

# Editor Visits Miccosukees Of Florida Everglades

By Howard Rock  
Times Editor

What is it like to go literally from one end of the North American Continent to the other—from the cool atmosphere of the early morning of November 9 at Fairbanks, Alaska to the humid temperatures in the 80's of Miami, Florida?

Was this editor there to enjoy the warm beaches and to bathe in the warm waters? He wished he had because of the heat but the trip was for a very different reason.

During the day of November 11, he was attending a confer-

ence on Indian education that had been called jointly by the Interior Department and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. He was also looking forward to attending another conference in New York City again on education.

During a lunch period, he found he had been called by William Byler, executive director of the Association on American Indian Affairs, Inc., a citizens organization devoted to assisting Indians all over the United States.

He returned the call and Byler asked at once, "How

would you like to go to Florida?"

"Florida?" the editor queried. "Whats going on there?"

Byler told him that the Miccosukees were putting on a ceremony commemorating a transfer of title to 25 new houses from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the tribe.

The Miccosukees—a tribe of Indians with a tragic, sad but noble background, the descendants of a group of Seminoles who escaped into the humid confines of the Everglades back in the 1830's after their

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# Miccosukees of Florida . . .

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intrepid Chief Osceola was taken prisoner by the United States Army while he sought to negotiate under a white flag of truce. The Seminoles had the distinction of never having surrendered in their war with the U. S. Army.

William Byler and the editor taxied out to the home of the colorful Chief Buffalo Tiger of the tribe who lives in the residential district of the City of Miami.

Buffalo Tiger is a tall man about six feet tall. He is a friendly man who holds his head high. He was amused to have met an Eskimo probably for the first time in his life.

The Chief took his two visitors in his air-conditioned car to his village 18 miles out of Miami. Along the way, sleek jet planes streaked by homing and leaving the city airport.

On reaching the village, Chief Tiger called the meeting

at the community hall, a "chickee" type structure native to the tribe. It was a grass thatched roof supported by timbers with open walls all around. There were benches for the audience and a table for the Chief and his council. Buffalo Tiger and his officers wore multi-colored specially designed jackets for the occasion. Their women were wearing their traditional long dresses, also generously and intricately designed.

Several old women were sitting around the hall. They were distinctive, significant, and proud. They wore strings upon strings of beads around their necks that reached up to their chins. The beads seemed to make them hold their heads high with the resulting effect of regal bearing. For the most part, their expressions were inscrutable although they smiled faintly at times. They occasionally turned their heads in measured movements as they listened to the proceedings. Two old men also stood out. One of them was Buffalo Tiger-Tiger, the father of the Chief. Smiling children flitted about some of them, occasionally cuddling up to the old people affectionately.

Buffalo Tiger conducted the meeting in his native tongue, pausing at times to explain what was being said to the officials from Washington, D. C., local Bureau of Indian Affairs officials and some city council members of Miami.

Shortly after the meeting got underway, the Chief handed Byler a lengthy document to read pertaining to the transfer of title to 25 homes from the BIA to the tribe. This was probably in appreciation of his organization for its assistance in the land and other problems.

The association had been instrumental in helping to set aside land for the Miccosukees on which the tribe now lives. It seems there is some oil on the land and there is a possibility that Buffalo Tiger and his people may get some \$76,000 a year from the State of Florida in the future as oil lease money.

The Miccosukees, however, have not been waiting for this money to help them develop business enterprises. With money acquired from the federal government, they have

built a fine restaurant, a grocery store, a service station and a gift store. Through these businesses, they are servicing tourists who are coming in increasing numbers to see daily wrestling matches between a Miccosukee and an alligator, to eat, to take fast air boat rides through the Everglades, to buy gifts designed by the tribe, and even to patronize the customers with self-service ice making machines to cool their drinks.

Within the last few years, the proud Miccosukees had been forced to change their way of life and to establish businesses because the Army Engineers had drained the waters in their lands where they were accustomed to hunt game for livelihood. They had chosen to lead their old way of life until very recently, even to ignoring modern schooling for their children up to five years ago when they finally decided to have a school built by the BIA. The Miccosukees had claimed that to attend white man's schools their children's minds stood to be contaminated with deceit they had experienced in the past.

"These people had long memories—150 years long," said William Byler.

That was about the time when the Florida government and the U. S. Army began feverishly to extinguish Indian titles to lands by force to move the natives to other states to make room for the colonists. The Seminoles fought back under the legendary leadership of Osceola who was forced to fight for eight long years because of repeated broken promises by the Army and the politicians. When the war finally ended, and after Osceola was captured under a white flag of truce, it was inconclusive.

At the time of Osceola's capture, many of his followers surrendered to be moved to other states but some 300 others escaped into the Everglades. They were never pursued. The U. S. Army, even under the famous general Andrew Jackson, had failed to defeat the Seminoles. In the eight-year struggle, the Army lost over 2,000 officers and men and with a monetary cost to the nation of about \$60 million.

The Miccosukees of Florida today are the remnants of the 300 who escaped into the Everglades. They are the traditionalists who have been forced into the modern way of life but with their cultural values largely intact, they are bringing into that life strength and honesty that should stand them in good stead.

One facet of this was evident during the meeting when a man from another tribe tried to join the band. It turned out that the applicant owed \$31 to his tribe and Chief Buffalo Tiger and his Miccosukees turned him down until the time he paid his debt.

When the meeting ended, Buffalo Tiger had the transfer of title to 25 homes for his people, houses designed as closely as possible to their original chickees, even to the grass thatched roofs but with walls around them. He dangled in his hands 25 keys to those new homes.