“When Is Enough, Enough?”

Willie Johns on Seminole History and the Tribal Historic Preservation Office, the Creek Perspective

WILLIE JOHNS AND STEPHEN BRIDENSTONE

In order for a Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) to successfully represent a tribe, it must be fully engaged with the community it serves. One way therefore to measure the impact of the program is to solicit feedback from the people themselves. Interviews were conducted with five citizens of the Seminole Tribe of Florida who are broadly representative of the diversity of perspectives within the Tribe. A cross section of age, gender, and personal biographies was deliberately selected with the common theme that all interviewees had interacted with the THPO in some capacity in the last five years.

Historically, the Seminole Tribe of Florida is made up of speakers of two related but culturally distinct languages—Miccosukee and Creek. Language affiliation and cultural identity are intertwined and distinct. Today this traditional dichotomy is made more complex by the cultural and biological influence of non-Seminole peoples. Willie Johns, who has a long history of working very closely with the THPO, offers a Creek historical perspective.

Author Bio

Willie Johns is a citizen of the Seminole Tribe of Florida and a member of the Wildcat Clan. Born in 1951 and raised on the Brighton Seminole Indian Reservation, Johns grew up in a traditional camp. He is a fluent speaker of the Cow Creek language and a respected Tribal historian. He earned an associate degree in agriculture from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College and a bachelor’s degree in history from Palm Beach Atlantic College.
A longtime advocate of education, Willie Johns served twice as the Education Director for the Tribe. From 2005, he worked as the Outreach Coordinator for the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, delivering lectures and workshops about Seminole Tribal culture and history to Tribal and non-Tribal audiences. In this position, Johns established an ongoing relationship with the THPO, becoming an informal cultural advisor. Since October 2013, he has served as Chief Justice of the Seminole Tribal Court.

On June 10, 2014, Willie Johns sat down with Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum Oral Historian Stephen Bridenstine to discuss Seminole history and his work with the THPO. In this humorous and insightful interview, Johns relates how he came to know and understand Seminole history and shares his personal thoughts and feelings about the work of the THPO.

STEPHEN BRIDENSTINE: Can you start out by describing for us the camp setting and the family environment that you grew up in?

WILLIE JOHNS: I always said that I came up at the right time because a lot of the elder gentlemen that I was raised with are no longer here. So I used to probe them, ask a lot of questions. And they would give me good answers, but I came to realize that history in their minds wasn’t really that important. They didn’t remember anything about,
for instance, Osceola. I asked several men about him. They knew very little other than the fact that he wasn't a full-blooded Seminole or Creek. They knew that fact and they knew that he died in captivity, and that's as far as it went with anything about him.3

So I knew that their main focus was survival, simply surviving the environment. They lived in Florida—camped the camp, hunting, fishing, you know, hunter-gatherer. They were forced back into that from the early people that came here. They were back into that hunter-gatherer mode, but they were finally calming down when I came around because by then, they were all on the reservation and working for the government or they had their cattle herd and that's how I got to know a lot of the guys. And I grew up with them. A lot of them were Medicine Men, especially in my family. They were medicine bundle carriers, so we have always passed down that tradition through our family. The strongest male would get it.

So history for the most part wasn't really there. The challenge was that I had a lot of non-Indian friends who would ask me questions and I wouldn't know the answers so I would have to come back home and ask my parents, ask my aunts. You see, I was brought up in a matrilineal environment. We had our great-aunt and she had seven sisters, so we had a large family, probably twenty chickees in our camp.4 So we were very challenged at the beginning anyway because our families, our parents, were illiterate. So like I said, there wasn't a whole lot to talk about concerning history. Most of my knowledge I got through my self-study because the college that I went to, Palm Beach Atlantic College, their specialty was European history. So I learned a lot about the kings and queens in Europe, in Russia, France, Italy, and how they all intertwined, intermarried among each other. But that was good for me.

