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PELTS, PLUMES, AND HIDES: WHITE TRADERS AMONG THE SEMINOLE INDIANS, 1890-1930

by HARRY A. KERSEY, JR.*

Only a handful of Indians remained in Florida as the Third Seminole War ended in 1858. When Chief Billy Bowlegs led his band out of the Big Cypress Swamp, accepted a government indemnity, and boarded the steamer *Grey Cloud* which would take him and his group to their new home in the Indian Territory, he estimated that only thirty-eight warriors and their families were left behind. This was probably a low figure, but his information was relayed to the war department by Colonel Elias Rector, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and plans were made to locate the remaining bands.¹ Throughout that summer, army and civilian scouts found signs of Indian habitation, but failed to make contact, and in the fall of 1858 a contingent of Seminoles led by Billy Bowlegs returned to seek out these Indians and, if possible, persuade them to join their tribe in the West. Only seventy-five more left the state, and when they moved to Indian Territory in February 1859, it marked the last substantive attempt by federal authorities to remove Seminoles from Florida.²

The Seminoles who had eluded the government faded into the Everglades and Big Cypress region where they developed what was later described as a "remnant of a remnant" culture.³ For two decades they had almost no contacts with whites except for occasional visits to trade at frontier villages such as Miami

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1. "Report of the Secretary of War," *House Executive Documents*, 35th Cong., 2nd sess., no. 2, 241-42.
2. Kenneth W. Porter, "Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco) in the Seminole Wars," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLV (January 1967), 241. See Edwin McReynolds, *The Seminoles* (Norman, 1957), 287 and Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman, 1934), 275.
3. "Bishop's Journal," *Journal of the Eighth Annual Convocation of the Church in the Missionary Jurisdiction of Southern Florida* (Tampa, 1900), 52.

and Fort Myers. There was no desire on the Indian's part to learn white man's ways, and the settlers were, with a few exceptions, little inclined to acculturate the Seminole. Then in 1879 the government dispatched Captain R. H. Pratt, the soldier-educator who founded the Carlisle Indian School, to investigate the condition of the Florida Seminole and prevail upon them to agree to leave Florida.⁴ Pratt contacted the Indians and reported on their camp life, but he made no headway in persuading them to move. In 1880 the Smithsonian Institution sent the Reverend Clay MacCauley to compile an ethnographic survey of the Florida Indians, which he completed in a period of several months.⁵ Publication of the studies by Pratt and MacCauley in the 1880s spurred renewed interest in the Florida Seminoles. By 1891 the Women's National Indian Association had purchased a half-section of land and established a Seminole mission, and within a year the government had acquired adjoining land to open an industrial education center and general agency for the Indians.⁶ However, both private and public efforts to contact the Seminoles had only limited success and little impact on their life style. The Indians engaged primarily in a hunting and trapping economy, augmented by some subsistence farming and raising of livestock. As long as game was plentiful and mobility was not constricted in southern Florida, the Seminoles defied attempts to convert them into farmers. Changes occurred in the first quarter of the twentieth century with the establishment of reservations, but as late as 1900 the Florida Indians were still basically a semi-nomadic people with a relatively unrestricted domain.

The people who knew the Seminole best were the white traders who at the end of the nineteenth century frequented their camps or established permanent trading posts on the periphery of their hunting grounds. Many traders and whiskey vendors came and went among the Indians but left little documentary evidence of their transactions. What is known of the Indian

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4. William C. Sturtevant, "R. H. Pratt's Report on the Seminole in 1879," *Florida Anthropologist*, IX (March 1956), 1-24.
 5. Clay MacCauley, "The Seminole Indians of South Florida," *Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, 1887), 475-538.
 6. "Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs," *House Exec. Doc.*, 53rd Cong., 2nd sess., no. 1, 356.

trade on the Florida frontier comes primarily from the documents and personal accounts of those families who established permanent trading posts and trafficked with the Seminole on a sustained basis. These pioneers, often living under the most primitive of conditions, were the Indian's contact with the outside world which he loathed but also needed. The trading posts were his source of supply for food staples, manufactured goods, guns, and ammunition that he needed for survival in the wilderness. They were also outlets for pelts, plumes, hides, and skins which would bring the cash money necessary for trading. The traders were also entrepreneurs, and they depended upon the Indians for those items which they sold at a profit to warehousemen in Miami, Fort Myers, Key West, and Tampa for transshipment to eastern manufacturing centers. Thus, there developed a symbiotic relationship between the trader and the Seminole that often transcended mere economic necessity; in most cases the traders also became friends of the Indians and keen observers of their way of life. The traders and their families often learned the language of the Indians, the Muskogee of the Cow Creeks and the Hitchiti of the Mikasuki, and taught the Indian some rudiments of English to facilitate communication. Many close relationships were established between white and Seminole youngsters that lasted over the years. The posts became havens for sick or injured Indians, especially in times of epidemics such as measles or influenza for which the Indians had no cure in their tribal medical lore.

