The Everglades

There is a compelling charm about the unknown, and in the Everglades that charm is still potent. They have always been a region of mystery. Stories are told of pirate ships laden with booty being chased to the Florida coast, where they evaded their pursuers by taking refuge within the fastnesses of the Glades. The winding streams of the southern part of the peninsula are reputed to flow over treasures in scuttled boats, and their banks to be the hiding-place of hoards of buried wealth left by the old sea-rovers. Much money has been spent in attempts to discover the treasures.

Although the mild winter of Florida draws constantly increasing numbers thither, the tip of the peninsula is the last portion of America to be intimately explored. Our own surveys of some of the more intricate parts of its coast have not been dependable until recently. The first organized expedition crossed the Everglades in 1883, and maps made not long ago portrayed good sized rivers half a hundred miles long traversing the region, where, in reality, the vague waterways are scarcely worthy to be called streams. The Everglades occupy a shallow basin one hundred and thirty miles north and south and seventy east and west, which makes a total area much the same as that of the state of Connecticut. Yet this vast expanse, bordered as it is by lines of commerce and fashionable travel, is even now almost unplotted and unvisited. Its only human dwellers are a few hundred Indians who thread its lonely water-paths in primitive dugout canoes.

It is not exactly land, and not exactly water. There is too much water to travel by land, and too much rank saw-edged grass to journey freely by water. The only relief to its level prairie-like monotony is a dotting of islets heavy with tropical growths, and usually plumed with one or two palmettos. Florida is a broad limestone mountain-top, much of which is covered by a mantle of sand. It has remarkably copious springs, and these springs are the source of the water in the Everglades. The water forms a veritable lake that nowhere is stagnant or wholly at rest. Rains furnish only a small percentage of the clear, limpid, and palatable water, and the springs account for the rest. No stream of any kind runs into the basin, yet numerous creeks and rivers lead out of it. The rim of the basin has an altitude of about a dozen feet above low tide. On the east it is within three to twelve miles of the coast, but on the west side recedes much farther; and here lie the dark watery woodlands known as the Big Cypress, a trackless labyrinth of swamps, lagoons, creeks, and low fertile islands, all deep buried in the shadows of a mighty cypress forest. The rock floor of the Everglades basin is usually found at a

depth not exceeding six feet, but in places is twice that far down. Wherever it is struck with a pole or an oar it gives out a somewhat hollow metallic sound.

Almost the entire floor is covered with a layer of muck, which varies in thickness from a few inches to several feet. In this muck grows the saw grass, sometimes attaining a height of ten feet. Its vigor never varies, for neither heat nor cold ever weaken its vicious energy. The grass hides the water, save in the numerous little channels which wind aimlessly about, sometimes coming to a blank end, sometimes broadening into a clear space abloom with pond-lilies. These leads or openings are full of promise to the explorer, but are usually only a snare.

Along the eastern and western edges of the lake are uncounted islands, some of them alluvial, but most outcrops of the rock of the basin covered with a rich mold. The former are wet. The latter are habitable, and occasionally one will have a dry cultivable area hundreds of acres in extent, that responds generously to the rather fitful labor of the Seminoles. The forests that cover the islands are very luxuriant. Vines abound and attain great size. Wherever the ground is dry enough the Florida arrow-root flourishes. This is the mainstay of the Seminoles and supplies delicate and digestible flour and starch. Wild flowers are remarkably profuse, including rare and lovely orchids. On many of the islands grow giant ferns, the fronds of which attain a length of ten feet.

Animal life is fairly abundant in the islanded parts. Here deer are found, and now and then a bear or panther. Otters are plentiful, and these and alligators are hunted by the Seminoles for their skins. There are numerous snakes, including the poisonous rattlesnake and moccasins, but they do not hang from the trees in the fine festoons that used to be pictured. One wonders that the Seminoles should go habitually barelimbed from the knee down in this snake-infested wilderness. There is such a dearth of stagnant water that few breeding-places are furnished for insects. Even mosquitoes are lacking except along the borders, but the thick abundant foliage encourages the gnats and small flies, and fleas are plentiful in the Indian camps.

