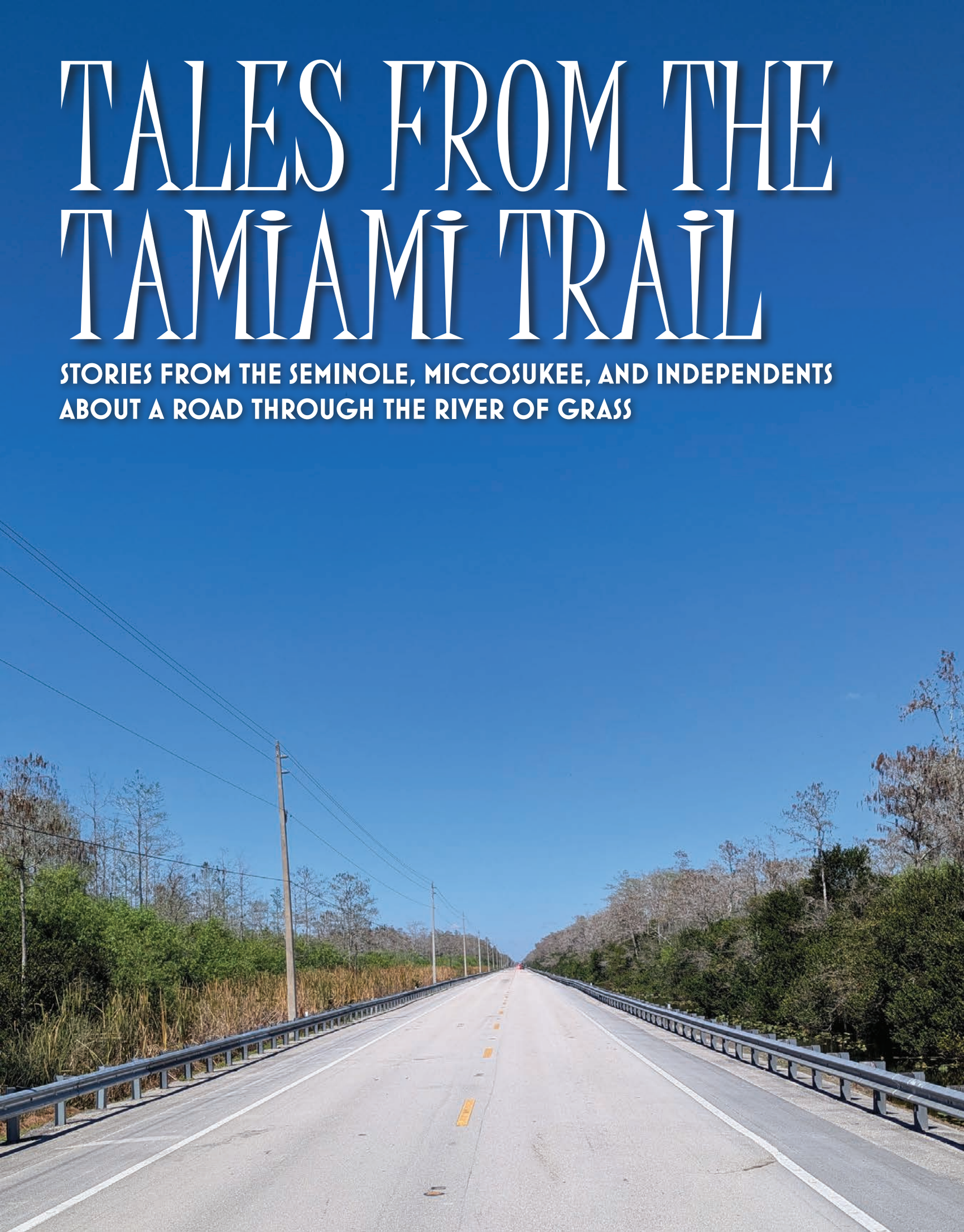
TALES FROM THE TAMIAMI TRAIL

STORIES FROM THE SEMINOLE, MICCOSUKEE, AND INDEPENDENTS ABOUT A ROAD THROUGH THE RIVER OF GRASS



TALES FROM THE TAMIAMI TRAIL

Storytellers
Rev. Houston Cypress (Otter Clan),
Angie Jimmie (Takoshaałee Clan),
Barbara Osceola (Panther Clan),
Pete Osceola Jr. (Bird Clan),
Popeye Osceola (Bird Clan),
Tina Marie Osceola

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Cover Image: Tamiami Trail near Mile Marker 42 (2025) Dave Scheidecker
Table of Contents Image: Seminole men guiding survey teams (1919) Courtesy of Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum (2001.3.2)
Back Cover: Hialeah Welcome sign depicting Jack Tigertail, (1921) W.A. Fishbaugh, Courtesy of State Archives of Florida
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TRIBAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

SEMINOLE TRIBE OF FLORIDA

AH-TAH-THI-KI

M U S E U M

A PLACE TO LEARN. A PLACE TO REMEMBER.

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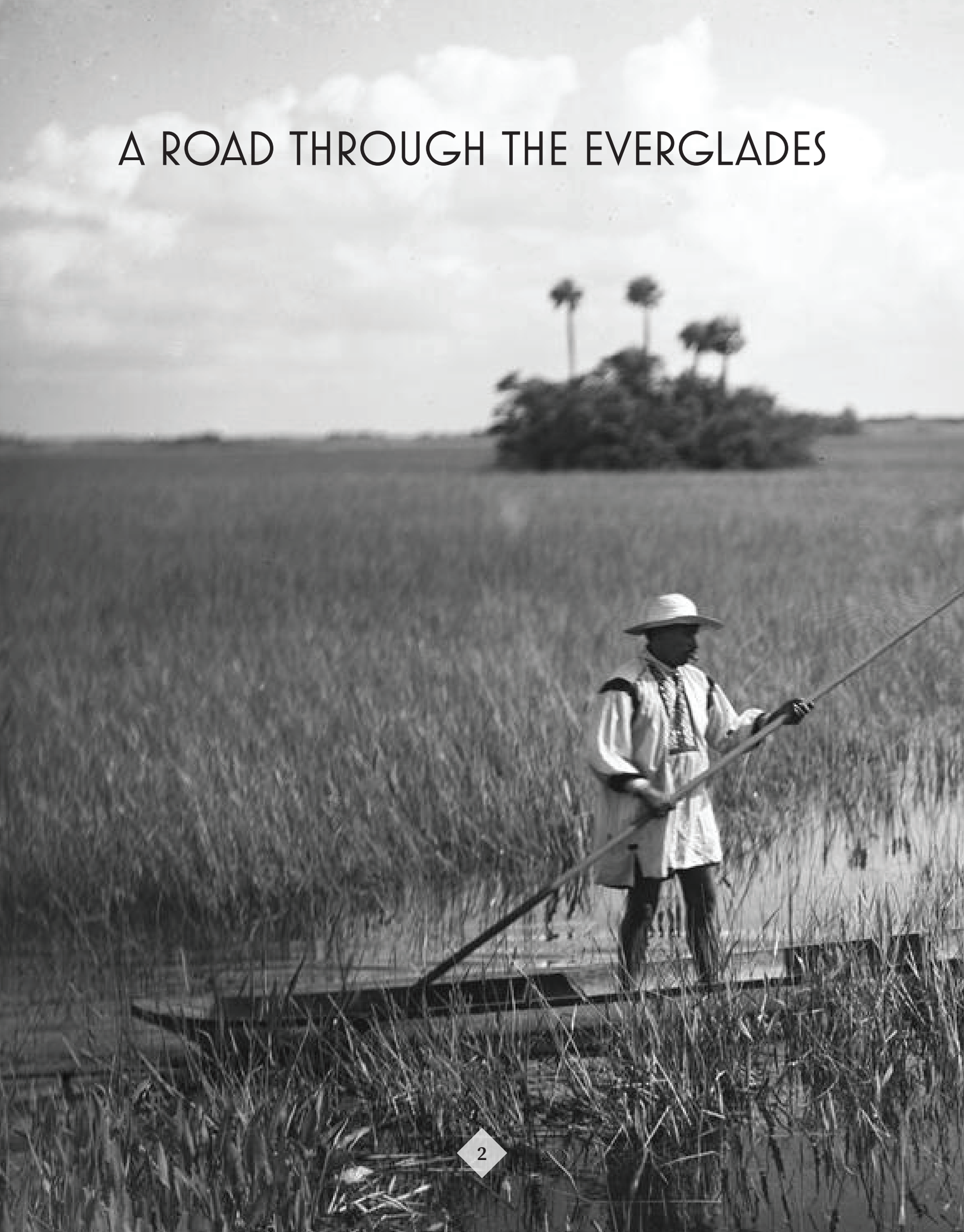
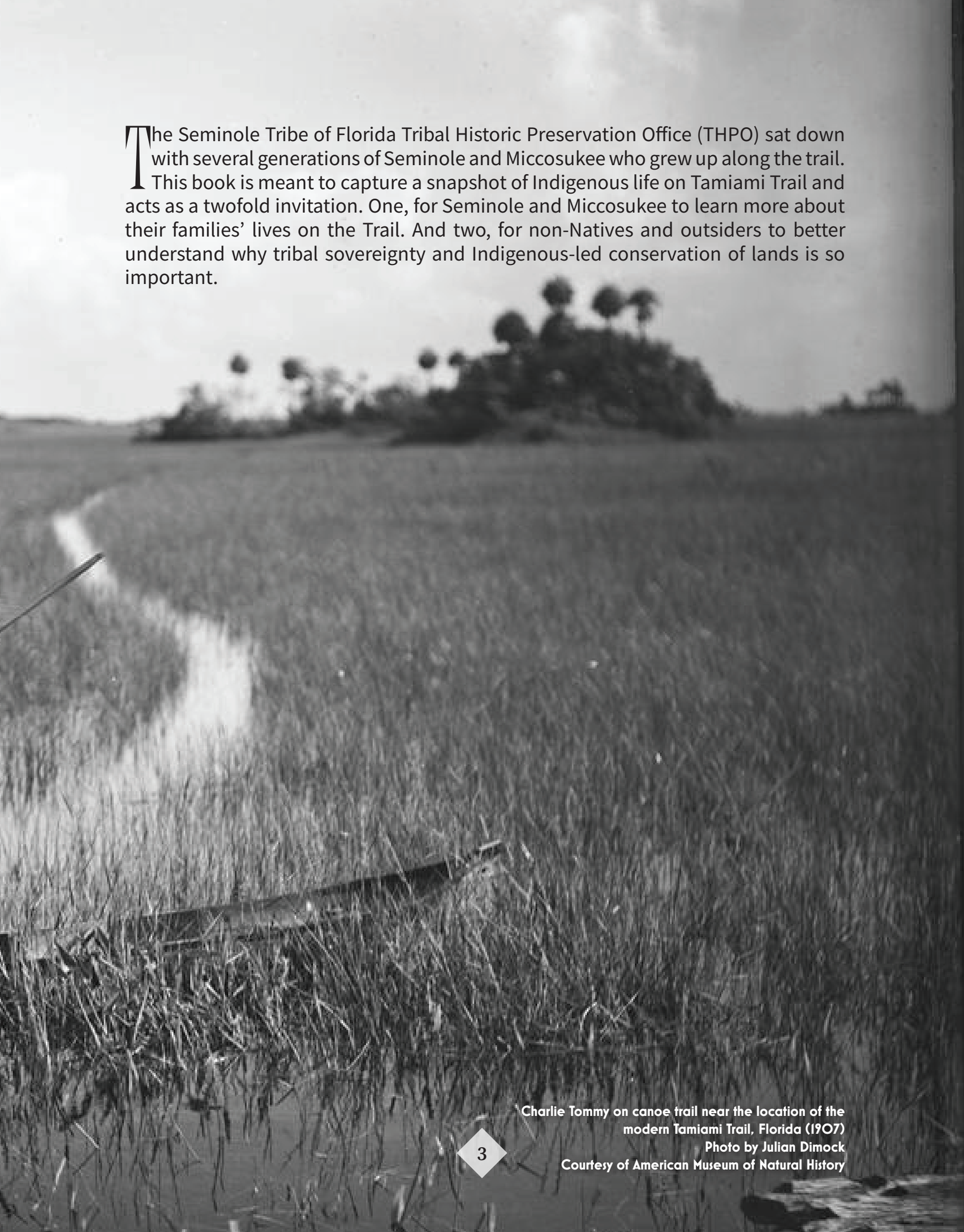


The Seminole Tribe of Florida Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) sat down with several generations of Seminole and Miccosukee who grew up along the trail. This book is meant to capture a snapshot of Indigenous life on Tamiami Trail and acts as a twofold invitation. One, for Seminole and Miccosukee to learn more about their families' lives on the Trail. And two, for non-Natives and outsiders to better understand why tribal sovereignty and Indigenous-led conservation of lands is so important.



Charlie Tommy on canoe trail near the location of the modern Tamiami Trail, Florida (1907)
Photo by Julian Dimock
Courtesy of American Museum of Natural History

A CONVERSATION

"I think that's one of the biggest differences between what the older generation had to deal with, people encroaching on us…

We asked the older generation who grew up on the Trail what they hoped readers would take away from this book...

Pete Osceola, Jr.: Why is everyone looking at me? (Everyone laughs.) That you read it from the point of view of the person who is talking. You read it from their viewpoint.

Tina Osceola: I hope it communicates to whoever is reading it. Right, and it makes them think about it. You know. And want more. Like wow, I want to read more. I want to learn more. I want it to be thought provoking. A conversation starter, and to be honest, I want a young tribal person to pick it up and look through it and go, "Why isn't my name in here?" Like I want them to be challenged by it. Even if they don't like what I have to say. I want them to want to do this job to prove me wrong. I want to know that there's tribal members who are going to do this.

Pete Osceola, Jr.: What if the generation before had done this? Would we have more or less?

Barbara Osceola: Right.

Tina Osceola: Good question.

