So we just . . . give the mysteries, I guess, or mean or whatever you want to call it, to the teacher until one leaves and then the other one comes. Mrs. DeVault was the last teacher I know that was there, but she didn't stay too long. . . . We don't know what school was because the Indian kids didn't go to school, and we just didn't care whether we went to school or not. We'd rather be out swimming somewhere. . . . None of us didn't stay too long. We come and spend a few hours, and we would just walk out when we feel like it. I went to school all right, but it is just that I didn't stay long

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 35.

enough to know what it was all about. That's why I didn't know nothing until I went to (boarding) school on my own. . . . I would go home and tell my mother that the teacher was mean to me and she would get mad at them instead of getting after me, see, that's the way it was and we didn't care.²⁸

With incidents such as these to report, government officials probably had grave misgivings about ever educating Seminole children. Thus when the depression years brought a paucity of federal funds, it was decided in 1936 to close the Dania day school. It was held that any Indian child desiring an education could attend the public schools or go away to a federal boarding school. Moreover, it was deemed desirable that Indian children be assimilated into the life of the community through attendance at the public schools. However, there was no rush by Seminole parents to enroll their offspring in schools off the reservation, nor were the local schools anxious to accept Indian children; in fact, none actually attended until the 1940s. When the day school closed a few of the children, under the auspices of Mrs. Stranahan's group, were sent away to the Cherokee Indian School in North Carolina. Two of the girls remained there until they graduated from high school in 1945.

There is some question whether Seminoles were ever excluded from public schools due to segregation policies - and the answer is not clear cut. Undoubtedly, the greatest factor retarding the school attendance of Indian children throughout most of this century has been the tribe's indifference toward education. This was most pronounced among the Seminoles living in the Everglades south of Lake Okeechobee. On the other hand, there have been numerous instances of Indians, either singly or in small groups, attending public schools along the East coast since 1915. This did not represent a mass ethnic influx and by most accounts they did not stay long or encounter undue hostility. However, by the early 1950s the situation had changed. A relatively large number of Indian children were ready to enter public school, and some counties were fearful that this might set a dangerous precedent for integrating the schools. In one instance Glades County, where the Brighton Reservation is located, refused to take Seminoles and they were

28. Interview with Betty Mae Jumper, June 17, 1969. Tape in files of author.

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bussed to Okeechobee City for a number of years. There were similar problems in Hendry and Collier counties as well. Today, the Indian children are accepted in the schools of the counties where they reside. How adequately the schools have met the special educational needs of these children is another question that must be investigated elsewhere.

When Seminole children began to attend public schools regularly, mainly through the efforts of the Friends of the Seminoles organization, they encountered some problems of adjustment to a new environment. The principal of the Dania elementary school at that time recalls: "I think we would be putting it mildly if we said they were still a little wild! They were a little bit clannish and they were not used to being restricted by the four walls of a classroom, and they had very little knowledge of or use of restroom facilities and things of this sort, so we had some rough moments in the beginning. . . . We tried not to discipline them in the very beginning for the simple reason that we did not want to discourage the Indians, and I think it was through patience of the teachers really that they started to adjust in the classrooms and to make proper use of restroom facilities and things of this sort. I think one of the things that we were most conscious of at that particular time was the fact that if we were going to make them feel welcome in the school, we couldn't do it by punishing them for things that were really no fault of their own, because they were not used to these things on the reservations and they had to learn to use them while they were attending school." He also remembers that "the students accepted them quite well."²⁹ The greatest problem that confronted the school faculty then as now was to get the Seminole parents interested in education; for the first year no parents came to the school to see how their children were getting along.

Although it was feasible to close the Dania day school, ostensibly to transfer the children to nearby public schools, this was not the case on the two outlying reservations which were very remote. Therefore the Bureau of Indian Affairs established elementary day schools on the Brighton Reservation in 1938 and on the Big Cypress Reservation in 1940. The story of these two

29. Interview with Myron Ashmore, May 12, 1969. Tape in files of author.

schools reflects to a great degree the acculturational differences which exist within the Seminole tribe today.

The approximately 300 people who live on the Brighton Reservation north of Lake Okeechobee are Cow Creek Seminoles. They speak the Creek language which was the major tongue of the Seminole when they migrated to Florida in the eighteenth century. The people from this reservation are excellent cattlemen and farm workers who are well accepted in the nearby agricultural communities where they have long been employed. Because of their contacts with off-reservation society, these Indians are generally more advanced socially than the rest of the tribe. They were the first to accept the value of education and the Brighton day school was well attended. The teacher who ran the school throughout the sixteen years of its existence has given the following account of the situation which he encountered:

