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An Indian Incident
On The Lake Of Flints

By DR. JAMES W. COVINGTON

In 1934 William A. Read, a professor of English at Louisiana State University, wrote a book entitled Florida Place Names of Indian Origin. Under the title "Thonotosassa" he lists a lake as noted on an 1839 map, a town of 896 on an 1892 map, and finally, the Indian name of Thonotosassa or Lake of Flints. Although Thonotosassa- Lake of Flints-is a word in a Seminole dialect, the area was known to the Indians of Florida long before the arrival of the Seminoles.

Sometime in the 1950s a number of spear heads 4 to 5 inches long were found two to three feet below the surface lodged in yellow sand on a farm between Thonotosassa and Seffner. When a detailed search was made of the ground it was ascertained that this place was a projectile (spear or arrowhead) workshop that existed four to five thousand years ago. In honor of this find, Ripley Bullen, who was the first to write a guide to the identification of Florida projectile points, named this rather long and heavy point "Thonotosassa," concluding that it seemed too heavy for anything except thrusting spears, daggers, or knives.

The Lake Thonotosassa region seemed to be a good location for Indian villages to be sited, for it contained high ground for protection and a plentiful supply of fresh water. In a recent listing of prehistoric sites by the Historic Tampa-Hillsborough County Preservation Board, Thonotosassa led the entire country with 108 recorded sites, followed by Gibsonton with 23. Most of the sites are located some distance from the coast and are designated special-use camps such as quarries, hunting and exploitation of food. No mounds or horticultural remains have been found in the Thonotosassa area, so it may be supposed that the natural features of the area, the lake for fishing and the supply of flint drew the Indians to the area.

The last pre-Seminole Indians to live in the Tampa Bay region were the Tocobagas. Although they had as many as 29 towns, none has yet been recorded at Thonotosassa. Due to the inroads of disease and slave hunters, the Tocobagas vanished by 1720, leaving deserted a wonderful land full of trees, streams, lakes, wildlife and containing no warlike tribes.

With the decline of the early Florida tribes, bands of Creek Indians that lived in Alabama and Georgia began to move into Florida. Two bands settled near Tallahassee as early as 1710. Another settled near Gainesville at Alachua in 1740.

The Indian economy at this time depended upon the traffic in deer skins. The warriors made lengthy trips during the fall and winter to secure the hides which were exchanged at trading posts for guns, clothing, whiskey, and other commodities.

The women stayed at home, working the fields, tending the cattle and horses, and waiting for the males to return from their long jaunts.
One hunting party, after spending some six months in the field, came into St. Augustine in 1818 to barter their wares - bear, deer, and panther skins and bear fat. After the trading, the men were seen in all parts of the town in various stages of drunkenness caused by the potent Cuban rum. Later, the warriors returned to their camp site with a barrel of rum and whiskey for the women so that the latter could have their own round of drinks.

The bands moving into Florida were divided into two groups speaking "the related but not mutually intelligible, Muskogee (Creek) and Mikasuki (Hitchiti) languages." It was difficult to identify a person or even a band as being Muskogee or Mikasuki.

Gradually, the Indians pushed deeper into Florida. From available evidence it appears that prior to 1800 no Seminole villages were located south of Tampa Bay. The Indians used South Florida as a hunting ground and carried with them "small bundles of sticks made of the sweetbay trees, which they used in roasting their meat" because it imparted such "a pleasant flavour." Sometimes scattered groups of Seminoles searched along the Atlantic coast for items washed ashore from ships wrecked along the beach.

In 1783, Joseph Antonio de Evia was ordered by Spanish authorities to chart the Florida coastal waters. At Tampa Bay, he stopped and talked to some Yuchis, Tallapoosas and Choctaws who stated that they had travelled by horseback for five days to hunt deer in the area. They hoped to exchange the deerskins for guns, powder, and dry goods with the English. Since the nearest English posts were at Nassau and Canada, the Indians probably were referring to the Panton, Leslie company at Pensacola.

Ten years later, Vicente Folch y Juan examined the same area in order to see if an outpost should be established. At Tampa Bay he explored the shoreline and found two Indian villages, Cascavela and Anattylaica. Judging from available evidence, these villages were semi-permanent in nature, and during part of the year the inhabitants hunted and trapped the abundant wildlife found in the area. They then carried the skins to St. Augustine, St. Marks, or Pensacola, where they exchanged them for blankets, shirts, beads, saddles, flints, and other items. The Indians said they would welcome the establishment of a trading post at Tampa Bay, and their visits to the northern trading posts depended upon the area in which the hunting parties operated.

It is believed that after the Alachua band was attacked in 1813 by a force of Tennessee and Georgia militiamen, the village was moved west to the banks of the Suwannee near the Gulf of Mexico. When in 1818, Andrew Jackson attacked the village, the survivors fled elsewhere. It is believed that one group of these Alachua refugees settled at or near Thonotosassa.

In 1824 United States troops landed at Hillsborough Bay and River to found Fort Brooke. One of the best accounts of life at Fort Brooke was written by Lieutenant George A. McCall who wrote letters back home which were collected together and published in a book entitled Letters from the Frontier.

