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THE FLORIDA SEMINOLES IN THE DEPRESSION AND NEW DEAL, 1933-1942: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

by HARRY A. KERSEY, JR.

THE Great Depression of the 1930s, following as it did the exuberant prosperity and financial excesses of the "Roaring Twenties," caught millions of Americans both economically and psychologically unprepared to deal with the collapse which was to follow. One of the few groups which was not adversely affected immediately, if only because they were already living perilously close to the poverty level, was the Seminole Indians of Florida. As late as the turn of the century they had participated in a profitable trading relationship with white merchants in the south Florida region. These merchants had purchased a great volume of bird plumes, alligator hides, otter pelts, and other items which the Indians brought in from the Everglades. These were valuable commodities utilized by the international fashion industry, and thus the Indian trade in Florida thrived throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. Then a series of events plunged the Florida Indians into an economic tailspin from which they had not begun to recover when the depression arrived.

The first major calamity to befall the Seminoles was the decision of the state of Florida to begin drainage of the Everglades in 1906, as part of Governor N. B. Broward's scheme to turn the area into a vast agricultural production center. The canals radically lowered the water table with disastrous effects to the wildlife of the region. In addition, the recently-organized Audubon Society fostered federal and state laws which ended the domestic plume trade. The onset of the First World War brought about the collapse of the international fashion trade, and this ended the great demand for Seminole goods. A collateral blow to the life-style of the Seminoles was the steady population growth in south Florida. Beginning with the arrival of the Florida East Coast Railway in Miami in 1896, new towns were

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settled along the right-of-way, while ranches, groves, and farms extended toward the interior. The Indians who had hunted and camped freely in this region found themselves being systematically displaced. This process was greatly accelerated by the Florida land boom during the 1920s. Fortunately, those government officials charged with the supervision of the Seminole Indians had foreseen such an eventuality, and as early as the 1890s had begun acquiring lands to be used as federal reservations in Florida. It was to these enclaves that the Indian people would eventually turn as the Great Depression continued through the 1930s and these would become the land base and sociopolitical nucleus for tribal reorganization some twenty years later.

In 1912 the commissioner of Indian Affairs had reported to Senator Duncan U. Fletcher of Florida that, "during the past year the tanneries have stopped the purchase of alligator skins, so that now a crisis is approaching, as at least 75 per cent of the Indian's income was derived from that source."[1] By 1913, Dr. William J. Godden, the Episcopal medical missionary in the Big Cypress, devised a plan for an agricultural program which would teach the Indians to support themselves, noting, "this they do now by hunting the alligator and otter and selling their hides, but the hunting season will soon be a thing of the past, as a means of livelihood."[2] Writing in 1921, Indian agent L. A. Spencer found that, "The year just closing has been a season of distress for many of the Seminoles. There was no demand for fur or alligator hides, the only two things that they depend on to obtain money with which to buy the necessities of life other than those which they obtain through hunting."[3] From the foregoing, it can be seen that the Seminoles were no strangers to economic hardship well in advance of the depression years.

There have been many studies of Seminole culture during this era, virtually all written by non-Indians. In none of these accounts was there a systematic attempt to present an Indian perspective on the events of the time, nor to have them recount their own tales of survival. With the passing of time there were fewer and fewer surviving Seminoles who were adults during the Great Depression, and the oral tradition from that period

1. U.S. Congress. Senate. *Seminole Indians in Florida,* 63rd Cong., 1st sess., S. Doc. 42, 1913, 5.
2. *Fort Myers Daily Press,* September 22, 1914.
3. U.S. Congress. Senate. *Special Report of the Florida Seminole Agency,* 67th Cong., 2d sess., S. Doc. 102, 1921, 5.

was in danger of being lost. In 1983, coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the inauguration of New Deal programs for Indian peoples, the American Association for State and Local History sponsored a project to gather oral history accounts of the Depression and New Deal from Seminole elders. This effort focused on elders with birth dates of 1913 or earlier, who would have been the work force during the depression years; however, there were also some interviews conducted with informants in the sixty to seventy age group.

Due to advanced age and infirmity many of the Seminole Indian elders chose not to be interviewed, reducing the original pool of forty to fifteen in the pre-1913 category. The interviews were conducted by native speakers of Mikasuki or Creek, the two languages spoken by members of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. All informants responded to a structured interview schedule, and were also encouraged to expand on their experiences during the depression years. A portfolio of historical photographs was also utilized as a memory prompt. The population of informants was skewed in favor of Mikasuki-speakers, most of whom had lived off the reservations during the depression but had moved there at a later time.

All of the informants, whether they were Mikasuki-speakers from the Big Cypress Reservation, or Creek-speakers from the Brighton and Hollywood reservations, shared several common characteristics. The most striking of these was their spirit of independence and total self-reliance. A great majority of the Seminole people did not live on federal reservations at the outset of the Great Depression, and most families were not inclined to do so. Neither did they look to the federal government to provide employment, education, or even medical services except in cases of extreme emergency. Most of the Florida Indians still shunned anything having to do with the United States government, a position reinforced by the fact that only a few generations separated them from the traumatic era of the Seminole Wars and removal from Florida, and it would take many years before these attitudes were modified significantly. In fact, most Seminoles of the depression period would have preferred to remain at their traditional camps deep within the Everglades and pine woods, carrying on the old ways, and maintaining only limited contact with the outside world and the white man. This cultural conservatism was a Seminole hallmark.