Although there had been trading posts at Fort Myers since the 1850s and at Miami since the 1870s, the boom in Indian trade came in the 1890s when the demand for alligator hides and the feathers of plume birds soared.⁷ As business grew it became profitable to establish trading posts close to the source of supply. By the late 1880s the Seminole had divided into three distinct groups, which reflected language and political differences, and had settled in three geographic locations, each having its own particular environmental potential for economic gain. In the

7. MacCauley, "The Seminole Indians of South Florida," 487-88. Two of the traders at Miami were William B. Brickell and J. W. Ewan. For information on their activities see Helen Muir, *Miami, USA* (Coconut Grove, 1953), 14-16, 30, 51-52, and Charles W. Pierce, *Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida*, edited by Donald W. Curl (Miami, 1970), 126-27.

marsh region northeast of Lake Okeechobee, along Cow Creek, were the Muskogee-speaking descendants of the lower Creeks who first entered Florida in the 1700s. In the broad watery land south of the lake lived the Hitchiti-speaking Mikasuki bands which were divided into two groups: along the lower east coast the so-called "Miami Indians" lived on the hammocks of the Everglades, while some sixty miles west, the "Cypress Indians" lived and hunted in the Big Cypress swamp southward to the Ten Thousand Islands. One or more major trading posts served each of these regions. The accounts of life at these posts produce a colorful and human narrative of cultural interaction, and if there is a thread of similarity in the experiences, there is also diversity in terms of the somewhat different needs and life styles of the Seminoles who frequented a particular site. The accounts of these traders provide a chronicle of the cultural changes that took place among the Seminole as they came in contact with the outside world. This study focuses on the major trading families who were active in south Florida and the reciprocal relationships which they established with the Seminole during the period 1890-1930.

Frank Stranahan was twenty-eight when, in 1893, he arrived at the small New River settlement now known as Fort Lauderdale. He was to manage the overland stagecoach mail line from Lantana to Lemon City, which had replaced the "Barefoot Mailman" route along the beaches. In addition, he was to operate the ferry across the river and develop a dining and lodging facility at this midpoint on the stagecoach route. Within a year he opened the Stranahan & Co. Trading Post on the north bank of the river. In 1894 Stranahan purchased a ten-acre tract from William B. and Mary Brickell of Miami, the first of many land acquisitions that would make him one of the area's wealthiest citizens. Stranahan's enterprises prospered, especially his trade with the Indians. In 1900 he was married to Ivy Julia Cromartie, who had come to the settlement as the first teacher, and the following year he built an imposing two-story structure on the river that would serve as both a trading post and family home.⁸

The Stranahans were staunch friends of the Seminoles who

8. August Burghard, *Watchie-Esta/Hutrie (The Little White Mother)* (Fort Lauderdale, 1968), *passim*.

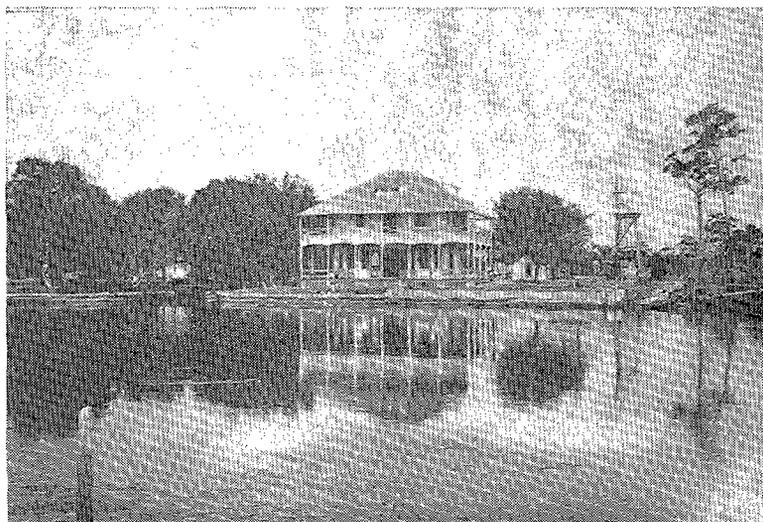
trusted them explicitly and who often traveled great distances to trade with them. The winter season was the heavy trading period, and Mrs. Stranahan recalled seeing as many as 100 canoes coming down the river loaded with Indian families, their trade goods, cook ware, and animals. These large groups might come in as often as every six weeks, depending upon the supply of game and where they were hunting. There were also families of Indians living in nearby camps, such as Johnny Jumper's who traded at the store more frequently and did not stay as long. Those who came would generally stay four days to a week, camping on the grounds, and keeping their dugouts in a slough which ran off the main river course. Stranahan also built a shelter with canvas roof and siding which served as a dormitory for visiting Seminoles. Since Stranahan refused to sell whiskey, often-times the Indians would take the stagecoach, later the train, to West Palm Beach for a drinking bout at Zapp's or other saloons in the vicinity. On such occasions Stranahan usually prevailed upon them to leave their weapons with him at the store until they returned.⁹