In climate the Everglades know neither sudden change nor extremes of heat and cold. Winter chill is softened, and summer heat made genial. The rainy season includes all the summer months and the early fall. The rest of the year is fairly dry, though showers are not entirely lacking.

Such are the difficulties of penetrating the Everglades that what we have learned of them during the past three centuries has been learned in fragments, and with pain and peril. The first white man to enter their confines was a Spaniard who was shipwrecked in the Strait of Florida, and became the captive and slave of a Calos chief who was known as Lord of the Everglades. The tribe called the whole region Mayaimi, a name

which still persists in that of Miami, and they called the Everglades the Lake of the Sweet Water.

The Spanish captive's name for them was the Lake of the Holy Spirit. He was among the Indians for seventeen years, during which time he was concerned chiefly in a search for gold and for the spring of fadeless youth. He found no gold, and though he affirmed that he bathed in every pool and spring his youth departed, and he died.

The Calos tribe presently disappeared from the region, and at length a remnant of the Seminoles settled in the Everglades which they called the Grassy-water. The seven years' war with the whites had not ended, and later fresh difficulties arose, with the result that military detachments made various incursions into the Glades from 1841 to 1856. One of these, which is fairly typical, occurred in June, 1855. Sixty-three men with an Indian guide set out from the eastern edge in canoes. When water leads failed them the boats were forced through the saw grass, partly by poling, partly by wading and shoving. Often the grass had to be cut away in front, and the men suffered greatly from wounds made by its sharp-toothed edges. At night they had to sleep camped in the canoes. Finally the grass barrier became so dense they were obliged to turn back, after having gone a winding way of one hundred and twenty miles, or, in a direct line, fifty-three miles.

The expedition of 1883, which has been referred to, was undertaken by four white men and six negro oarsmen. They had two large canoes and several smaller ones, and carried provisions for sixty days. The start was made October 21st, from Punta Rasa at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee, and on the first day of November the party reached Lake Okechobee. Beyond that they encountered a dense tangle of grass, scrub-willow, and custard-apple through which they were only able to advance a few hundred yards a day. Presently this was succeeded by watery prairies of saw grass to which they set fire, but as the water here was only four feet deep progress continued to be slow and laborious. Not until late in the month did they find deeper water. Then they got along faster and at last descended the Shark River to Whitewater Bay at the tip of the peninsula.

A more ambitious expedition was undertaken in the early spring of 1892. Twenty-one men with two cypress skiffs and two canvas boats entered the Glades from Fort Shackelford in the middle of the peninsula about forty miles south of Lake Okechobee. They expected to travel five miles a day, but even this low rate could not be maintained. Four days after starting it became necessary to leave behind one of the skiffs and some of the baggage. Leaders and laborers worked alike, often standing waist deep in water and muck, cutting away the saw grass to make an opening for the boats, which they

then shoved ahead by main strength. At times portages were unavoidable, and the men had to carry the boats' cargoes on their backs. A burden bearer would frequently get into a mudhole up to his waist, and was only able to extricate himself by laying hold of a boat.

The party camped at night on small islands when they could, but if none was available some slept in the boats, and others cut saw grass, piled it on that which was growing, and spread over the pile heavy rubber blankets, thus contriving a rude swaying bed. Several of the men gave out from incessant and arduous labor, and provisions ran short so that only half rations were served, eked out by terrapin and a few fish and birds procured along the way. Their baggage was abandoned. Distant Indian fires had been seen from time to time, and on April 4th the men saw and hailed an old Seminole whom they persuaded to guide them to Miami. There they arrived haggard and exhausted three days later.

The easiest natural approaches to the Glades are by way of the New River and the Miami on the east coast. The other outlets afford only difficult pathways at best. The New River flows forth in a somewhat sweeping but gentle stream. The Miami has worn for itself a way through the rocky rim of the great basin, and comes tumbling in a noisy flood down a ten foot fall in three hundred yards.

There is undoubtedly agricultural value in the rich deposit of mud at the bottom of the great inland lagoon, and if the water could be withdrawn the region would attract population and be marvelously productive. The reclamation of the Everglades has been a subject of public discussion from almost the time of Florida's acquisition by the United States. The first contract for draining the region was made in 1881, and work continued for several years, but without very important results. In 1906 the task was resumed, and

considerable progress has been made in opening canals to the coast. It is estimated that the work now under way will make available one million acres of land particularly adapted to raising sugar-cane, oranges, and garden truck.

