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Savages of the Sun

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The shores surrounding the great bay of Tampa were originally salt marshes, ponds, and sandy palmetto brush land. Scattered about were slash pines, magnolias, swamp maples, water oaks, sweet bay and cabbage palms. Several rivers and creeks ran through the region and emptied into the bay. It was a mosquito haven where wildlife abounded, with deer, bears and rabbits; with alligators, raccoons, bullbats and tormenting insects. For eons this semi-tropical wilderness remained undisturbed and in silence except for the cry of a wild beast or the hoot of an owl.

Then, at some period in the misty dawn of time, probably about 15,000 years ago, after the last glacial period that forced the prehistoric animals down into Florida, early man first set foot here. A wandering hunter who knew the use of fire and a few tools such as the flint-tipped lance, war-club, and throwing-stick, early man followed his prehistoric game into the peninsula, and later down the west coast, to settle along the shores of Tampa Bay.

When the Spanish explorers arrived in the early sixteenth century, the Tampa Bay region was populated with approximately 10,000 Indians. These aborigines were members of the Timucuan Confederation, which extended from Tampa Bay to Fernandina. They were called Tocobagas by the conquistadores after a village on the shore of the bay.
The fierce Tocobaga warrior was highly skillful with bow and arrow, and capable of very frightful shots.

-Courtesy Warm Mineral Springs Cyclorama

SPOKE BEAUTIFUL DIALECT

The Tocobagas spoke a dialect of the musical Timucuan language, lingua franca, a noble and general language used throughout the peninsula. They had developed a culture to conform with the maritime environment of the peninsula of the sun. Florida archaeologists theorize that the Tocobagas lived along the saline estuaries of the Gulf of Mexico from the mouth of the Manatee River to the mouth of the Suwannee River. The eastern limits were partially bordered by sections of the Peace and Withlacoochee Rivers.

From the heartland of Tampa Bay the Tocobagas could control the waterways by swift canoe expeditions.

The Tocobagas were strong and savagely handsome with bronze-colored skin. They possessed great prowess and courage. "Clad in air and sun," with the exception of a breechcloth, they were the original Florida nudists. They cut a fine figure with their bows and arrows, clubs and darts. They adorned themselves with colorful feathers, shell necklaces, bracelets made of fish teeth, and pearl anklets. Some of their more attractive ornaments were the small fish-bladders they wore as earrings. These
bladders when inflated shined like pearls, and when dyed red looked like rubies.

‘FEARFUL TO LOOK UPON’

The warriors trussed up their long, charcoal black hair upon the top of their heads bound with grass fibers to enhance their height. One of the Spanish explorers was to later record that "the Florida Indians go naked, and are large of body and appear, at a distance, like giants, and fearful to look upon."

What rendered their appearance even more formidable were the colorful tattoo designs on their bodies which enhanced their beauty, while recording their warlike exploits. This exhibit of pride by the warrior endured through the centuries. In World War II, the American soldier recorded his victories with attractive insignias on planes, tanks and warships. Some proudly imitated the Tocobagas with military tattoos on their arms and chests.

These natives encountered some of the same problems today’s Floridians still battle: insects and a harsh sun. They set a precedent for future Floridians by being the first to use insect repellents and suntan lotion. During the heat of the summer they covered their bodies with smelly fish oils to repel gnats and mosquitoes, and for protection from the rays of the hot sun.

‘DAUGHTERS OF THE SUN’

Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, an artist and historian with the ill-fated French Huguenot colony on the St. Johns River in 1564, gave us the first paintings and written narratives on the culture of the colorful Timucuan tribes. Le Moyne describes the Indian women "adorned with belts worn at their shoulders or waists, made of a kind of moss that grows on trees ... woven into slender threads of bluish-green color, and is so delicate in texture as to be mistaken for filaments of silk." From the waist up, they wore nothing, except their luxuriant long hair.

The Indian girls were attractive. When the Spanish conquistadores arrived they gave vent to their wanton lust upon the wild, hot-blooded nymphs of the Florida wilderness.

The Indian brave judged the beauty of a woman by the trimness of her figure. The men were much addicted to women of easy virtue who were called "daughters of the sun.

The women attended to the domestic duties, and assisted in planting a few crops in the fields. They used various herbs to avoid pregnancy and to preserve their youthful figures. Abortion was a common practice among the women. During pregnancy they lived apart from their husbands.
When a woman became a widow she cut off her hair below the ears and, with great lamentations, scattered it over the grave of her husband. She was permitted to remarry only when her hair had grown long enough to cover her shoulders.