The Seminoles brought a variety of items to trade at Stranahan's store: "After abolition of the egret plumes trade in 1901, otter pelts became the most valuable trade item with a single skin priced from \$7 to \$8 during the winter season. . . . In summer, alligator hides brought \$1.80 to \$2.00 for specimens 6 to 8 feet long, but only 50 to 75 cents each for smaller hides. Newly hatched alligator eggs were also important. The Indians would place moist leaves around eggs and hatch them at the store for Stranahan who in turn sold them to tourists for 25 cents to \$1.00 each, depending upon size. Garden produce in the form of corn, pumpkins (of the special Seminole variety), and beans were often offered to the store as were huckleberries and wild grapes. But the old customs of bartering preserved quail, doves, parakeets or live turkeys seems to have died out, although deerskins remained a common trade item. Kunti (koonti, compte) the famous Seminole starch and famine food, constituted a significant item of commerce at Stranahan's store."¹⁰ The scope of the trading activities was such that some Indian groups "brought

9. Alan Craig and David McJunkin, "Stranahan's: Last of the Seminole Trading Posts," *Florida Anthropologist*, XXIV (June 1971), 48.
10. *Ibid.*



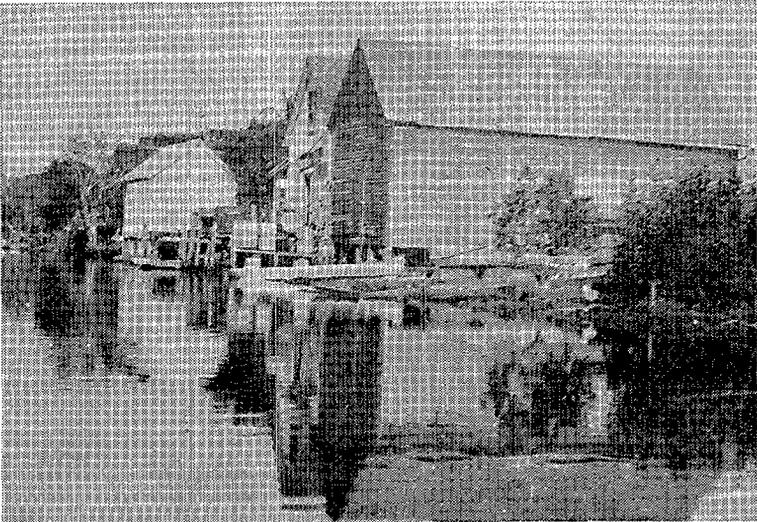
Hunting party on the New River, ca. 1904. Courtesy of Stranahan Family Collection.



Stranahan home and trading post, 1901. Courtesy of Stranahan Family Collection.



W. H. "Bill" Brown, his wife, and children, at a Big Cypress camp, ca. 1902. Courtesy of Percy Brown Collection.



Storter's store at Everglade, ca. 1920. Courtesy of Kirby Storter Collection.

in as much as \$1200 to \$1500 in materials to be sold to Stranahan although generally the amount involved was much less, usually \$50-75.¹¹ The volume of Seminole trade was substantial, adding significantly to the economy of the area.