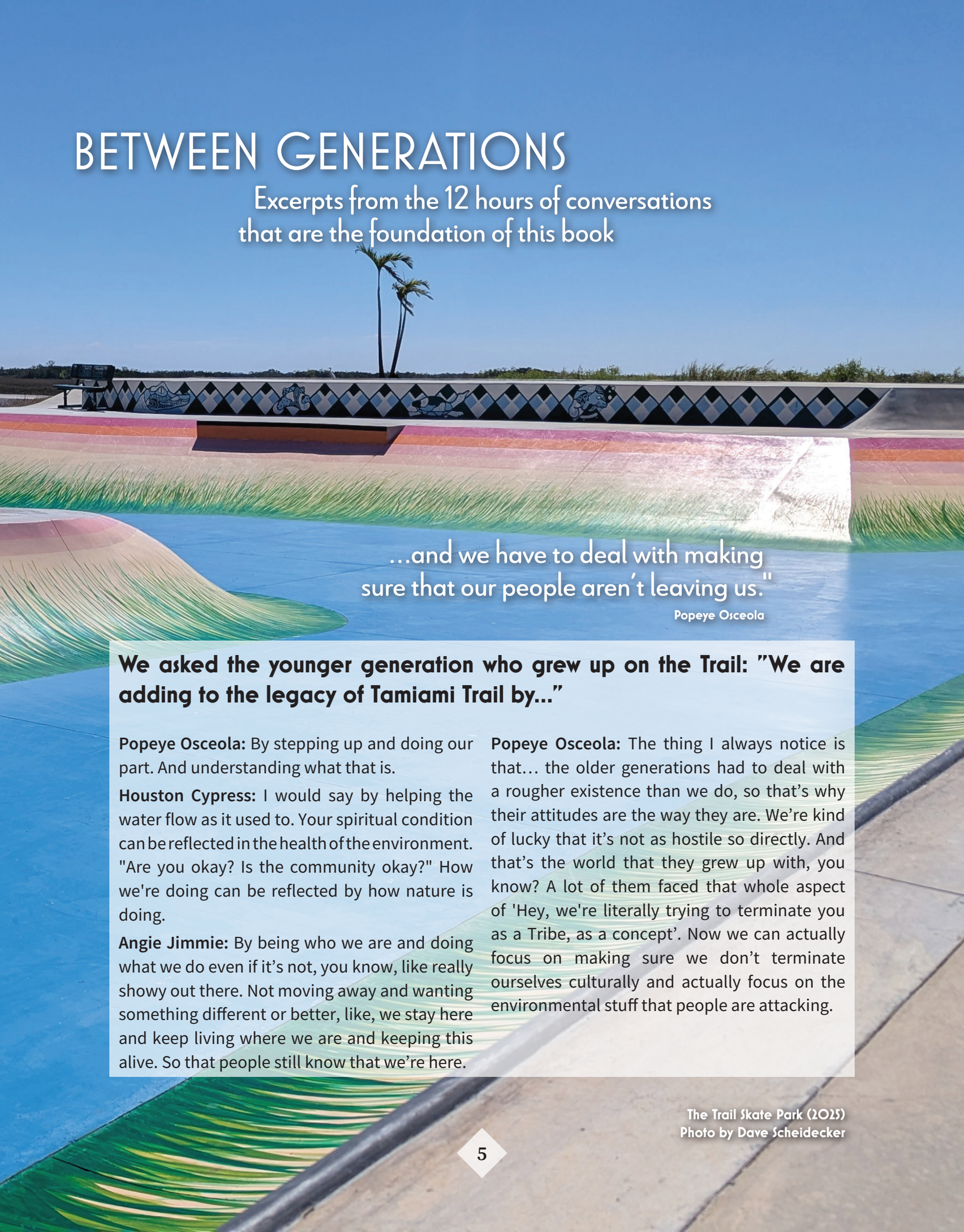
Pete Osceola, Jr.: Would we say, hey, it's already been written? It's already been preserved. Or would we say … I can add to it?

Barbara Osceola: That's what I'm saying. I want to add to this. That's what I want to hear them say, that's what they need to think.

Pete Osceola, Jr.: You have to have a little bit of anger too. Like this. (He places his fist on the table to laughter). Growing up on Tamiami (in the 1960's) you could find someone to talk to, let's say that you wanted to talk to. And you could sit there all day and all night and not get bored and not want to go somewhere else. Those are the people that influenced me... And it's not telling stories but it's just the fact that I have something to contribute to my family, to my kids and grandkids if they want to hear it. Our culture is not mandatory, no one is here to say you have to learn this and that, but if you have a good teacher, they make you feel like you need to know this, so you'd be better off in life. And you have something to contribute and can make yourself a whole person.

BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Excerpts from the 12 hours of conversations that are the foundation of this book



...and we have to deal with making sure that our people aren't leaving us."

Popeye Osceola

We asked the younger generation who grew up on the Trail: "We are adding to the legacy of Tamiami Trail by..."

Popeye Osceola: By stepping up and doing our part. And understanding what that is.

Houston Cypress: I would say by helping the water flow as it used to. Your spiritual condition can be reflected in the health of the environment. "Are you okay? Is the community okay?" How we're doing can be reflected by how nature is doing.

Angie Jimmie: By being who we are and doing what we do even if it's not, you know, like really showy out there. Not moving away and wanting something different or better, like, we stay here and keep living where we are and keeping this alive. So that people still know that we're here.

Popeye Osceola: The thing I always notice is that… the older generations had to deal with a rougher existence than we do, so that's why their attitudes are the way they are. We're kind of lucky that it's not as hostile so directly. And that's the world that they grew up with, you know? A lot of them faced that whole aspect of 'Hey, we're literally trying to terminate you as a Tribe, as a concept'. Now we can actually focus on making sure we don't terminate ourselves culturally and actually focus on the environmental stuff that people are attacking.

The Trail Skate Park (2025)
Photo by Dave Scheidecker

HOME

My grandmother's goodbyes comforted me, assuring me that everything we were experiencing was for a purpose and not just about survival. I was around eight years old and going off to school. As the bus pulled away from the camp my grandparents had built with their hands -- and headed toward the manufactured city of Miami -- I reflected on what else I was saying goodbye to.

In 1919, construction of a road began, which is now known as the Tamiami Trail. Our people armed themselves with hope and courage to adapt, and rather than weaken us, we were strengthened by the unpredictability of what might come. What could have been an uprooting and eradication of a culture, and its people, resulted in an incredible story. We used the development of the Tamiami road as a catalyst to reestablish an unwavering fortitude across everyone who lived on Trail. This allowed us to feel at home in our hearts, and to persevere no matter where we were pushed.

The plan was simple, make a road connecting the east and west coasts with no regard for the families living on the hammocks. This forced families to relocate in droves and learn a foreign language almost immediately, forging new ways to acclimate to the dominant and persistent culture of the encroaching cities. The construction of the Tamiami Trail did not just reshape the geography of Seminoles, Miccosukees, and Independents, but altered their once sustainable landscape without conscience.

For the Indigenous people of Florida, the Tamiami Trail is not just a road. It is home. This is not the story of the Tamiami Trail itself, but of the people who lived in its path. The people whose lives would be forever changed -- the first generation to grow up on the Trail and their children today. The way that they have carried on the spirit of those who have gone before them, and how they have kept their culture alive through challenge and change. These are the tales of the Tamiami Trail.

Contributed by Marcella Billie (Otter Clan)

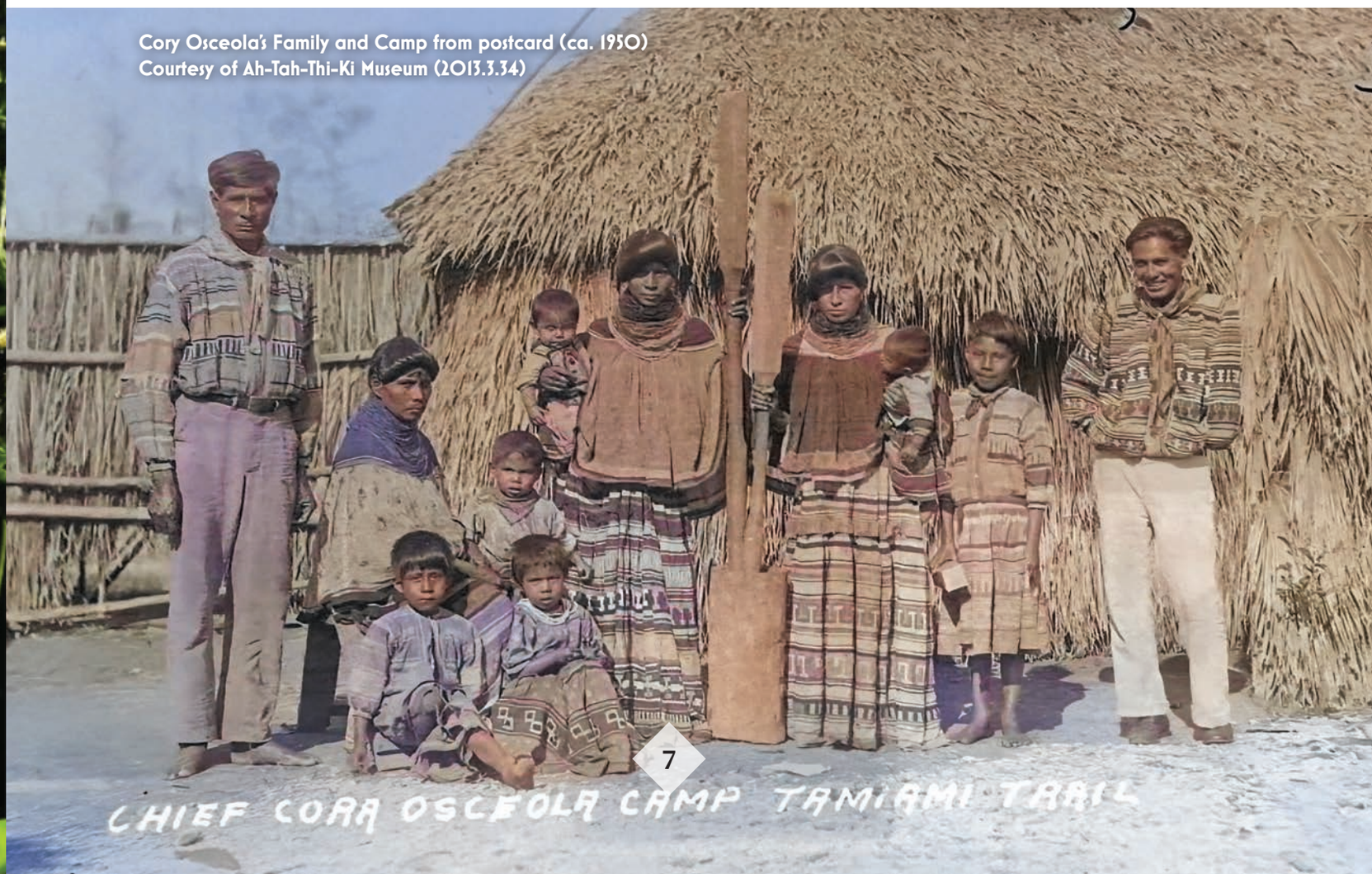
Chickee at Tamiami Trail Camp (2025)
Photo by Marcella Billie

CAMP LIFE ON TAMIAMI TRAIL

Growing up in traditional camps meant living in the Everglades amongst extended families who slept, ate, and cooked in chickees. Before generators brought electricity, people rose with the dawn and spent their days tending to their camps and to their gardens. Before pollution from Florida agriculture poisoned the waterways in the 1980's, families fished for gar and bass, bathed in the canals, and swam at their favorite swimming holes. Everyone was connected by waterways they could traverse by canoes through a river of grass. Before much of the Everglades was drained in the later 1900's, people could travel by canoe from the middle of the Everglades to the mouth of the Miami river, and back, all via waterways.

As more and more draining occurred to create more land for settlers, the first road, the Tamiami Trail (U.S. Highway 41), was completed in 1928, to cut across the Everglades and connect Miami to Naples. During the Great Depression, very little changed in South Florida for Indigenous people, as they continued farming, fishing, and hunting deer in the Everglades.

The presence of the highway eventually brought state game wardens who confiscated their fish and deer, giving the reason that people were hunting animals out of season or catching too many fish. Families began to go hungry while the unlawful game wardens would sell their meat and deer skins for profit. Their camps were



Cory Osceola's Family and Camp from postcard (ca. 1950)
Courtesy of Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum (2013.3.34)

randomly shot into by outsiders, which created fear to give the game warden what they asked for. Non-Natives began to build in the hammocks in ways that destroyed the environment. As families had their food sources stolen and experienced their land rights being ignored, people came together to be federally recognized as the Seminole Tribe of Florida (1957) and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida (1962) in order to gain their land rights and ability to feed their families and protect the Everglades.

During our conversations, when Tina Osceola asked Pete Osceola Jr., “Do you think your late uncles Jimmy Tiger and Buffalo [Tiger] would have ever foreseen the Miccosukee tribe having the political clout that it has now being able to push back the Army Corps of Engineers?” Pete responded, “Our rights were literally being trampled. That’s how our Tribe started. It was just to protect ourselves and our Everglades and the environment because if we didn’t do it, nobody else was going to do it. We would have ceased to exist. The game wardens were corrupt anyways, they would take the skins and sell them. They were shooting into the camps. Our camp got shot into like two or three times. That’s one of the reasons the Tribe was formed. To protect us.” Over the decades, urban development from the east and west has encroached on the Everglades, making it smaller every year. For example, where the Palmetto Expressway (State Road 826) is today used to be where the Everglades touched greater Miami on the east coast.

Nellie Tommie and her son in canoe (1956)
Courtesy of State Archives of Florida

IF I COULD GO BACK...

Barbara told us, "When all these families would come, they would sit around the fire in the chickee, and we were taught that we didn't look our elder in the eye, and we would sit and listen, and it penetrates. That's what my grandmother always told me, not to look the elders in the eye. You're supposed to listen. So, we would all sit there for hours, and they'd be talking and talking and talking. And you'd just sit there. We weren't allowed to get up and be crazy and run around. But those days, if I could just go back to those days. I would ask those things that I wish that I could have asked."

Everyone in the room agreed that there are so many questions they wish they could go back and ask their elders. They wish they could ask them how they managed to make things, carve wood, and sew at all hours of the day and night when they were struggling with finding enough food and nutrition, when they must have been exhausted and hungry. Barbara told us, "That's why this is so important to talk about now, because just think about all the information lost to the children born today."

Everglades Landscape north of Tamiami Trail (2025)
Photo by Dave Scheidecker

MY MATRIARCH

Every morning as I walked through our camp on the Tamiami Trail to the school bus, I would pass my grandmother's Chickee and call out "goodbye." From inside she would always respond "Bye," which was possibly the only English word she ever spoke. It was a morning ritual that I would remember years later when I walked out on stage to receive my bachelor's degree.

> Speaking the language feels like a form of activism.
>
> - Marcella Billie

Now that I'm a grandmother myself, I reflect on how adamant she was about us staying close to our camp and being self-sufficient. Her fear of losing autonomy was a real one. I remember my grandmother having a sense of urgency when treating us kids for everything, from bad dreams to fevers. We would stand side-by-side in front of her chickee as she used healing methods that have been passed down for generations. To her, even going to Miami for essentials was moving away from camp life. My grandmother believed that would chip away at our identity as Indigenous people. Even with her consent to attend public school, she said to go and learn, but don't become dependent on conventional society.

I feel we had different journeys but shared the same purpose, and Im keeping her alive by speaking the language in a world that wants us to forget. Speaking the language feels like a form of activism. I like to think that my six years working at the Miccosukee Indian Village, along with my current position in the Tribal Historic

Annie Jim (Otter Clan, ca. 1970s)
Courtesy of Billie Family

Annie Jim sewing patchwork at
Miccosukee Indian Village (ca. 1970s)
Courtesy of Miccosukee Indian Village

Preservation Office is a way to honor her legacy by protecting our cultural resources. She feared the loss of our language and of our culture. Her fears have become my fears now.