Le Moyne also observed and recorded various rituals and customs of the Timucuans along the St. Johns River. Although some cultural differences existed among the Timucuan-speaking chiefdoms, it is probable that some of the rituals described by Le Moyne were practiced by the Tocobagas.

The Indians were sun worshippers, and the chiefs claimed to be descendants of Tonatico, the sun. On special occasions they gathered for great religious festivals.

Le Moyne gives us a vivid narrative of one of these rituals. "In early spring the Indians held a religious festival offering the skin of a stag to the sun. They take the skin of the largest stag, with its horns still on, and stuff it with the choicest roots. On its horns, neck and body they hang long garlands of the best fruits. Thus decorated, it is carried with music and song to an open, level place and hung on a high tree with its head and breast toward the sunrise.

"They then pray to the sun that such good things as these offered may grow on their lands. The chief, with his sorcerer, stands near the tree and offers the prayer, while the common people, some distance away, make the responses. After the prayer they salute the sun and depart, leaving the deer’s hide on the tree until the next year."

HUMAN SACRIFICE

Human sacrifice was also practiced along the Florida Indians, with the firstborn son offered to the chief. According to Le Moyne, "On the day of sacrifice the chief goes to the place dedicated for the purpose. There he takes his seat on a bench. Not far off is a tree stump about two feet high and as many thick, in front of which the mother of the firstborn squats on her heels, her face covered with her hands, in sorrow. One of her women friends or relatives then offers the child to the chief in worship. After the offering is made the women who have accompanied the mother, dance in a circle.
around the stump, with great demonstrations of joy. In their midst, singing the chief’s praises, dances the woman who holds the child.

"Nearby stands a group of six Indians. They surround a magnificiently decorated warrior hold a club ready to perform the sacrifice. When the dance ends, he takes the infant, and kills it on the wooden stump in honor of the chief."

The ruling chief or Cacique, as De Soto later called them, was responsible for the well being of his people, and had full authority in directing the growing, gathering, storage and distribution of food. Crops were stored for use during the winter in communal storehouses called barbacoas. A special guard was placed in charge of the granary, with strict orders to be on the alert at all times. At the slightest neglect of his post he was clubbed to death. The Tampa Bay Indians, therefore, practiced a basic form of simple communism, like all the Indians of North America.

**THOSE DELICIOUS ALLIGATORS**

The center of political and religious life was the village. The villages were located along the bay, and the lifestyle was basically sedentary. An Indian village usually numbered several thatched huts (bohios) with the chief’s large house in the center of the community. Some of the chiefs located their houses on large flattop pyramid mounds of earth. These huts could be heated with a fire, permitting its occupants to sleep without covers.

Their food consisted mainly of maize, shellfish, crabs, fish, deer, turkeys, raccoons, roots, nuts and wild fruits. A limited amount of squash, beans and tobacco was raised in small fields. During the winter months, if their food supply diminished, they wandered into the back country and subsisted on acorns, terrapins, and game which they baked, boiled or roasted. They also gathered very ripe wild fruits. Hernando de Escalante de Fontaneda, writing his Memoria in 1575 describing Florida in the Sixteenth Century, reported that the Florida Indians enjoyed eating "delicious small alligators, appetizing snakes and juicy eels, as long as a man and as fat as a thigh."

The Tocobagas used tobacco extensively. To them, it was a medicine, a pleasure in the form of smoking, a means of fumigating their huts, and an adored talisman over which they said their prayers before going on a hunt.

**McKAY BAY SHELL HEAP**

In ancient times, the forerunner of the Tocobagas lived on and around shell middens. A large part of their food-fare was shellfish. The shells of these fish make up the bulk of the tremendous shell middens found along the shores of Tampa Bay. The dead were covered in the shell heaps, along with all types of refuse. These old kitchen middens have contributed much valuable information on the primitive inhabitants of the Tampa Bay region. In these shell heaps, the bones of small animals have been found, such as dogs, raccoons and oppossum. Dogs, the only domestic animals, were frequently eaten, and perhaps even kept and raised for the purpose. Turtles, snakes and alligators were used.

A shell heap existed until very recently in a densely wooded area on the east bank of McKay Bay, between the Palm River and Twenty-second Street Causeway. Many artifacts in the form of broken pottery, bones
and arrowheads have been found there by amateur archaeologists. Another shell heap was located at the head of McKay Bay on the old Gavino Gutierrez Spanish Park Estate.

About the time of the coming of the Spaniards the custom of covering the dead in these old kitchen middens was abandoned. The elaborate ceremony of burying the dead in earthen mounds became the practice.