Stranahan's store provided the Indians with nearly everything they needed to survive in the Everglades: "new pots and pans, traps, good quality shotguns, ammunition, an occasional rifle, 'books' of calico (this is a 10-yard bolt folded so as to resemble pages of a book), some canned goods (particularly peaches), flour, a small amount of grits, much salt (for salting alligator hides), jewelry in general (especially watches, fobs, and beads), axes, hatchets, saws, knives, hammers, and large amounts of nails. This latter commodity was extensively used in the construction of their chikees and other structures. In addition to lard and butter used for cooking oil, they bought canned milk. Kerosene was not used for cooking but rather for illumination and as a mosquito repellent. Cheesecloth was purchased for mosquito netting. Chewing tobacco, pipes, and snuff were not popular with the clientele of Stranahan's store but they did buy cut tobacco and cigarettes in quantity. . . . Stranahan refused to sell patent medicines, vanilla extract, or any other item containing alcohol."¹²

Mrs. Stranahan often recounted her experiences with the Seminole early in this century.¹³ 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 young Seminoles roamed the Stranahan house freely during their 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 traditional school materials such as the Webster blue back speller and McGuffey readers, she used large brightly colored religious posters supplied by the Presbyterian Church. These posters contained pictures of saints, apostles, and other scriptural figures with their names printed underneath. The children learned their letters on the Stranahan's back porch,

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 45, 49.

13. Burghard, *Watchie-Esta/Hutrie (The Little White Mother)*, *passim*. See Harry A. Kerry, Jr., "Educating the Seminole Indians of Florida, 1879-1970," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLIX (July 1970), 18-19.

or around Mrs. Stranahan's Model-T Ford when she drove in later years to nearby camps. Her educational efforts were not always well received. "The parents frowned upon education," she recalled, and the "medicine men detested it."¹⁴ 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 men were not necessarily the best for the 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."¹⁵ 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 1927.¹⁶

In addition to these efforts, there were other instances where the Stranahans helped introduce new elements into Seminole culture. For example, Mrs. Stranahan possessed an 1893 sewing machine which her husband had purchased directly from the manufacturer, Thomas H. White, an early-day yachting visitor to the area. The Indians learned to sew on this machine, and Stranahan later sold them smaller hand cranked models for \$30.00 to carry back to their camps. He always kept a few treadle models for them to use when visiting his store.¹⁷ The Stranahan phonograph and wax cylinder records both amused and frightened the Indians. They enjoyed the music but were alarmed at the talking voices, and one Seminole reportedly gathered up his family and commanded: "Go! No like canned man."¹⁸ The Indians had become increasingly fond of canned goods, and this fellow apparently believed that a person was incarcerated in the cylinder like the beef and vegetables.

In 1906 Stranahan moved his business to a location on Brickell Avenue adjacent to the Florida East Coast Railroad. The company ledgers reveal that the Seminole continued a brisk trade with Stranahan until he sold his interests to the Oliver

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

15. *Ibid.*

16. Roy Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," *Senate Doc.*, 71st Cong., 3rd sess., no. 314, 70.

17. *Fort Lauderdale News*, August 6, 1956.

18. *Ibid.*

brothers in 1912.¹⁹ He devoted his remaining years to private and civic affairs until his death in 1929, always maintaining a close relationship with the Indians, and often accompanied federal officials on their visits to the camps. Mrs. Stranahan also devoted her time and energies in support of the Seminoles, and she was instrumental in establishing the federal reservation at Dania in 1926.²⁰ She later organized the "Friends of the Seminoles" to continue her work, and it was her personal prestige with officials at all government levels which generally brought decisive action favorable to the Florida Indians. Mrs. Stranahan died at her home in Fort Lauderdale in 1971.²¹

William H. "Bill" Brown was perhaps the most famous Indian trader to operate in the Big Cypress region on the western edge of the Everglades. An Englishman who had run away from home as a teenager, Brown jumped ship in Havana, Cuba, and eventually made his way to Fort Myers. Around 1885 he began taking a covered wagon filled with groceries into the wilderness to trade with the Seminoles. When the mission was established at Immokalee in 1891, the Browns had already moved their home to the new community. In 1896, Rose, the eldest Brown daughter, was the first white child confirmed in the region by Bishop William Crane Gray of the Episcopal Missionary Jurisdiction of Southern Florida.²² Rose claimed that when she told the bishop that the Seminole term for "my home" was *Immokalee*, he gave that name to the mission.²³ In 1896 Bill Brown decided to move closer to the Indian camps located some forty miles further into Big Cypress Swamp. He later bought out a trader named Wilson and established Brown's Boat Landing on a hammock now located in the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation.

The Indians traded the usual assortment of alligator hides, otter pelts, and bird plumes. The best season for taking alligators was during the high water of summer and early fall, and

19. *Ibid.* See ledgers of Stranahan & Co., 1906-1911, Ft. Lauderdale Historical Society, Ft. Lauderdale.

20. Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 70.