And so now I keep these memories alive by writing about them and sharing them. The mere sight of a mosquito net sends me back to my grandmother singing a Creek song while spinning a towel over me until I fell asleep. A soda can whisks me back to the time when we would flatten aluminum cans in front of our camp, throw them in garbage bags, and take them into the city for money. Porches remind me of the morning rituals my grandmother practiced -- walking chickee to chickee, visiting her daughters -- before settling into the cooking chickee. Even at that age, I picked up on how gathering and spending time with her daughters was a routine she nurtured and relied on for comfort and joy.

The time she spent with me, the time she devoted to her daughters, the trips to the Hollywood Reservation to visit her sister, and her commitment to attending Sunday services to watch her nephew preach at the Trail Baptist Church, all reflected her loyalty to family and her sense of duty.

Even with everything she instilled in me, I would still receive the harsh reminder of what it meant to be Indigenous. Seeing my grandmother sign her name with just an X was hard to watch, and seeing this vulnerability outside the camp disarmed me. Yet, this was a testament to her resilience that I saw throughout my childhood. She refused to give up her fight to be independent, not reliant on any government, even the Tribal government. I see this unwavering spirit today in her eldest daughter, my aunt Peggy.

Contributed by Marcella Billie (Otter Clan)

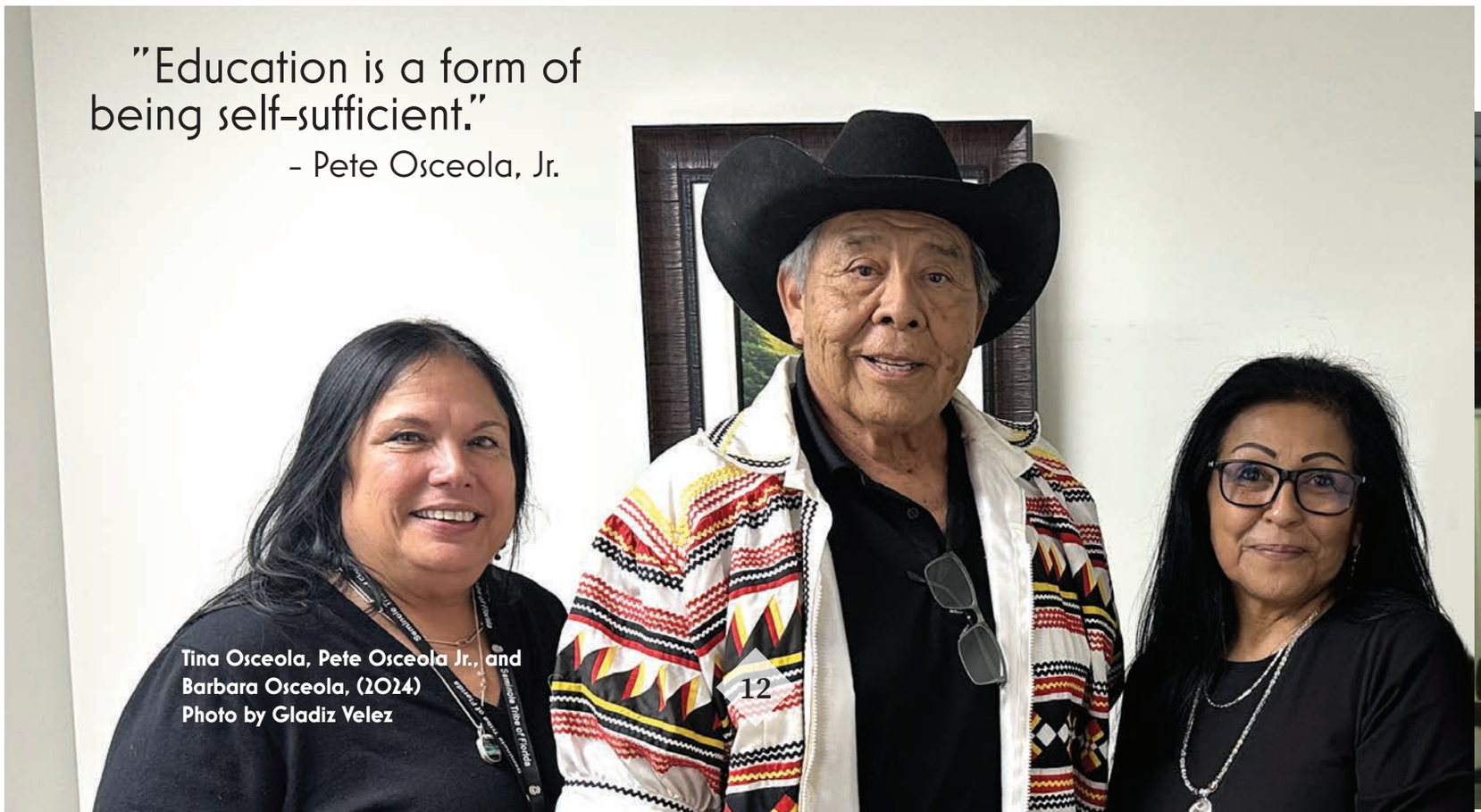
EDUCATION WAS CONTESTED AND PURPOSEFUL

Speaking with Tina, Pete, and Barbara Osceola, we asked what it was like growing up in camps with their families on the Trail. Back in the 1960's and 1970's the Tamiami road was narrower, they told us, and hence slower. To go to Miami to one of the two hospitals (Baptist and Jackson) or to a trusted non-Native docto, like Dr. Konger, would be an entire day's journey. Otherwise as Pete explained, "you had to look for the medicine man to help you out. Which back then, they lived in other parts, and you had to go looking. And he might not be home." Thus, coming and going from the camps to the cities was a much slower process than it is today.

In order to attend elementary school, they had to get up at 5:00am to take buses to Everglades City or to Miami and they returned after 5:00pm. They shared that at the time they were embarrassed of their hair smelling like smoke when they went to school, but now looking back, they wouldn't trade their childhood for anything else. Their generation were some of the first to attend outside schools, an idea that was not accepted by all family members. In their words, their grandparents supported it, knowing that their grandchildren would need to know English and other non-Native ways in order to support their families and navigate the encroaching non-Native world.

Pete shared a story about how his grandmother spoke to her grandmother to decide whether his dad should go to school in the 1940's. After it was decided that he should go, people from another camp showed up armed to stop his dad, and confronted Pete's grandfather who said, "Talk to my wife." Pete's grandmother then told them to

"Education is a form of being self-sufficient."
– Pete Osceola, Jr.



Tina Osceola, Pete Osceola Jr., and Barbara Osceola, (2024)
Photo by Gladiz Velez

go talk to her brothers, who at the time were not living nearby. He continued, “My uncles had to get involved. Between Jimmy Tiger and Buffalo, they said times are changing, just make sure that at home you’re still teaching the language and everything. But they (your educated children) can come back and help you.”

> ”Just going to school was very threatening back then.”
>
> - Tina Osceola

Reflecting on how much has changed in her lifetime, Tina shared, “Just going to school was very threatening back then. Fast forward now, and we are making it mandatory for kids to graduate high school. So now we see leadership differently and we rely on council to make these decisions. That’s in one generation. That’s so fast.” Education for her “was purposeful, it gave you purpose.” She said her grandfather Cory Osceola asked her about her homework every day, even though he grew up working in the camp instead of going to school. She recalled that he always sat nearby and wanted to know what she was reading and what was in her textbooks. She found out later in life that the White woman who taught her grandfather to read and write was Janet Reno’s mother (Janet Reno was the first woman to serve as Florida state attorney and U.S. Attorney General).

Barbara shared with us that today there still stands a royal palm tree that for her is a symbol of her first camp. Her grandfather Cory Osceola moved it from their first camp in Ochopee and planted it in front of their camp in Naples. She explained, “And growing up I would stand in front of it every day to catch the bus. Everyday Grandpa would put me on the bus there. And I had a friend who checked on the tree for me over the years and he said I should come by, that it was humongous, so we took a photo in front of it. Then when the development came, and he thought it was gone.” In response Tina updated her story, “no, it’s still there along the sidewalk, now there’s a Culver’s.”

On having their grandparents decide to send them from the camps to schools in faraway cities we heard, “We are all their hope, it’s a big responsibility, and I’m not taking it lightly.”

William Jim (Otter Clan), Cheyanna Bert (Otter Clan), and Jennifer Cypress (Panther Clan) receiving their GEDs. (1991)
Courtesy of Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum (2015.6.21844)

FROM THE CANAL TO THE COOK CHICKEES IN THE 1960's

Barbara, Tina, and Pete shared memories of people coming to visit by canoe, or of their parents pulling over by the side of the canal and blowing their car horn to let someone in the camp know they were there. For the generation who grew up without electricity along Tamiami Trail surrounded by aunts, uncles, great-aunts great-uncles, and grandparents, their stories are different from those who grew up raising cattle on lands further north. As Tina shared, "That's camp life. That's the difference. On reservation they had to live in nuclear families like mom, dad, and the children. Tamiami was camp life, and it was photographed and was on every postcard. For Tamiami you can't not talk about all this stuff in our generation. You can't talk about this with anyone else in the state. I mean we're young, in terms of how long ago this was and we all took baths in the canal. You go up to Brighton and you talk about cattle and it's a completely different experience, but just as valuable."

Barbara recalled when JFK was assassinated in 1963. She remembers it because her grandparents were waiting for the McCormick's company to come and clear the land that her grandfather had bought. She was just three years old and sitting in the truck in the front seat between her grandparents when the non-Native workers came over to the truck and said they couldn't work that day because a national tragedy had occurred. Her grandfather had to clear a little spot in the woods and build a canvas roof for them all to spend the night as they waited for the workers to return the next day.

As the elder of the group, Pete told us about several vivid memories from his childhood growing up in his family's camp in the 1950's and 60's:

"People would come from tour groups from the mouth of the Miami river in 1956 when my mom and dad started a camp. First it was a home, then a giftshop, then an airboat ride. Growing up there, if you're young it was fun. We didn't live next to each other like we do now. The nearest person was like quarter mile away. Which for us was the Wind Clan, Tommie Tiger and family and going the other way was Sam Willie (Bird Clan.) More homes were built when the reservation was built in 1962 and by that time I was like 14 or 15 and we all used to get together and just go out into the swamp. I remember going out one time like 8 or 10 of us and it was kind of a dry season, but we found a pond and there was a whole bunch of gar fish and we just dove in there with our hands and grabbed as many as we could and brought them home for dinner and had the best dinner we ever had. We enjoyed that time, being a kid, fishing, just running around, and being mischievous. We lived in a traditional camp, you know at first, we built the cooking chickee, and the sleeping chickee. Around 1965 we got a little generator, and we finally got lights. My job was to climb up the ladder and put in water to cool it off. That was one of my responsibilities. I dreaded doing that, especially in the dry seasons because you had to dig a hole because we had no water. When it's coral rock and you have to get a pick and shovel, it was pretty tough back then, but we did it anyway."

John Osceola's Camp, Tamiami Trail from a postcard (1950)
Courtesy of Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum (2001.75.3)

We heard how during these decades, grandparents had a powerful presence in the camps. With one person recalling how her grandmother woke every morning and put on her many necklaces. She was like a beacon of cultural pride, reminding everyone to hold onto their traditional ways. Their grandparents, great-aunts, and great-uncles were a big part of why their families remained in the camps while their parents watched their neighbors move into concrete houses on the reservation.

> "I grew up in a village where they raised a lot of children And I had the best of everything in love and care."
>
> - Barbara Osceola

Because of the distance to the reservations, many friends and extended family in the camps did not see people from the reservation until the big Christmas parties that were held in the camps on the Trail. During this time, they also recalled how the general stores moved in, changing how people got their food. Despite these changes, they also recalled watching their grandmothers, and aunts all cooking together with their usual spots in the cooking chickee, and everyone sharing a meal. Tina recalled how food went "from the canal to the cook chickees," with Barbara adding, "Uncle Doug would catch snook." Pete responded, "I remember that I would catch so many snook that I would always leave some with Grandma."

When category 3 Hurricane Donna hit in 1960, Barbara was only six months old. Her family told her that her grandmother, her great-aunt Annie, her sister Wanda, and their families went across the highway to the packing house to ride out the storm. She recalled, "They were all over that packing house trying to find a safe spot, the ladies would take turns coddling me and trying to keep me safe. They were running back and forth, it was traumatizing." She joked, "Now I'm coming to a hotel for protection if a hurricane comes, that's all within one generation." Her sister Wanda Zepeda, who told her the story, is now 75.

Barbara told us, "I was raised by my grandmother since I was an infant, but I had the best life." Barbara herself has adopted children, inspired by her grandparents' example. "I always tell them that's how my grandparents were. I grew up in a village where they raised a lot of children. And I had the best of everything in love and care."

They recalled how attending the first church on Tamiami Trail, built in a chickee and known as "chickee church," became part of life for some.

One person remembered how her grandmother would attend the chickee church, where her nephew was a pastor, because she wanted to support him. Her son was a medicine man. Growing up at that time it was common to attend both chickee church and traditional ceremonies without anyone saying anything negative. They both existed, and many Seminole, Miccosukee and Independents on Tamiami Trail saw church as another cultural experience, comfortable in the knowledge of who they were and their own cultural ways of knowing and being.

Sitting with Tina, Pete, and Barbara Osceola, we asked if the construction of Tamiami Trail brought communities together. Pete responded, "For me it helps. It's like everything else, whatever tool or mechanism is invented, if you know how to use it in a positive way it's useful, it's like comparing it to you raising your son, and saying here's a gun, you can kill someone with it or you can hunt with it to feed yourself. And you need to choose. It's as simple as that. I don't want

to say it's that simple, but it is." He compares this to now, how the road allows fast access for emergency vehicles. But also faster access to what he calls "the seduction of the city."

Over the many hours of sharing childhood memories of growing up on Tamiami Trail in the 1960's and 1970's, several stand out. Barbara remembers taking journeys to Big Cypress to see a medicine man, how it would take all day, and her mother would go shopping in Immokalee during the trip to buy food for him. Barbara tells us how, when she was tiny, her grandmother used to fill up a galvanized tub with a pitcher pump and then bathed her in cold water every morning. She adds to everyone's laughter, "That was the way of life. Now our hot water heater goes out and we freak out, you know." When she was old enough, she bathed in the canal with her sister Marie and Wanda using green lava soap. Which she remembers well because one time Marie threw the lava soap at her, and it hit her right in the eye, and she remembers the burning it caused.

This generation shared meaningful relationships with the Australian Pines that stood along Tamiami Trail. One person remembers their brother jumping from the tallest trees into the canal, another person remembers sitting in the back of a moving truck and getting so excited when she saw the pines above her to know she was approaching the camp known as Seminole Goods. Another recalled the trees as a marker for knowing they were nearing the site of ceremony. The trees were a part of their emotional landscape, embedded in their memories as living landmarks of their childhood.