We opened the school with eight children. . . . We helped with the building and also became acquainted with the people . . . a few could speak some English and understand some, but neither my wife nor I could speak the Creek language which the Indians at Brighton use. . . . They ranged in age from six years to about sixteen, and only one of these had ever been in school. One of the boys spoke fairly good English, the one who had attended public school. . . . There really was not much support for the school at the beginning. The people on the Brighton reservation are good workers; they are hard working people. If there was not work on the reservation they would go out to ranches and farms, sometimes thirty or forty miles away, to work; and when the winter's truck farming season opened they often would take the whole family and go to these farms until the crop was harvested, and take the children along. In fact, the children worked too. . . . Our attendance for the first two or three years probably ranged in seventy-two to seventy-five per cent attendance. But at time went on the parents learned that the children did not learn unless they were in school; they had to attend regularly in order to continue to progress. The parents saw this, and later on they would go to the farms for work, but they would leave the children at home with an aunt or grandmother or somebody to take care of them. . . . 1954 was the last year that we had school. . . . The program of the Bureau of Indian Affairs was to place children in

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public schools wherever it was possible, because the feeling was that they would be assimilated into the dominant culture better this way than if they were kept in segregated schools. . . . We had 100 per cent enrollment, every child on the reservation was in school. The average attendance for the last several years was ninety-five - ninety-six percent, which was better than most public schools had.³⁰

When the elementary school was closed in 1954 the children were transferred to the Okeechobee City schools. Today students from Brighton attend the public schools in Moore Haven. The first Seminole to graduate from a public high school in Florida was a Brighton youth, and the people from this reservation have supplied most of the current leadership for the Seminole tribe.

The people of the Big Cypress Reservation are Mikasuki speakers, many of whom have until recently been resident in the deep Everglades and have had limited contacts with white culture. Consequently, those tribal members who live on this virtually inaccessible site - there was no all-weather road into the area until the late 1950s - are the least acculturated and least prepared to accept change or adapt to the dominant culture. A third of the population still lives in the primitive thatched roof "chickee" which has served the tribe for over a century; few homes have adequate sanitation facilities; running water is a rarity. Adults work on nearby farms and ranches or for the tribe; the average annual income is extremely low, and there are numerous families on welfare. Many of the parents are illiterate and have little conception of the need for formal education. In such conditions it is difficult to foster a climate of opinion that is conducive to formal schooling of even the most rudimentary level. Nevertheless, because this settlement is over forty miles from the nearest town, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has continued to operate a four-year elementary day school with a resident teacher and staff. In addition to the normal school work, the staff provides two meals a day and tries to meet the major physical and health needs of the children. Beginning with the fifth grade the students are bused into the Clewiston public schools - a round trip of some ninety miles each day. The result has been low achievement, erratic attend-

30. Interview with William Boehmer, January 23, 1969. Tape in files of author.

ance, and a high drop-out rate; there was not a high school graduate from Big Cypress until 1963.

Today, the Hollywood Reservation (formerly Dania) presents yet another problem of Seminole social and economic assimilation. Although it is now surrounded by a metropolitan area, serves as the seat of tribal and Bureau of Indian Affairs offices, and offers the most modern living facilities, the people of this reservation are still insulated from the local society and economy. Very few Seminoles have moved off the reservation or hold full-time employment in nearby communities. The children attend public schools, and many graduate from high school; however, their social life, with the exception of organized athletics for boys, is mostly centered within their own group. There is little interracial dating and only a few mixed marriages are known. A few women participate in PTA activities, but most Seminoles take little part in off-reservation civic affairs. Thus, access to formal education has not served as a social or economic catalyst for these people to any appreciable degree.

A study of those Seminoles who have received a secondary or higher education dramatically points up just how limited their educational progress has been. The first members of the tribe to complete high school did so in 1945 at the Cherokee Indian School in North Carolina. However, it was not until 1957 that a Seminole graduated from a public high school in Florida. By 1970, only slightly over 150 Seminoles have completed high school or trade school, or approximately ten per cent of the tribe. Of this number fully a half are either unemployed or have great difficulty in securing and retaining permanent employment. Most of the others are employed either by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or in various tribal enterprises such as handicrafts or the cattle program. Only one Seminole has graduated from college, and he is presently teaching in a public school. This general lack of educational attainment has been a major cause of Indian youths' alienation from society. Their contacts with the outside world have led them to desire economic assimilation; however, they suffer from poor language facility, limited social skills, and generally lack the marketable skills which would allow them to be accepted by the dominant culture. This has created a great deal of frustration and inter-personal stress, often resulting in socially deviant behavior;

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alcoholism, glue and gas sniffing, sexual promiscuity, and illegitimacy are on the increase among young Seminoles. It will take the best efforts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and tribal leaders to reverse this trend with educational and social programs that allow these young Indians to become useful and productive citizens.