21. Mrs. Stranahan died August 30, 1971.

22. Interview with Rose Brown Kennon, Fort Myers, September 24, 1971. Tape (50A) and transcript in University of Florida Indian Oral History Archives, Florida State Museum, Gainesville. See "Address of the Bishop," 60.

23. Interview with Rose Brown Kennon.

Frank Brown recalls one year when in a four-week period the Seminoles delivered 700 hides to George Storter's store at Everglade and a similar number to his father. The average 'gator hide traded ran from five to eight feet in length, according to the surviving Brown children. A five-foot hide sold for fifty cents, a six-footer for seventy-five cents, and ninety cents was the top price for eight-feet or over.²⁴ The hides were transported to Fort Myers, a five-day trip by oxcart, and were sold to dealers such as R. A. Henderson or H. P. Parker. The top price paid by Parker for an eight foot 'gator hide seems to have been \$1.05, so the profit for Brown was not large.²⁵ The Seminoles also traded buckskin which Brown bought from them by the pound, and egret plumes in season, April to June, when they were most brilliant and would bring top prices. The major pelts that the Indians brought to the Boat Landing were otter; they did not like trapping raccoon, claiming they "stink too much."²⁶ Whenever Brown had a load of trade goods and needed to replenish his store inventory he and his sons would make the long trek into Fort Myers via Immokalee. Sometimes the entire family would go along, although they generally remained at the trading post nine months of the year, moving into Immokalee to farm during the summer months. The *Fort Myers Press* once reported his arrival: "Mr. Wm. H. Brown came in from the Everglades Tuesday bringing his wife and four children, two wagons, 4 yolk of cattle, 3 dogs, 513 gator hides, seven otter hides, 10 Seminole chickens, 3 pigs, thirty pounds of buckskin and 4 pounds of alligator teeth."²⁷

For the most part the Indians traded for staples such as flour, sugar, coffee, and grits. The Browns hauled sugar in 355-pound barrels and grits in 196-pound barrels, and then sold them by the paper sack full. Another popular item was cloth, particularly calico, which the squaws bought three to ten yards at a time selected from counter bolts. They also purchased sewing machines, and Mrs. Brown taught both men and women to sew.

24. Interview with Frank Brown, Immokalee, September 24, 1971. Tape (51A) and transcript in University of Florida Indian Oral History archives, Florida State Museum.

25. Interview with Rose Brown Kennon.

26. Interview with Frank Brown.

27. *Fort Myers Press*, December 10, 1891.

A hand-cranked machine was first sold in the Big Cypress.²⁸ Of course, glass beads were always a popular item with the women, and the Browns sold them for approximately \$3.00 a quart. Among the men, skinning knives, guns, and ammunition were in demand, particularly twenty-two pump guns, thirty-two single shot rifles, thirty-eight Winchester '73 lever-action rifles, as well as twelve and sixteen gauge shotguns. Firearms were relatively inexpensive: the thirty-two single shot rifles selling for \$5.00-\$8.00, and shotguns for \$12.00 or less. The Seminoles also purchased a variety of farming instruments with which to plant and harvest their crops, and there was a limited demand for harness and wagon parts by the few who had oxen and carts. Derby hats were also a popular item of wearing apparel for the Indians.²⁹

The Brown family established many close friendships with the Indians who frequented their trading post. The Seminole called the trader "mac-kin-a-see" or friend, and whenever they poled their dugout canoes in from the deep water of the saw-grass and down the canal that had been dug to the landing, they were accorded the freedom of the place, including the Brown homestead. At Christmas time the Browns always held a barbecue for the Indians, sometimes to the distress of missionaries who had settled nearby and felt this conflicted with their services. Mrs. Brown cared for the sick and injured who came to the landing and taught them various domestic arts. On at least one occasion she taught an Indian man to read minimally and to write his name.³⁰ The children of the family, especially the two oldest, Rose and Frank, learned to speak the Mikasuki tongue fluently, and they helped their father in the store. At age 85, Frank Brown still retained vivid memories of life in the Indian camps at the turn of the century. He learned the Mikasuki language from Billy Conapatchee, who had some schooling and spoke excellent English; he often hunted with Conapatchee's son Josie Billie, as well as his brothers Billy Fewell and Miami Billy. He could recall when a spread of egret plumes brought \$50.00 in a Fort Myers's hotel before the 1901 anti-pluming law.

28. Interview with Frank Brown.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.* The teaching activities of Mrs. Brown are also reported in Harriet Randolph Parkhill, *Mission to the Seminoles* (Orlando, 1909), 15. Also, Charlton W. Tebeau, *Florida's Last Frontier* (Coral Gables, 1957), 194.