Maggie Billie Buster (Bird Clan) sewing patchwork (ca. 1960)
Courtesy of State Archives of Florida

We also heard how visits to their camp by close friends and family were often a multi-day affair. Everyone in the camp was involved and all priorities shifted to focus on spending time with whoever was visiting. Time was different back then, they told us. People did not stop by briefly, instead visitors would stay for several days. Even if people came for a day, everyone's lives shifted into family mode. Pete remembered his Uncle Bill Osceola, his wife Charlotte, and their family used to come to his home site on Trail. "They would come and stay with us, they would show up like 10:00am after breakfast. Then my Dad had an airboat, so they used to go out in the canal and get gar fish. And my mom and Charlotte would clean it up and that's what we would eat that day all day. And at the end of the day if there was any left, they would take some home. And that was a visit for a day. We never said we have to go somewhere, we never said we had a time limit. Everybody just stopped and did what they did."

Nellie Tommie and Son (1956)
Courtesy of State Archives of Florida

LAUGHTER ALONG THE ROAD

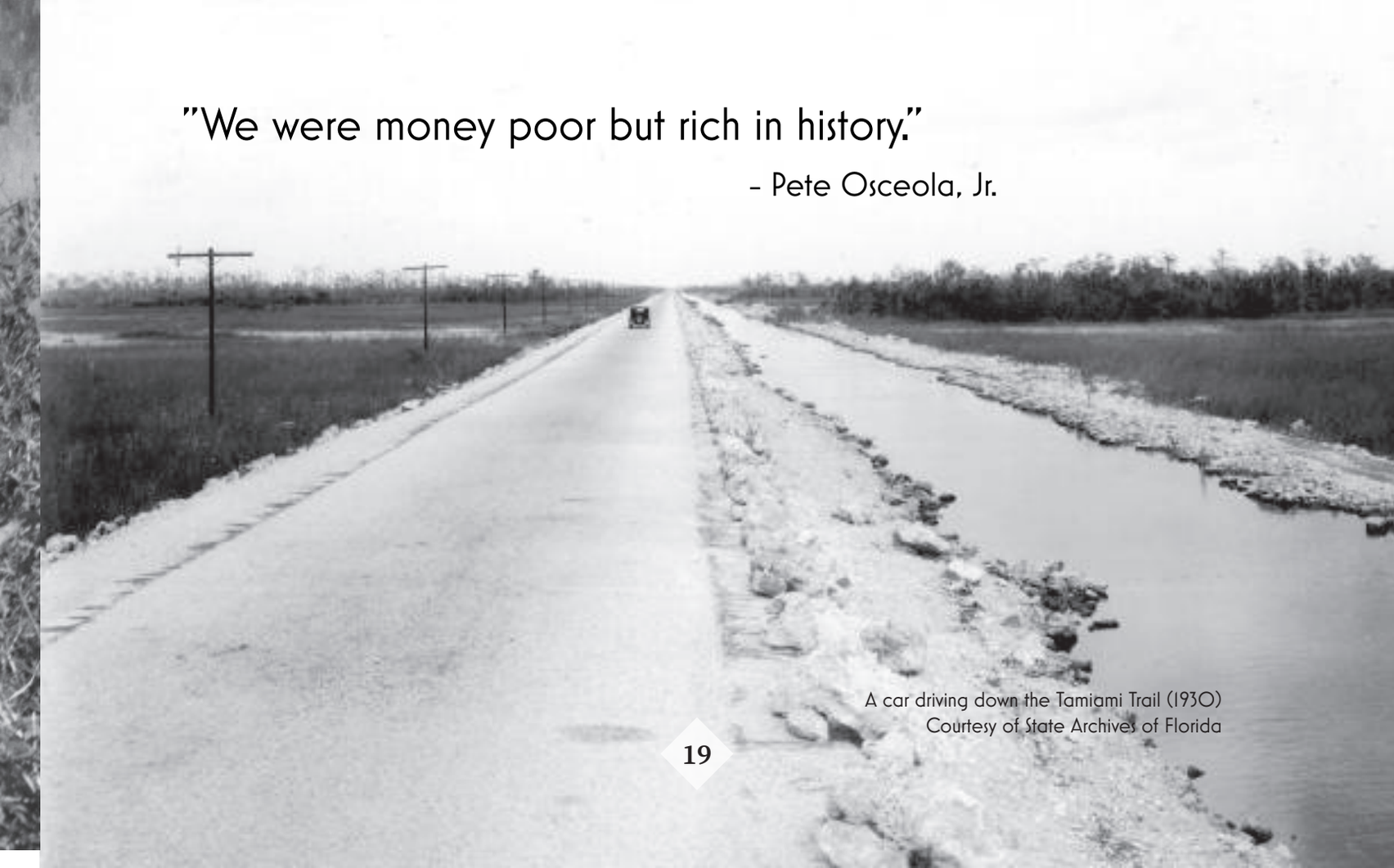
Tina remembered her dad and her Uncle (Pete Osceola Sr.) arguing and laughing in a Cracker Barrel, telling the story of almost being hit by a truck on Tamiami Trail in the 1940's. Their bicycle broke as they were riding down Tamiami Trail. They were working hard to piece it back together when a truck was coming right at them. At this point, Tina's dad had already been hit once in his life, she recalled (with much laughter in the room), "So my Uncle Pete grabbed the bike and was like C'mon! and he left my dad laying there in the middle of the road, because Uncle Pete was like "We put so much hard work putting together that bike and I wasn't sure whether we'd be able to get another one! I had more than one brother. I didn't have another bike!"

Pete remembered one incident where his dad was tasked with taking one of the elders home from the Copeland Sawmill in the 1950's, and failed miserably.

"They were sitting in... it was a flatbed. So they were sitting with their feet hanging out. And, to this day I don't know who's driving because they were pointing fingers. Anyway one of the brothers was driving. And they hit a pothole and that old man fell out. All three of them fell out! My dad, O.B., Guy, the only one that didn't was the driver. And they thought, you know, he was going to get angry and mad. And my dad and O.B. got up and he's over there along the ditch. Everybody came out! And he [the elder] gets up and says, "you gotta drive slower.'"

"We were money poor but rich in history."

– Pete Osceola, Jr.

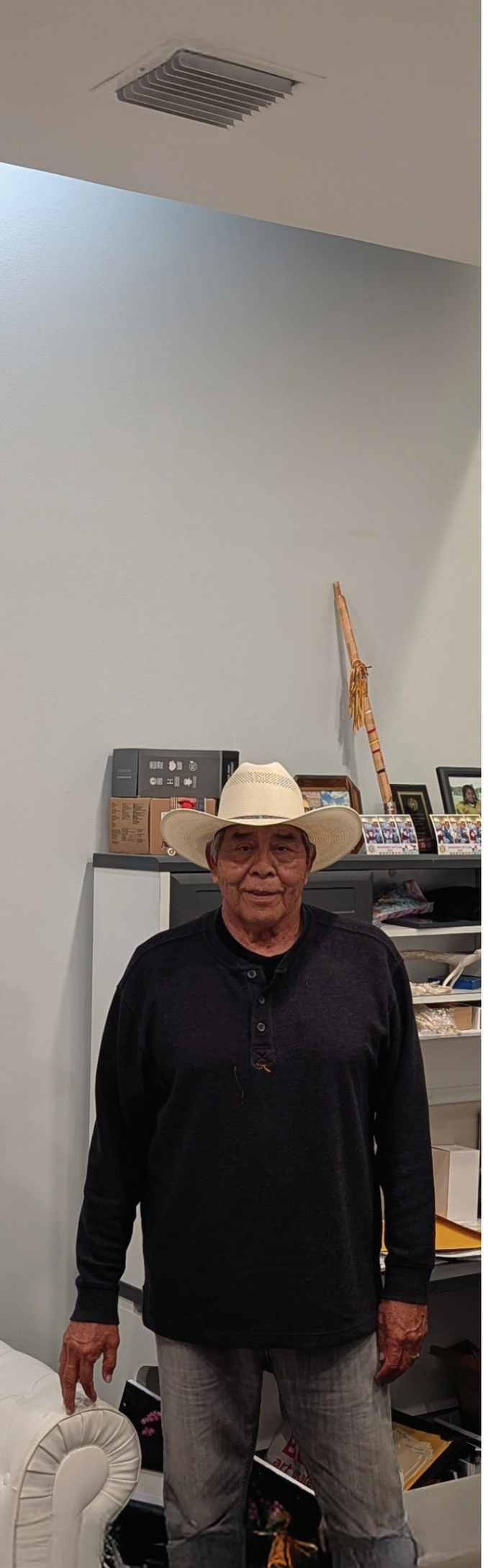


A car driving down the Tamiami Trail (1930)
Courtesy of State Archives of Florida

THE WAR WAS NOT ROMANTIC: "IT WAS LIKE YOU COULD REACH OUT AND TOUCH IT"

"We grew up being told how horriffic it was, and it was genocide to us. It was killing, it was violent, it was war."

- Tina Osceola



Pete, Barbara and Tina told us how real the Seminole War was to them and their families as they grew up on the Trail from the 1950's to the 1980's. Pete told us,

"When my grandma and grandfather ran away from soldiers, they carried the kids and they carried the food, whatever they had. And the men had to keep their hands free so they could shoot back. Can you imagine what kids are thinking today? They're, like, where is the ATVs? Where is the 4-wheel drive? So, when we were little, we could relate to our grandparent's stories but I'm not sure if kids today can."

Tina responded,

"I think about that with my dad being 90 and what he remembers firsthand. I think about grandpa's days -- his dad was in the war. Then grandpa comes along, and he didn't fight in the war, but the trauma is real because his dad Robert Osceola did. So, for our generation, it was like right there, you could reach out and touch it. But when you talk to my kids and their kids' generations, they're going to histories written by white guys like the Seminole War Foundation, you know what I mean? They're going to read about it, and I just wonder what they think."

"When you read about your history in a book it becomes romantic. So, they (the younger generations) read about it in this romantic setting. But we grew up being told how horrific it was, and it was genocide to us. It was killing, it was violent, it was war."

Pete jumped in to say, "But you've got to understand no matter which part of Native struggles, wars, hostility, whatever you want to call it-- the majority of the books that are written are written from one viewpoint. It becomes propaganda." We then heard how impressed they are that Miccosukee youth are writing articles and posting on social media about their history. To them this marks a massive generational difference. As Tina explained to us, "with my generation there was deep mistrust, like do you write it, do you tell it? Is it my place to write it? There was always this big question mark, and now there's these younger generations who are like we don't want to lose it. So, you have to tell it. We have to write it. It's something you're now seeing. You're seeing it on social media."

Opposite page: Pete Osceola, Jr. shows the painting he commissioned of Osceola being taken into Fort Marion (2025)
Photo by Dave Scheidecker

SEWING FOR SURVIVAL: FROM SOUVENIERS TO ART

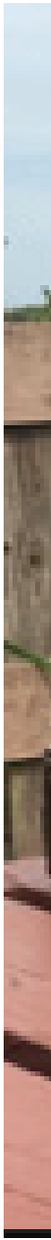
When asked how work and art came together in that time, we heard that making beautiful artistic objects was not considered art by their generation until ten or fifteen years ago. As Tina put it, “When we were growing up and making beadwork, whatever we did, it wasn’t because we were thinking of it as art, it was to survive and eat. It wasn’t a choice. You just did it. Even as you got older, even 20 years ago -- I considered it as souvenirs. I would never have considered it art. But now chickees are art. Now you think about the craftsmanship.”

> “You know my generation never had money. We were surrounded by people who did, but I never knew we didn’t.”
>
> – Tina Osceola

Pete elaborated, explaining that the word “work” was not part of how people in the camps thought of their daily lives,

"That’s a tough question because when you were doing something, you didn’t consider it work, you just considered it a part of life so that you can get paid and buy food and gas, you take it in those terms. It’s been part of our survival instinct. Art is another separate thing. Like when you have time, and you say I want to make patchwork, or I want to make bead work. Or I want to make a belt, or I want to carve something. You do that on your spare time. I remember people used to go to work and come back in the afternoon and I would see some men carving. But also, that became something they could sell for their family. I remember my mom when they turned their camp into a tourist attraction, they would have to be cooking or sewing or beading. I remember my mom used to make dolls from the palmetto fiber. I remember we used to have to string it out to dry it out and it was my job to dry it out. You laid it out on the ground, and you flipped it over in the afternoon and you did that for a couple of days. And then she would make it into a doll form and somehow sew it together, and then she would dress it up with the clothing. And do the beadwork around it. I could do the beadwork but not the sewing because it was more simple. And then at nighttime she would make jackets or skirts for us. I remember at nighttime waking up at two or three o'clock in the morning and she would be sewing away. So, I think that the women did more work than the men."

Barbara recalled, “I remember that my aunt would sit there and sew and sew. And some of it would go to someone who would sell it so we could have food. I remember we would have stacks and stacks of jackets and we would pull up to a house and this White man would pull out his billfold and buy everything they had. Then we would go to Miner’s Market and buy all this bacon and meat and then journey home. So that’s how they fed us and took care of the village.” They recalled that most of their clothing was hand sewn, except for the rare occasion when someone took them on a day long trip to the city to buy non-Native clothing.



Barbara remembers,

"The only White people clothing I had was from this lady who was also the tax collector. This lady would come and pick me up and take me downtown to 5th avenue to a store called the Merry-Go-Round, it was a children's clothing store, and once a year. My grandma would say, "This lady she is going to come and pick you up and take you shopping for school clothes." She'd buy me five outfits and, like, a pair of shoes and a bunch of socks, and she'd bring me home and drop me off. That's how I would get my clothes, otherwise my grandmother would get sit and sew and sew and sew. They'd go to Miami and get the fabric and make my clothes and that's what I wore."

Pete told us about how in middle school when Members Only brand jackets were the rage, and everyone who thought they were someone had one, they asked where his was. He said he had his traditional jacket, which he was proud to wear. He told us, "I thought the one I had was good enough for me." While reflecting on pressures to conform and wear non-Native clothes at school Tina said, "You know my generation never had money. We were surrounded by people who did (have money), but I never knew we didn't. You know, I never lived without, you know what I mean? I never thought about it until I was much older, and I had my socks made fun of because I bought them at Kmart. But I thought they were really cool."

Christina Osceola (Takoshaalee Clan) working at a Miccosukee Indian Village crafts table (2017)
Photo by Marcella Billie

MICCOSUKEE INDIAN VILLAGE

My first memory of the Village was of early setups with my mom, where she would clothed me head to toe in dresses with patchwork and beaded necklaces that she created. Family and friends, who were also coworkers, would gather at each other's chickees before the tourists arrived. Looking back, I didn't realize how these shared moments instilled a sense of community in me early on. I remember feeling a sense of pride as I watched my mom's friend, Sally, carefully take out her palmetto dolls and supplies from boxes covered with blankets and pieces of wood. Her orderly process captivated me, and I always wanted my mom and me to arrive on time to see her begin her display. It was comforting to watch and it set the tone for my day. Another coworker and close friend of my mom's, Alice, made a strong impression on me. Times were difficult, so most people in the community were serious and emotionally burdened. I was too young to understand why, but I was sensitive enough to feel the tension around me. Yet, Alice, with her loud and contagious laugh, and the way she sat crisscrossed on my mom's table during her visits, felt refreshing to me. Her long gray hair flowing in a ponytail down her back, and her lighthearted qualities symbolized freedom.

