

LIVING LEGENDS OF THE UNCONQUERED SEMINOLES

BY

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An excursion into the heart of the Everglades 40 miles west of Clewiston is a unique “place to learn” (translated from the Miccosukee), the namesake of the Seminole Tribe of Florida’s Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. Walking through tall glass doors, the visitor is greeted by a large inscription depicting the purpose of the museum: “The museum collects, preserves, protects and interprets Seminole culture and history, inspiring an appreciation and understanding of the Seminole people.” The Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, located in the middle of a 64-acre swamp on the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation, demonstrates and displays in their own words their story of survival in the unforgiving Everglades.

The history of the early Indians in Florida dates back to the Pleistocene Era when Paleo-Indians hunted great Mastodons from the Arctic Circle into Florida over a 12,000 year period. Europeans did not discover Florida until the 1500s, when Ponce de Leon arrived near St. Augustine. While he was mapping Florida, moving south along the east coast, he encountered resistance from the Tequesta Indians settled at the mouth of the Miami River. The Jesuits attempted to establish a mission to convert the Tequestas to Christianity but it failed. The Tequesta, along with the Calusa, Mayaimi, Jeaga, Ais, and other neighboring tribes, obtained new goods for hunting and fishing from the early Spanish explorers but many succumbed to European diseases for which they had no immunity.

The Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum picks up the history of the early Seminole tribe with a short documentary film, “We Seminoles,” depicting their early history from the 1800s when a number

of southern tribes, removed from their native land, escaped to the Everglades to rebuild their lives and preserve their culture. Following the film, the Museum tour begins taking the visitor back into another era of Florida history.

Mounted on circular platforms, life-like Seminoles modeled after actual living members of the tribe, appear as if frozen in time performing traditional dances, and ceremonies. Informative tour guides walk alongside to interpret displays, or an audio self-guided tour is available. “The museum is artfully designed with dramatic lighting and careful detail to accuracy in every exhibit,” says Dorian Lange, Museum Curator. Museum researchers pay close attention to replicas of Seminoles in their actual environment. There is a hand-carved cypress tree canoe with Seminoles hunting and fishing. All replicas of the Seminole people are displayed in their traditional colorful garments including ceremonial accessories such as the gopher turtle shell rattles used in the Green Corn dance.

One of the most popular traveling exhibits at the Museum is the “Cattle Keepers: The Heritage of Seminole Cattle Ranching” that the visitor can enjoy through September 2010. Upcoming this year is a new exhibit, “Seminoles Look Back: Our People in Postcards.” The museum also offers historical, cultural lectures for high school students and traditional Seminole storytelling for the young.

Moving outside, the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum provides a one mile nature boardwalk through bald cypress trees, oaks and native vegetation. Along the way, detailed signs describe the native vegetation and how the Seminoles learned to live off the land. Walking past a tall native Willow tree numbered to distinguish it from others, signage describes how its leaves and bark were used in making antiseptic cures. The Seminole “medicine” practice remains an important part of their cultural heritage preserved today through

the expertise and training of the Medicine Man. Other plants along the boardwalk are identified as used to weave baskets or make utensils.

Curving along the boardwalk a clearing opens to the “living Ikalee Village” where tribal elders demonstrate traditional skills. The village is a circular area of open cypress “chickees” where Seminoles prepared meals, sewed garments, tanned hides, taught their children, created their crafts and slept on the same raised platforms at night. They demonstrate to the public how they make sweet grass baskets, beaded necklaces, and wood carvings.

Although a harsh environment, the Seminoles tamed the land to grow their families, their cattle, and their food. In the 1950’s the Seminole people joined together to create the Seminole Tribe of Florida with reservations across the state in Hollywood/Tampa that includes one of their gaming enterprises, the Hard Rock Café. There are also reservations in Ft. Pierce, Brighton, Immokalee, and the Big Cypress. Another focal point at the Museum is traveling exhibits that change throughout the year featuring contemporary native art. For those who want to purchase authentic patchwork clothing, beads, carvings of Seminole and Miccosukee indigenous tribal art, there is the on-site retail store.

For those who want to stay the night and sleep under a blanket of stars, the Big Cypress RV Resort is across the highway. It features a solar heated swimming pool, hot tub, nature walk, children’s play area and casino excursion to the Tribe’s “Vegas-style slots.” The Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum is a cultural experience worth the time and drive.

Hours: 9 – 5 p.m. daily. Admission: Adults \$9.00; seniors, students military -\$6.00; children 4 and under FREE. Directions from Clewiston: Take SR 80 West to SR 833 South. Travel approximately 40 miles into the Seminole Indian Big Cypress Reservation and turn right on West Boundary Road. The museum entrance is on the left, parking on the right.