The Seminole elders' keen sense of identity with a unique

Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 65 [1986], No. 2, Art. 5

time/place context may be viewed in the following excerpts. In the first, Albert Billie describes his life before moving to the Big Cypress Reservation: "When young man [I] lived out here, not sure [where]. Lived out in forest of cypress trees. Farmed out there. Most of the people during that time have died. My sister died and I'm not sure how long I'll live. My mother said 'when I go you must live and join with other people.' Not long after that she got very ill and died, not sure of the year."[4] When asked where his family had lived during the 1920s old Frank Cypress replied simply, "I was told I was born in the clearing, where the big lake lays."[5] Similarly, most of the elders tied events to particular occurrences in their lives, or to specific places, rather than to chronological dates.

The Seminole camps were amazingly self-sufficient places half-a-century ago. Materials for the thatched roof "chikis" were readily available, and only a small plot of hammock land was required to sustain an extended family group. In their small gardens the Indians could easily grow corn, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, cow peas, and sugar cane. Many camp sites had stands of bananas, along with guava, lime, and sour orange trees; berries were plentiful in season. The women kept herds of hogs which foraged near the camps. A hunter could easily bag deer, turkey, duck, curlew, turtle, and also alligators to provide meat. Fish were always available for spearing in the shallow waters of the Everglades. The staple food of the Seminole camp was "sofkee"– a gruel derived from hominy grits, often enhanced with chunks of dried meat and eaten with a communal spoon. Despite this relative abundance of food, the Seminoles still needed hard cash to buy grits, coffee, salt, sugar, baking powder, and canned goods, as well as clothing, camp hardware, rifles and ammunition, and the ever-present sewing machines. In short, they were becoming a cash-dependent and less autonomous people.

As their meager cash flow dried up during the depth of the depression, the Seminoles became more peripatetic in their search for employment. Initially only a few came to the

4. Interview with Albert Billie, by Jeanette Cypress, October 30, 1984, SEM 191A, University of Florida Oral History Archives (UFHA), Florida State Museum, Gainesville.
5. Interview with Frank Cypress, by Jeanette Cypress, April 22, 1984, SEM 194A, UFHA.

Seminole Agency seeking assistance– these included both unaccompanied males as well as entire family units, staying only for short periods of time. A much larger number of Indian families moved about south Florida engaging in seasonal agricultural work. Still another segment of the Seminole population took up residence in commercial tourist villages for at least part of the year, returning to their camps periodically or during the "off season." Even those families which continued to occupy isolated Everglades camps and remained static throughout the 1930s often ventured into urban areas such as Miami to visit their kinfolk at the commercial villages, and sold their own handicrafts and food products to tourists. Increased mobility would expose the Seminoles to both the best and worst elements in white society, and some elders claimed it had a corrupting influence on the younger generation.

Agricultural labor was the most common source of employment for the Seminoles during the depression years. In his 1930 "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," Roy Nash noted, "In the winter and early spring when garden truck is to be harvested the Seminoles make fair wages for perhaps 45 days a year. They receive $2 a day for picking tomatoes and eggplant; picking beans at 20 to 30 cents a bushel pays them $4 to $5 a day. Children generally help their parents and receive no individual wages."[6] Later, an Indian agent from this era wrote, "... Indian women have found work on a nearby farm and have fitted into the industry about them. They are picking peppers, and I am told that they were more careful in handling the vines than either white or Negro labor. Like so much farm work, they are employed only a few weeks of the year, but it does help them provide for their homes."[7] It is noteworthy that this signalled the entry of Seminoles into the wage-labor economy, where formerly they had been almost exclusively entrepreneurial.

Picking crops was just one aspect of the annual economic cycle which the Seminoles developed out of necessity during the depression years. Typical was the account of eighty-five-year-old Susie Billie, a venerated "medicine woman" from the Big Cypress Reservation: "I lived around here. I grew up here. Employment was scarce. People hunted, killed raccoons, killed deer,

6. Roy Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 71st Cong., 3d sess., S. Doc. 314, 1931, 38-39.

7. James L. Glenn, My *Work Among the Florida Seminoles* (Gainesville, 1982), 20.

Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 65 [1986], No. 2, Art. 5

made moccasins and sold them to buy groceries. Ate berries and whatever else could be found or hunted. There was a lot of hunger. If you didn't go looking, or was lazy, if you couldn't help yourself, you would go hungry. . . . There was men who found employment for people but the pay was very cheap back then. There was farm labor. When of age to work in fields you could use money for clothing and food. . . . A day's work pay was $1 .50."[8]

