When Seminole medicine man Bobby Henry has to make it rain, he tosses a live gopher tortoise into the air. That angers the gods because “turtles not s’posed to fly,” he said. When the gods get sufficiently angry, they roar with thunder and hurl spears of lightning. If Bobby keeps throwing that turtle up, or if he adds a frog, as he did when he ended the drought in Tampa several years ago, the furious gods will send down torrents of angry rain.

But there is obviously more to it than that. You and I can throw reptiles or amphibians into the air and nothing would happen. There are ancient words that Bobby utters in his native language and thoughts in his mind that no one can know about, he said. Some of this came to him naturally not long after he was born, in the mid-1930s, out in the cypress swamps near Ochopee on the Tamiami Trail. He doesn’t know why, and he doesn’t really want to talk a lot about it. In traditional enigmatic fashion, however, he will give you his commercial business card. It reads “Rainmaker” and lets you know how to reach him if you need a canoe, a totem pole or a chickee hut built.

Or if you need it to rain.

Bobby Henry is not a typical medicine man. None of them are, as far as I know. For the first 10 years I knew Miccosukee medicine man Sonny Billie, he scowled at me whenever I was around, refusing to allow me to take his photo. A large, tough man, Sonny spent his working days operating a bulldozer. Out of the blue one day, he just sat there and allowed me to photograph him blowing into a jar of clear liquid through a long straw. And, from that day forward, he was very cordial and friendly to me, even mugging for the camera!

Though I knew many in Seminole medicine woman Susie Billie’s family and had been in her presence dozens of times, she never seemed to acknowledge me. When I had my camera, I was aware that she seemed to never even look at me. Then, one day, I noticed her walking all by herself along the side of Snake Road, way south of the Big Cypress Reservation, looking at the ground. Something told me to stop, and I walked up to her with my camera draped over my shoulder. She looked up and held out her hands to reveal a sprig of herb she had found on the roadside. It was one of the best photographs I ever took – I call the image “Grandmother’s Hands.”

From then on, she would look toward the camera whenever I was around. She even sat down with Tribal member Danny Jumper and me to voice, on video, her opinions about the Florida panther. Powerful medicine people, Sonny, 75, and Susie, 107, both died in 2003. “One year, six people die,” Bobby said, referring to deaths of Seminoles he considered his elders, rapidly shaking his head as if to bolt the thought from his mind. “Boom, boom, boom!”

How many medicine men and women are left among the Seminoles and Miccosukees? “I don’t know,” Bobby said. I think he knows, but he won’t say. “When you find out, let me know!” he joked. Where Sonny could be menacing and Susie quiet and reserved, Bobby is personable, always mixing humor and humility with a smile and a handshake for all. He turned 75 last month.

“Bobby Henry is the main medicine man,” said Seminole Chairman James E. Billie, who sent Bobby
to the funerals of non-Seminole friends to attend their “crossover” journeys. “When he shows up at your event, or anywhere he is around, everyone whispers and nods towards him. Everyone is impressed. Bobby Henry is powerful and very respected by all Indians. Bobby is the most famous medicine man in the world.”

Bobby and his family are known in indigenous circles around the globe for their compelling demonstrations of traditional Seminole dances, foods and crafts. They are well known to most American Indian Tribes and have made their mark in Europe and Asia. A giant totem pole Bobby carved and emblazoned with his own likeness stands in downtown Singapore to this day. A lifelong entrepreneur, Bobby has made his living picking fruit, building chickees, wrestling alligators, installing septic tanks, hauling fill and carving canoes. Now, he’s the proprietor of his own American Indian gift shop, Rainmaker, at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Tampa.

Son of Maggie Henry Doctor and Jim Henry Doctor, Bobby Henry had three siblings: Tommy, Lois and Dorothy. The way Bobby tells it, the Tribal elders of the 1930s must have noticed something special in him.

As a little boy, he said he was taken aside and provided special training. What to eat and how to cure.