McCall visited much of the area about Tampa Bay including an Indian village at Thonotosassa. His account of life at the village reads as follows:
"The town nearest to, (at a distance of 12 miles,) and the first with which we opened communication, is 'Thlonotosasa,' which translated is 'Flint-abundant.' It numbers about 200 souls, and is under the rule of 'Tustenuggethlock-ko,' the 'Stout Chief.' An incident occurred a month ago which afforded one of many instances of filial affection to which I have alluded. In few words you have it here.

"It happened one day, that, among the motley crowd of visitors that graced our camp - for there are grades or classes, the result of wealth or talent, with Indians as well as other peoples - there were present a man of the better class, of 30 years, and his wife, of 20, with a pretty child of two years. This Indian and his wife were by all of us much admired for their personal beauty, and esteemed for their quiet, yet dignified but always respectful bearing whenever addressed.

"They seemed to be a model of conjugal happiness: never seen apart, never jarred by any clashing of separate inclinations or motives. The husband was, I think, the most perfectly formed man I ever beheld, and graceful in every motion; the wife, in addition to uncommon personal attractions, was ever scrupulously neat: both had withal a calm and peaceful expression of countenance that bespoke the friendly regard of all who met them.

"On the unfortunate day to which I allude, that bane of the red man, that cursed and destroying affliction which the advance of the pale of civilization has imposed upon his race, a bottle of whiskey, fell by some means into the possession of our friend. Like a true Indian, he drank it off in a few minutes, notwithstanding the efforts of his wife to prevent it.

"The effect, as you suppose, was sudden and fearful. His brain was crazed; in a state of wild frenzy he threw off his clothes, except that portion of which an Indian never divests himself, and mounting his horse, rode furiously about the camp, stopping every few yards to challenge the soldiers, and whooping his war-cry in the faces of all he met.

"His poor wife, with her child in arms, was following him and striving to reclaim him. The outrage became so serious as to reach the ears of the commanding officer, who immediately sent for the chief, then also in the camp. To him the Colonel read a scathing lecture, and directed him to have this Indian removed, or he would be arrested by the guard and severely dealt with.

"Old Tustenuggee, who had seen some 50 summers, bowed his head without reply. He walked rapidly to the part of the camp where he understood his townsman was. On coming upon him, the chief uttered in a low tone a few words which I, who had been brought to the spot by the tumult, did not understand; but the effect upon the inebriate was magical. He was sobered at once. He hung his head, and suffered his wife to lead his horse to where her own was fastened, when together they left our camp. The chief and his party bivouacked that night at the spring, about a mile from our camp.

"In the course of the evening, the Indian who had been intoxicated became sober; and smarting under the reproof he had received from his chief, arose from his own fire which his wife had kindled, and walked over to that of his chief. The latter had not his family with him, and was alone, seated by
his fire, with his pipe as his only companion and solace. The other seated himself quietly on the opposite side of the fire, and after a short pause, which is always the introduction to the discussion of a serious matter, complained of the indignity that had been offered to him. Whatever it was, I never learned; but it was evidently what the chief had said to him at our camp, and which, as it humbled him, had also galled him bitterly.

"But few words, as we were told, passed between them, when the young man sprang across the fire, seized his chief under the arms, and thrust his back and shoulders into the fire, where he held him until the latter fainted, when he cast him on the ground and moved away slowly to his own hearth-stone, where he directed his wife to saddle their horses. They then, without further ado, rode off, and have not be seen since, though I have understood they are sojourning in the neighborhood of Okahumpky, about 100 miles north of us.

"The following morning the affair was reported to the Colonel, who at once requested the surgeon to ride out and see what could be done for the old man. On his return, the surgeon reporting that the old chief was very seriously if not fatally burned, a light wagon with a bedsack was sent for him; a wall-tent was pitched near the hospital tent, and old Tustenuggee was comfortably established.

"The next day, his wife, a son about 20, a daughter of 18, and a younger boy, came to camp. They had a tent given them by the side of the chief's, and there abode. The meeting, I was told, was quiet, but exceedingly touching; and I certainly never saw, during several weeks that the chief lay, at first in great danger, afterwards convalescing, more gentleness and more skilfulness and tender care than these children of the forest showed in moving and handling their father, while the doctor dressed his wounds. No one of them ever left him for an hour. Scarcely did they suffer a wish to be expressed before it was gratified.

"Indeed, I often thought the group of husband, wife, father, mother, and children, was a subject worthy the pen of a Walter Scott, who alone could have given in their true colors a graphic presentation of the patient smile of the chief, the anxious but ever watchful eye and ever ready hand of his wife, and the unsleeping assiduity of the children. I confess I never saw these traits more beautifully exemplified where Christianism, the religion taught by the Saviour of men, was accepted and its teachings practiced.

"I have only further to say that the old man finally recovered, thanks to the care of the doctor and the untiring watchfulness of his family; and was afterwards always known and referred to as the 'Burnt Chief.'"