



Ivy Stranahan greeted by prominent Seminole leader

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IVY STRANAHAN AND THE "FRIENDS OF THE SEMINOLES" 1899-1971

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One of the legendary pioneer figures in recent South Florida history was a slight, soft-spoken but iron-willed school teacher who became a leading champion of Indian rights in this century. Born at White Springs on the Suwannee River in 1881, Ivy Julia Cromartie moved with her family in 1895 to this section of the state, settling first at Juno and later at Lemon City. By 1899 she had completed her schooling, qualified for a teaching certificate and was sent by the Dade County Board of Education to open a school at the small New River settlement known as Fort Lauderdale.

Life in the wilderness was not easy; the opening of school was delayed because the building was unfinished when she arrived, the path from her house to the school abounded with wildlife, and the oppressive heat and bugs made teaching difficult. Moreover, only nine children attended when the school did open. This was to be Ivy's only year as a paid teacher, although she later recalled that she felt "well to do" on her \$48 monthly salary.

In August, 1900, Ivy Cromartie was married to Frank Stranahan who first came to run a stagecoach stop-over camp and ferry service across the New River.¹ He soon established a trading post and carried on a profitable commerce with the Seminole Indians of the region. Within a year, Stranahan built a rambling river front two-story house for his bride; they lived above and used the lower portion for a store and trading post. Mrs. Stranahan would make her home there for the next seventy years.

When the Seminoles poled their canoes from the Everglades to trade at the Stranahan store, they usually brought the entire family and camped for several days. With no children of her own, Mrs. Stranahan took a great interest in the Indian youngsters who accompanied their parents. At first they were shy and afraid of the white woman, but she soon won them over by letting them dress up in her large "merry widow" hats and gave them the run of the house.

As time went by, she informally began to teach the rudimentary "three Rs" to some of the children, using materials supplied by the local Presbyterian Church — although she was a devout Seventh Day Adventist. Only children were instructed, in groups ranging from six to twelve. She believed that they could relay their information to receptive adults more effectively than she ever could. Mrs. Stranahan had no desire to transform the Indian culture and often told her pupils "We don't want to make white people out of you, just give you the best of what you are."² Many of the old Seminoles dis-

trusted any of the white man's ways, especially education, but over the years they came to trust and respect the woman whom they called *Watchie Estra/Hutrie* (The Little White Mother).³

During the first quarter of this century, Ivy Stranahan was a major spokeswoman for the Seminoles in their dealings with the federal government and local officials. She was instrumental in having Tony Tommie, a young Seminole boy, admitted to the Fort Lauderdale public school in 1915 — only the second time that a member of the Tribe had attempted public education in Florida.⁴

As Chairwoman of the Indian Affairs Committee of the Florida Federation of Woman's Clubs, Mrs. Stranahan played a prominent role in that organization's lobby for the establishment of a permanent reservation for the Seminole people. She was at odds with the aggressive tactics of her illustrious contemporary Minnie More-Willson, who helped organize the "Friends of the Florida Seminoles" society at Kissimmee in 1899. Mrs. Stranahan attempted to have the abrasive Mrs. Willson removed from the Indian Committee of the Federation in 1916, but to no avail.⁵ Thereafter, Mrs. Willson pursued an independent course of action, and when the state legislature did establish a 100,000 acre state reservation in 1917, it was the Kissimmee organization which received most of the credit. Undaunted and almost single-handed, Mrs. Stranahan continued her struggle to assist the Seminoles who lived along the lower East Coast of the state.