Frank Brown hunted and trapped throughout the Everglades, and he became a leading guide in the region. The Audubon Society hired him as one of the first wardens guarding the plume bird rookeries, and he later worked for the Indian agent when the Big Cypress Reservation was established.³¹

Mrs. Rose Brown Kennon recalled that her mother and father had great confidence in the medical powers of the Seminole, and once when she contracted blood poisoning and was in danger of losing her arm they agreed to have her treated by old Doctor Tommie, the Indian medicine man. He arrested the infection with herbal medicine, and she used the formula often in later years.³² Other whites also learned much about Everglades survival by emulating the Indians; for example, using palmetto and cabbage palm for both food and shelter.

Due in part to his wife's poor health and his own advancing years, Bill Brown in 1908 sold the Boat Landing and moved his family back to Immokalee. The post was purchased by Bishop Gray for the Episcopal Church, and the activities which had been centered at a mission called Glade Cross since 1898 were moved to the landing. Dr. J. W. Godden, a medical missionary, continued to trade with the Seminoles at that location until he moved the operation to a site near old Fort Shackelford, some six miles away, where he hoped to establish an industrial training farm for those Indians who wanted to learn a new way of life. When Dr. Godden died in 1914, the mission was closed permanently, and the Indians were once again forced to carry their trade goods to Immokalee or Fort Myers. Bill Brown continued to run a small store in Immokalee until his death in 1927, and his old Seminole friends often would make the long trip to visit him and the family.

In 1887, George W. Storter, accompanied by his wife and infant daughter, arrived at the hamlet of Everglade on the Allen River in southwestern Florida where his father and younger brother had settled seven years earlier.³³ Establishing a home on

31. Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 68. Also, interview with Frank Brown.

32. Interview with Rose Brown Kennon.

33. Interview with Kirby Storter, Miami, September 15, 1971. Tape (35A) and transcript in University of Florida Indian Oral History Archives, Florida State Museum. See Charlton W. Tebeau, *The Story of the Chokoloskee Bay Country* (Coral Gables, 1955), 32.

the river, Storter made his living by farming and cutting buttonwood to supply stove wood for the Key West market. At first there were no Indians in the vicinity, although occasionally he saw them when hunting deer in the Everglades. Then in 1888, five canoe loads of Indians settled in the lower section of the Big Cypress Swamp. Four years later Storter had acquired sufficient capital to take out an occupational license for \$1.50, and he opened a general store at Everglade. The family operated this store until 1921, and during that time one-half of the customers were "Cypress Indians."³⁴ Because of the isolation of Everglade, store supplies were brought in by schooner which a family member operated. The major sources of supply were wholesalers in Key West and Tampa; there was little contact with other traders in south Florida.

The Indians brought in a variety of trade items to the Storter store: otter and raccoon pelts, bee's wax, fresh deer and wild turkey, cured buckskins, and Indian dolls and costumes. A common item was salted and rolled alligator hides. The Seminole only took belly skin, and these were stretched on a table and measured to the nearest foot; the going price was ten cents a foot. There were also small 'gators called "hornbacks" which had been skinned out in their entirety for souvenirs, and these brought a slightly higher price. The hides were packed in empty sugar barrels and shipped to Bayer Brothers in New York. Some months the Storters handled as many as 700 alligator hides.³⁵ The Indians also brought in egret plumes to trade. At first Storter was not sure of their value, but finally agreed to pay fifty cents for poor ones and seventy-five cents for the better quality. When he had collected enough to stuff a mattress, Storter took a load to Key West where he sold them for a handsome profit.³⁶

The Seminoles were waited on individually in Storter's store, and since they often came four or five canoeloads at a time, it could take as long as twelve hours to complete a trading session. The Indians were paid in cash for the goods they had brought in. Then they roamed freely behind the counters selecting items which they paid for a piece at a time. Thus the Indian

34. Interview with Kirby Sorter.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

would have his goods, and the Storters would have their money back, and the process would begin again with another Seminole. Only rarely did the Indians not spend their entire income before leaving the store, but if they did have a cash surplus they would refuse paper money, since it was subject to rotting or being mutilated in the camps. Gold and silver coins were relatively indestructible, and they could also be strung together as ornamental necklaces or bracelets. On occasion Indians sought to buy on credit, which they called "making book," and it was usually granted because the majority always honored their debts.³⁷

