

TEACHERS OF TRADITION: LEE BILLIE & CHARLIE CYPRESS

Lee Billie (Panther Clan) and Charlie Cypress (Otter Clan) were a married couple who worked diligently to help the Seminole Tribe of Florida maintain their culture through the challenges of the 20th century. Both were leaders and educators with the community. Lee passed down traditional skills and crafts including cooking, sewing, and basket weaving to the younger generations. Charlie was a traditional leader and performed the ceremony that designated Lee as the family matriarch. He was a renowned canoe carver, and ensured that this art was passed down and carried on.

Charlie Cypress was part of a group in the 1930's that asked the Secretary of the Interior to grant them land in multiple counties spanning the Everglades, Cow Creek, and the Fort Drum Swamp. While working on this project that would align with the modern #LandBack campaign, they also made sure to ask for assistance with full time Indigenous nursing to provide healthcare for their Tribe. As the reservation expanded, so did their camp. Lee and Charlie's daughter Willie Mae Cypress and her husband took over the camp and preserved their family home while maintaining their traditional lifestyle. Their son Stanley Cypress expanded the perimeter of family camp and raised an American-style wooden structure but also included traditional chickees as found in his parents' camp to keep tradition alive while also modernizing his home.

Lee and Bille did incredible work to preserve traditional Seminole culture during a time of intense change and transition. While they each have their own accomplishments that deserve to be celebrated, their partnership helped the continuation of traditional customs, values, and the expansion of the land on which the Tribe continues to thrive today.



If you're interested in more Seminole History, The new STOF Tribal Historic Preservation Office website is coming online Feb 10 with more stories, articles, and historic resources. STOFTHPO.com