Within the last few years tribal leadership has gravitated to the few educated Seminoles. One of the youths who graduated at Cherokee Indian School in 1945 now serves as tribal chairman, while the young man who was the first Seminole graduate of a Florida public high school is president of the tribal enterprises. It took the Seminoles many years to rise above partisan politics and tradition to call upon their best educated people for leadership—the incumbents are the first to hold those posts who were not functional illiterates. This accounts in part for the lack of progress by the tribe, even though it enjoys many potential economic advantages, notably valuable real estate holdings, that are not available to other Indians in this nation. A number of ill-starred business ventures in the past have left the tribe in precarious financial position, but with more astute management and an impending land settlement payment from the federal government, the Seminole tribe could recoup its losses and stake out a better financial future. This new leadership also promises much for the educational progress of the tribe through its full support of federal and state programs to upgrade the schooling and home life of Seminole children.

During the last two decades there has been increasing pressure to have Seminole children attend school and continue on to graduation. In the 1968-1969 school year there were 278 children aged six through eighteen attending school. Excepting those children who required special institutional situations, this represented ninety-five per cent of the children. Of this number only forty attended the federal day school on the Big Cypress Reservation, while forty-eight were away at federal boarding schools. The remainder were enrolled in the public schools of four south Florida counties.³¹ In many instances this enrollment

31. School Attendance Report, Seminole Tribe, 1969. Seminole Indian Agency Files. These figures do not account for all Indian children attending school in Florida. In 1957 the U.S. Department of Interior allowed the Seminoles to set up a tribal government; a few years later about 400 dissidents elected to break away from the main body and

has not been matched by diligent attendance, due in part to the distances involved and the apathy of many Seminole parents. To combat this, several programs have been initiated to make schooling more palatable. At the Big Cypress day school, which is within walking distance of most homes, free breakfasts are served to those students who must make the long bus ride to attend public school, as well as to the elementary schoolers. These children also receive free medical and dental services. Various federal welfare programs provide clothing and other necessities for children attending school if the families will take advantage of them. Since 1966 a Head Start program has operated on all three reservations to prepare the children for entry into formal schooling. In 1968 an adult literacy program was initiated on the Brighton and Big Cypress reservations to help illiterate parents reinforce what their children learn in school. As a last resort, children whose home situations preclude their regular attendance in the classroom are sent to federal boarding schools to continue their education. Even so, the drop-out rate among Seminoles is extraordinarily high. In a report to the U. S. Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education the Seminole Agency found: "In 1956 thirty-eight children entered first grade on the three reservations. Twelve years later, 1968, twelve students graduated from high schools. Seven (7) from public schools and five (5) from boarding schools. This would indicate a ratio of one-third (1/3) graduates to two-thirds (2/3) drop-outs."³²

Despite these appalling statistics there is some cause for optimism. Most of the Indian children presently in school have a high probability of remaining to graduation due to the efforts of the government and tribal officials. Moreover, a few Seminole youths who graduated from high school in the last three years have shown an interest in furthering their education; there are federal scholarships available for this purpose, and four Seminoles are currently enrolled in junior colleges and

establish their own tribal identity. This group, living along the Tamiami Trail or squatting on federal land along the northern boundary of the Everglades National Park, call themselves the Miccosukee Tribe. In 1962 a federal day school was opened to serve the children of this group.

32. Eugene W. Barrett, Superintendent Seminole Indian Agency, to U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education, January 21, 1969.

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universities. It is with this group that the future of the tribe lies. One of the students, an articulate senior in a Florida university, has expressed the sentiments of the others. A public administration major, she plans to return to the reservation following graduation and aid the tribe in fiscal planning. Rather than wanting to break completely with the old ways, she welcomes the opportunity to serve her people. "Sticking to the reservation is good in that you don't forget your traditions," she contends, "but you've got to keep up with the world."³³ The problem is to develop the tribal enterprises to a point where they offer some economic inducement to the educated Seminoles who wish to stay and help their people, yet feel that they should utilize the education already attained.

In addition to those Seminoles who are continuing their education there are other signs that bode well for the future of the tribe. A number of young men have joined the armed forces where they receive valuable training as well as exposure to the world. The first group of Viet Nam veterans has returned and assumed responsible jobs in tribal enterprises. There is also an increasing awareness of the necessity for education among some younger parents on the reservations, many of whom regret having not completed school. The parents who share this view should be organized into an effective force to run the school board that ostensibly functions in connection with the Big Cypress day school, and to represent Indian viewpoints to the public schools. At this point in time the lack of effective parental organization is the greatest obstacle to educational progress on the reservations.

Thus, the pendulum is slowly swinging away from parental antipathy or indifference and toward acceptance of education as Indians come to realize that it provides a key to their survival in today's world. If the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the tribal leaders are able to improve social and economic conditions on the reservations, involve parents in making educational decisions effecting their children, and develop programs of remedial and compensatory education at the federal day school as well as vocational training for older youths, then perhaps a brighter chapter in the history of Seminole education can be written in the not too distant future.

33. *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, December 13, 1968.