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The Seminoles of Florida by James W. Covington

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Vernon Peeples

The Seminoles of Florida. By James W. Covington. Gainesville, Florida. 1993 University Press of Florida. 389 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth—\$49.95. Paper—\$18.95.

“By concluding a negotiated peace with the federal government [in 1842], the Seminole Indians had accomplished something that many other larger tribes had not: they had fought a war with the whites during the nineteenth century in the eastern United States and under the peace terms had been allowed to remain on their own land” (p. 109). So writes James W. Covington, emeritus Dana Professor of History at the University of Tampa, in his recent work on the history of the Seminoles from their origins as a distinct people to the present. In fourteen chapters, seven up through the three Seminole wars and seven more to the present, Covington’s work represents the culmination of over forty years of research and writing on the Seminoles.

The work begins with the familiar story of the migration of the Lower Creeks into the Florida peninsula in the eighteenth century. Through a combination of raids alongside whites, diseases and other calamities, the Creeks eventually displaced Florida’s original Indian tribes. Whether Lower Creeks or Upper Creeks, who came in the next century, Covington reminds us that “the first Seminoles were really Creeks who migrated to Florida” (p. 5). As he chronicles the movement of the Muskogean and Mikasuki bands, the author discusses various features of Creek society transplanted to Florida, such as the rituals of war and peace, traditional “square ground” towns, marital practices, slave holding patterns, and the Green Corn Dance.

The War of 1812 was a watershed for the Seminoles. Allied with the British, a few Seminoles even accompanied General Pakenham on his ill-fated expedition against New Orleans in 1814. At war’s end, the plight of the Seminoles seemed hopeless. The issue of runaway slaves’ encroachment over the nebulous boundary separating American from Spanish territory proved disastrous for the Seminoles and their black allies. Added to this volatile mix was the British, who understood that any hope they had of maintaining a presence in the Gulf hinged on Seminole support. The British seemed to give the Seminoles just enough support to encourage them against the Americans, but then withdrew at the time the Seminoles needed them most.

The First Seminole War was the beginning of the end for the tribe because its end marked the beginning of the tribe’s relationship with the Americans. Covington skillfully guides the reader through the complicated leadership factions, intermittent bouts of fighting and negotiating with whites, and the various migrations leading up to the wars of removal. His work chronicles the various removals of the Seminoles to the west, but his focus remains with those left behind.

After the Third Seminole War (1855-58) there still were isolated Seminole settlements in the Ten Thousand Islands, the Everglades, and Big Cypress Swamp. The Civil War and Reconstruction diverted attention from the Seminoles, and serious efforts to remove the tribe west abated. As the twentieth century neared and white settlement grew in south Florida, Indian-white contacts became more frequent. The Indians bargained for manufactured goods with deer, mink, and alligator skins at posts in West Palm Beach, Jupiter, Fort Lauderdale, and Miami. By the turn of the century efforts of missionaries and educators were well under way. In



The wife of Billy Bowlegs in an 1858 drawing.

Photograph from *The Seminoles of Florida*.

the 1930s and 1940s reservations were established at Brighton, Big Cypress, and Dania-Hollywood.

The single most important piece of legislation affecting the Seminoles in the post-World War II era was the 1946 Indian Claims Commission Act, which provided compensation to tribes for past frauds committed by the federal government. According to Covington, the act “proved to be a bonanza for lawyers, a good research tool for scholars who provided material for the attorneys, and of some benefit to those tribes that stipulated that part of the funds go for improvements such as roads and schools. The act also caused a split within the ranks of the Seminoles” (p. 233). What followed was a seemingly endless trail of litigation. Friction between reservation and nonreservation (Trail Indians and Miccosukees) emerged, so much so that the Miccosukees obtained distinct tribal status.

Fortunately for his readers, Covington probably overruled his editors because the book includes many long quotes. We read the comments of such Seminoles as Alligator, Wildcat, Jumper, and Billy Bowlegs; such military men as John Sprague, Ethan A. Hitchcock, John Casey, and Oliver O. Howard; and such other interesting characters as Alexander Arbuthnot, Kirk Munroe, and Lucien Spencer. These long quotes are well chosen and flow well with the narrative. The book contains many excellent pictures and maps. Covington’s work is well researched and written. It constitutes the best full treatment available of Florida’s Seminoles.

James M. Denham

Idella: Marjorie Rawlings’ “Perfect Maid.” By Idella Parker with Mary Keating. Gainesville, 1992. University Press of Florida. xv, 135 pp. Illustrations. Index. Cloth—\$22.95. Paper—\$12.95.

The tongue-in-cheek title is a good beginning for the ambivalent and understated tone of this book. Idella *was* the “perfect maid” for Marjorie Kinan Rawlings. She was talented, obedient, and industrious, handling every situation, no matter how bizarre, with a quiet, strong desperation that renders a familiar persona in American literature: The Black southern female domestic worker. The most important aspect of this story, however, is that it is Idella Parker’s own life told in her voice, with the assistance of writer Mary Keating.

Written in a serene conversational tone, this recollection gives the warmth and authenticity of a storytelling session on an old sun-drenched Florida porch. One may even feel a sense of being there, listening to Idella “remember the days.” She was cook, maid, beautician, hostess at several of the famous writer’s residences, and counselor for Marjorie Kinan Rawlings from 1940 to 1949. *Idella* gives a detailed, sometimes colorful, often painful narrative of just what that was all about.

The great value of the book is its first person telling of Black Floridian women’s history. Idella provides accounts of the quality of life in north central Florida for Black people and more specifically for the African-American female born in the South at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is always powerful and instructive to remember that Black Floridians had to pay to attend “public schools.” It is magical and exhilarating to read of Idella’s proud connection to Nat