Another octogenarian, Abraham Clay, still living alone in his camp near Ochopee, recalls earning money, "picking tomatoes, cutting wood, building railroad tracks and various other jobs [such as] cattle fence making . . . [also] looked for alligators, raccoons, otters and hides to sell."[9] When asked if his people traveled to various locations seeking employment, Willie Tiger answered emphatically, "Yes, Indiantown, Fort Pierce, Vero Beach, yes we traveled and lived in those areas where work was available. Picking oranges and various other farm labor."[10] Evidently the Indian families lived on the farms where they worked, or made temporary camps nearby. In one instance an interpreter inquiring about this aspect of Seminole life, inadvertently learned a bit of her own family's history when a relative recounted: "Oh yes, your mother would go there when she was little. So she was our only child at the time. But she was born past Deep Lake, a place called the big carved tree. On the other side was a cypress forest. We moved there; people there were camping during tomato picking time and that's where your mother was born."[11]

Nevertheless, in the 1930s economic conditions had led a few Seminole families to take up semi-permanent residence on farms in the vicinity of Lake Okeechobee. Nash reported in his survey that eight or ten Indians, "live in an old house on the farm of a friendly white man, Mr. Clarence Summerlin; they come and go, working for him when he has work for them, hunting and berrying as the mood strikes them, a distinctly transitional type. . . . Dan Parker houses his family in an old

8. Interview with Susie Billie by Jeanette Cypress, May 6, 1984, SEM 187A, UFHA.
9. Interview with Abraham Clay, by Jeanette Cypress, May 6, 1984, SEM 193A, UFHA.
10. Interview with Willie Tiger, by Jeanette Cypress, October 30, 1984, SEM 188A, UFHA.
11. Albert Billie interview.

barn and makes a precarious living as a casual laborer. . . . Mrs. Ella Montgomery . . . by the gift of a Ford car persuaded the family of Charlie Cypress to abandon his home in the Big Cypress and build a camp adjoining Mrs. Montgomery's home at Loxahatchee Farms, 10 miles west of Palm Beach."[12] Although Nash was probably correct in his assessment that these Seminoles were exceptions for that time, at least four of the current informants reported living on farms prior to moving to the Brighton Reservation. Therefore, the practice of settling-in at farms for protracted periods of time may have become more widespread as the depression worsened.

Obviously, many Seminoles were still engaged in hunting and trapping to raise cash as late as the 1930s. It is well documented that the heyday of the Indian trade in pelts, plumes, and hides had long since passed, peaking around the turn of the century.[13] As Nash pointed out, "the Indian is a minority factor in the Florida fur trade," having been displaced by white hunters who used better equipment and were better organized to take the remaining game.[14] Even so, the hide buyers were an important source of revenue for the Indians. When queried about this, Frank Cypress responded, "Yes, when tomatoes weren't in season we hunted alligators. The gators weren't too abundant either, but when we find a few and kill and sell those. . . . Raccoons were sold in La Belle for $1.00 apiece. Sometimes even 75 cents or 50 cents."[15] Willie Frank remembered that "before 1941, around 1930-1936, we did sell hides and pelts, raccoons, otters, alligators as a source of income." He had lived all of his life in the area near Miami, "mostly working farm labor, but around that time, along 1941, during war with Japan we helped build boats and things for the war."[16] This is perhaps one of the earliest isolated examples of

12. Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 21-22.
13. Harry A. Kersey, Jr., *Pelts, Plumes and Hides: White Traders Among the Seminole Indians, 1870-1930* (Gainesville, 1975), 1-158.
14. Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 36.
15. Frank Cypress interview.
16. Interview with Willie Frank, by Jeanette Cypress, May 21, 1985, SEM 192A, UFHA. Evidently some other Seminoles and Mikasukis living in the Miami region were also engaged in work relating to the military. Buffalo Tiger recounted to the author that he and two Indian men from villages west of Miami were employed in building light aircraft around 1942. Believing that Tiger should use an anglicized name, the plant foreman began

Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 65 [1986], No. 2, Art. 5

Seminole involvement in the war effort. Another source of wages in which none of the Seminoles interviewed had engaged was serving as guides for white sportsmen. However, practically speaking, this was limited to a relatively few well-known Indian hunters, and produced irregular income at best.

There had been commercial "Indian Villages" operating as Florida tourist attractions since 1917, primarily in Miami and St. Petersburg, and later at Silver Springs near Ocala. In Miami the two major villages were at Musa Isle Grove and Coppinger's Tropical Garden, and many of the Mikasuki-speaking Indians were employed there periodically. Evidently a cadre of families resided at these sites year-round, with others visiting randomly. The Seminoles performed in such tourist-oriented activities as dancing, alligator wrestling, and mock "Indian weddings," but they also carried on a camp life similar to what they knew in the Everglades, made and sold handicrafts for income, and a few improved their language skills. These villages were constantly criticized by Indian agents and social reformers as being demeaning and demoralizing to the Seminoles, and they sought to have them closed. Interestingly, a recent study by Patsy West based upon interviews with Indians who actually lived there, presents a more benign assessment of the tourist villages.[17] West contends that the villages provided a transitional environment in which some Seminoles could earn a living while preserving many elements of their traditional culture. Moreover, the Indian people themselves did not feel demeaned or overly exploited, and many seemed to prefer this means of earning a living rather than relocating to the Seminole Agency.