In addition to the members of the Federation of Women's Clubs, who lent moral and limited financial support to her efforts, Mrs. Stranahan's great ally was the federal Indian Agent, Lucien A. Spencer, who served in that capacity from 1913 until his death in 1930. Spencer was an Episcopal clergyman who left his post as Dean of St. Luke's Cathedral in Orlando to take up field work among the Indians, following in the footsteps of Bishop William C. Gray, Dr. W.J. Godden and others of his denomination who had established Seminole missions.⁶ He brought a high standard of ethics and a zeal which matched that of Mrs. Stranahan; together, they were relentless foes of bootleggers and those who carried liquor to the Indian camps. Unfortunately, their idealism was not matched by local magistrates who refused to vigorously prosecute the dealers who violated state and federal statutes. So ardent a temperance advocate was Mrs. Stranahan that she would not allow her husband to sell the Indians any items which contained alcohol, not even vanilla extract.⁷ Despite such efforts,

however, the Indians continued to succumb to drink, which many other traders had no qualms in providing.

During the Florida "Land Boom" of the 1920's there was an insatiable demand for real estate, and even submarginal land brought premium prices. Corporations drained and fenced their holdings and demanded the removal of Indian squatters by the law. Seminole camps rapidly were being displaced by housing developments. The Indians held no legal title to the sites which they had occupied for generations, yet many were reluctant to move on to federal trust lands which had been set aside beginning in the 1890's for their use. Because she was trusted by the Seminoles, Agent Spencer solicited Mrs. Stranahan's aid in convincing the local group of Seminoles to take up residence on a 500-acre tract near the town of Dania. In 1924 she took four of the Indian leaders there in her automobile and persuaded them that the move would be in their best interest.

The Seminoles agreed to the move, and in 1926 the Dania Seminole Reservation was officially opened as a camp for sick and indigent Indians.⁸ The government provided quarters which were quickly occupied by the Osceolas, Jumpers, Tommies and other Indian families. The following year a government elementary day school was opened at Dania Reservation and the wife of an Indian missionary was the teacher. Mrs. Stranahan was pleased to see the school in operation and considered it the culmination of her efforts to educate the children. Unfortunately, the school was plagued by a rapid turnover of teachers, a marginal curriculum and limited support from Indian parents. It eventually was closed in 1936 as part of the economic retrenchment which curtailed services on the reservation.⁹ However, rather than see the government assume the burdens of education and other social services for the Seminoles, Mrs. Stranahan was about to embark on yet another phase of her mission.

The Depression era of the 1930's took a terrible toll on the Seminoles of Florida. The economic and social dislocations of the preceding two decades had left them destitute and dispirited. Many Indian families lived either in camps near the trust lands or at shoddy tourist villages. They eked out a bare existence by working for farmers or the government agency, sold a few handicrafts and occasionally guided a hunting party across land that they had once trapped and hunted as their own. They were victims of poor health, poor nutrition and an ever increasing problem with alcoholism. In a 1931 survey of the Seminoles for the U.S. Senate, Roy Nash found that "It is difficult to overestimate what the friendship of people like the Stranahans of Fort Lauderdale, the Hendrys and Hansons of Fort Myers, and the Willsons of Kissimmee meant to the Seminoles during the years when they distrusted the Government and hated the missionary. They had one of the dominant race to whom they could turn for disinterested advice."¹⁰

Indeed, Mrs. Stranahan had carried on an extensive correspondence concerning Indian affairs with members of the Florida congressional delegation. In 1930, she testified before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs and recounted the plight of the tribe.¹¹ Her testimony touched on most of the major social and economic ills of the Indian people, especially the fact that bootlegging was still rampant and no action was being taken by local authorities to stem the flow of liquor to the Seminoles. She reported that many of the women and girls of the tribe were receptive to education, although the older people were not, and cited the fact that some attended the reservation school regularly. Nevertheless, she admitted that Indian children would have great difficulty entering public schools at that time due to their academic deficiencies and a low standard of personal hygiene. Clearly, if there were to be any promise of a better future for the Seminole youngsters, there would have to be more direct assistance from the government and other sources.