Even as a kid, I recognized the pride and consistency in Sally's demeanor, and Alice's childlike ease. These charecter traits were survival tools that I needed then, and still need now. I thought the Village's sole purpose was to attract tourists driving through the Tamiami Trail seeking "culture" in Miami. Over time, my view of the Village's purpose has changed. As a kid, I saw it as just my mom's job to help us pay off layaway at K-mart and Zayre. At that time it felt like a means to an end, and I didn't see it as meaningful, but I did feel an air of urgency to be prepared, presentable, and to be on time. I thought my mom and the other artists were simply put on display to perform for non-Native customers. My naiveness kept me from realizing they were performing acts of courage, honor, and resilience.

Working at the Village from 2012-2018, I recognized it as a living entity. I witnessed the renovation of the museum, films being developed, chickees filled with community, kids running through, families visiting, sitting by the fire, drinking sofkee. All these moments contributing to the well-being of our world in Tamiami. We owed this to the Village, and it felt as if it took a deep breath, grateful to be remembered.

Returning to the Village as an adult with new purpose brought a new meaning to my life in ways I hadn't appreciated as a kid. Although the Village was created for tourism, it is more than that. I saw humans beyond their work, and discovered generations that cherished the Village's significance. This new generation feels the shared identity, deepened purpose, and strengthened bond that connected Sally, Alice, and my mom.

The visiting tourists couldn't see the transformations that were happening right in front of them. But at this point in my life, it was all I could see.

And just just like when I was a kid, I wanted to be on time.

Contributed by Marcella Billie (Otter Clan)

Aimee Osceola (Bird Clan, top left), Vanessa Poole (Bird Clan, top right), and unknown woman (bottom) displaying their Seminole Patchwork skirts (2023)
Photo by Marcella Billie

LANGUAGE AND ELDERS IN THE 1960's, 70's, AND 80's

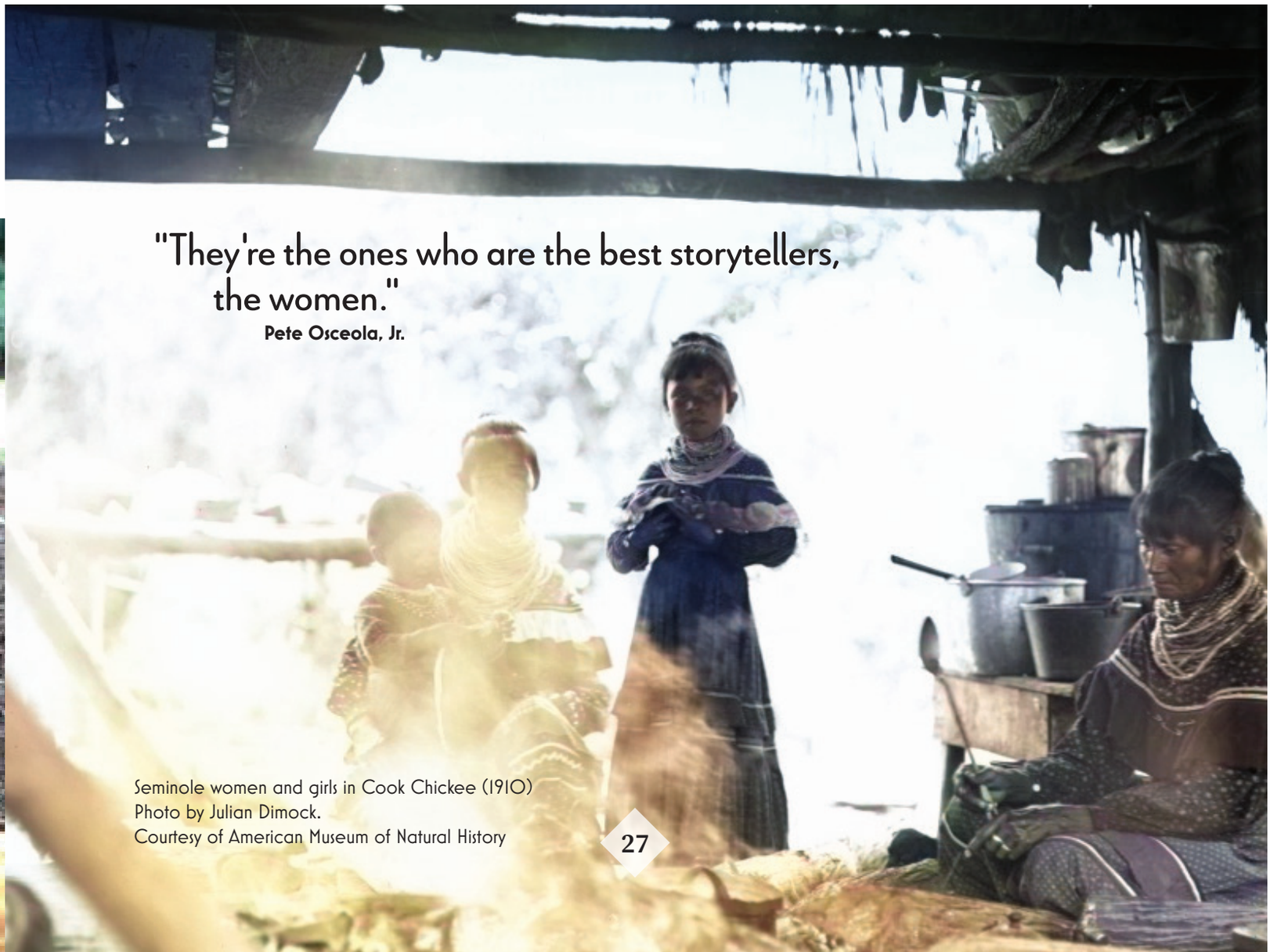
Elders in the camps on Tamiami Trail spoke their Native language, and most did not speak English. Some did, but life for them had thrived without everyone needing to know English. Pete described the English language as a forced necessity for survival in the 1800's, "You have to understand, when the European settlers came, we had no choice but to learn the language because we had to start early. We were trading pots and pans, beads, blankets or whatever and pelts -- alligator skins, raccoon, deer, panther skins so you had to learn the language. Today it's more challenging to teach our Native language because of the apps, the TV, and everything else." Barbara points back to the critical role that grandparents had in their lives in the camps that now feels less possible due to language barriers, "Our grandmother was strict, she laid the law down and we had to listen. There's a breakdown now between the grandkids and the kids because they don't know the language." Pete points out that women had a particularly powerful role in the camps, "When you haven't left the nest, when you're growing up, our women—they are the best storytellers, they're there to help you. The best storytellers, the women."

All three shared that they were taught so much by their elders in the camps -- the values they carry, the stories that stand out for them, the sense of duty and responsibility that seeped into them as little kids -- was all from their elders. They said that learning about culture and learning at

OB Osceola Sr. and OB Osceola Jr. making a dugout canoe at the Florida Folk Festival (1977) Photo from the Folklife Collection. Courtesy of State Archives of Florida.

school were separate things, and at home they learned a sense of humility that grounded them in their identity. Pete explained, “My parents used to say school, you’re there to read write, and everything. But culture, it’s right here and that’s the way I was raised. Because I’m not special, you’re not special, we are just people, we live, and we die.” Pete continued, “That’s where a lot of parents fail. They fail to communicate, which could be seen as a form of neglect because you aren’t telling them how we got here and if we don’t let them know that there’s a lot of history, then a lot of heritage gets left on the table. We have a school that should only be a support, like ten percent. Ninety percent should be the parents teaching them.”

They told us that now it feels like a battleground, a struggle, to remind their youth where they came from just one or two generations ago. This is why, they told us, they were happy to sit down with THPO and talk about what their elders taught them growing up in the camps. Tina said, “To me it’s why we share these stories.” She asked Pete, “Does it feel good when you’re able to get in front of them and fight? Because that’s what it feels like right? Like a fight?” Pete responded, “Yes, because it is a battleground. Literally it is. Because you know what, we’re talking measles, it’s like hostile territory. Instead of using guns and whatever, they’re using words and letters.” Barbara added, “It feels like your purpose, Like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing.”



"They're the ones who are the best storytellers, the women."

Pete Osceola, Jr.

Seminole women and girls in Cook Chickee (1910)
Photo by Julian Dimock.
Courtesy of American Museum of Natural History

CAREERS THAT STARTED WITH SURVIVAL

One thing we heard from everyone we spoke with was how the sense of doing what needs to be done, of necessity and survival they learned from their extended families in the camps led them to their career paths. On working with elders now, Barbara told us, “My grandma would make me sit there when they were all talking. I just sat there and listened. I know nothing else. It’s natural for me. It shaped me growing up on the Trail. I feel like there’s gratitude from the elders. I feel like I can always learn something every day from them, you know.” She continued, “It’s what I feel good about. I feel honored because I was asked to do this job by the councilman, because I speak my language, I know my culture, I keep my traditional ways. I am honest. I’m responsible. That’s kind of what my story is about because I’m the one that my clan family looks at whenever there’s a death or a family situation.”

Pete shared with us that he had an inspiring paraplegic teacher at Coral Park High School who encouraged him to go to college even though he did not think he could afford it. Thanks to this encouragement he went to FIU to study business while starting a chickee building business on the side. He said the business really took off so he asked his professor what he should do, and his professor said it sounded like he already started a successful business so perhaps he could just put his efforts into the business instead of school. On starting a business, he said, “You had to do this to survive.” He said that this mindset was also true when family men went off to work in the sawmill in the 1940's and 50's, explaining that there were times when the animals were depleted or taken by the game wardens, and everyone needed another way of living. He says when families lacked nourishment a lot of families had to move to work on farms. He remembers at age six, helping his mom pick potatoes in Homestead by pulling the box. During World War II when people could not buy gas and food staples were in limited supply, Pete's grandfather Cory Osceola was savvy enough to get much needed gas vouchers and food rations for the community.

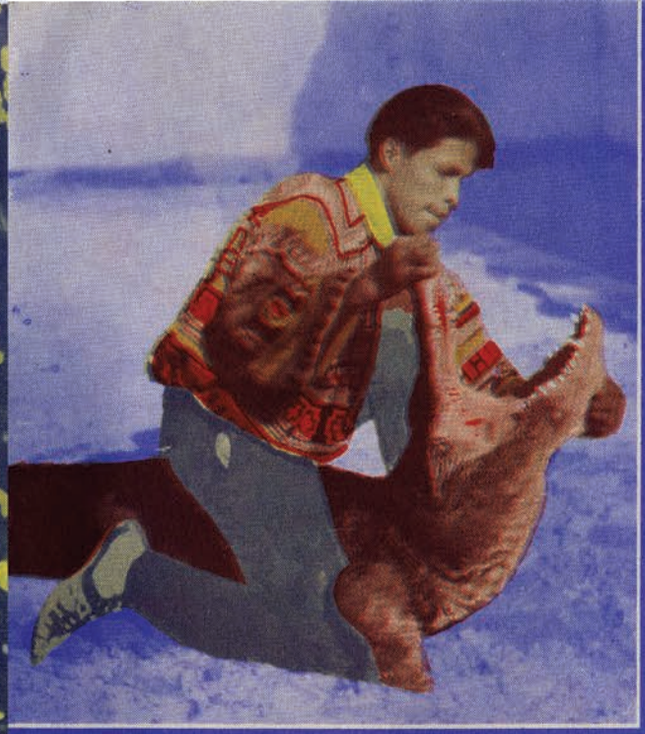
He also reflected on the history of building chickees and the availability of tools in his family, “When my dad was building chickees he started off using axes, like my grandfather did but he didn’t have the equipment my dad had. My Dad at least had a truck. My grandpa Bobby didn’t have a truck. When I took over, I had a chainsaw. So I had it easier than them, so it’s not hard work, you just do it.” He said there’s a long tradition in his family of people learning to do what was needed. His brother Cory Osceola was a self-taught mechanic to help run the airboats. His dad’s older brother Curtis Osceola learned to be a surveyor at Copeland sawmill, before he was a scout helping to lay the route for the railroad before learning to be an electrician to help build houses.

In his own capacity as Lawmaker, he learned from his uncles, Jimmy and Buffalo Tiger. Pete acknowledges that each generation has faced new challenges and new ways of living. “Rather than a clash,” he says, “it’s more like evolution to me.

Opposite page: Musa Isle Tourist Brochure (ca. 1950)
Courtesy of University of Miami

MUSA ISLE

HOME OF THE SEMINOLE INDIANS



Indian Camp

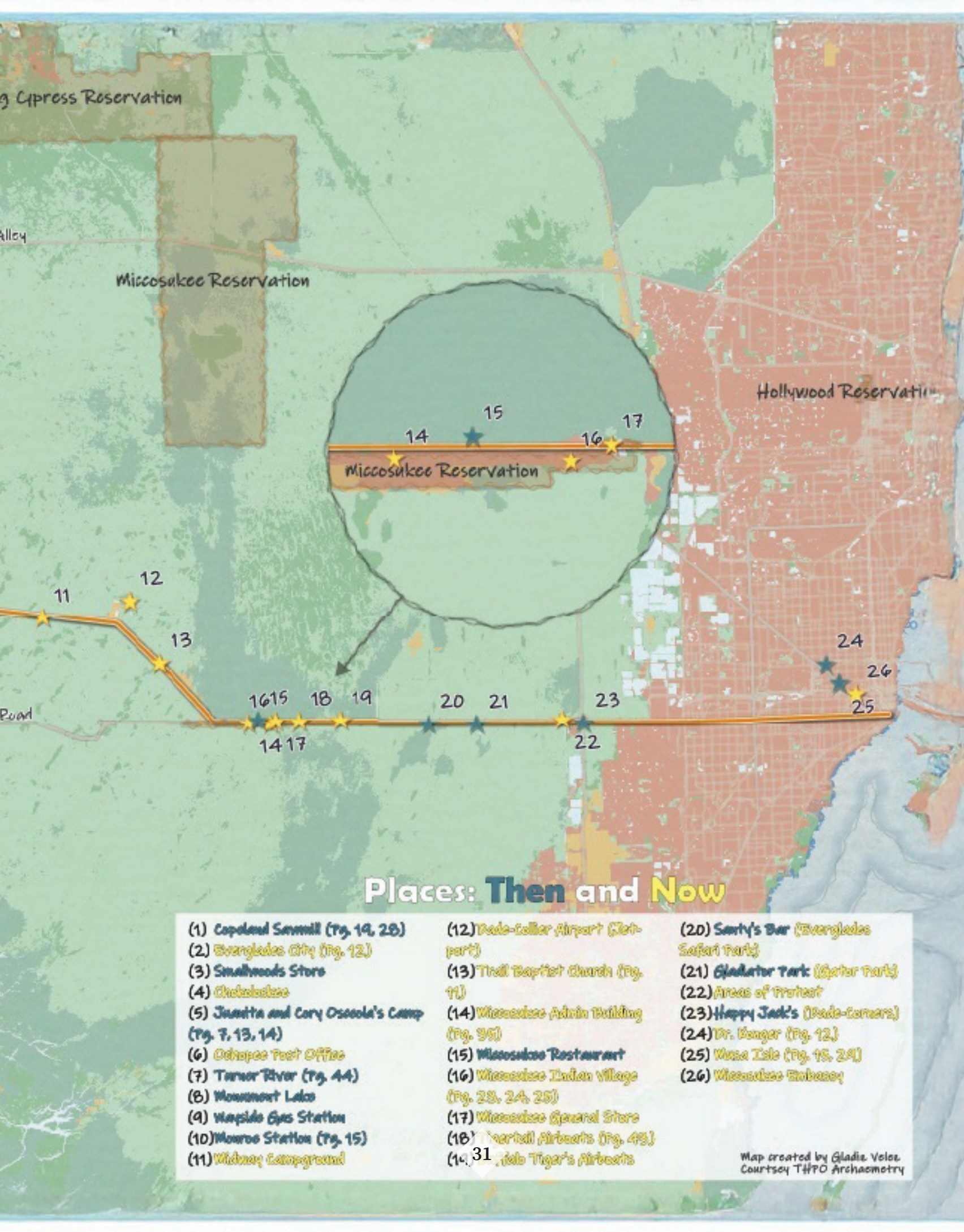
The Indian Camp, nestling on the banks of the beautiful Miami River, is an unusual sight. Here you will see the "Silent Seminoles" living and working in their own primitive way, making curios and novelties in their own crude and interesting way. Be sure to bring your kodak—there is no restriction on taking pictures, and you will obtain some rare and interesting views.

