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A "NEW RED ATLANTIS": JOHN COLLIER'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE FLORIDA SEMINOLES IN 1935

by HARRY A. KERSEY, JR.

IN March 1935, some two years following his appointment as commissioner of Indian Affairs by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, John Collier paid his first official visit to the Seminole Tribe in Florida. Although recognized as one of the nation's leading Indian Rights advocates throughout the 1920s Collier's work had been focused almost exclusively among the western tribes. As secretary of the American Indian Defense Association, he frequently appeared before various congressional committees, testifying on such issues as tribal water and mineral rights, control of reservation lands, and Indian religious freedom. His name had become synonymous with a progressive commitment to the advancement of native peoples, so it was only appropriate that Roosevelt would tap the charismatic Collier to create a New Deal for American Indians.

The most significant legislative achievement during Collier's long tenure as commissioner was the enactment of the Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934, known as the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), which became the fundamental document guiding the Indian New Deal. Essentially, it provided for ending the sale of Indian lands, allowed the tribes to organize themselves to achieve economic independence, and guaranteed their political self-determination. One stipulation in the legislation required that within twelve months of its passage the Indian tribes were to vote on whether they would be covered by the provisions of the act. Commissioner Collier spent the ensuing year in a grueling round of meetings with Indian tribal leaders and their constituents on the reservations, urging their support for the Indian

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Reorganization Act which he believed provided the best hope for the tribes to control their own destinies. A philosophical progressive, he was greatly enamored of Indian cultural values, especially the consensual decision-making process. In 1922 he had written an article entitled "The Red Atlantis," which suggested that Pueblo Indian patterns of social integration could provide a model to be emulated by the hectic, materialistic, strife-torn industrialized societies of that day.¹ However, after months of wrangling with Indian leaders who were reluctant to subordinate their own political influence to tribal reorganization, and listening to the petty, often petulant complaints of tribal councils, Collier was beginning to despair that Indian politicians—be they Navajo headmen or Pueblo governors—were as self-serving and self-indulgent as their non-Indian counterparts. Moreover, the tribal polities were themselves split over numerous matters ranging from grazing rights to the production of handicrafts for the tourist trade. By this time, Collier was distressed that his idealized version of Indian life had been politically tested and found wanting. It is against this background of disappointment in the apathy and occasional negativism encountered among the western tribes that the Florida excursion must be viewed.

In December 1934, Collier's office initiated an exchange of IRA-related correspondence with James L. Glenn, the chief financial clerk and acting superintendent of the Seminole Agency at Dania, Florida. The commissioner alerted Glenn to the necessity of adhering to the congressional guidelines for conducting the vote: "You have received information and material regarding the Indian Reorganization Act and are, no doubt, familiar with its scope and purposes. Under Section 18, the Indians must vote within one year from the date of the passage of the act, June 18, 1934, to exclude themselves if such be their wish. We must, therefore, plan to extend to the Indians of your jurisdiction the privilege of voting on this important question. We want to know what work you have done among your people to discuss this legislation with them, to advise them of its purposes and advantages, etc., and whether you feel that a date should be set to give them the opportunity to express themselves in accor-

1. John Collier, "The Red Atlantis," *Survey* 49 (October 1, 1922), 15-20, 63, 66.

dance with the requirements of the act."² Agent Glenn replied to Collier, informing him of the steps taken and adding his own observations about the impact which the IRA might have on the Florida Seminoles. He believed that the provision for the consolidation of Indian lands could easily be accomplished as none of the Seminole reservation had been allotted. Furthermore, he noted, "The Seminoles of Florida do not even receive leasing benefits from their land. To put this land or any other land to work for the support of this racial group is the largest feature of the Florida program. The new Act makes this possible. And it is not a 're-organization' in Florida. It is rather an organization. There is nothing to tear down— no established methods of either occupation or ownership. The territory is virgin."³ Glenn concluded by suggesting that an election should be held in either March or April 1935, and that additional time was needed for the purpose of informing the Indians as to the character of the election. He also requested and was granted permission to visit Washington to discuss the Florida situation. Following this meeting Commissioner Collier apparently determined to make his trip to Florida prior to the balloting.

Although the primary thrust of the commissioner's visit to Florida was to enlist Seminole support in the upcoming vote on the Indian Reorganization Act, there were several other factors which compelled an inspection. Not least of these were the reports which he had received from anti-Glenn elements, including some Indians protesting what they considered to be inadequate services for the tribe. In the fall of 1934 the *Miami Daily News* published an expose depicting federal efforts on behalf of the Seminoles as a failure and presenting Glenn quite unfavorably.⁴ There was also correspondence from prominent citizens in south Florida attacking various policy interpretations which Glenn made. The most critical letters came from Mrs. Frank Stranahan of Fort Lauderdale, chairman of the Indian

2. John Collier to James L. Glenn, December 24, 1934. Record Group 75 (cited hereafter as RG 75), File 9735, Seminole 066, National Archives, Washington, DC.