Shortly after Mrs. Stranahan's appearance in the nation's capitol, a group of Christian women in Florida took up the cause of the Seminoles. Early in 1934, Miss B. Louise Woodford, Executive Chairman of the Florida Chain of Missionary Assemblies, became interested in the work of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs in the areas where the Indians lived. Miss Woodford was determined that her organization should cooperate and band together with other clubs to give aid and support to the Indian people whose needs were identified by the Stranahan testimony. After several meetings with interested groups in St. Petersburg, Orlando and Fort Lauderdale, it was decided to call the new society "Friends of the Florida Seminoles."¹² This title was an unfortunate choice because it often was confused with the Kissimmee group of an earlier period, even after "Florida" was dropped from the name. Any individual who was a friend to the Indians would be allowed to join. Mrs. Stranahan was chosen Secretary-Treasurer and would occupy an active or honorary office in the group for the remainder of her life.

One of the Friends' first projects was to bring an educated Indian woman from the West to protect Seminole women and girls from the liquor and immorality that was afflicting the tribe. The person selected was Miss Minnie Deer, a Creek Indian and a teacher in Bacone College, Oklahoma.¹³ Upon arriving in Florida, she initially spent some time with Mrs. Stranahan in Fort Lauderdale to familiarize herself with Seminole ways, then she went into the camps. At first she was shocked by the Seminole's primitive way of life and her initial contacts with the people were unfriendly; but after a time she was accepted by young and old alike.

Contributions from all over the state made it possible to continue Minnie Deer's work for several years. The job of collecting funds was assigned to Mrs. Robert Shearer of Orlando, President of the Florida Federation of Woman's Clubs. Her region was the first to make its

assigned quota. In 1935, U.S. Indian Commissioner, John Collier, accompanied by Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes and his wife, visited the Big Cypress. Their meeting with the Seminoles was judged successful due in part to the liaison work of Miss Deer.

The education of Seminole children soon became the major focus of the Friends of the Seminoles. In her report for 1937, Mrs. Stranahan noted that there were five Indian girls and two boys in grade school who needed a chance at education. Only through study and vocational training, she wrote, could these people emerge as leaders among their own people.¹⁴ By that time the day school at the Dania Reservation had been virtually abandoned and there was no place for them to continue their studies. Thus, with financial support from the Friends, the first children of the tribe were sent to the Cherokee Indian School in North Carolina in the fall of 1937. The children were Betty Mae Tiger, her brother Howard Tiger, Mary and Agnes Parker, Mary Tommie and Moses Jumper.

Throughout her school years, Betty Mae Tiger continued to correspond with Mrs. Stranahan. When this young Indian girl left for school in 1937, many in the tribe were not happy, but she hoped that someday they would understand and accept school. As she approached graduation, there were nine other Seminoles in school with her. In one of her letters she wrote: "... and I hope that it will be possible for more to follow and as I saw children following my footsteps toward an education I knew then I would never quit school which my grandmother wished me very much to do, because it means everything to me to see my tribe take an interest toward the school which we need so badly. All the years I have been in school I pray that someday all my people may realize the needs of an education and that my influence may mean something to them."¹⁵

In June, 1945, Betty Mae Tiger and Agnes Parker graduated from Cherokee Indian High School. Betty Mae went on to take nurse's training and returned to work at the Dania Reservation as a public health assistant. Twenty years later she was elected Chairman of the Tribal Council, the only woman so honored by the Seminoles. This was the fulfillment of one of Mrs. Stranahan's fondest dreams, a dream which began on the back porch of her trading post home over half a century before.

In the years immediately following World War II, the Friends of the Seminoles turned their efforts toward having Seminole youngsters admitted to local public schools in Florida. By 1946, there were seventeen Indian students in the Dania public school, three at Immokalee and another twenty-five attended the Federal Day School that had been opened on the rural Brighton Reservation. A number of children continued to go away to boarding school. That year there were twenty-one attending at Cherokee, North Carolina, and another two in Oklahoma.