Informants in this study generally confirm the West thesis that some Seminoles viewed commercial villages as acceptable economic alternatives during the depression years. When questioned about visiting the Miami tourist attractions, Albert Billie confided, "My brother and I went there because Indians were living at a place called Indian Village. Three villages, one called Musa Isle. These three villages would visit each other. . . . People

calling him "William." Tiger, the former leader of the Miccosukee Tribe, signed official documents as William Buffalo Tiger. The 1942 census roll of the Seminole Agency also added an Anglo name, but erroneously listed him as Frank (Buffalo) Tiger.

17. Patsy West, "The Miami Indian Tourist Attractions: A History and Analysis of a Transitional Mikasuki Seminole Environment," *Florida Anthropologist* 34 (December 1981), 200-24.

would come in buses and they charged them. They had alligators and wrestled them and they paid to watch. Others stayed in Miami and we lived at Silver Springs. . . . During the winters they would come get us to stay there, then leave when winter was about over."[18] More detail on the third Miami area tourist village was furnished by Buffalo Tiger: "Back in 1926, I was old enough to remember this particular time, there is a village in Hialeah, and my uncle, his name is Willie Willie, established a nice little village; not too many people live around there that time. I am talking about public. . . . My uncle established that and we lived there about a couple of years I believe. 1926 hurricane blew everything down but during that time we were out here to do our hunting, and we have villages out here. I do not mean tourist village. This is our home and we were out here hunting and our village [was] there. It was some of the families that lived in it with my uncle and the village blown down and instead of rebuilding again, he made a choice. He was going to go to a reservation. He went to [the Dania] Reservation, so they come back to Glades."[18] Buffalo Tiger's family never lived on a reservation, and during his youth they moved constantly back and forth between their camp in the Everglades and the Miami tourist villages. Many other informants also reported visiting these villages briefly, or even for "a season," but never considered them a permanent home.

The Great Depression had brought untold economic hardship to millions of people worldwide. Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president in 1932 and proposed the New Deal, a legislative package providing for the economic and social rehabilitation of the nation. One of these bills established a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which was to provide employment for young men between eighteen and twenty-five years of age, working in a variety of projects to restore forests and grasslands, improve national parks, provide flood control, and the like. In 1933, a modified version of this program was made available to American Indians as the Indian Emergency Conservation Work (IECW), later to be called Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian

18. Albert Billie interview.
19. Interview with Buffalo Tiger, by Harry A. Kersey, Jr., May 3, 1984, SEM 185A, UFHA.

Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 65 [1986], No. 2, Art. 5

Division (CCC-ID).[20] The Indians of Florida would receive limited, but significant, benefits from the IECW, CCC-ID, and other New Deal programs.

The Dania Reservation, located several miles southwest of Fort Lauderdale, became the focal point for New Deal programs to benefit the Seminole people. This 360-acre-tract in Broward County was originally set aside for Indian use by a presidential Executive Order in 1911, but it remained undeveloped until 1926 when it was designated as "a camp for sick and indigent Indians."[21] The government built ten one-room cottages and a small administration building, only to have them destroyed by the hurricane that swept through the area that year. Within nine months the camp had been rebuilt with ten two-room cottages, a two-story administration building, a school, infirmary, wash house, and several auxiliary buildings. The ten cottages "were occupied immediately by the Tommies, the Osceolas, and the Jumpers."[23] These were Seminole families which had been displaced from their east coast camps near Fort Lauderdale and Miami, as speculators acquired control of even the most marginal land. Lucien A. Spencer, who served as Seminole agent from 1913 until his death in 1930, seized upon this opportunity to try to develop a self-sufficient Indian community. His long-range goal was to attract as many Seminole families as possible to Dania, where they could benefit from educational and health care facilities, and have an opportunity to learn industrial pursuits. Some thirty-five acres of the reservation were cleared and planted in crops by Indian labor under the direction of a Government Farmer. Seminoles were employed three days a week at $2.50 for an eight-hour day. Agent Spencer could report, "The lands at this unit are being subdivided into five acre tracts (which are sufficient for any one family) and the Indians are given employment at the Agency sufficient to furnish them with the necessary food and clothing, providing they spend the re-

20. Donald L. Parman, "The Indian and the Civilian Conservation Corps," in *The American Indian: Essays From Pacific Historical Review,* ed. Norris Hundley (Santa Barbara, 1974), 127-30. See also James W. Covington, "The Seminoles and the Civilian Conservation Corps," *Florida Anthropologist* 34 (December 1981), 232-37.
21. Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 70.
22. Ibid., 71.

mainder of the week clearing their own tracts."[23] Apparently only a few Seminole families took advantage of this opportunity, preferring instead to work for the government as casual laborers. Thus, wage labor had been introduced at Dania Reservation well in advance of the New Deal employment schemes.