Most of the "Cypress Indians" understood English, and there was little difficulty in communicating. The Storters also learned the Mikasuki language, particularly idioms and the name for store goods. The Seminoles mainly bought groceries, especially coffee, flour, salt, and grits which they used in making "sofkee." Different kinds of cloth and hand-cranked sewing machines, each costing \$25.00, were popular among the women, as were multi-hued glass beads which were sold for \$1.75 a pound and sometimes more.³⁸ By the beginning of the twentieth century the men began buying trousers. Often they would stuff their knee-length shirts in at the waist, giving a rather ruffled appearance. Derby hats and broad-brimmed woven hats were also popular. The Storters did not regularly stock guns but these could be ordered from suppliers in Tampa. The most popular weapon among the Seminoles was the Winchester '38, 1873 model, lever-action, which was very effective in bringing down deer or dispatching an alligator. Twelve- and sixteen-gauge shotguns and twenty-two pump-action rifles were also used, and it was easy to obtain ammunition for them. After completing their trading the Indians often remained overnight in the loft of the store or made camp on the grounds. Only once did an Indian abuse the Storter hospitality by stealing from the unguarded store, and the offender was barred from further commerce at Everglade. The Storters sold their holdings to Barron Collier in 1922.³⁹ One year later the Florida legislature recognized the latter's holdings

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.* According to Kirby Storter his father George W. Storter was not named after his grandfather, George W. Storter. See Tebeau, *The Story of the Chokoloskee Bay Country*, 35.

as Collier County, and the newly renamed Everglades City became its first county seat.

Chokoloskee Island, less than 150 acres and rising only twenty feet above sea level, lies in the shallow inland sea known as Chokoloskee Bay some six miles southeast of Everglades City.⁴⁰ Since 1955 it can be reached by a causeway and bridge, but earlier shallow-draft vessels brought in supplies and mail, and carried out the produce raised by the islanders for the Key West and Miami markets. As early as 1886 a small store was established on the island by C. G. McKinney, but it did not become a prominent Indian trading center until C. S. "Ted" Smallwood opened his post there in 1906. The original store was in Smallwood's home, which also served as the post office. Later he constructed a store at the water's edge, and had it raised on pilings after the hurricane of 1924 set the business awash. A prominent historian of this region has contended that "after 1906 the Smallwood place became increasingly the trading headquarters for the region, being rivaled only by that of Captain George W. Storter at Everglades."⁴¹ The shallow waters of Chokoloskee Bay were ideally suited for the dugout canoes of the Seminole, and they often frequented Smallwood's store, particularly after the Storters sold out their holdings to Barron Collier.

Ted Smallwood ran his store for thirty-five years until his retirement in 1941, then his daughter Thelma took over the post office and business which still remains in the family to the present. As a youngster growing up at the trading post, Thelma Smallwood retained many memories of the Indians who traded with her father.⁴²

In the Lake Okeechobee region two families dominated trading with the Cow Creek Seminole who lived and hunted on the prairie and marshlands northeastward to the Blue Cypress Swamp. Ellis Meserve came to Okeechobee City, then called Tantie in honor of a local school teacher, in 1915 and opened a hardware store with money advanced by his father.⁴³ A decade earlier L. M. Raulerson, the son of a pioneer family, had

40. *Ibid.*, 5.

41. *Ibid.*, 55.

42. *Ibid.*, 56-59.

43. Interview with Hiram Raulerson, October 10, 1971. Tape (36A) and transcript in University of Florida Indian Oral History Archives, Florida State Museum. Also interview with Ellis Meserve, October 10, 1971. Notes in possession of author.

opened a grocery store and trading post.⁴⁴ The Meserve and Raulerson enterprises have been the dominant mercantile interests in the Okeechobee area and the prime recipients of the Indian trade.

Meserve bought plumes from the Seminoles, which they brought wrapped in bundles, and he would determine a value by feeling the texture. At Raulerson's the Indians traded alligator hides and otter pelts as well as plumes, and they occasionally brought in fresh meat and berries. At the hardware store the Seminoles secured pots and pans, single barrel shotguns, boxes of black powder shotgun shells which cost forty-five cents, and sometimes sewing machines.⁴⁵ They insisted that items be selected and paid for one at a time and that each item be wrapped, probably because they needed the paper and string. If they had cash left after leaving Meserve's they usually went to Raulerson's trading post where they purchased staples like flour, grits, rice, coffee, sugar, and citrus which they did not raise at that time.⁴⁶ Neither merchant learned the Muskogee language, although they knew enough to transact business. The Indians could not speak much English in the early years; when they saw something they wanted, they pointed and grunted, and they knew the value of money.