Providing clothing and lunch money for the school children became a major concern of the Friends, and various local organizations such as the Panhellenic Society and Daughters of the American Revolution contributed heavily in this regard. In fact, there was somewhat of an interlocking directorate between the Friends and D.A.R. because one of Mrs. Stranahan's closest associates in the Indian work, Mrs. O. H. Abbey, was also a moving force in the local D.A.R. chapter¹⁶ and often accompanied the Seminole children on their bus journey to the North Carolina boarding school. One of the preconditions for admitting Indian children into the Broward County schools was that they be properly clothed and trained in sanitary habits. It was Mrs. Abbey who supervised this readiness program with the aid of an Indian teacher sent down from the Cherokee school. The children learned the alphabet, some English phrases, the Pledge of Allegiance, as well as how to wash themselves and use the "flushing johns." According to Dr. Myron Ashmore, who was principal at Dania when the Seminole children first came, they did not always remember their hygiene lessons; nevertheless, with the help of teachers and Friends the transition was achieved with minimal trauma for all concerned.¹⁷ By 1950 the Indian enrollment in the public schools of South Florida had doubled, and a preschool play group was established on the reservations to begin preparing children earlier for school. Members of the Friends of the Seminoles contributed countless hours working with the children, taking them shopping and into their homes, as well as soliciting the support of various community agencies.

The "Friends of the Seminoles, Florida Foundation, Inc." was chartered in 1949 as a non-profit organization by the Circuit Court of Broward County.¹⁸ In the incorporation papers, Mrs. Stranahan was listed as president and her home address given as the group's principal place of business. Mrs. O.H. Abbey was treasurer of the corporation, whose general nature and purposes were "to promote educational, physical, social and economic welfare, home building and advancement of the Seminole Indians of Florida."¹⁹

The corporation could acquire and hold or sell real property to a value of \$50,000, establish loan funds and conduct business like any other corporate entity. Annual membership dues were a minimum \$1.00. In the early 1950's, the Friends were concerned with improving living conditions on the reservations. Mrs. Stranahan's annual report of 1952, noted that "The need of greatest importance to the welfare of the Seminole now, since he is friendly to the government under which he lives; has accepted Christianity, and is willingly permitting his children to attend school; is a better home for his family, he is asking for a better house."²⁰

Literature distributed by the Housing Committee appealed for volunteers to co-sign bank notes for Seminole homes at the rate of \$800 to \$1,000, but funds

were slow in arriving. In 1952, the focus was on building a home for Bill Osceola, an Indian elder, as an example for others to follow. Funds for the project came from throughout the state, but primarily from the Tampa Woman's Club where the Chairman of their Indian Affairs and Welfare Department, Mrs. T.M. Shackleford, prevailed in having the club's entire account for Indian work diverted to this project. The clubs' cooperative venture resulted in the deposit of \$1,500 in the Dania bank to insure construction of the Osceola home. Other donations soon followed.²¹ Through the 1960's, the corporation's building fund would make contributions to erect community centers and individual homes on the three Seminole Reservations.

Just as the Seminole Indians were beginning to make real progress in all areas of self-development, the federal government announced its policy of "termination" whereby all support services to the tribe would cease. In effect, this would place the Seminoles on their own at a time when they had neither an educated leadership with skills necessary to handle their own affairs, nor a political structure to carry out the necessary social and economic functions of the people. When the withdrawal plan was formally presented to the Seminoles in October, 1953, the response was immediate and negative in all quarters.

The Indian people held a series of meetings and promulgated resolutions which called for the continuation of the Seminole Agency and essential support services for twenty-five years. During that time, the government should concentrate on the education and training of the people, as well as improving their reservations, with a view to the time when they could run their own affairs. The Friends would support this position at congressional hearings the following year but, fearing the worst, they passed an immediate resolution requesting "That at such time as the Government relinquishes their right and control in the Seminole Reservation, that we, the Friends of the Seminoles, Florida Foundation, Inc., ask for the right of the Trusteeship of the property... until such time as the Seminole Indians are able to take possession in their own rights."²² Fortunately, termination did not proceed to that point.