It would fall to James L. Glenn, the Seminole agent from 1931-1935, to implement the New Deal programs that were approved for the tribe. Evidently the early depression years were not noticeably difficult for Indians who were already living at a marginal subsistence level. Only a few old, infirm Seminoles, or women with dependent children received monthly grocery allowances or other direct subsidies. But by 1933, as the depression worsened, the need for aid increased dramatically. Nevertheless, Agent Glenn, who shared the views of former President Hoover that self-help was preferable to governement assistance, would write, "Through the last year the Seminole Indians have had all the relief that might be absorbed without injury to the tribe. The Agency has furnished the sick, aged and other dependents with groceries to the amount of $1571. From ten to fifteen percent of the population have been benefited from these supplies."[24] The United States Army had provided the Indians with surplus breeches, overcoats, shoes, shirts, and leggings, while the Red Cross supplied some 2,000 yards of cloth, as well as overalls, jumpers, sweaters, blankets, and infant garments. Glenn was much more proud of the fact that, "A total of 535 work days has been given to the Indian labor. For more than half the year every Seminole who asked for employment was given work. Handling stock, driving trucks and tractors, farming, carpenter work and painting are some of the trades in which they have engaged. Thus the program serves as an industrial training school, preparing these people to take their place in America's larger economic system."[25] Glenn's language is full of the rhetoric of the New Deal, for it is highly questionable whether many Indians became skilled enough to enter the off-reservation job market.

The first New Deal program to be authorized for the Seminole Agency– a Civil Works Administration (CWA) pro-

23. Lucien A. Spencer, Annual *Report of the* Seminole *Agency, 1929: Narrative Section,* p. 10, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D. C.
24. James L. Glenn, Annual *Report of the Seminole Agency, 1933:* Narrative *Section,* p. 11, Record Group 75, National Archives.
25. Ibid., 9.

ject– was approved on November 3, 1933.[26] Officials in Washington telegraphed authorization to hire a clerk, supervisor, and two skilled and five unskilled workers. The Indian men were set to work clearing palmettoes from reservation land that was to become a campsite for Seminoles visiting Dania Reservation. They also built rock driveways and laid sidewalks in the housing area. Several weeks of this project were spent in clearing a similar campground on federal land near Miles City in Collier County. The Indian and white employees labored together well, and Agent Glenn believed the Seminoles proved themselves to be excellent workers. Another aspect of the CWA project provided training for Indian women in making quilts, but this had no lasting impact due to the lack of a market for such goods in the Florida climate.

An Indian Emergency Conservation Work project for the Seminole Agency was approved on January 22, 1934.[27] The objective was to clear the Dania Reservation of palmetto growth and timber felled during the 1926 hurricane. The work began with Indian laborers using axes and hoes to clear the densely-matted roots, but this proved ineffective. Agent Glenn rigged two Fordson tractors to a plow to pull stumps, and trained Indian drivers to operate the machinery. Later, he secured a large Holt tractor, and Josie Jumper learned to operate it expertly. Glenn admiringly reported, "Josie was never more delighted than when he tied this tractor to a large pine stump, and watched it drag the great roots out of the soil. . . . He ran this machine for more than a year, and although it was a man-killing job he got as much work out of it as any white man anywhere."[28] At the end of the year over 140 acres had been cleared and planted in grasses for pasturage. The Indian workmen also fenced the land and constructed a telephone system for the Seminole Agency. A photograph of this 1934 land clearing project at the Seminole Agency was included in the "Final Report of The Indian Emergency Conservation Work and Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division Program, 1933-1942."[29]

26. James L. Glenn, *Annual Report of the Seminole Agency, 1934: Narrative Section,* p. 3, Record Group 75, National Archives.
27. Ibid., 4.
28. Glenn, *My Work Among the Florida Seminoles,* 16-18.
29. D. E. Murphy, "Final Report of the Indian Emergency Conservation Work and Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division Program, 1933-1942," Typescript, Record Group 75, National Archives. The National Archives

Within a few weeks after this IECW project began, the agent reported that Indians from every section of the state came to Dania seeking employment. This may have been overstating the case. Although at times there were in excess of 150 men, women, and children camped at Dania, the number actually employed rarely exceeded fifty at any given time. The Final Report Of The CCC-ID shows that between June 1933 and June 1942, a total of ninety-two Indians and seven whites were employed in the projects at the Seminole Agency.[30] This would have represented approximately thirty per cent of the Seminole adult population at that time. The CCC-ID enrollees were to receive thirty dollars per month, plus food and housing allowances. However, the agents were in complete charge of the projects, and often reduced the hours in order to distribute the limited funds to as many workers as possible.