The drainage channels that have been opened make crossing the Everglades a favorite trip for Florida tourists. There is considerable advantage for sightseers in having a short route across the lower part of the state, but the novelty of it is the chief attraction. The usual course is between Fort Myers and West Palm Beach. You leave Fort Myers in a little launch which goes up the Caloosahatchee. The river is broad at first, but after a while becomes narrow and tortuous. You stop for the night at the village of Labelle on the borders of the Everglades. The next morning you go on up the river and through a canal to Lake Okechobee. The canals have lowered the water of the lake so that it is very shallow and has a broad border of exposed bottom. Several little lighthouses have been erected to guide the boats across it. Late in the day you arrive at West Palm Beach.

Some authorities consider the Seminole dwellers of the Everglades the most picturesque Indians in the United States. Their strange environment, their habits of living, and their dress are all romantically interesting. For more than a decade after the seven years' war ended in 1842 they continued in their wilderness retreat unmolested. Then some engineers, engaged in a government survey of Florida, camped not far from the home of Old Billy Bowlegs, the leading chief of his tribe. One day Old Billy was dismayed to find that marauders had been in his garden and deliberately cut and torn to pieces some banana plants which were the pride of his heart. When he went to the engineers' camp to complain, the men admitted that the deed was theirs, but insolently refused to make amends. As a result the Indians went on the warpath, and the cost to the government was a number of lives and thousands of dollars. At the end of three years Old Billy Bowlegs and a band of one hundred and fifty men, women, and children were induced to emigrate.

The Seminoles at present in the Everglades probably do not number over three hundred. They do not make much of a showing in the vast expanse of the Everglades that they inhabit. If you journeyed into that watery wilderness you might travel scores of miles and not see an Indian. They live in small widely separated colonies that usually consist of five or six families. A typical camp covers about an acre of dry land. The ordinary dwelling consists of six upright poles, three on a side, and a gable roof of palmetto thatch. It has an earthen floor, and the main articles of furniture are large tables which nearly fill the interior, and on which the Indians eat and sleep. There are chests of old clothes and tools and guns, barrels and boxes for provisions, and a

sewing machine. An old sheet or blanket generally hangs down on the northerly side in winter to keep out the winds and rain. In the center of the camp is a circular shed used for cooking. Under this is a fire from which logs radiate like spokes from the hub of a wheel. As the ends burn away, the logs are pushed toward the center.

Any one is welcome to share the Indians' food with them at mealtime. The standard dish is a stew made by cooking meat in a large kettle and thickening it with vegetables and meal. A spoon is placed in the kettle, and each person takes a single mouthful in turn, or you can reach in with your fingers and help yourself. When food is plentiful the stew kettle is seldom empty.

The squaws wear long calico dresses of blue or brown that have bright bands of red or yellow. Their most cherished ornaments are strings of colored beads. The beads are about the size of a small pea, and the preferred colors are turqoise blue and a light red. A string of beads is given to the girl baby by the time she is a year old, and each notable event in her life is made an occasion for giving her more beads. But in advanced age some are taken away. There are women who carry as much as twenty-five pounds of these beads around their necks. They always go without head covering and barefooted. Silver coins are frequently beaten into various designs and fashioned into jewelry for personal adornment.

The men acquire store clothes such as the whites wear, but have an antipathy for trousers. Their habits are so amphibious that they prefer bare legs. Some still dress in the old Seminole manner, and have a tunic tied on with a bright sash, and a red turban made of a shawl or many handkerchiefs. An Indian will frequently wear half a dozen shirts at the same time. Silver earrings are worn very generally by men, women and children.

In the vicinity of the habitations is a little clearing where are raised scanty crops of corn, squashes, sweet potatoes, and sugar-cane. Chickens and razor-back hogs run about wild.

An old cane mill is used to extract the juice of the sugar cane, and this juice is transformed into whiskey by means of a still, crudely constructed from an iron pot with a wooden cover, a length of iron pipe, and a box of water. When under the influence of liquor the Seminole is quarrelsome, bites like a dog, fights with his companions and all the members of his family, but seldom with white men whom he fears even when drunk. On occasions of carousal one of the Indians always keeps sober to look after the others. After a spree in a town of the whites, as soon as the drinkers recover their usual gravity and gentleness, they disappear into the Everglades fastnesses as silently as they came. The Indian has a mysterious ability to cross the Everglades at will.