On March 1 and 2, 1954, a joint hearing of the Subcommittees of Congress considering termination of the Seminole was held in Washington. An array of state and federal officials, anthropologists, Indians and private citizens gave testimony or entered statements supporting the Seminole position that they should not be terminated. Florida Congressman Dwight Rogers was particularly outspoken in his opposition to termination, as was Mrs. Abbey who represented the Friends of the Seminoles due to Mrs. Stranahan's illness. However, Mrs. Stranahan's letter, affirming the Seminole position and eloquently stating her own views, was entered in the minutes. In part it read:

"It is only some fifteen years now that any citizen interested in Indians could come in and

work with the Seminoles. But now since this is possible, we have hundreds of well-meaning men, women and children, organizations and clubs as well as churches of our state and community cooperating to make them feel a part of the community in which they are the real pioneers, the people the first white citizens found here when they arrived.

"But gentlemen of the committee, this hard work of fifty years will lose all its meaning in moral building if we permit our government to withdraw all their protection. We as a state and community will take our responsibility as it has come to us that we have been doing to a degree but it has misled our Government to withdraw Federal protection from the Seminole lands, cattle and property there in the short time of three years as in Bill H.R. 7321 now before your committee. Mr. Chairman you must strike the number "3" and substitute the wish and request of the Seminole Indians to 25 years. Please Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, this is the best interest of the most minority group in these United States. A people who are asking the least and have the least. They are asking a reasonable service for part of a race who have given up much of the beautiful country to ruling white man."²³

As a result of these hearings, as well as subtle pressure brought by bureaucrats and committee members such as Congressman James A. Haley and Senator George Smathers, the Seminoles were removed from the list of tribes to be terminated.²⁴ Instead, they were allowed to formally organize themselves under provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and formed their own Seminole Tribe of Florida, Inc., in 1957. Five years later a group along the Tamiami Trail broke with the main body and organized a new Miccosukee Tribe of Indians.²⁵ In the intervening years, both tribes have effectively assumed most of the health, education, welfare and economic development programs formerly provided by the federal government and private associations. From that point forward, the Friends of the Seminoles and similar societies around the state have had no significant impact on the Indian people except for underwriting occasional social festivities and awarding educational scholarships to Seminole students.

When Ivy Stranahan passed away in August, 1971, it was the end of an era in Florida. She was one of the last survivors of that rugged pioneer generation which opened the peninsula south of Lake Okeechobee. They arrived long before the railroad, wrested a living as best they could by farming or trading with the Indians and turned old fort sites into thriving settlements. Unlike most of her contemporaries, the literate and articulate Mrs. Stranahan achieved state and national recognition

for her Indian work although many other pioneer families rendered equally valuable assistance to their Seminole friends on an individual basis.

She was cast in the mold of a typical 19th Century humanitarian reformer who undertook her mission as a Christian duty. And if she failed to recognize that efforts to educate, house and otherwise "uplift" the Seminoles contributed to the very disintegration of their core values, it can only be attributed to a lack of understanding of how cultural change occurs. Regardless, there was little that she or anyone could have done to reverse the inexorable process of acculturation which was under way among the Florida Seminoles. It is to Ivy Stranahan's everlasting credit that she devoted most of her life to making this cultural transformation as painless as possible for her Indian friends.

FOOTNOTES

1 A concise history of the settlement on New River is found in Philip Weidling and August Burghard, *Checkered Sunshine, the History of Fort Lauderdale 1793-1955* (Gainesville, 1966). For an account of Stranahan's trade with the Seminoles see: Harry A. Kersey, Jr., *Pelts, Plumes and Hides: White Traders Among the Seminole Indians, 1870-1930* (Gainesville, 1975).

2 *Fort Lauderdale News and Sun Sentinel*, September 9, 1967.