**WITH GREAT WAILING**

The burial mounds were usually located near the village. The dead were buried with many "grave goods" such as spear points, clay points, ornaments and other worldly possessions.

Upon the death of a chief his subjects fasted for three days, the women cut off half of their long hair. Certain women were designated to mourn their chief with great wailing three times a day for a period of six months.

One of the strangest funeral cults practices was observed by Father Juan Rogel, of the Society of Jesus, in 1567, in the village of Tocobaga, an ancient Indian settlement on the site of Philippe Park on Old Tampa Bay. Father Rogel, the first resident priest of the bay area, made the first efforts to convert the Indians to Christianity. Here is Father Rogel's description of the macabre cult:

"At the death of a chief his body is divided into small pieces and cooked for two days, until the skin could be removed from the bones. Then the skeleton was reconstructed. During the four days which were required, a fast was observed, and on the fourth day the entire village accompanies the bones, in procession, to a temple in which the reconstructed skeleton was deposited amidst the reverences of the assembly. All who attended the processions were said to gain indulgences."

Father Rogel also preserved for us another strange custom of the Tocobagas:

"When an Indian took sick they believed that one of his souls had left his body. The sorcerer then could go into the forest to look for the wayward soul. He returns guiding the lost soul as a herder would lead his goats into a corral. While the sorcerer holds the patient by the neck the lost soul is reentered into the body. The sick Indian is placed in a circle of small fires to keep the soul from escaping."

The Tocobagas also believed that after death the principal soul entered the body of a beast or fish, and upon the death of one of these, the soul reenters into a smaller animal. This process continues until there is nothing left. This belief was so ingrained in the brain of the Tocobagas that converting them to the Christian doctrine of immortality of the soul and its resurrection was practically an impossible task.

**WPA DIGS LYKES MOUND**

But the Tocobagas did believe in their concept of immortality. They were happy to die in battle as it assured them another life. Their main concern was that their bones be preserved for burial in a mound, "so they could sprout and be covered with flesh once more."

One of the important burial mounds in Tampa was the Lykes mound located a few yards south of the old Lykes Brothers slaughterhouse on Fiftieth Street and the
Seaboard railroad tracks. Excavations of this mound were conducted in 1936 by the Work Progress Administration.

The Lykes mound was about five feet in height with a major axis of one hundred and ten feet, and a minor axis of sixty feet. Excavations disclosed thirty-four burials, arrow points, fragments of chert, scrapers, clam shells and pebbles.

On the event of the arrival of the Spaniards, Indian villages dotted the shores of Tampa Bay, and a temple mound dominated the scene in the more important villages. These large mounds were flat-topped, rectangular in shape with a ramp leading to the top. On the summit were houses for chiefs and priests, and elaborate wooden bird carvings adorned the roofs of the houses. It is believed that the temple mound tradition originated in the northeastern Mexico. There were at least nineteen temple mounds at Tampa Bay. One of the most notable temple mounds in the bay area was located in Tampa near the intersection of Morgan Street and Ellamae Avenue, near the shore of the open bay, now the Hendry and Knight Channel. D.B. McKay, a pioneer Tampan, former Mayor, and Florida historian gave us, from his personal memory, a description of the mound:

"This mound was one of the largest in Florida - at least fifty feet in height with a large, level space on top. The base covered an area nearly as large as a city block . . . Many years and a large force of laborers must have been employed in its building."

Daniel G. Brinton, noted in his scholarly book, The Florida Peninsula, 1859, that,

"There is a ceremonial mound on the Government reserve (Fort Brooke) in Tampa. The high mound, made with hands, at the spot where De Soto landed, and which is supposed by some to be that one still seen in the Village of Tampa."

The Indians must have carried millions of baskets full of earth from a nearby borrow-pit to build the Tampa mound. When the Americans arrived they found a deep scar in the earth where Jackson Street is now located. It extended from Morgan Street to the river. The pioneers referred to the borrow-pit as the Jackson Street Ditch. McKay in his Pioneer Florida series in the Tampa Tribune wrote that,

"A great ditch on Jackson Street extending from Morgan Street to the Hillsborough River, the full width of the street, and from Florida Avenue to the river, averaging twenty-five feet deep. The ditch was crossed by wagon and foot bridges at Florida Avenue, Franklin, Tampa and Water Streets."

McKay also related a story of pirate gold in the Tampa mound. He recalled,

"A yarn in circulation when I was a child credited a group of treasure hunters with digging a chest filled with Spanish gold coins from the mound . . . The name of Madison Post, Tampa's third mayor, was linked with the story."