MUSA ISLE INDIAN VILLAGE

N. W. 25th Ave. AT 16th ST., MIAMI, FLORIDA
Seminole Indian Trading Post . . . Alligator and Crocodile Farm . . . Museum and Zoo . . . Wishing Well . . . largest, most complete. A place of beauty and interest for 30 years. As you enter the grounds you are in a tropical beauty spot, there is tropical foliage of every kind from the towering Royal Palms to the lowly cacti. There are such rare specimens as the Golden-Feather Palm, Banana trees, night-blooming cereus, bamboo, citrus, sausage tree and hundreds of others.

Guides on duty at all times. Phone 4-9115. Open to visitors 9:00 A. M. to 6:00 P. M.

Tamiami Trail: Then and Now



Places: Then and Now

(1) Copeland Sawmill (Pg. 19, 28)
(2) Everglades City (Pg. 12)
(3) Smallwoods Store
(4) Chokoloskee
(5) Juanita and Cory Osceola's Camp (Pg. 7, 13, 14)
(6) Ochopee Post Office
(7) Turner River (Pg. 44)
(8) Monument Lake
(9) Wayside Gas Station
(10) Monroe Station (Pg. 15)
(11) Midway Campground
(12) Dade-Collier Airport (Merrit)
(13) Trail Baptist Church (Pg. 11)
(14) Miccosukee Admin Building (Pg. 35)
(15) Miccosukee Restaurant
(16) Miccosukee Indian Village (Pg. 23, 24, 25)
(17) Miccosukee General Store
(18) Everhart Airboats (Pg. 43)
(19) Jack Tiger's Airboats
(20) Santy's Bar (Everglades Safari Park)
(21) Gladiator Park (Gator Park)
(22) Areas of Protest
(23) Happy Jack's (Dade-Corners)
(24) Dr. Benger (Pg. 12)
(25) Musa Isle (Pg. 15, 24)
(26) Miccosukee Embassy

Map created by Gladis Velez
Courtesy THPO Archaeometry

WATCHING THE TRAIL CHANGE GROWING UP IN THE 1990's AND EARLY 2000's

We sat down with Reverend Houston Cypress, Popeye Osceola, and Angie Jimmie who all grew up on Tamiami Trail as kids in the 1990's and as young adults in the early 2000's. We asked what has changed on the Trail from when they were younger. They told us that they went to the city far less and that when they were kids there was almost no traffic, construction, or garbage on the Trail. Now, thanks to more people visiting there is more garbage present and constant traffic. Houston explained that the biggest change for him has been the growth of urban spaces, "The city ate up all the green spaces. That's transforming the natural world into a human construct. The media is infiltrating a lot, media is coming out more often, and we're online more often. So, my personal world, which is the Everglades is getting smaller." When they were younger, they said that they went to stores or to the city far less often. As Popeye put it, "Now we go to the city and come back in one day, and don't just hear about things on the news or TV, we go out and experience things for ourselves." Houston tells us that he grew up hearing about how people were careful and deliberate about their going to and from the city, "I remember hearing of folks who took that spiritual practice seriously. If you were going to the town or city on these dirty roads, they would have to cleanse themselves of all that spiritual gunk that they picked up from the city. Even that way of looking at that world: it's dirty, it's harmful, and we have to, like, cleanse ourselves from it every time we interact with it. I heard about that, that's something that stands out for me." Angie thinks about how to describe what it felt like as a kid to leave the Trail for the city, "I think for me it's kind of hard to describe it clearly but, like, I know we're on the same planet and everything but going to town felt like you were really going somewhere else. And now going to town it feels like something you do every day and go and pick up some coffee and come back or whatever. Like we weren't supposed to be leaving and mingling with outsiders for too long you know because it could influence you in this way or that way or whatever. If you're going, then hurry and come back. You're not supposed to dilly dally. And now I dilly dally all the time."

> "I think people see Tamiami as a link between cities... and then people were able to travel through, but there was already people living here and existing even when it wasn't there."
>
> – Angie Jimmie

From the birth of the Internet to smart phones and social media, technology and connection to the outside world has changed rapidly within just a few decades for this generation. Of the massive technological shift Popeye said, "There's more to deal with so we need to learn new tools to deal with it." New forms of activism and identity celebration have also emerged during their lifetimes, such as direct action for environmental protection and the Pride festival.

When asked what successful environmental stewardship looks like, everyone agreed that to be able to drink the water would mark a significant success and Houston added, “The option to live off the land again.”

"Now when I care for, I'm talking about plant medicines, for example, like for dreams. So for me, I grew up, like playing in the woods, spending a lot of time in the woods, it was just fun, like making trails, hiding from getting punishments (everyone laughs). Or like going with older folks to collect medicine or going with uncles to collect chickee building stuff."

As they discuss the changes they’ve lived through in their thirty to forty years, Popeye adds,

"This world, whether we want it or not, is here, so how do we try to make this work for us? And that’s what we’ve all had to carry forward and that’s what we’re carrying forward now, that’s what we’re operating under. When I speak in public to non-Natives, I always have to remind them that their version of the Independence basically calls us merciless savages so we know the system is not built for us. It’s often built in reaction against us. But that’s the reality so how do we face that and make it work? Nobody’s going to want to hear our sob stories, so how do we adapt and change without losing ourselves? That’s why I always come back to community. It’s like a chicken and an egg type thing. One can’t survive without the other. As much as everything changes around us we’ve got to be around the people, go to Ceremony because that will keep you centered in some way."

Road construction on Tamiami Trail next to an airboat path (2025)
Photo by Dave Scheidecker

THE CHALLENGES OF GROWTH AND EVOLUTION

Miccosukee Tribal Office (ca. 1970)
Photo by Claudia Wilson
Courtesy of Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum (2018.21.381)

Popeye said "I think they were more certain of who they are, and who they were, and so they were able to tap into that pride of themselves a little more easily than we are now. We do have to get back to the center of who we are and that's going to help us stay together." Angie shared how navigating change is just a part of her everyday life, knowing for instance that more houses need to be built on the reservation, but feeling unease about where those houses might go and change the landscape. She said, "There's a housing shortage on the reservation, and we do need to build --but you know I'm being selfish here -- but looking in my backyard and knowing there's going to be a house there one day, you know, it does make me kind of sad. And I know it's for the better. I would like to have more people living on the reservation, I mean, I feel like that's how it should be for people to come back and stay there. But I'm always looking back there and wondering, how can we address needs but also take care of what has taken care of us for so long?"

Houston pointed out that he has always felt from his community a deep sense that change went hand in hand with protection and resistance,

> "How can we address needs but also take care of what has taken care of us for so long"
> - Angie Jimmie

"I kind of grew up with this feeling that our community is still in conflict with America, and our people are still at war mentality, and I kind of feel like that every now and then still, and I'm kind of ok with that. I find that it kind of gives me purpose. I kind of felt like that was a big thing

Miccosukee Administration Building (2025)
Photo by Heather Cypress

for the community, the ancestors and the elders, and family and all that. And I personally don't mind that kind of attitude. It doesn't mean that I want to fight people, it just means that there's something that I have to guard, and something may not be appropriate for me, my family, or my community, so I have to negotiate, and say yes or no to influences and things like that. It kind of felt very extreme when I was younger, but I kind of feel like the attitude is very useful these days."

Popeye recalled, Buffalo Tiger, the first MIccosukee Chairman saying, "We don't fight with guns and tomahawks anymore, we fight with lawyers in the courtroom." Houston agreed and shared that when he gives educational airboat tours he "likes to say the three S's: science, story, and sovereignty... For the Love of the Everglades I like to say poems, prayers, and petitions." Thinking about how to adapt and evolve as Miami and Naples grow, Angie acknowledged, "I know it's necessary and we are trying to move ahead into the future but it's a little bit scary. I sort of feel like there might be almost no separation between Miami, Naples, and the Trail." They talk about the burden of never ending change and the opportunities for the future. Popeye says he believes that "The burden we have right now is setting a good example. We're at the age now where it is a little more on us." Angie says that her concern centers on young people today. She says, "We have to do better to build up future generations, so they have the ability to shoulder making choices about change. That's what I'm always saying to my kids, I want you to be assets (to the Tribe) instead of liabilities." Popeye agrees saying, "You gotta earn what you're given. That's why I have worked for the Tribe for as long as I have. They've set me up for success, I want to give that back in return."

KNOWING OUR HISTORY 100 YEARS FROM NOW

We visited Popeye Osceola in his office to ask him about the future of the community archives. He told us that there are plans to split the archives into community-related and governmental in a multi-story library in which the top floor will be community-oriented and will not provide access to non-Natives. How the community archives will be organized is still being figured out, he told us it may be based on clans or camps or family organized. We asked him how he got into history as a young person. He responded,

"I learned a lot about non-Native history at school and I thought it was fascinating how people have to work with what they're given because people don't do a good job of preserving their own history. So people have to just start guessing and I didn't want that to be the situation we're in 100 years from now with our own people just guessing -- so for me, as someone who likes history, despite how awful history can be, I want to make sure we have a handle on our history so that we know where we are going. I don't want to be manipulated by others to hear who we are. I want a handle on who we are and move forward as such. Also, when I talked to students they asked me questions and I realized that I didn't know the answer. I know older people have been worried about younger people losing their way because of these cities. But I kind of see the opposite now happening. Specifically, the generation right before mine, the ones in their 20's, they might not know how to do it-- but it's more on their minds -- like how do we keep this alive? How do we tap back into this? How do keep on the pathway we're on?"

Angie used to translate for her grandmother, even going to work with her at 4am. Angie shares that everything her grandmother taught her -- about history and life lessons-- helps her make decisions every day. She said, "My grandma is still a part of me." She tells us that she wants her

View from the Miccosukeee Administration Building (2025) Photo by Gladiz Velez

kids, “to have autonomy but there has to be that sense of duty. There has to be. That’s what I’m always trying to navigate.” She further explains that based on the teaching from her elders she tries to take her kids out into the Everglades to know more about who they are,

"And back to that mentality we heard growing up, that there is someplace for you to go when something happens. You can’t just go there, it has to be a part of you, you have to learn how to exist there. So it’s like education, but not like studying, but like feeling it --and being there -- I think is important. And taking those generations there, and knowing that doesn’t always mean let’s throw down some land and build a house on it."

Popeye agrees stating, “I think that’s actually what makes Indigenous people Indigenous. Actually, seeing yourself as connected to the land and not separate from it.”

He continues,

"That’s something I tell the students about. We have to know our own history in order to understand that we played a part in some of the stuff we have to deal with now. And that’s why it’s important to think ahead about what we’re doing. And also not act like it’s everyone else’s fault when we had a hand in it as well. We’ve got to be honest with ourselves. Having a sense of history is important because as we’ve discussed compartmentalizing of the environment and our whole history shows -- like through the assimilation period-- that when we start compartmentalizing that makes it easier to start selling things off piece by piece. That’s why we’re always, like, it’s the greater Everglades. Everything’s connected and flows through. You can’t just section parts of it off."

Rows of available books at the Miccosukee Community Library (2025)
Photo by Gladiz Velez

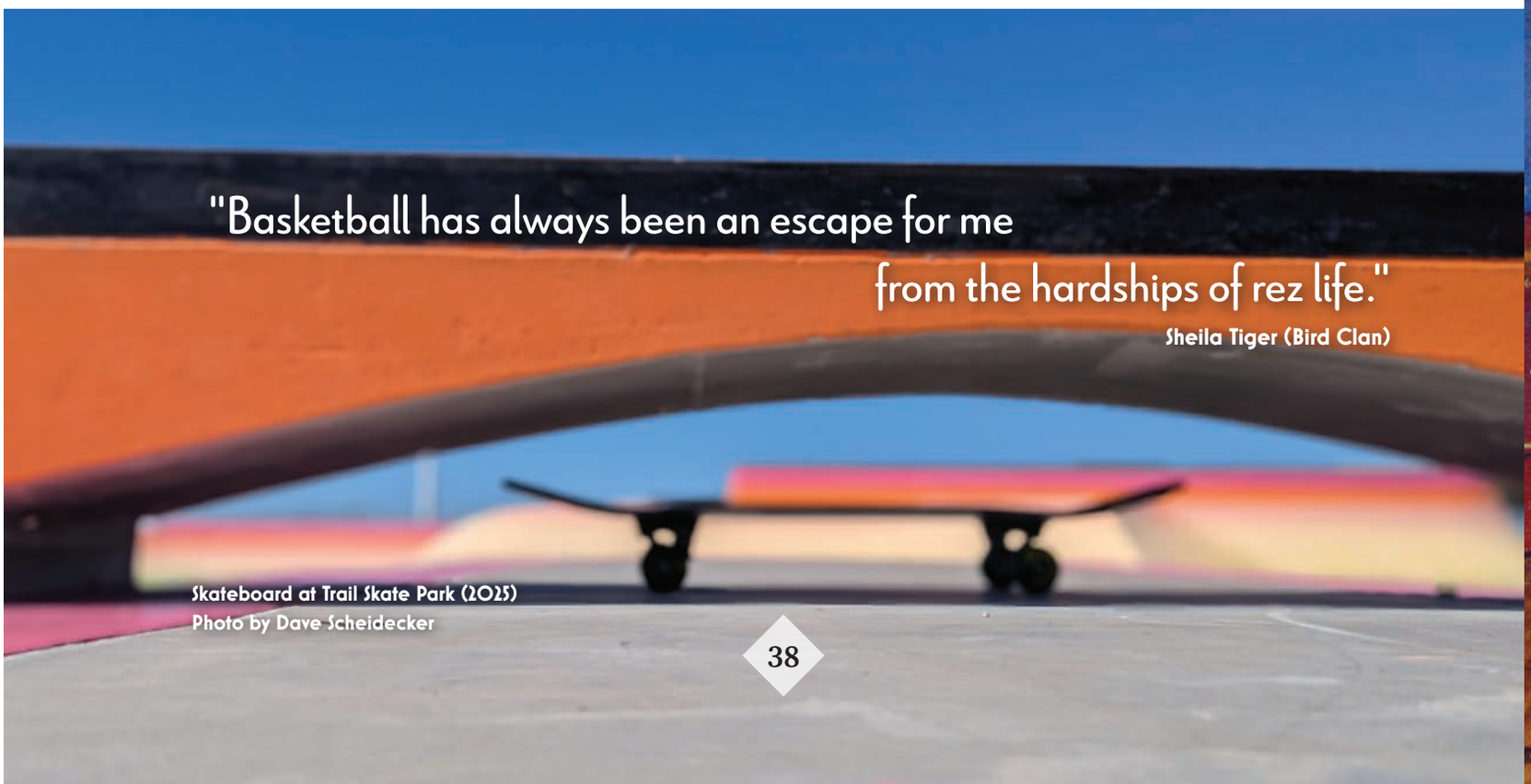
FROM THE COURT TO SKATE PARKS: RESILIENCE THROUGH REZ SPORTS

On any regular summer afternoon, John Kyle Osceola (Bird Clan) helped his uncle build Chickees, climbing up to the roof to attach the palmetto branch thatch work. The traditional structures were needed throughout the communities, and making and repairing them was hard work under the blazing summer sun. When work was over John would jump down from the chickee roof and the whole crew would run straight to the basketball court, playing as a team, "the Canes."