When the water is high he can pole his dugout the entire width of the saw grass waste in four days. But he is not a satisfactory guide, for he is easily discouraged and lacks resourcefulness. If the route through the Everglades is made difficult by low water, and canoes have to be hauled through mud and saw grass, the Indian is apt to conclude that he is sick and needs whiskey. If the liquor is not forthcoming he at once gives up his job, quite regardless of all contracts.

Some of the men occasionally work for truck farmers, but most of the tribe regard such employment with haughty disdain. Nor are the willing ones dependable as laborers. An Indian who refused to do some light field work at a dollar a day readily accepted an offer of a moderate sum for capturing a live otter wanted by a zoo, without trap marks or other injury. He spent several weeks in securing the creature, and it bit his thumb half off, yet he seemed satisfied with a compensation that was far less than he could have earned hoeing tomatoes.

One of the Indians told a white man that he would like to go to school, and that he wanted to attend for two weeks.

"Two weeks are not enough," the white man commented. "You must go a long time to learn."

"No," the Indian responded, "Me smart-learn plenty in two weeks."

A Seminole who was asked if he ever prayed, replied: "Um, um, me hunt two, three days, get no deer; have big talk to Great Spirit-get deer. Me want go in canoe no water; me talk to Great Spirit-water come plenty. Injun, he buy iron pot and pipe and sugar-cane water-make much whiskey. Me tell him stop. He no stop. Drink, drink, drink, all same like white man. Me bury him; then say lilly bit prayer."

The Everglades Indians show little inclination to adopt the religion of the white race. Missionaries rarely allow a savage to escape them, but they find the Seminoles peculiarly elusive. Not many years ago a missionary settled near an Indian encampment, whereupon the natives moved to the recesses of the Big Cypress Swamp, and declared they would go still farther if the missionary followed.

The Seminoles have an annual Corn Dance that begins with the new moon in June and lasts from ten to twenty days. On the night of the full moon they dance around the festal pole from sunset until sunrise. The dancing is not as a whole very spirited. Those who take part walk around in a circle about thirty yards in diameter, and talk, until, at the signal of a scream, they jump up and down. Sometimes the younger girls vary the performance by a rough-and-tumble wrestling match. Casualties are not uncommon during these festivities. On one occasion Jimmy Jumper ran amuck and killed five Indians before he himself was shot down.

Marriage ties are lightly regarded. One squaw got drunk and pounded her husband. He did not strike back, but left her and the camp, and married a widow who was a score of years his senior, and had six children. The tribe inflicted no additional punishment.

Implicit obedience to their leaders is one of the Indian traits. If a man sentenced to death is granted permission to go to town for a few days he is sure to return at the time appointed for him to be the chief figure in an execution.

A Seminole often takes the medicine of the white man for slight attacks of illness, but in serious cases he calls in the medicine man of his own people. One of the worst foes of the tribe is measles, which easily becomes epidemic. If the disease itself does not terminate the life of the sufferers, the medicine man puts in the finishing strokes with his mummery. By means of bleedings, poultices, and closings he disposes of the disease and patient both.

The dead are left on top of the ground wrapped in blankets, and further protected by a pen built over the body. When a man's squaw dies he wears his shirt till it rots off. When a squaw loses her husband she refrains from combing her hair for three months. Aside from these formalities little reverence is shown for the dead; and when Tom Tiger's grave was robbed, and his bones taken for exhibition, the Indians were indifferent.

Surveyors are beginning to invade the Seminole country. Lumber, bark, and fruit-growing companies are gaining a foothold. Hunters roam over the preserves in increasing numbers, and the state is going ahead energetically with drainage projects. The Indians have become anxious over their future as they see the water in the Everglades receding, game becoming scarcer, and the white men locating on more and more of what was formerly an almost inaccessible wilderness to civilized humanity. Some adjustment must be made for them, but negotiation with them is not easy, for their general opinion of the whites is that they are "no good and lie too much."