3 August Burghard, *Watchie Estra/Hutrie (the Little White Mother)* (Fort Lauderdale, 1968).

4 Harry A. Kersey, Jr., "Educating the Seminole Indians of Florida, 1879-1970," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 49 (July, 1970), 19-20.

5 Harry A. Kersey, Jr., "The 'Friends of the Florida Seminoles' Society: 1899-1926," *Tequesta*, 34 (1974), 13-14.

6 Harry A. Kersey, Jr. and Donald E. Pullease, "Bishop William Crane Gray's Mission to the Seminole Indians in Florida, 1893-1914," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 42 (September, 1973), 272.

7 Alan K. Craig and David McJunkin, "Stranahan's: Last of the Seminole Trading Posts," *Florida Anthropologist*, 24 (June, 1971), 45, 48.

8 Roy Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," Senate Doc. 314, 71st Cong., 1st sess., 1930, p. 70.

9 Kersey, "Educating the Seminole Indians of Florida," 28.

10 Nash, "Survey of the Seminole Indians of Florida," 54.

11 U.S. Congress, Senate, *Survey of Conditions of the Indians in the United States: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs*. Part 16, 71st Congress, 1st sess., 1930, pp. 7603-7614.

12 "Complete Report of Work: Friends of Florida Seminoles 1933-1937," Submitted by Mrs. Frank Stranahan, Secretary-Treasurer, p. 1. Typed manuscript. Stranahan Papers, (Friends of the Seminoles File), Historical Society of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to the Stranahan Papers are found in this collection.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

15 "Report on first 5 Seminole children sent to Cherokee, North Carolina," p. 1. No author, no date. Typed manuscript. Stranahan Papers, (Betty Mae Tiger File).

16 Lucy Heidenreich, "Dreams Come True, Education of Seminole Indians," *New River News*, 11 (January, 1973), 1-6.

17 Kersey, "Educating the Seminole Indians of Florida," p. 29.

18 The "Friends of the Seminoles" was chartered as a Florida Corporation on November 28, 1949. *Corporation Book* 13, Broward County, pp. 616-622. Office of the Comptroller, Broward County, Florida.

19 Charter, "Friends of the Seminoles, Florida Foundation, Inc.," Article II.

20 "Annual Report: Friends of the Seminoles, Florida Foundation, Inc., 1952" Submitted by Mrs. Frank Stranahan, President, p. 1. Typed manuscript. Stranahan Papers, (Annual Report File).

21 "Friends of the Seminoles, President's Annual Report, November 3, 1953," Submitted by Mrs. Frank Stranahan, p. 1. Typed manuscript. Stranahan Papers, (Friends of the Seminoles File).

22 Letter, Mrs. Frank Stranahan to Whom it May Concern, October 8, 1953. See also: Statement of Fact, Friends of Seminole to Hon. James A. Haley, April 6-7, 1955. Stranahan Papers, (Government and the Indians File).

23 U.S. Congress, *Joint Hearings Before the Sub-Committee of the Committees on the Interior and Insular Affairs. Termination of Federal Supervision Over Certain Tribes of Indians, Part 8, Seminole Indians of Florida*, S. 2747 and H.R. 7321, 83rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1954, pp. 1130-1131.

24 For insights into these hearings and the subsequent development of separate Seminole and Miccosukee tribes in Florida see: William C. Sturtevant, "Creek into Seminole," in *North American Indians in Historical Perspective*, edited by E.B. Leacock and N.O. Lurie (New York, 1971).

25 The extent to which the Indian people control their own affairs is spelled out in their constitutions and corporate charters. *Constitution and bylaws of the Seminole Tribe of Florida, ratified August 21, 1957* (Washington, 1958). See also: *Corporate Charter of the Seminole Tribe of Florida* (Washington, 1958). *Constitution of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, ratified December 17, 1961, with amendments adopted 1964 and 1965* (Washington, 1965).

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