SB: Why?
WJ: Because it gave me a really broad perspective on different people. I wasn't clouding my history, my mind, with just total Native stuff. So I got a broad picture of why people would want to come to America too. You know, because they totally destroyed Europe so they needed a new place to go—(laughs)—a new place to destroy. So they came to the promised land. So it kept my door open with the Native people, the Native history, my own history. Then once I graduated from college, I began my own venture into Florida's history and then into Native history, into military history, and into Tribal history. I had to
start somewhere so back in high school days, you always start at the Mayflower. (laughs)

SB: I did.

WJ: Yeah, I did too! Because nobody talked about Florida history or Seminoles in Florida, the rich history that the Seminoles have. Nobody even mentioned that because from the Mayflower, it seemed like you dove right into the Revolutionary War. And then right there is when they spoke of the Trail of Tears very little. And then Indian Removal, very little in American history books. So I didn't get a whole lot out of that but I knew there was a rich history, and I knew by talking to guys like Sonny Billie, I knew that I didn't originate from here.

SB: Where did you come from?

WJ: Our people come from the southeastern area like Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, parts of North Carolina.

SB: Did you know that growing up?

WJ: I didn't. So when I learned that, it was a shocker because I always believed that I lived here. I was from here. And I've been challenged by other Tribal members for believing that we didn't come from here. They've told me, "Our grandparents say we've always been from here." And then my comeback would be, "Well you must be Calusa or Tequesta or Jeaga, one of those aboriginal tribes that were here." That's who you are I guess." But I said, "I'm not. I'm a Creek guy and I come from North Florida for sure. And then I came into Florida. I don't know which way, Alabama or Georgia." I think my family came in after the Horseshoe Bend, when the Red Sticks and the White Sticks had their big fight and Andy Jackson came in there and helped the White Sticks, and the Red Sticks were repelled and sent all over the country and a lot of them fled into Florida.

But that's not the beginning either because there were already Creek people in Florida before that fight. Because by 1760, there were already large Creek towns in North Florida. Like the Red House, [also called] Chocochatti, Bowlegs town, Micanopy up there in the Ocala area, and Alachua. All those were settled by earlier Creek guys who were already in business selling cows in the cattle industry. So we're pretty progressive people, I realize that. But to touch base with the men that I knew growing up, they didn't know this stuff. You see, their moms and dads came out of the Everglades after the war just surviving, hunting and fishing. Nobody wrote anything down, just the
military people and the government. So they didn’t have a whole lot to give me.
SB: Do you differentiate between history and the legends and some of the other stories about the Tribe? Do you see these as different or the same?
WJ: I see them as different. I grew up listening to all the legends. Some of the best storytellers in the language, telling stories about the rabbit and how arrogant he was and then in our language it’s very funny but when you translate it back into English, it doesn’t make sense. I think that those gentlemen in those days that I grew up also understood the difference. Something did happen because theoretically we would never have gone down into the Everglades. Something forced us. You know the Creeks led the Miccosukees down into the Everglades.
SB: I didn’t know that.
WJ: Yeah, the Creek leaders, they’ve always known the Everglades. They hunted it and fished it for decades before Europeans knew that the Everglades sat there.
SB: Is this something you learned growing up from the community?
WJ: Yeah. And so these men, their parents came out, came out of the Everglades after the Wars looking for a better way of life because there is no life in the Everglades other than hunting and fishing. And most of these Creek people that were down in the Everglades were cattlemen, horsemen, so they were looking for a new way, a new route back to the old life. So they came out into the prairies after the Americans pulled out after the Seminole Wars.
SB: So the Seminoles were pushed south and then after the War, they went north again?
WJ: Yeah.
SB: Okay.
WJ: And see, that’s where my family starts because my great-grandfather was born in 1875 but I never knew him. And my grandmother’s mother, we’re not sure, but on the census they have her death in 1930 and she was ninety-six years old. So she would have been born around 1834.
SB: So she saw a lot?
WJ: Yeah. We like to push her back to the Second Seminole War and say, “Wow! She saw one Seminole War, a second Seminole War, the Civil War, World War I, and then she died just before World War II.” So hardship she had known.”
SB: As you learned these new things about the history of the Seminoles, did that change your identity in any way, or how you saw yourself and your community?