Because many Indian camps were only some twenty miles away, the Seminoles rarely spent much time in Okeechobee when they came in to trade, and entire families often made the trip. If an Indian did stay for a day or two they used the Raulerson porch as a sleeping and eating area. Indicative of the changing life style of the Seminole in the region, Hiram Raulerson recalls that initially the men who came to his father's store wore traditional long shirts and that a few still wore the old turbans; by the 1920s they were buying denim work clothes and Stetson hats like the whites.⁴⁷ The Raulersons trusted the Indians and would extend them credit. A ledger entry from 1920 shows that Billy Bowlegs III and Charlie Micco were customers who enjoyed this privilege.⁴⁸ The Raulerson and Meserve businesses continued

44. Interview with Hiram Raulerson.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. Ledgers of L. M. Raulerson & Co., 1905-1926, in possession of author.

to benefit from the Indians even after the day of plume and hide trading had passed, and today many of the Indian cattlemen from the Brighton Reservation have accounts at the stores. For many years Raulerson's also had an open account for the "Friends of the Seminole" organization headed by Mrs. Stranahan, and outfitted many of the children who were going away to boarding schools. Even now an occasional pelt or hide is taken in exchange for goods at Raulerson's, keeping alive its heritage of a trading post.

By the late 1920s the lucrative era of the Indian trade in Florida was drawing to a close, and there was a decline in both the volume and value of the goods which the Seminole brought to the trading posts. A primary cause of the decline was the accelerated draining and cultivation of the Everglades during the Florida land boom of the twenties. Then, too, the changing whims of fashion, coupled with a renewed national emphasis on the conservation of wild life had drastically reduced the market for the products of hunting and trapping. Moreover, there was an increasing competition for the game remaining in the region. Roy Nash, in his 1930 survey of the Florida Seminole, reported that hunting and trapping were still the chief occupations of the Big Cypress and Everglades Indians and that diminishing supplies were in some measure compensated by rising prices. Nevertheless, he estimated that the Indian trade in furs and hides brought them no more than \$25,000 annually, and he found that "the Indian is a minority factor in the Florida fur trade . . . he is regularly beaten at his own game by white men. . . . It is the difference between dugout canoe and a gasoline launch (in taking number of 'gators) White men buy better traps and they take more pains in handling their pelts."⁴⁹

The rapid settlement of south Florida also had an impact on the Indian way of life. With the completion of the Tamiami Trail in 1926 linking the lower east and west coasts of the state, plus the addition of secondary roads in the region, the Seminole had easier access to the coastal towns and cities for shopping and employment. Unfortunately, this also brought him into closer contact with the baser elements of the dominant culture, and some Indians were ensnared in the vicious life of the commercial

49. Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 37.

"tourist camps" which sprang up during that period. However, few Seminoles willingly chose to move into the populated urban areas for any length of time; they began to acquire cars and trucks and were frequent visitors, but preferred to live in a wilderness seclusion.

In the long run, perhaps the most important factor in changing the economic life of the Seminole was the establishment of permanent federal reservations in Florida. With land of their own and government support, the Seminole increasingly turned to cattle raising and agricultural labor, as well as semi-skilled and skilled construction work both on and off the reservation; their children began to attend school, modern housing supplanted the "chickee," and inexorably a new life style began to emerge.⁵⁰ Today, the Seminole rarely hunts or traps except for recreation, and stringent game laws govern these activities except on the reservations. The Miccosukee Tribe which lives along the Tamiami Trail and maintains the most traditional cultural patterns of the Florida Indians, did a thriving business as late as the 1950s supplying restaurants in Miami and the Everglades City-Naples area with frog legs and other delicacies.⁵¹ Now even the Miccosukee have turned to commercial ventures with the establishment of a tribal restaurant-service station complex at 40 Mile Bend on the Tamiami Trail west of Miami. Thus, for all practical purposes the days of commercial hunting and trapping are over for the Florida Indians; in the not too distant future the young Indian will probably look on the hunting and trading period of his people's history as a quaint cultural anachronism, better left to the studies of anthropologists and historians while the Seminole and Miccosukee people get on with the serious business of life in the twentieth century.

50. Harry A. Kersey, Jr., "Ahfachkee Day School," *Teachers' College Record*, LXXII (September 1970), 94-95. See Kersey, "Educating the Seminole Indians of Florida, 1879-1970," 26.

51. Ethel Cutler Freeman, "Culture Stability and Change Among the Seminoles of Florida," *Men and Cultures* (Gainesville, 1965), 251.