Popeye told us that his father's generation was all about basketball tournaments that helped build community, and the generation before his played baseball. But instead of playing basketball with his dad, he was really into skateboarding. He tells us that when his dad would take him to his many basketball tournaments, he would bring his skateboard and go skate around with the kids from Big Cypress and other reservations. For him, instead of the competition of Trail versus other reservations on the basketball courts, he found solace and connection with other kids in his generation at the skate park.

Without screens in their pockets tying them to the outside world, he said skating gave him the sensation of flying and feeling the air fully around him, being fully present.

When he fell he said, "I laid on my back and actually felt the time, the time to look at the stars or the clouds." He also recounted that for his generation, the skate park was one of the few places where he received positive encouragement from his peers, it was a place where they could cheer each other on. He recounted, "So I had that sense of freedom and positive reinforcement." This, he told us, is why he worked on the design of the new skate park. He wanted to make sure that the next generation had the opportunity to feel the same sense of



Skateboard at Trail Skate Park (2025)
Photo by Dave Scheidecker

freedom. He worked on the park design with his younger cousins, incorporating their new ideas and what they cared about. He said the design was intentional. For example they decided to leave off a canopy cover because it would block the sky. He explained, “We wanted to make sure the outer reflected the inner and wanted the skate park to reflect our environment.”

He told us that very little was able to be done for his own generation 20 years ago, so he feels a sense of purpose to develop new projects for today’s youth. We ask him if he thinks that naming new buildings, like the new gym, after inspirational athletes might help support interest in community sports and the history of the community? He tells us,

"I hope so because I grew up hearing you’re not supposed to talk about the dead. But then my grandmother said, “No, you’re not supposed to speak ill of the dead,” which is a different thing. Otherwise how are you supposed to remember them? So, I feel like there’s a knowledge gap. I feel like we should remember those who did good things for the community otherwise what example will there be to follow?"

Of working to add to his community’s history he says, “Culture is the thread all the beads hang on. There were beads before us, now I’m just adding beads to the necklace.”

Cassandra Osceola (Bird Clan, top left), Farren Cypress (Bird Clan, top center), Bonnie Williams (Otter Clan, top right), Jacqueline Osceola (Bird Clan, bottom left), Sheila Tiger (Bird Clan, bottom right), with trophy (1994)
Courtesy of Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki (2015.6.1754)

Norman Huggins (Bird Clan, left) and John Osceola (Bird Clan, right) playing basketball in the Miccosukee gym with members of the Miami All-Stars, 1996
Courtesy of Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki (2015.6.1780)

CULTURE AS AN ANCHOR FOR HEALING INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Over the hours we spoke with them, we noticed that the generation who grew up in the 1990's often mentioned the presence of intergenerational trauma. So, we asked them, when planning events or projects is there a focus on healing?

Popeye responded,

"Yes. I know when I plan stuff that's what I'm thinking, like, how can we build up the community again? I'm always thinking how can we help improve relationships among each other and remind each other that we like each other?"

We heard that if people are unable to heal from their past trauma, they just pass it on to the next generation. "It's a heavy lift, but we have to try. If we lose who we are, then we fill the gap with something else." Houston explained his own attempts to design events that can be healing for both his communities and for outsiders who attend his gender-affirming events:

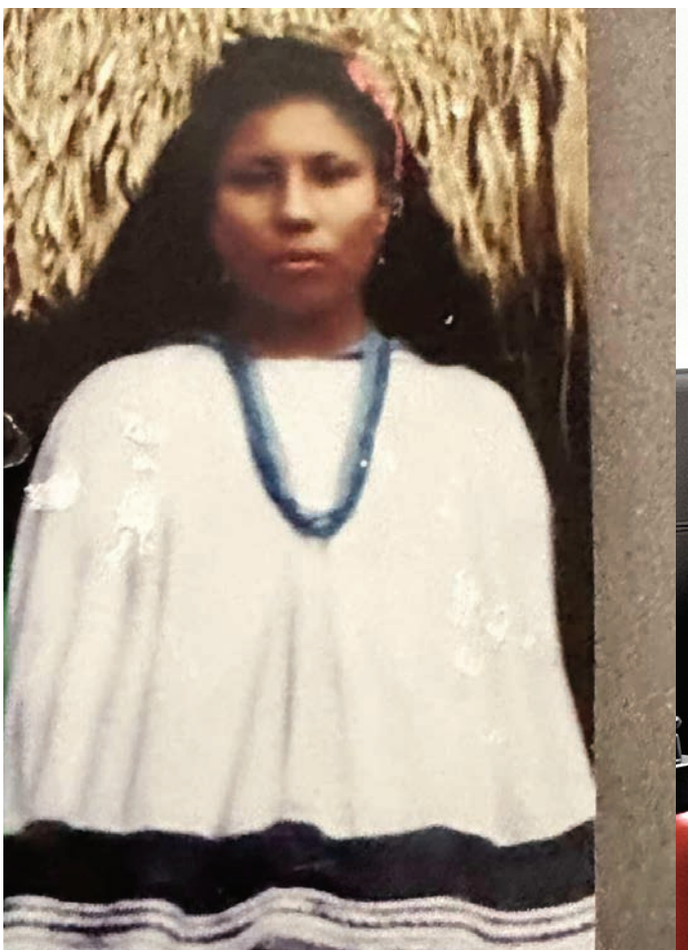
"I'm inspired by the journey of our ancestors and how, like, even through difficult times they relied on medicine and ceremony, and so I think that relying on that has been inspirational for me whenever I'm planning projects or events. I think ok -- instead of sharing about our tribe or our private ceremonies-- it's good times, good vibes, art. There may not be a dance, but someone might call it choreography. It may not be a skirt but someone might call it fashion. Like, these kinds of vibes are what inspires me, like joy and good times.

Designs by Tribal artist decorate the pool at the Trail Skate Park on the Miccosukee Reservation. (2025) Photo by Dave Scheidecker.

For example, when Betty was doing her prayer walks and she said, “This is not a protest. We’re not angry. We’re not mad. We’re here to pray. We’re here to listen to each other.” and I think that’s important. I think people got something out of it not just Native folks but whoever wanted to come and support the cause. So, I like that sort of thing that she promoted, and people got something out of it. And that’s the reason why Gunny (Amarys Huggins, Bird Clan) and I started the LGBTQ pride event. To make people feel welcome and supported and encouraged. Part of that background is traumatic, but also an opportunity to help each other out."

Angie told us, “The thing I am most passionate about is the language.” She said that teaching the younger generation is not easy, “you kind of have to sit them down and make them learn.” As they talk about the importance of knowing who you are and where your people come from, Popeye explains, “That’s what's nice about growing up in a unifying culture. You grow up understanding that there are different roles and expectations. And not everything is for everybody. Not everybody is going to be a medicine man or whatever. And sometimes just being there to support them on their path is the best role that you can do.” Angie agrees, commenting on the focus on perfectionism that may have come from a past focused on survival, "That is a big part of the culture. And that perpetuates that perfectionism running through all of us all the time. There is no trying, there’s only do. And if you’re not going to be the best at it then why are you doing it?”

In response Popeye asked, “How do we get out of that mindset of how do we survive to how we actually thrive?” He shared that his grandmother, Peggy Osceola who is almost 100 years old, was one of the exceptions to this survival mode way of thinking. He said, “She literally grew up with people who saw the destruction of war firsthand. Yet you never got that sense of do or die pressure from her. To me that’s been the model. You got all that, you dealt with it, you know what the reality is, but you still love being alive and with



Popeye Osceola (right, 2025) discusses how he was inspired by his grandmother, Peggy Osceola (left, Otter Clan, ca. 1955)
Courtesy of the Osceola Family
Left Photo by Gladiz Velez

Mother and daughter looking out at the Everglades (2023)
Photo by Marcella Billie

your people. You're still going to teach them, but you're not going to impart that anxiety, that intergenerational trauma. It's like a turtle shell almost, you've got that protective shell and then the soft parts are underneath."

Angie said she can already start to feel it happening in her generation. Her grandmother used to be extremely mindful of how high the fire was in the cooking chickee, and they all used to be quite serious while cooking together. Now, she told us, "we like to go in there and turn on the radio and listen to music." She told us that she thinks about this issue everyday with her own family, "For my kids I try to be, like, it's your life, and you live it, and you make your choices, and you do what you want to do. But it's not even a question that you're going to be at Ceremony or you're going to have to deal with me."

Popeye told us that when he speaks to kids, he likens the importance of culture in their lives to an anchor on a ship. He said he tells them, "If you're a ship in the sea you can navigate, but you put that anchor down at night and that anchor is culture so you're not drifting around, and you know who you are in the morning. You're not just timelessly floating around. It can feel heavy and holds you down, but really it holds you down in one place."

GLIDING ACROSS THE WATERS

Tristan Tigertail on his Airboat at Tigertail Airboat Tours (2025)
Photo by Dave Scheidecker

Tigertail's Airboat Tours got started when Tristan Tigertail's (Panther Clan) great-grandfather became friends with Francis Taylor. "He was one of the original airboat builders here in South Florida, and through that friendship he got airboats off of him and learned a lot about airboats, and that was like the 40's." Since then, this Tigertail family has owned, operated, and engineered their airboat business starting within Everglades National Park and eventually growing roots on the north side of Tamiami Trail which sits on reservation land.

During their busy season, Tristan stated that he operates tours for people from all over the world and that, "It's fun to take somebody from somewhere else that's never seen anything like this." Tourists from Germany, France, and other places are always clamoring to see an alligator. Tristan has experienced his fair share growing up on the airboat. He said, "[You] kind of see it for the first time from someone else's eyes." That is just one of his motivations to continue operating the airboat business.

With the family growing and thriving around the airboat business, some family members decided to pursue education that would help further the business. Tristan's Uncle Sammie does all the welding, and his cousin Alex received a degree from a technical university to work on large motors. This was especially needed given that the current airboat, which Sammie built, runs on a Chevy 502 motor. Tristan's role is to operate the airboat and conduct the tours. He told us, "I got so many people that'll fix it for me," and while he also wants to learn, he said he had a lot of other people to lean on.

Being and working in the Everglades, he said, "Deepens that connection, at least to my grandma." Tristan remembered being out on the water and in the camp with his grandmother who would demonstrate how to make crafts and sell them. He told us, "So, when I'm out here now, it's like, she's not around no more. And I can think about that, you know, and I can remember her, and I'm sure she's happy that we're out here, too."

FINDING IDENTITY AND INSPIRATION ON THE TRAIL

When we asked how is your identity defined by Tamiami Trail, Popeye answered, “I can’t escape it whether I want to or not, it informs how I interact with people, it could be as constrictive as it was freeing.”

Houston agrees, he says, “So shorthand, when I’m talking to people, I say I’m from Trail. But my home is off-road; different tree islands.”

Similar to what we heard from the older generation, Houston says that the loss of the Australian Pines uprooted by Hurricane Andrew felt like losing family members. He misses the feeling of the protection they gave him, and the sound they made whispering in the wind.

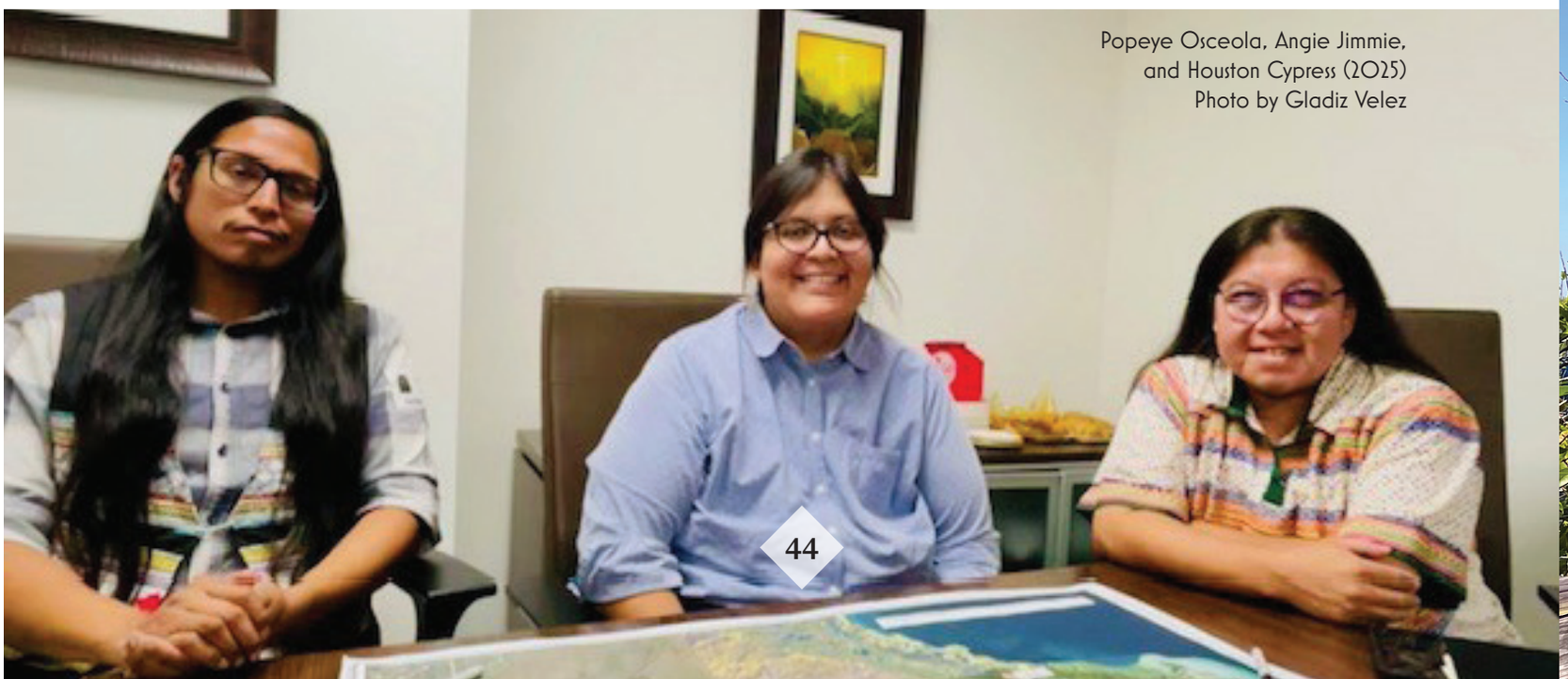
Houston tells us that his grandmother, Nellie Willie Billie, gave birth to his mother in the traditional manner in Big Cypress forest, along the Turner River. His mother was literally born on the Trail.