Perhaps, there is a relationship between the "ditch" and the mound that early settlers did not see. The Caloosa Indians living south of Tampa Bay were noted canal builders. One may surmise that the Tocobagas could have gotten the idea from them to build a canal and at the same time build their great mound. A canal from the river to the inlet or estuary in the great salt marsh (later to become the Ybor Channel) would have made the south tip of Tampa into an island. The canal would have served as defense in
case of a tribal war, and also could have provided a sheltered and swift canoe crossing from the river to the inlet.

**TAMPA ON 1683 MAP**

Ironically, in the 1870s, the great mound was razed to refill the immense ditch as "at places on Jackson Street the buildings were partially undermined during the rainy season.

The Indian village at Tampa was the hub for the villages along the shore of the bay. The Alonso Solano map of Florida, circa 1683, shows El Pueblo de Tampa, at the exact site where the City of Tampa stands today. The map describes the Indian village as un pueblo de infideles.

Old Indian trails near Tampa were called "Los Caminos Reales que van de un Pueblo a Otro." These "Royal" pathways were actually mere Indian trails. Spanish explorers used these same traces on their trek through the Florida wilderness. They led to villages, rivers, to a spring or a well-known ford, or a secluded camp site.

Life was barbarous then - and so were the Tocobagas. When the Spaniards arrived the Tocobagas were barbarians still in the stone age; they were fierce and warlike savages, constantly waging raids against neighboring tribes.

The Tocobagas were excellent warriors. They possessed great agility, and an uncanny skill with bows and arrows capable of fierce and frightful shots. They tracked their enemies by their highly developed sense of smell.

**ON THE WARPATH**

When they went on the warpath they painted their faces to affect a fierce appearance. The warriors wore a headdress of animal skins, feathers and grass ornaments. Their fingernails were allowed to grow long and sharp, to a point, so that they could dig them into the forehead of their enemy, tear down the skin over his face, and blind him.

After a skirmish the wounded were dragged off the field and promptly scalped. These scalps, with hair a foot and a half long, were dried over a fire until they looked like parchment. After the battle they would cut off the legs and arms of the fallen warriors. The scalps and bleeding limbs were hung at the end of their spears and the victors marched to their village, in triumph, along with the women and children who were spared, and brought back as captives.

Karl A. Bickel in his book The Mangrove Coast notes that, "On occasion, following an inter-tribal raid, there is a sinister touch in their diet. The breasts of young girls, it was said, were especially reserved for the chiefs."

The enemies of the Tocobagas were the ferocious Caloosa Indians. They occupied the entire region south of Tampa Bay, and were considered the most uncivilized savages in Florida.

'THE CRUEL VILLAGE'

Because the bay area was a tropical paradise abounding with fish and game, these tribes were in constant territorial conflicts.

The province of Caloosa was a populous and wealthy region, rich in pearls and sea foods. The main village of the province was called Carlos, and was referred to by the Spaniards as "the cruel village." It was situated on the
Caloosahatchee River, and the Caloosas were mainly a canoe people.

These two tribes were similar in manner, habits and physical appearance. Their languages, however, differed. The Caloosa dialect was of the Muskogeon speech group which some believe originated somewhere west of the Mississippi. Fontaneda mentions that in southwest Florida there were "whole villages of western Indians who had come there in search of the rejuvenating powers of a magic spring."

The cosmographer, Juan Lopez de Velasco, in his narrative, gives us the following information on some of the tribal customs of the Caloosa. In the summer season they celebrated with a three months long festival. During that period they held wild ceremonies in which they wore deer antlers upon their heads, and ran madly throughout the night, howling like wolves. In their more "sacred" moments they paid homage to idols which were kept in a temple.

**DEATHJOURNEY**

On the death of a child of a chief, members of the tribe sacrificed some of their children to accompany the departed child on its death journey. When a chief died, his servants were sacrificed so they could look after him in the happy hunting grounds. "The enemy captives were offered as food to their idols, who were said to feed upon their eyes." In the course of the celebration a dance was performed with the head of the victims.

The Caloosas were a vicious, suspicious and treacherous tribe. But soon, the Tocobagas were to face an even greater threat.

Early in the sixteenth century wild rumors from the West Indies began filtering through the mangrove coast of Tampa Bay. Indians fleeing the islands by canoes for a safe haven in Florida brought tales of misdeeds by strange white men who came in great canoes with great white wings. The feuding savage tribes would soon forget their petty enmities, and turn their ferocity on the Spanish explorers who came casting an ominous shadow over their paradise of the sun.

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