WJ: It did in a way change me because I was all of a sudden speaking a different tune. I was telling people, “You know what, I’m learning.” And then from what I’ve learned, they would add in or if I got called out and I was told that I was wrong, then I always gave them the opportunity to challenge me. “Show me where I’m wrong,” I always used to tell them, “prove me wrong.” And of course that meant they had to go back and do some studying or talk to grandma but usually grandma is already in the grave. (laughs)

So I was called, for a long time, and I still feel that every now and then, that I’m a “textbook Seminole historian.” Everything I know is in the book but you know what, there’s truth to that. Because when I was growing up, there was not much by way of the talking history, the interpretive, because nobody hardly knew much. I mean you could get medicine. There were medicines around, Medicine Men. And still today you can still do that. But culture is culture. You can ad-lib that real easy, you know, the way of life, but you shock a Seminole when you tell them that their ancestors, when they came to Florida, did not live in chickees.

SB: What did they live in?

WJ: They lived in log cabins. We’re the ones who taught you guys how to build them. So it shocks a Seminole to hear that. “Oh no!” they say. We didn’t start living in chickees till we got pushed into the Everglades and then they became survival huts. Because they were real easy to put up and you could get out of the environment real quick and they were harder to detect. So it boggles their mind because that’s all they’ve seen. That’s all they’ve seen. It was chickees all their lives. And then some smart Seminole guy with a history degree comes up and says, “Look, we lived in log cabins.”

(laughter)

SB: So of the little history that you did hear from the community, how far back did it go? Did it begin at the Seminole Wars? Because that was still alive in the memory of the community, right?

WJ: Yeah. What kept it in perspective was cattle.

SB: How so?

WJ: There’s a thesis written by a U.S. Marine titled [“American Military Strategy during the Second Seminole War”]. And he talked about
cattle and horses. So as we fled we had to leave a lot of cattle and horses because you could follow us easy. They left a lot of tracks with grazing and the big herds so we had to slim down. So you can see that we knew how to change game plans.

SB: And were there specific stories about the Seminole Wars?

WJ: Yeah, but not a lot. Not a lot because you know these men that I knew probably didn't see a real white man up front for many years. They saw them from a distance because they thought that they were dangerous. They'd take your stuff from you. So they didn't really want to intermingle but then after the Third Seminole War, everything kind of loosened up and then we started doing a lot of trading with the traders: Stranahan, Storter's, the Browns. So I think learning from the community, there was not a lot there. And there weren't that many educated people either. But as far as history goes, another thing that really got me into the swing of things was Chairman James Billie because he used to tell me a lot. We used to hang out a lot together, and he would tell me things that I never heard of and it's about our people and I wanted to learn. I wanted to know.

SB: Would that be because he grew up in a different community, on a different reservation, surrounded by different people?

WJ: Yeah, I think so because he always ran with a different crowd. And then being in that Chairman's Office, you're always around people telling you things. Other historians, you're always around them. They're always near you.

SB: So within the Tribe, obviously you have different reservations. You have a Creek-speaking community. You have a Miccosukee-speaking community. You have eight different clans. Do those different designations change what people might know about the history or what they know about the community?

WJ: You know, I don't think so. We knew about our clans all along. We knew our designations, what we're to know, what we can say, what we want to put out there. But I learned a lot because I was inquisitive. There was one man in my life, Ollie Jones, he used to teach me different songs all related back to war, war songs. He taught me a song that if somebody held a gun on you, you could sing that song and that bullet, while meant for you, would hit somebody else. And there was another song about when you're fleeing the enemy and you disappear in front of their eyes. Now this is all when I'm young and I'm interested but I'm not learning. I should have really learned them. If you