When questioned about going to the Dania Reservation to seek work, Albert Billie responded, "Yes I did, in 1934. Doing cleaning up reservation. I don't know the name of program."[31] Although he did not go to Dania himself, Jimmie Cypress recalled that, "first time my dad worked with government was with Mr. Glenn, a superintendent around 1930. During that time we lived in Immokalee. . . . He helped Dania Reservation get established and more developed, like clearing land."[32] Another informant who worked in the CCC-ID program was Willie Tiger: "Yes I did for a short period, around five months

provides background on this document which apparently never was printed due to the restrictions imposed during World War II. The Emergency Conservation Work (later Civilian Conservation Corps) program was established by an Act of Congress in March 1933. Work on Indian reservations was included from the beginning. Activities within the Bureau of Indian Affairs were handled briefly by the Forestry Division. On May 23, 1933, a separate Indian Emergency Conservation Work Division (IECW) was established. It was headed by a director and included several field districts. When Emergency Conservation Work became the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1937, the name of the Indian unit was changed to the Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division (CCC-ID). Daniel E. Murphy was the director of both IECW and the CCC-ID throughout their existence. See National Archives, *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs,* Volume I, Record Group 75, compiled by Edward E. Hill (Washington, 1965), 287.

30. Ibid., 24.
31. Albert Billie interview.
32. Interview with Jimmie Cypress, by Jeanette Cypress, October 30, 1984, SEM 190A, UFHA.

Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 65 [1986], No. 2, Art. 5

doing land clearing work, pulling up palmetto bush roots. Then taking the roots and stacking them up in piles to haul away."[33] The oldest member of the group, Abraham Clay, remembered, "Yes, I did a little bit of work there [Dania] clearing the land. Making small farm fields. There wasn't too much farm work. The pay was small, too. We worked at different jobs . . . about six dollars a week. Low pay."[34]

By 1936 the CCC-ID projects had been extended to the newly-opened Brighton Reservation in Glades County, as well as to the older Big Cypress Reservation in Hendry County. Francis J. Scott was superintendent of the Seminole Agency, and served in that post until 1941.[35] He received constantly increasing CCC-ID budgets between 1937 and 1939, and employed Indians in a variety of jobs aimed at making the three reservations more attractive and livable places. Unfortunately, most of the funds were expended on equipment, materials, and supplies, and there was never enough money to provide jobs for all the Seminoles who sought employment. Scott constantly beseeched the officials in Washington to increase his budget allocations for salaries, but had no success. In 1941, Dwight R. Gardin replaced Scott, and he carried on the CCC-ID projects as best he could with the severely reduced budgets. He echoed his predecessor's concerns that if funds were further depleted, Seminoles who had been induced to settle on the reservations hoping for permanent employment, might leave and return to the unsettled life of migratory labor or take up residence in a tourist attraction. Finally, frustrated by bureaucratic indifference to his pleas, Gardin radically overspent his budget and was promptly replaced as superintendent of the Seminole Agency by William B. Hill.[36] When the United States entered World War Two, Congress voted to terminate all CCC-ID programs as of July 2, 1942. Accordingly, Superintendent Hill was notified in April 1942, to "close out as soon as possible, except for forest protection, CCC-ID."[37] This signalled the end of the New Deal for the Seminoles of Florida.

A majority of the Seminole informants believed that the

33. Willie Tiger interview.
34. Abraham Clay interview.
35. Covington, "The Seminoles and the Civilian Conservation Corps," 234.
36. Ibid., 236.
37. Ibid.

Kersey, Jr.: Florida Seminoles in the Depression and New Deal, 1933-1942: An I

white superintendents had worked for the Indians' best interests. When asked if the government agents had been helpful, Frank Billie answered, "Yes, they helped very well, especially Scott and Glenn. Gardin I didn't know too well because he was there only a short time."[38] Willie Frank, on the other hand, recalled that, "Gardin help with CCC program. He did help with finding work and helping with assistance for food if needed. . . . We built roads, this main work through Big Cypress, 833 road."[39] Frank Cypress had known Agent Spencer only as a "government worker which our people believed was going to send Indians to school, so at our camp we really didn't get involved with him. But at another camp he usually visited them, so on one of his trips out there we heard he died out in woods . . . at a clearing near some woods in Ochopee on this side of Immokalee. . . . His car got stuck and he was pushing it, and during the strain he got short of breath, turned pale, and some people got some canvas down. He lie down on it and died."[40] Abraham Clay remembered the old government agents; asked if one stood out he said, "Yes, there was a boss, Spencer. I know him, he overlooked [oversaw] the Indian people and assisted them with their problems."[41]

Susie Billie had no direct contact with Agent Spencer, but when asked if he had helped the people, she replied, "He might have. I really don't know, but not us personally. I'm sure he helped because he moved around and did a lot. There was also a woman called Old White Woman. She took me to a doctor in Miami several times."[42] Jimmie Cypress also confirmed the assistance received from a public health nurse, "Yes, there was Miss [Charlotte] Conrad. Indians called her Old White Lady. She wore white uniform and that's why they called her that name. She made home visits even if it was muddy and her car would get stuck, she still visited people."[43]

Betty Mae Jumper, who attended the day school on the Dania Reservation, and later was one of the first Seminoles to complete high school, credits Agent Scott with a role in that

38. Interview with Frank Billie, by Jeanette Cypress, October 30, 1984, SEM 189A, UFHA.
39. Willie Frank interview.
40. Frank Cypress interview.
41. Abraham Clay interview.
42. Susie Billie interview.
43. Jimmie Cypress interview.

Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 65 [1986], No. 2, Art. 5

accomplishment, "He was pretty good man, too. He is the one that had me go away to school to Cherokee, North Carolina. He find a school for me to go to."[44] She also recalled accompanying Agent Glenn, an ordained minister, on visits to local churches. "We used to go out and sometimes he preached at night. We used to go sing for him; I remember that– Indian songs, Christian songs."[45] Glenn was also known as the dispenser of relief funds. "I remember he gave my grandmother ten dollars a week, or somebody give ten dollars a week, the government or something. Ten dollars a week to buy groceries, and they got a truck and went in back and forth to Dania on Saturdays to get groceries."[46]

From the foregoing accounts one gains the impression that the Seminoles believed the government agents and other workers were trying to perform their duties, and assist the Indians as best they could, given the limitation of funding and scattered nature of the population throughout south Florida. This is not to imply, however, that all of these interactions were without misunderstanding or distrust. It was a long-standing goal of the government to have Seminoles living on reservations, ostensibly to receive continuous education, health, and employment benefits, and the agents were capable of subtle coercion to get the families to relocate. But even after they had resettled, the Seminoles were likely to rebel against government policies which they misunderstood. For example, Jimmie Cypress, commenting on the question of how much pressure was placed on the Indian people to move to the reservation, said, "They didn't ask us to move. Around 1938-1939 it was said all United States citizens were to be registered. CCC program was started first around this time, jobs were being provided, people were counted. Someone said they were counting the people to make soldiers, and even though the Indians were not asked to move off the reservation, they all left and lived about seven miles from here. I told my dad that kind of talk is not true. They are just counting people, everyone in the United States. And he and I moved back and people got mad at us, but eventually all of them moved back too."[47] In a similar vein, Susie Billie told of a

44. Interview with Betty Mae Jumper, by Jeanette Cypress and Harry A. Kersey, Jr., January 2, 1985, SEM 186A, UFHA.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Jimmie Cypress interview.

misunderstanding over the Social Security system: "Oh yes, people didn't have social security cards then. People heard you have to have it to seek employment. At that time people were working digging ditches. When they heard, they quit work thinking they were going to get sent off for military reasons. Thinking if signing anything they were being prepared for draft. They quit work and went into woods and started farming their own food, but shortly after someone explained the purpose of Social Security, and that no harm has come to the people. So people signed the papers and returned to work."[48] These two related incidents reveal a great deal about the Seminole aversion to military service, as well as their lingering distrust of the federal government.

Comparing the documentary sources with these oral history accounts, what generalizations can be made regarding the Seminole experience during the New Deal era? Although the Florida tribe was relatively small, virtually unorganized, and geographically isolated from "Indian Country" in the West, it received the same New Deal programs offered to other Indian groups– and enjoyed the same mixed results. Certainly the federal employment and direct assistance programs afforded short-term, immediate relief to many Seminole families, who otherwise would have been in dire straits. Nevertheless, the long-range impact of the New Deal on the Seminoles is difficult to assess. Evidently this is a general problem of Indian historiography, for as a leading historian of the Indian New Deal, Donald Parman, has noted, "Even though the public has always accepted CCC publicity which stressed the program's wholesome effects on the enrollees, we have no conclusive evidence that these assertions are true on a long-range basis. We badly need careful follow-up studies of former enrollees' careers before any accurate assessment can be made about the social effects of the CCC. Such studies might well reveal that the program had much less rehabilitative effect than is commonly believed. In the case of the Indian enrollees, the impact of the CCC is complicated by their minority status in American society. The obstacles faced by Indians made the benefits of CCC-improved morale, better adjustment to changing conditions, and acquisition of work skills– much more important for Indians than for whites. Unfortunately, we do not have sufficient data on the subsequent

48. Susie Billie interview.

careers of former Indian enrollees to be able to determine whether service in the CCC greatly benefitted them."[49] A limited carry-over from federal programs such as CCC is certainly indicated in the Florida Indian experience, perhaps owing in part to the fact that it was a scaled-down program and lacked a unifying CCC camp experience.

Furthermore, there were those in the federal Indian Service who questioned whether the Seminoles might not be corrupted by the introduction of such programs, limited though they were. An overly paternalistic Commissioner John Collier, following a 1935 visit among the Seminoles in Florida, would write, "Is it our duty to 'civilize' the Seminoles? . . . Possibly– it might be– a very few of their young people should be chosen to receive an education most carefully planned– in English, in buying and selling, in modern health science, in biology, zoology, ecology and anthropology. These young people might mediate between the tribe and the white world; particularly they might work to lead their people to become conservationists. For now, though they do not kill for 'sport,' the Seminoles are not conservationists. Personally, I hesitate at one step more than the above. I deeply doubt the wisdom of schooling the Seminoles. Let English come, and the newspaper, and that kingly confidence, that radiant reality, which is their life in the wild, might grow less, might fade away. And what worth would be the exchange."[50] Evidently the idealistic Collier believed that he had found a pristine tribe living in a state of nature, rather than people trying to survive the depression. He appeared less concerned with preparing the Seminoles for active participation in American society– a professed goal of the Indian New Deal– than in preserving them as a cultural anachronism.

The CCC-ID apparently did not generate a broad based upgrading of Seminole work skills, or prepare them to enter the labor market outside their reservations. Most of the Indians interviewed were employed as unskilled laborers, and only a very few learned marketable trades such as the operation of heavy machinery. Then, too, the isolation of the reservations limited

49. Parman, "The Indian and the Civilian Conservation Corps," 144.

50. John Collier, "With Secretary Ickes and the Seminoles," *Indians At Work 2* (April 1935), 3-4. Collier appears to have re-examined his views regarding the Florida Seminoles and their ability to absorb modern life in his work, *From Every Zenith* (New York, 1946), 203-13.

the job opportunities which would have been available to Indians. The Seminole communities were too far removed from urban industrial centers for them to participate in war-related occupations. Equally important, few families were interested in relocating. Thus, the CCC-ID jobs became a closed circuit providing supplementary income, rather than a preparation for broader participation in the expanding off-reservation economy.

Although a limited educational program was available at the day school on the Dania Reservation, few of the adults availed themselves of the opportunity to improve their English reading and writing skills, further limiting their chances for off-reservation employment. Neither would there be any wholesale entry of Seminoles into the military when World War Two was declared. Only three Seminoles are known to have served in the armed forces.[51]

Those Seminole families which moved to the reservations during the 1930s tended to remain there, even though employment opportunities were limited and began to decrease rapidly with the outbreak of the war. The federal enclaves at least offered access to financial assistance, medical treatment, and eventually schooling, even on the rural reservations. Over time the reservation residents developed an economic cycle which included some government employment, seasonal agricultural labor in the vicinity, as well as hunting, trapping, and fishing for family consumption. While this socioeconomic transition was taking place, the federal reservations provided a safe haven for people who otherwise would have had no permanent home and limited legal protection. A major function of the Indian agents during this period was to facilitate the transition from displaced wandering to a settled reservation existence for most of the Seminoles. This process took several decades to complete, and some families were just moving to the reservations in the 1950s. However, many traditionalists shunned the reservations and remained in their Everglades camps.

There were a number of positive aspects to the Florida Seminole situation during the New Deal era, not least of which was the acquisition of some 30,000 acres of additional land in

51. Covington, "The Seminoles and the Civilian Conservation Corps," 236. See also James W. Covington, "The Seminoles and Selective Service in World War II," *Florida Anthropologist* 32 (June 1979), 46-51.

1936 to form the Brighton Reservation.[52] In the previous year, Commissioner John Collier and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes had come to Florida and held a quasi-official meeting with a delegation of Seminoles requesting more land from the government.[53] Both Ickes and Collier pledged their support in obtaining more land, and this no doubt helped to expedite the acquisition of the Brighton acreage by the Department of Agriculture and the Resettlement Administration. The latter federal agency also provided a herd of western cattle which was pastured at the Brighton Reservation, and became the nucleus of a nascent Seminole beef cattle industry. Ultimately, Indian families bought cattle from this breeding pool to start their own herds. They received technical assistance from the Seminole Agency, and eventually a Cattlemen's Association was formed to regulate the operation. This successful cattle program was extended to the Big Cypress Reservation by the late 1940s.[54] The cattle owners became the first prosperous element among the modern Seminole people.

The period of the 1930s also produced the first small cadre of Seminole youngsters who took advantage of the opportunity to attend school, primarily at the Dania Reservation where a day school was in operation from 1927 to 1936. When the school was closed, ostensibly so the Indian children could attend public schools, a few of the youngsters were sent to the Cherokee Indian School in North Carolina. Several of them continued there, and the first Seminoles to receive a high school diploma graduated in 1945.[55]

Perhaps most important, however, the lure of New Deal programs stimulated the process of bringing a scattered and fragmented Seminole population together on their own land– a process that fostered a new tribal unity, and culminated in 1957 with the formation of the Seminole Tribe of Florida as a federally-acknowledged polity. Thus, the adversity of the depression and promise of the New Deal had created the conditions that would lead to Seminole tribal regeneration by mid-century. Thanks to the accounts of these tribal elders, we now have a

52. Ibid., 234.
53. Collier, "With Secretary Ickes and the Seminoles," 3.
54. Merwyn S. Garbarino, *Big Cypress: A Changing Seminole Community* (New York, 1972), 106.
55. Harry A. Kersey, Jr., "Educating the Seminole Indians of Florida, 1879-1970," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49 (July 1970), 28.

Kersey, Jr.: Florida Seminoles in the Depression and New Deal, 1933-1942: An I

clearer picture of how the Seminole people survived, endured, and ultimately prospered.