Angie is quiet for a moment. Then she said,

"For me it’s a great deal of my identity, growing up there. My grandmother used to call it heneh choobe*. So, for me it meant travel on it to have breakfast at Panther Camp, travel on it to go to Ceremony, travel on it to go to stores, travel on it to go to jobs. It’s been a big part of my whole life. It’s just a road, I guess, but for me it’s been such a big part of my life. So, yeah, I’m from Trail and I’m a part of it."*

Popeye follows up saying, “For me it’s about walking. Being out in nature to walk to my friend’s house. It’s a nice reminder that you can’t just be stuck inside your house.” Angie added, "I'm glad I grew up where I did because I know what peace feels like, and quiet, and a sense of safety that you know the community. I know just about everyone in the community, and they know who my family is. That's so special." Houston then adds, “The road represents change, but for me it also represents, like, what are we going to hold onto in the face of that change?”

Houston, Popeye, and Angie talk about the duty and sense of responsibility they feel towards



Popeye Osceola, Angie Jimmie, and Houston Cypress (2025)
Photo by Gladiz Velez

their communities, towards helping preserve the surrounding Everglades and their waterways. They discuss how difficult it can be to know how to step up and when, and Popeye says his dictum is, “If not you, then who else?” He says he tells the students he speaks to, “You can’t just wait for someone else to step up.”

We ask this generation what else inspires them? Angie says,

"Mainly the seamstresses of my community, and mainly the creativity of my community, and just the bravery to try new things, new fabrics and the willingness to say if you want to learn I’ll teach you. It reminds me a lot of my grandma because she used to have a sewing class. And she worked until like eight at night, and that is inspirational. And my fellow moms in my community also inspire me, and when I’m at my wits end I look to other women in the community who have survived their kids who maybe were not on the healthiest path -- or maybe lost their kids – it’s so inspirational that they still have the capacity to love and I hope to be that strong. That’s very inspiring."

Houston agrees, “I second on the moms. Anyone who is a mom and who is mothering. Also being in the woods and listening to the wind sounds makes me happy. And anyone who has a way with words could be a traditional storyteller or it could be, like, contemporary poets.”

> “The road represents change, but for me it also represents, like, what are we going to hold onto in the face of that change?”
>
> – Houston Cypress

Popeye tells what he is inspired by,

"The kids. Working with the kids as long as I did, that taught me to be more empathetic, and to get over myself. I need to be the best version of myself when I’m in this room with them because that’s what they deserve. And I’m still going to be myself, but I’ve got to be the me that they deserve. It humbles you. Also, the stars out there. The night sky is so incredible out there on the Trail. They're so far away, but they connect us. As you get older you appreciate that disconnect from the outside, to connect with your people, to remind you what’s important, which is being with your people."

Tigertail Family Camp in the Everglades (2025)
Photo by Gladiz Velez

LIL/BIG REMINDERS FOR THE FUTURE

When I found out I was pregnant with my first child, I was so young. I didn't fully realize until much later that we already begin caring for our children and implementing cultural teachings, even before they are born. I was blessed enough to be raised by my grandmother who guided me to start cultural teachings for my child while I was pregnant. It was relatively minor things like altering my diet and avoiding certain situations and images, but these are cultural teachings, nonetheless. My grandmother didn't necessarily "teach" me, but it was delivered more like reminders, not formal lessons. These reminders made me feel like she knew I could be trusted with the responsibility and that made me feel respected as a mother, even before I became one.

I have five kids, four of which are adults living on their own. They are all growing up to be wonderful people. It's an indescribable feeling to see how my grandmother's "reminders" have shaped, and continue to shape, my experience as a mother, and in turn, my children's experiences growing up. I've been there to see the evolution of the "minor" cultural things I was taught while carrying them. Now they are mostly adults and shoulder heavier cultural responsibilities and are navigating through an ever-changing world. I'm glad that they understand those responsibilities. I hope that will help ground them when times get difficult.

My grandmother also taught me that being a mother doesn't stop when your children reach a certain age. When life as a mom gets overwhelming, I remind myself of the love my grandmother and other important family members had for my children. That love is still there, even if the people are not. They would want me to keep speaking to my children, to keep encouraging them, so that's what I do. I will always be their mother and that is my honor.

Contributed by Angie Jimmie (Takoshaałee Clan)

Angie Jimmie and her children (2016)
Photo courtesy Angie Jimmie

TREASURED STORIES

I treasure the early morning drives along the Trail with my father, O.B. White Osceola, Sr. He shares his memories in such an illustrative way that what is now a vacant landscape, seemingly void of people, comes to life. I can imagine the canal banks occupied with traditional villages with smoke billowing from the cook chickees. I can close my eyes and smell the burning wood and feel the warmth. His stories provide a vivid picture of what the Trail was like when he was a young man driving a farm truck filled with kerosene at the young age of nine or ten. I also envision his three-year old self, walking barefooted across the loose gravel road in Ochopee from where his camp was to the canal bank where his grandfather, Futch Cypress, was carving a canoe. It is hard to think of how the driver of a truck along a very remote stretch of road could have run over my dad, but it happened. The tragedy gave my dad a legal name, $50, and a story to use to keep my brother and I away from the road.

The Tamiami Trail is a living being. It has a heartbeat. The pulse of what is seen by many as a long road, has been a lifeline for my family and many others. A few years back, Marcella Billie and I were talking about our years growing up in a camp. Although I grew up visiting our family's camp everyday, Marcella lived in her family camp. She had made the statement, "I grew up taking a bath in the canal with my cousins, and we had to look out for gators. I've got dirt under my nails." That resonated with me, and it is my hope that the stories shared within this publication bring the Tamiami Trail to life for all of you, as my dad's stories did for me.

Contributed by Tina Osceola

A cabbage palm taken by Cory Osceola from his camp at the Copeland Sawmill and replanted at his new camp near Naples (2025)
Photo by Tina Osceola

MENTORS & INSPIRATIONS

Billy Cypress (Takoshaałee Clan)

Billy Cypress, former Chairman of Miccosukee and a graduate of the University of Miami, supported Tina's desire to go to college, asking her, "What do you want to do with it?" This made her think about the importance of the decisions she made, even which school she would attend as an undergrad. She thinks of him as an "education pioneer," saying "Billy was so invested in the youth having purpose."

Evelyn Cypress (Bird Clan)

Popeye admired his grandmother Evelyn Cypress for the work she did and the way she took charge in her role as Tribal Administrative Coordinator. He spoke highly of her unwavering willingness to help everyone in the community. He adopted her inclusive mindset in his own role within the Tribe, saying, "No one can truly thrive unless we all do."

Amarys "Gunny" Huggins (Bird Clan)

Houston is inspired by Amarys "Gunny" Huggins, who has supported and led both educational and healing events for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit communities, and for environmental rights. She was a big part of the educational movement against Burnett Oil drilling in Big Cypress. Gunny started the Miccosukee Pride festivals, "she just made it happen." She's also "a badass for direct action, so that she can show up for other communities."

Sylvester Jimmie (Wind Clan)

Angie is inspired by her husband Sylvester, who works with the Elders in the community. Elders trust him with many necessities, from running errands to picking up their groceries. He's become a dependable presence, working "day in and day out" to support them. Angie shares, "(Elders) need to not be forgotten… they need to be seen and heard." Sylvester gives them that, and Angie finds it deeply moving that Sylvester dedicates himself to them.

Cory Osceola (Big Town Clan)

Barbara was inspired by her grandfather, Cory Osceola. She admired his savviness to provide for his family and community, from selling jackets made by his wife Juanita to farmers in Immokalee, to managing the Tribal work camp at the Copeland Sawmill. Cory always would give to others, adopting Tribal children in need of a home, and throwing the annual Christmas party that brought the community together. When one of his grandchildren asked how he did all this with only one arm, he smiled and replied "God is my left arm."

Renée Manyari (Otter Clan)

Houston recalls the powerful influence of his mother, Renée Manyari, on his development as an artist. He was deeply inspired by her resilience and the way she consistently encouraged him to be strong. She also instilled in him the importance of language and the value of hard work. He remembers his mother always urging him to be helpful wherever he could, especially within the community, a lesson that continues to guide him today.

Juanita Osceola (Panther Clan)

Barbara spoke of the influence of her grandmother, Juanita Osceola, saying "She was my matriarch". Juanita taught Barbara how to work with her hands, mind, and heart so she would be able to provide for her family and her community. Juanita felt a duty to keep traditions from being lost during a time of intense change, and she ensured that Barbara could carry on this knowledge. Juanita taught Barbara pride, “I was born Seminole, and I live my life Seminole."

Marie Osceola-Branch (Bird Clan)

Tina Osceola recalled watching her aunt, Marie Osceola-Branch, fight for the support to become a first-generation college student. Her education led to helping the Tribe in many roles, including principal of the Miccosukee Indian School. This support came full circle when Tina visited her aunt’s dorm room at the University of Miami. Tina shared, “I wanted that, you know? I wanted to do that.” Inspired by her aunt’s perseverance, Tina was motivated to pursue higher education herself.

Pete Osceola Sr. (Panther Clan)

Pete Osceola Jr. always looked up to his father. He was an entrepreneur who supported his son in becoming a first-generation college student. Pete Sr. worked hard to provide for his family, instilling in his children the values of humility and a strong work ethic. Today, Pete Jr. honors his father's legacy by applying those same principles in his own entrepreneurial journey and by using his dad as an example for his own children.

Margie Sanders (Takoshaałee Clan)

Angie was always inspired by her grandmother, Margie Sanders. Her house was the “main hub” for her family, and she spent most of her childhood there. Angie says that her grandmother is "still a part of her", who taught her how family is stronger together. Margie was a talented seamstress, and taught classes to anyone in the community willing to learn. She remains a constant traditional influence for the family.

Buffalo Tiger (Bird Clan)

Pete told us that his uncle, Buffalo Tiger, was a major influence on his life for many reasons. He admired his role in drafting the Buckskin Declaration to preserve Tribal Sovereignty. Pete says he spent "half his time" growing up learning what Buffalo, and his other uncle Jimmy Tiger, taught him. Buffalo adn Jimmy's lessons remain his "main life foundation", guiding him in his career and service to his Tribe.

Hector Tigertail

Popeye is inspired by Hector Tigertail, who has always shown strength and resilience from a young age. Hector is a part of the Miccosukee Fish & Wildlife Department, where he is a Wildlife Biologist Intern. He strives to protect the Evergades, removing invasive species, and conducts outreach, educating both his community and the broader public about the ecosystem of the Everglades.

TRIBAL CONTRIBUTORS

Marcella Billie (Otter Clan)

Marcella Billie grew up in Ochopee, along the Tamiami Trail. She has served as the Village Manager of the Miccosukeee Indian Village Wand Assistant Director of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. She has since worked as the NAGPRA Liaison for the Seminole Tribe, helping to repatriate ancestors, and is now the Director of the Seminole Tribal Historic Preservation Office. She is an enrolled member of the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

Rev. Houston Cypress (Otter Clan)

Houston Cypress is an artist, poet, activist, speaker, ordained minister, and co-founder of the Love the Everglades Movement. He has served as a cultural ambassador for his Tribe and worked to foster between communities. He has worked on numerous efforts to promote environmental protection, LGBTQ rights, decolonization, and community healing. He is an enrolled member of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida.

Angie Jimmie (Takoshaałee Clan)

Angie worked at the Miccosukee Indian School for five years, first as a library assistant and later as the Miccosukee language arts teacher for high school students. She cares deeply about teaching the Eleponke language for her community. She currently works for the Miccosukee Tribe transcribing minutes for the General Council meetings. She is an enrolled member of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida.

Barbara Osceola (Panther Clan)

Barbara Osceola was born and raised in Ochopee. She has worked in Seminole Housing, was the manager of Okalee Village, and was the Executive Assistant for Hollywood Councilman Max Osceola Jr. until 2011. Today she is the Liaison for Elder Services, and the Elder Affairs Special Advisor for the Hollywood council office. She is an enrolled member of the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

O.B. White Osceola, Sr. (Panther Clan)

O.B. White Osceola was born on the Tamiami Trail, and grew up working multiple farm jobs, even driving trucks before he turned twelve years old. He was one of the first of his generation to attend formal schools and would go on to serve in the US Army. He has worked to preserve and teach many Seminole traditional crafts, including chickee building and canoe carving. He is an enrolled member of the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

Petties "Pete" Osceola, Jr. (Bird Clan)

Petties “Pete” Osceola, Jr. grew up in the Musa Isle camp along the Miami River. After a lifetime of successful entrepreneurship, he now serves as Lawmaker on the Tribal Council for the Miccosukee Tribe of Florida Indians, where he works to defend Miccosukee sovereignty, protect the Everglades, and oversees the MIccosukee Police Department. He is an enrolled member of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida.

Tina Marie Osceola

Tina Osceola has spent her life working to support Tribal sovereignty, cultural preservation, and has driven efforts to repatriate ancestors. She has served as the Executive Director of the Tribal Historic Preservation Office and the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, as well as an Associate Trial Judge for the STOF Tribal Court. She now serves as the Executive Operations Officer. She is an enrolled member of the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

William J. "Popeye" Osceola (Bird Clan)

Popeye Osceola is an artist, educator, and the youngest member of the Miccosukee Business Council, representing a new generation of leadership. In his role as Secretary, he oversees the records of the Tribe, including Tribal membership, governmental correspondence, and historical archives and preservation. He has worked to preserve the Eleponke language of the Miccosukee. He is an enrolled member of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida.

SEMINOLE TRIBE OF FLORIDA

AH-TAH-THI-KI MUSEUM

A PLACE TO LEARN, A PLACE TO REMEMBER.

TRIBAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE