

THE ANCESTORS' LESSONS TO BEAT THE HEAT

Whether you mark it by the calendar, the beginning of afternoon storms, or the exodus of snowbirds, summer has arrived to south Florida. Nearly every day we hear warnings about the heat, and we're cautioned not to spend too much time out of our air-conditioned comfort zones.

But how did the ancestors handle the heat? How did generations of Seminoles stay safe and comfortable before electricity? By observing the natural world and how it worked, they developed resourceful solutions to challenges.

What gives us relief from heat? Cooler air! But how can air be made cooler without electricity? Indigenous science came up with several ways to do it. First, Seminole ancestors observed that winds followed particular patterns during different seasons. In the winter, winds in south Florida come from the north and northeast. In the summer, prevailing winds come from the south and southeast. Tribal citizens have shared childhood memories of summers in their families' camps watching adults cut back vegetation

on the south and east sides to allow the winds to blow through. They recalled sleeping soundly on platforms in the chickees, where they enjoyed a steady, cooling breeze.

But when things really heat up in south Florida, even the breezes bring little relief. To overcome these conditions, ancestors had a couple of ingenious strategies. Simply raising surfaces off the ground, like platforms in chickees, allowed air to circulate around them and prevented warm air from accumulating.

Yet, the truly innovative technique for cooling air that the ancestors developed was a form of evapotranspiration – the same principle that cools our bodies by absorbing heat into beads of sweat, which then evaporate into the air carrying the heat with them. Ancestors learned that splashing water on walls and mats around structures cooled the air as it moved in by absorbing heat into the water that then evaporated away. While this was less effective in humid conditions, it still offered relief from stagnant hot air, and in dryer times, this method cooled homes by as much as ten degrees Fahrenheit!



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Photo: A Chickee under construction in the Everglades, photographed by Julian Dimock in 1907.