3. Glenn to Collier, December 28, 1934. RG 75, File 9735, Seminole 066.

4. Cecil R. Warren, "Florida's Seminoles. An eye-witness story of Indian want and privation, with affidavits and accompanying comment," *Miami Daily News*, September 15, 1934.

committee for the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs.⁵ Her complaint was that Glenn had attempted to collect rent from the Seminoles living in government housing while working on the Indian Emergency Conservation Work project at the Dania reservation. She not only wrote to Collier, but also to her old friend Senator Duncan U. Fletcher of Florida, who in turn voiced concern to the commissioner. While this issue was easily resolved, such negative publicity did not endear the outspoken Glenn to Collier's administration. James L. Glenn, an ordained minister, typified the old-line assimilationist sentiment which prevailed among the Bureau of Indian Affairs field staff. He was extremely skeptical and openly critical of Collier's Indian self-determination policies, especially those which de-emphasized the importance of compulsory schooling for Indian youngsters. In later years Glenn wrote in a memoir: "I have often told the men of this tribe that there were many things that the white men had that they did not want their people to have, but education was one thing that they needed most of all. Because we are disgusted with ourselves and with the wars that curse the higher educated communities of the world, we have elevated men to high positions who are so misdirected in their convictions that, as John Collier said to me, they are afraid to teach these Indians to read, for they then will read the newspapers and get in the awful world in which we live. In spite of his ecstasy over the glory and goodness of primitive life, I think I have seen enough of it to be assured that it too has its 'sweat, blood and tears'."⁶ Evidently the rift between Collier and Glenn widened to a point where there was an open confrontation. "I made the mistake," Glenn later recalled, "I went to Washington and he called me in his office. He said 'Glenn, there's been a lot of criticism of you. What have you got to say?' I didn't say anything. I should have defended myself. I think that he had an open mind in the matter, but we had these politicians."⁷ Pressures continued to mount for Glenn's removal, so it was not surprising when the *Fort*

5. Mrs. Frank Stranahan to Collier, May 1, 1934. RG 75. File 24298, Seminole 344.

6. James L. Glenn, *My Work Among the Florida Seminoles* (Gainesville, 1982), 32-33.

7. Interview with James L. Glenn by Harry Kersey, January 12, 1978, SEM 172A, University of Florida Oral History Archives (cited hereafter as UFHA), Florida State Museum, Gainesville.

Lauderdale News of March 1, 1935, announced the arrival of a new Seminole agent, Miss Agnes Fitzgerald, who reportedly had worked with the Indians of Wisconsin.⁸

Nevertheless, Glenn remained in charge at Dania, for he was soon notified by the Indian Service that Commissioner Collier would be traveling to Florida accompanied by Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, his wife, Anna Ickes, and their son, Raymond.⁹ Washington requested an itinerary which would allow the commissioner and secretary to meet with as many Seminoles as possible during a two-day visit, and preferably in their natural Everglades habitat. Accordingly, Glenn and Ms. Fitzgerald met the Collier party which arrived by train in West Palm Beach on the evening of March 18, and took accommodations at the Royal Worth Hotel. The following day the group motored westward through the agricultural area around the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee, and from there southward to the vicinity of Deep Lake. There they visited the secluded camp of a Mikasuki-speaking Seminole, Johnny Buster. It was about one-half-mile away from the paved road, and Glenn had promised, "We will have to do a bit of 'log walking', but I was in there yesterday and there is no water to wade. It can be reached in ten minutes' walk from the automobile, and yet is so completely 'lost' to the white man that few knew its location."¹⁰ This was just the type of setting that Collier and the Ickes family had hoped to find, and it made a lasting impression that would be recalled in subsequent writings by the commissioner. The party then continued to Everglades City which was to be their overnight stop. There they met with a large number of Mikasuki-Seminoles who were visiting the small mission run by Deaconess Harriet Bedell. She was an Episcopal missionary who had virtually no success in achieving religious conversions, but was instrumental in reviving the production of authentic

8. *Fort Lauderdale News*, March 1, 1935. Evidently Fitzgerald remained in Florida only a short time, and there remains some question whether she ever officially served in the capacity of Seminole superintendent. In 1936 Francis J. Scott was appointed superintendent of the Seminole Agency; that same year Glenn resigned his post as financial clerk and re-entered the ministry. UFHA, SEM 172A.

9. A. C. Monahan to Glenn, March 1, 1935. RG 75, Office File of Commissioner John Collier, 1935-45, T-W, Box 17, Entry 178 (cited hereafter as Commissioner's Office File).

10. Glenn to Monahan, March 2, 1935. RG 75, Commissioner's Office File.

Seminole handicrafts during the Depression era of the 1930s. Later during this visit Commissioner Collier was offered a young fresh water otter as a gift from the Indians. He declined, but subsequently wrote several letters to Bedell and others inquiring as to the animal's fate.¹¹

On March 20 the Collier-Ickes group returned over the Tamiami Trail to Miami, and then went on to West Palm Beach. There is no evidence that they visited any of the commercial "tourist villages" as had been originally suggested by the Washington office. It is likely that Glenn was anxious to get the party back to West Palm Beach in a timely fashion, as Collier and Ickes were scheduled to meet with a delegation of Indians during a tourist-oriented affair known as the "Sun Dance." Unfortunately, the meeting was staged in such a manner— including martial music and the presence of three companies of National Guardsmen— that it gave the impression of being a quasi-peace conference. Moreover, the *New York Times* had already proclaimed: "Florida's Seminole Indians, after 100 years of technical warfare with the United States, plan to offer the pipe of peace."¹² This was misleading, however, for neither Collier nor Ickes had any intention of engaging in spurious treaty making— a process which, as Collier had earlier pointed out in a memo to Ickes, had been discontinued by the Congress in 1871.¹³

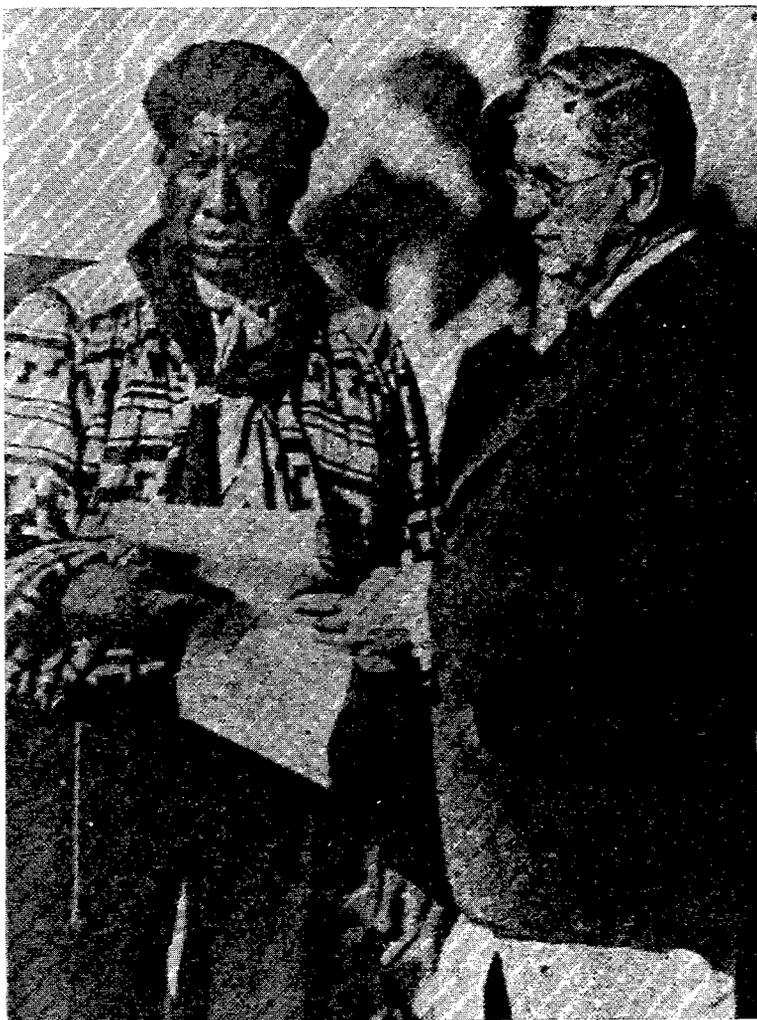
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11. Collier to Harriet Bedell, April 6, 1936; Collier to Glenn, April 6, 1935; Collier to Arthur C. Black, April 6, 1935. John Collier Papers, Stirling Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
 12. *New York Times*, March 17, 1935.
 13. Collier to Harold Ickes, March 13, 1935. Presented as Exhibit 8 in Indian Law Resource Center, "Report To Congress: Seminole Land Rights in Florida and the award of the Indian Claims Commission," May 9, 1978. See United States Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, Ninety-Fifth Congress, Hearings on S. 2000 and S. 2188, *Distribution of Seminole Judgment Funds* (Washington, 1978), 147. Collier's memorandum was prepared in response to Ickes's request for advice concerning disposition of a document titled "Petition for Peace Treaty," which the Seminole Indians of Florida had addressed to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It remains unclear who originated the idea for this treaty petition and drafted it. After specifying particular remedies the petition ended with the plea, "NOW, THEREFORE, we, the Seminole Indians of Florida, on the one hundredth anniversary of the war between our fathers and the Great Government of the United States of America, do hereby petition the United States of America for a treaty of peace and beg that our people be given reparation for the losses that they have sustained." Collier saw no reason why the petition should not be passed on to President Roosevelt, but noted that by an act of Congress, approved March 31, 1871, no Indian nation or tribe could

Therefore, the two government leaders agreed only to hear statements and accept a petition from a delegation of Seminoles who were requesting assistance in securing more land and financial aid. They could not foresee that even this seemingly innocuous action would later bring stinging protests from various Indian advocacy interests in Florida.

Approximately 160 Indians were assembled at West Palm Beach, virtually all of them Muskogee-speaking members of the Cow Creek band of Seminoles who lived north of Lake Okeechobee. The interpreter-spokesman for this group was Sam Tommie, a member of a prominent Indian family. He interpreted as the Seminole men spoke and was a signatory of the petition which they presented to Ickes and Collier. The petition essentially recognized that the Seminole Indians had been at peace with the United States for 100 years, lived in peace and happiness in the Everglades, and had pleasant relations with the government. However, many white men had come into their land, drained the lakes, cultivated fields, killed the game, and generally made life more difficult. Therefore, they wrote, "we request and petition you to use your influence with the Congress and the President of the great Government of the United States to obtain for us the following lands and benefits."¹⁴ These included lands in south Florida counties amounting to approximately 3,000,000 acres, an annuity of \$15 per capita per month, and a full-time nursing service by trained Indian nurses.

be acknowledged as an independent unit with whom the United States could contract a treaty, and that the Indians were now citizens of the United States. Furthermore, the land they were seeking was deemed unsuitable for their use.

14. Petition to Honorable Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, United States of America, March 20, 1935. RG 75, Commissioner's Office File. The petition presented to Ickes and Collier bore the unmistakable influence of Glenn. On March 2, 1935, he had written Assistant Commissioner Monahan concerning the upcoming West Palm Beach meeting, noting, "I have advised against 'negotiations' for a treaty status with the United States on the part of our Indians. They are embittered at 'treaties'. They are already citizens of Florida, and must be citizens of the United States. I suggested that any move that should come from the Seminoles should be in the form of a petition to the Secretary of Interior and the Commissioner that they use their influence with Congress to obtain for the Florida Seminoles the same status with the Government that is enjoyed by the Oklahoma Seminoles. The content of such a position would follow along the line as suggested under the three numerals of my letter of the 20th." The final wording of the petition was almost verbatim of that proposed by Glenn.



Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes and Sam Tommie at the Sun Dance festivities in West Palm Beach. Photographs from the *Palm Beach Post*, March 21, 1935.

Secretary Ickes accepted the document presented by the Seminoles, saying, "I receive your petition in the spirit in which it is offered. The Seminoles are a brave and independent people and should be able to live their own lives and sustain themselves and their families if given a proper opportunity. Whether or

not it is possible for the United States government to give you all the lands you ask for, it is only fair to say that I think that you should have more land for your own. I promise to do what I can in cooperation with the State of Florida to provide you with lands adequate to your needs."¹⁵ Commissioner Collier also spoke briefly, heaping praise on the Seminoles as a heroic people who had defended their homeland in the past and had never surrendered to superior forces. Continuing on, Collier rapturously recalled, "Yesterday we went to a remote Seminole camp and met and shook hands with the Indians. This camp was a place of beauty, gentleness, hospitality and true aristocracy. The handclasp of those Indians was the handclasp of an aristocratic people. Their demeanor was the demeanor of kings and queens. You have maintained back in the Everglades a life of singular chastity, temperance, and humility. Surely the United States ought to make restitution for what it has taken from your people. I know Secretary Ickes will do that which he promises. His heart is with you and he has great power. I hope you will not consider this as a surrender. Rather it is the beginning of your golden age and a new life in the wild country that you love."¹⁶ The gathering reportedly concluded in an aura of good feeling; Mrs. Anna Ickes was presented with a gift of two Seminole Indian dolls, and Commissioner Collier was offered the live otter, while the assembled Seminoles performed their "peace dance."

Shortly after Collier's entourage returned to Washington, the Department of the Interior issued a press release which reiterated the pledges made to the Seminoles. It particularly emphasized that "Secretary Ickes, in replying to the petition of the Seminole leaders, explained the plan for the creation of a National Park in the southern extremity of the Everglades, and stated that for a considerable time to come, in any event, he believed the Seminoles ought to have the right of subsistence hunting and fishing within the proposed Park, and that they should always have the labor preference."¹⁷ However, Commis-

15. *Palm Beach Post*, March 21, 1935; *Fort Lauderdale News*, March 21, 1935.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Department of the Interior Memorandum for the Press, For Release in Afternoon Papers of Tuesday, April 2, 1935. RG 75, Commissioner's Office File. On the day following issuance of this press release six of the

sioner Collier then cautioned that “three million acres probably never can be bought by the Government for the Seminoles. A part of the land they have petitioned for— land which they regard as morally theirs already— is highly developed truck and citrus fruit land. The Seminoles’ request must be weighed with the land requirements of Indians in other parts of the country, which are great as there are more than 100,000 of totally landless Indians.”¹⁸ More optimistically, though, he noted, “Already the Government is negotiating for the purchase of three tracts for the Seminoles, and cattle should be supplied which they can herd upon their little reservation already established south of Lake Okeechobee. In exchange for their 100,000 acres of relatively worthless land and water within the proposed park area, we hope that Florida will supply them with 100,000 acres north of the Tamiami Trail, close to the park area. Altogether, acreage of a quarter of a million probably can be supplied these Indians for a permanent reservation. Then if the Federal Government and the State of Florida cooperate energetically, wild life protection and restoration can be set in motion through the whole park area and in a million acres, at least, of the Everglades north of the park area. With land for planting, and land for stock grazing, and with greatly increased game supply, and with a proper development and marketing of their crafts, the Seminoles undoubtedly will be able to develop a successful life of the kind they want, which is the life of Wild Indians living in the fastness.”¹⁹

John Collier was fascinated with the Florida Seminoles who appeared to manifest all those qualities of social integration which he had so admired in the Pueblos over a decade earlier. Had he found a “New Red Atlantis” in the Everglades? Certainly his ambivalence about introducing New Deal programs to the Florida Indians emerged clearly in an article which he penned for *Indians At Work*, a monthly journal of the Indian Office which publicized federal efforts to rehabilitate American Indian

traditional leaders and medicine men of the Mikasuki-Seminoles submitted an affidavit prepared by their attorneys, White & Colson, denouncing the West Palm Beach meeting and reaffirming their opposition to the Indian Reorganization Act. This action was reported in the *Miami Herald*, April 4, as well as other south Florida newspapers.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

tribes during the Depression era. Titled "With Secretary Ickes and the Seminoles," the article extolled the virtues of the Seminoles' unique life-style in the wilderness and suggested a few programs which should be implemented to assist them.²⁰ However, in this case the commissioner expressed a reluctance to pursue economic and educational development policies which he had consistently advocated for other tribes. In essence, he proposed an agenda to ensure cultural encapsulization. Collier began with the question, "Is it our duty to 'civilize' the Seminoles? They have bad teeth (apparently, bad in the measure of their contact with civilized foods). Probably they have too many enteric disorders, and there are sanitary and health habits which perhaps, they well might learn. They are now too poor. Added to more of wild range, and greater security on the widened range, they need cattle; and they need to farm more extensively (subsistence farming). Their religious custom directs that the man shall always cultivate a field. Somewhat their craft output might be improved, and better marketed. But cautiously. 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 wild life 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?"²¹

Ironically, the fact that the Seminoles lacked any semblance of a tribal government to uphold their interests did not appear to faze Collier at all— this at the very time that the IRA vote was hanging in the balance. His justification was, "Possibly the Seminoles' position is unique among that of all Indians. An almost unique history within an environment unexampled in the

20. John Collier, "With Secretary Ickes and the Seminoles," *Indians At Work* 2 (April 1, 1935), 1-5.

21. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

United States has created an adaptation— a physical and social structure— most delicate, yet ample, and life sustaining. It may be that no other structure would uphold their spiritual life at all. And it is by the spirit that they live. Hence, beyond restoring those equilibriums of the natural environment which the white man has destroyed, and thus making possible a better life within their own social structure and their own unhesitant and powerful and sane instinct— beyond that point, we should go with extreme caution in Seminole matters, and perhaps we had better not go at all.”²² Was Collier actually advocating that the Seminoles should not participate in the organizational aspects of the Indian Reorganization Act? Was this intended as a means for preserving his “New Red Atlantis?”

Collier’s visit among the Seminoles appears to have left him with a dilemma. On one hand he sincerely believed that acceptance of the Indian Reorganization Act by the tribes provided their only assurance of ever achieving a degree of self-determination in managing their affairs. On the other, he feared that the political and economic organization fostered by the act might bring to an end what he perceived to be a relatively pristine culture. However, Collier soon learned that he would not have to concern himself with this issue; the Seminoles displayed no great exuberance for organization. On March 30, the acting Seminole agent, J. L. Glenn, telegraphed the following message to Commissioner Collier: “Balloting at Florida Seminole Jurisdiction on Indian Reorganization Act tabulates twenty one for the act and none against it.”²³ The Florida Seminole population at that time was reported to be slightly over 500.²⁴ Several days later Glenn sent a follow-up letter explaining the difficulties encountered in getting the Seminoles to participate in the balloting. “I suppose there will be a lot of fuss,” he wrote defensively, “about our election in Florida. Our Indians have never used the ballot to determine their affairs. To educate them in a few months to cast an intelligent ballot is not possible. The matter was administered as justly as I was able to administer it under the conditions.”²⁵ The low voter turnout was due primarily to

22. *Ibid.*, 5.

23. Glenn to Collier, March 20, 1935. RG 75, File 9735, Seminole 066.

24. James L. Glenn, *Annual Report of the Seminole Agency, 1934: Narrative Section*. RG 75, Narrative Reports, Seminole.

25. Glenn to F. H. Daiker, April 4, 1935. RG 75, File 9735, Seminole 066.

Indian apathy. However, many of the problems could be attributed to the obstructionism of the new agent, Agnes Fitzgerald. "When Miss Fitzgerald came down she told me she planned to have the election postponed. I had already posted the notice of the election at the Reservation, and had visited Indian leaders where I thought a pole [*sic*] should be established. For six months or more I had talked with the Indians about the provisions of the Act. But I thought Miss Fitzgerald might gladly have the responsibility. About a week before the election she asked me if I could postpone it. I told her I thought I had no such authority. We then agreed upon the plan of conducting the poles [*sic*] at Dania, and providing means for absentee voters to vote. Miss Fitzgerald gave her time to the Health Clinic, and the election was left to me."²⁶ Collier's reply of April 9 seemed to express a sympathetic understanding of his field officer's situation in Florida: "I have read carefully your letter of April 4. The very small Seminole vote was to be expected in view of their traditional detachment from the Government. I am sure that you did everything that you could have done."²⁷

In 1935 the Congress amended the Indian Reorganization Act requiring a favorable vote by a majority of each tribe for acceptance of the act, with at least thirty percent of the eligible members voting. However, Collier and his solicitor, Nathan Margold, had developed procedural means to circumvent these congressional mandates. Therefore when, in 1936, a new superintendent of the Seminole Agency requested information regarding the exact status of the tribe vis-à-vis the Indian Reorganization Act, Assistant Commissioner William Zimmerman sent the following reply: "Our records show that while a majority of the votes cast at the referendum held for the Seminole Indians was favorable to the acceptance of the Indian Reorganization Act, the total number of votes cast was less than 30%. The Act of June 15, 1935, amending the Indian Reorganization Act of June 18, 1934, declared, 'That in each instance the total vote cast shall not be less than 30 per centum of those entitled to vote'. The Solicitor for the Department has passed on the question of the validity of such elections and has ruled that it is discretionary with the Secretary as to whether another election

26. Ibid.

27. Collier to Glenn, April 9, 1935. RG 75, File 9735, Seminole 066.

shall be called. He says 'In the discretion of the Secretary, therefore, a second election may be called within the time prescribed for holding elections, irrespective of whether the majority of votes cast at the previous election was in favor of or against the act'. Since in the case of the Indians mentioned herein a majority of the votes cast was in favor of the act, the Office shall hold officially that they have not voted to exclude themselves and therefore, another election will not be authorized or called for these Indians. You may furnish this information to the group of Indians concerned."²⁸

The decision at the Washington level to declare that the Florida Seminoles had voted to accept the provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act would have no immediate impact on the Indian people. As evidenced by the miniscule number who participated in the IRA balloting, there was little understanding of or interest in the measure. By the account of Agent Glenn, only those Indians living at the Dania reservation, and perhaps eight or nine in the Okeechobee area, cast ballots.²⁹ There was no involvement at all among the very conservative and reclusive Mikasuki-speaking Seminoles who lived in the lower Big Cypress region or in the Everglades near the Tamiami Trail.³⁰) This large group still followed their traditional leaders, the medicine men, and busk councils who remained unalterably opposed to any dealings with the federal government.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the Florida tribe among those accepting the IRA would have long-range beneficial results. One ironclad provision of the Wheeler-Howard Act was that the tribes had only one opportunity to vote either acceptance or rejection of the bill; they could not revisit the vote at a future date.³¹ Even though the Seminoles were too ethnolinguistically, socially, and politically fragmented in the 1930s either to seek or accept organization under the IRA— a fact which seems to have eluded the commissioner's staff— they retained the eligibility to do so at a later date. When the time came some twenty years later that the reservation populations felt the need to protect themselves by establishing a tribal government and business

28. William Zimmerman, Jr., to Francis J. Scott, April 22, 1936. RG 75, File 9735, Seminole 066.

29. Glenn to Daiker, April 4, 1935.

30. Ibid.

31. 48 *U. S. Stat.* 988 (1934).

corporation, they were merely exercising their rights under section 16 of the Indian Reorganization Act.³²

If Collier mistakenly assumed that a socio-political homogeneity existed among the Seminoles, it did not take long for him to become disabused of that notion. Certainly, he understood that the Seminoles spoke two languages and were separated into several ceremonial busk groups. These should have been telltale signs. Moreover, each of the major Seminole factions had its dedicated and vocal advocates in the non-Indian community who were quick to respond to the Collier-Ickes visit. The most outspoken critic was W. Stanley Hanson of Fort Myers, the long-time secretary of the Seminole Indian Association.³³ On March 21, the day following the West Palm Beach celebration, Hanson wrote a caustic letter to Collier: "It has come to the attention of the Seminole Indian Association of Florida that irresponsible parties have been recently heralding to the world the signing of a so-called treaty at West Palm Beach, Florida, between the Seminole Indians of this state and the Federal Government, with whom it is claimed they are still technically at war, owing to the fact that the Florida Seminoles never surrendered."³⁴ Hanson then launched into a discourse on the differences between the Seminole groups: "The Florida Seminoles are not a 'tribe' as ordinarily supposed, being composed of two distinct groups who strayed away or seceded from other tribes more than a century ago, and hence the term 'Seminole,' meaning renegades or wanderers. These two groups live entirely apart, speaking different dialects, the Muskogee living north and east of Lake Okeechobee and the Miccosoukees mainly in the Big Cypress country to the south and west, the latter group being by far the larger as to numbers. There being no chief of the Florida Seminoles, their government is vested in a supreme council of Medicine Men who correspond to a board of directors in the white man's corporate organizations. Hence it is obvious that no individual or group of Seminoles can pledge the Seminole population to any treaty or agreement of any kind whatsoever without such is first sanctioned and endorsed by the

32. *Ibid.*, 987.

33. W. Stanley Hanson to Collier, March 21, 1935. RG 75, Commissioner's Office File.

34. *Ibid.*

Supreme Council of Medicine Men.³⁵ He also bitterly denounced the participation of both Collier and Secretary Ickes, saying, "While it is not exactly plain to the white friends of the Florida Seminoles whether the recent ceremonial at West Palm Beach was merely a burlesque for entertainment of the tourists, or whether it was not, the fact remains that the presence of the Secretary of the Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs lends to the ceremonial a touch of serious reality."³⁶ The letter concluded with a call for an investigation of unidentified designing individuals who were exploiting the Florida Indians.

Even before the Collier-Ickes party departed for Florida, O. B. White of Miami, a lawyer representing various Mikasuki-speaking Seminoles who resided in the Everglades west of Miami, had written to protest that the secretary and commissioner would be meeting with a selected group of Indians who did not represent the views of the entire tribe. When his clients requested a special meeting with Ickes and Collier, White noted in a letter to Florida Congressman J. Mark Wilcox: "I feel certain that in this way the Secretary will be better informed as to their necessities. The Big Cypress Indians, as they usually term themselves, do not feel that they will be able to fairly present their plight through this Indian known as Sam Tommy [*sic*]."³⁷ When he received the letter, Congressman Wilcox forwarded it to Ickes's office where it arrived after the secretary had departed for Florida. Upon his return Ickes replied, dismissing White's complaints: "I should have been glad to have had the information prior to my trip, but I believe that my contacts with the Indians were fairly representative, and that I am now in possession of a true picture of the situation. I was able to visit one of the Seminole camps in the Immokalee district, and I believe that the Indians who spoke at West Palm Beach voiced the real wishes of most of the Seminoles."³⁸

Collier also produced an immediate, characteristically acerbic response to the accusations levelled by Hanson. He wrote: "Secretary Ickes and I will welcome every bit of true information, and every relevant suggestion respecting the Seminoles.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. O. B. White to J. Mark Wilcox, March 13, 1935. RG 75, Commissioner's Office File.

38. Ickes to O. B. White, March 26, 1935. RG 75, Commissioner's Office File.

However, I am compelled to raise the question why you did not ascertain the facts as to what did take place at West Palm Beach, before you released a newspaper criticism and wrote your letter. You refer to a so-called treaty adopted at West Palm Beach by 'irresponsible parties.' This matter is pure fiction; no treaty, real or so-called, was or could be adopted at Palm Beach or anywhere. A number of the Seminoles at Palm Beach voiced the desire for secure land titles and a reservation of adequate size. I have no knowledge as to whether they were the most representative Seminoles, but I have no doubt that all the Seminoles do desire this advantage, and I share with Secretary Ickes the view that it is the government's duty to supply it to them. The incident was so simple and so large a number of people are acquainted with what actually transpired, that I must treat as a remark not made in good faith but for political or publicity purposes, the following words: 'The Seminole Indian Association of Florida herewith registers official protest with you against this buffoonery of signing treaties with irresponsible Seminoles'.³⁹

Collier was aware of Hanson's great influence among the Mikasuki-speaking Seminoles, as well as his deep-seated animosity toward federal agents L. A. Spencer and J. L. Glenn who together had served the Seminoles since 1913. Warming to his attack, the commissioner questioned the legitimacy and basic integrity of Hanson and his organization: "You are not a Seminole Indian. So far as I can make out from your letterhead, there is not a Seminole on your directorate. Your organization is not The Seminole Association of Florida, as its name evidently seeks to convey and as your letter assumes. You have been for years a candidate for a position in the Seminole work of the Indian Office. That is your inalienable right. But it is not your right to conduct a white organization which pretends to be an organization of Seminole Indians, and it is foolish to make vociferous protest against an alleged incident which as a matter of common knowledge and of fact never took place."⁴⁰

This slashing rebuttal by Collier was strongly supported by Mrs. Stranahan of Fort Lauderdale, who was noted for her long years of work with the Seminoles residing at the Dania reserva-

39. Collier to Hanson, March 26, 1935. RG 75, Commissioner's Office File.

40. *Ibid.*

tion. She, too, had written to the commissioner, but had responded positively to the West Palm Beach meeting with the Seminoles. As for the critics she noted: "I have just picked up the paper and read the 'outburst' of our old enemy, W. Stanley Hanson, Fort Myers— this is the same old tirade he has been carrying on for years & years. Please pay no attention to him. The Indians who met you and Secretary Ickes Wednesday represent a group of Indians who want the things they petitioned for. Those Indians who do not want that recognition will never be compelled to accept it. Stanley Hanson has always kept the Indians at enmity with any friendly feelings toward the Government (I mean the Indians he holds contact with). I never meet or speak with him but I know how he made Mr. Spencer's life miserable by his faulse [sic] accusations and Mr. Spencer had not yet been buried when he was flying over the state politicking for the position."⁴¹

Even the Deaconess Bedell, who had written to Commissioner Collier primarily in response to his inquiry concerning the fate of the otter presented to him by the Indians at West Palm Beach, took the opportunity to express still another viewpoint on the concerns of the Seminoles.⁴² No doubt by this time Commissioner Collier and Secretary Ickes, having fended off this limited but intense flurry of complaints, were questioning the wisdom of their public meeting with the Seminoles. Nevertheless, they appear to have followed through with their pledges to support efforts to secure more land for the tribe and to protect its economic interests within the Everglades National Park which had been approved by Congress in 1934.⁴³

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41. Stranahan to Collier, March 23, 1935. RG 75, Commissioner's Office File.
42. Bedell to Collier, April 12, 1935. Collier Papers. Bedell assured Collier, "You will be glad to know that the Indians here feel that you are their friend but with the National Park, the meeting in West Palm Beach, and now doctors trying to assemble the Indians for a clinic they are more than ever suspicious. These Indians resent the Palm Beach gathering and very few of the leading Cypress Indians were present."
43. 48 *U. S. Stat.* 8 16 (1934). Section 3 of this legislation provided that "nothing in this Act shall be construed to lessen any existing rights of the Seminole Indians which are not in conflict with the purposes for which the Everglades National Park is created." However, it soon became obvious that the camp sites and hunting grounds of traditional Seminoles would be adversely impacted, while there would be few jobs available to Indians in the park proper.

What then were the lasting results of this encounter between John Collier and the Florida Seminoles— an interlude so fleeting that it does not even rate a footnote in most accounts of Collier and the Indian New Deal? Surprisingly, there were several very substantial outcomes affecting the Seminole people. First and most immediate was the acquisition by the Department of Agriculture and the Resettlement Administration of some 30,000 acres of land in the "Indian Prairie" region northwest of Lake Okeechobee. These purchases were already under way in 1935, but they were no doubt expedited when the Collier-Ickes position became widely known. By 1936 this tract was opened as the Brighton Indian reservation for the Muskogee-speaking band of Cow Creek Seminoles.⁴⁴ The government supplied these Seminoles with a herd of beef cattle, and the Indians developed into excellent cattlemen.⁴⁵ In 1939 they selected their own Cattle Trustees, and were so successful that Commissioner Collier once advocated that they should be organized separately from the other Seminoles and granted their own corporate charter.⁴⁶

Second, at the urging of Ickes and Collier, in 1935 the state of Florida exchanged the Seminole lands situated in the Everglades National Park for a 104,000-acre reservation in present-day Broward and Palm Beach counties.⁴⁷ The restrictions which were to be placed on Indian hunting and trapping in the park area, some employment opportunities as guides, as well as their inevitable transition to a more sedentary agricultural lifestyle, made this a good trade. Today, the drained areas of this reservation are highly cultivated and also provide prime grazing lands for Seminole cattle interests.

Third, the consolidation of a Seminole land base provided an isolated, secure haven in which the Indian people could determine their own rate and extent of acculturation. It would take the better part of a generation before most of the Florida Indians accepted reservation life. However, a significant group of tribal-traditional people living near the Tamiami Trail never

44. James W. Covington, "The Brighton Reservation, Florida, 1935-1943," *Tequesta* 36 (1976), 54-64.

45. Merwyn S. Garbarino, *Big Cypress: A Changing Seminole Community* (New York, 1972). This work contains a brief but thorough study of the Seminole cattle enterprise.

46. *Memorandum: "Indian Organization,"* March 4, 1941. Dictated by DMcN [Darcy McNickle?]. RG 75, File 9735, Seminole 066.

47. Chapter 285.06, Fla. Stats. 1985.

did, and ultimately formed a new tribal polity. Nevertheless, this period of reservation organization may still be viewed as an integral element in what one specialist has identified as a “New Ethnogenesis” of the modern Seminoles.⁴⁸

As for Commissioner Collier himself, it was an experience which seems to have heightened his awareness that tribal groups could experience differential rates of acculturation, yet retain their essential Indianness. Almost thirty years after his initial visit to the Florida Seminoles— he came among them only twice in his twelve-year tenure⁴⁹— Collier reflected upon the experience: “There are those who have experienced these primitive societies, disciplined yet possessed by joy, and see no hope that their life can be saved. I myself was one of these, my first wild happiness overcome by a desolating sadness, believing that these societies had to die. For the center of their life is spirit— they walk with the gods on every road of man— and what place have our times for such a life? Even in the early days of the New Deal when we were moving night and day to open the channels of modern life to the Indian societies, I was often gripped in anxiety that this spiritual center of Indian life might be lost if we carried the Indians too far along with us. This anxiety was sharpest when I first visited the Seminoles. . . . Possibly the Seminoles’ situation was unique among that of all Indians. An almost unique history within an environment unique in the United States had created an adaptation— a physical and social structure— most delicate, yet ample, and life sustaining. It might be, we then thought, that no other structure would uphold their spiritual life at all. And it was by the spirit that they lived. Hence, beyond restoring those equilibriums of the natural environment which the white man had destroyed, and thus making possible a better life within their own social structure and their own

48. William C. Sturtevant, “Creek Into Seminole,” in Eleanor B. Leacock and Nancy O. Lurie, eds., *North American Indians in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1971), 117-23.

49. Collier’s account of his second official visit among the Seminoles in 1940, including several photographs of the Florida reservations, is found in *Indians At Work* 5 (February 1940), 2, and (March 1940), 9-10. Collier had come to investigate the Seminoles’ opposition to a United States Department of Agriculture and state of Florida plan for exterminating the Everglades deer population as part of a cattle tick eradication program. An analysis of Collier’s support for the Seminole is found in Kenneth R. Philp, “Turmoil At Big Cypress: Seminole Deer and the Florida Cattle Tick Controversy,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 56 (July 1977), 28-44.

unhesitant and powerful sane instinct— beyond that point we knew that we had to go with extreme caution, and it seemed that perhaps beyond that point we should not go at all. . . . As time went on, and they came to want them, we established schools for the Seminoles, and gave aid to their agriculture and stock, and they borrowed from the revolving fund for economic enterprises, and paid back the loans from the returns of the enterprises. And we joined with them in a prolonged struggle . . . to save their deer from slaughter by the State and Federal Bureaus of Animal Industry. Indeed, the way the Seminole future first appeared to us in 1935 was neither necessary in their case nor representative of the Indian outlook in general. Tribes and cultures more ancient and more complex than that of the Seminoles were challenged by the Indian Reorganization Act to give themselves with all their powers to the world's main stream. And they did give themselves, deepening their ancient powers while thus giving themselves to the world."⁵⁰

At last, John Collier had perceived that a true "Red Atlantis" lay not in merely preserving traditional cultural forms, but through facilitating that dynamic process by which the Seminole and all Indian people shape their own destiny.

50. John Collier, *From Every Zenith* (Denver, 1963), 203-04, 213.