Thoughts and chants. Discipline and concentration. “Hear the owl, respect panther, stare with snake’s eye,” is all he will say. He watched the elders closely at the Green Corn Dance and other Tribal events and learned to shuffle and shove his legs hard into the ground, over and over, with a rhythm called to him by the earth in the peculiar choreography of the Southeastern Indians known as the Stomp Dance. In later years, he would become the dance leader, first in line, the caller who chooses the dances and calls out the lyrics of the songs.

In 1956, Bobby Henry married Annie Osceola, one of six daughters of clan matriarch Ruby Tiger Osceola. Annie and Bobby will celebrate their 56th wedding anniversary on May 12; they have five children: Suzie Q, Linda, Barbara, Joanie and John Henry.

By the mid-70s, the 18 members of the Ruby Tiger Osceola family were scattered about the West Coast of Florida, working alongside migrants in tomato and gladiola fields; doing road and construction projects; and entertaining tourists at small pre-Disney tourist attractions. Bobby and Tommy Henry purchased and repaired an old dump truck and crane. They would rent out the equipment themselves to do jobs most did not like.

“We did a lot of septic tank work,” Bobby said. Tommy and a third partner both died in 1975, however; the heavy equipment was eventually sold, and Bobby resumed building chickees. “We were poor, but we were makin’ it. We worked hard,” Bobby said.

“In 1979, James came to town,” said Bobby, who listened with enthusiasm to the new Chairman’s vision for a reservation and village in Tampa. “I asked him, ‘Do you need workers? I got ‘em.”

Up from Bradenton came Ruby and her descendents. They converged on a 4-acre plot in East Tampa, granted official reservation status. During the next few years, a village, museum and small zoo of Florida animals was built. In 1982, Chairman Billie had another offer for Bobby. “He told me he needed someone to manage the village. I said I could do it,” Bobby said. “He put out his hand, I shook it, and he paid me $275 a week!”

For the next 20 years, Bobby and his family operated the Tampa Reservation as a living, native village tourist attraction, complete with Florida animals, alligator wrestling, museum programs, Florida music and Seminole culture shows; it was all nestled between the Tribe’s popular discount
cigarette shop and the original Seminole bingo hall and hotel that preceded Tampa’s Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, which opened in 2004.

Once, during a severe 1985 drought in West Central Florida, Bobby was summoned to the steps of City Hall; exasperated municipal officials were worried about the area’s dwindling water supply and out-of-control fires. With newspapers and television stations documenting the event and former Tampa Mayor Bob Martinez looking on, Bobby got out the turtle and the frog. Immediately following his ceremony, the skies mysteriously darkened, and rain fell in torrents. Area weathermen, who were predicting no end to the drought in sight, were shocked. The Associated Press sent word of the miracle around the world. The Rainmaker was born.

Ruby died in 2002, at the age of 106. Her bronze likeness can be seen today at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Tampa in a diorama which includes images of her six daughters; Suzie, Nancy, Peggy, Maggie, Linda and Annie. By 2004, when the Tampa Hard Rock Hotel & Casino opened, Ruby’s family – the original 18 had grown to more than 100 – were relocated into dozens of single-family homes spread about several nearby towns. Keeping a promise made to the Tampa Seminoles, Tribal leaders OK’d the purchase of 900 acres of pasture and woodland in a Polk County greenway, about 20 miles east of Tampa. At this writing, the tract is still going through the federal trust process to become an official American Indian Reservation.

“I’ll have my school,” Bobby said, referring to a medicine man training camp of sorts he has dreamed up in his desperation to preserve the vanishing Seminole culture. “Then, my family, we’ll be all together again.”

Short and strong, with black hair barely graying, a wide, toothy smile and a perennial twinkle in his eyes, Bobby is a living museum, holding the precious tablature of Tribal medicine in his brain. He is bothered by what he regards as a rapid and ongoing disenfranchisement of the Tribal culture, fueled by the money and morays of modern times. It has created a strange world for a medicine man who carries business cards and a cell phone in his pocket and wears a gold chain hanging over his patchwork shirt.

“Don’t know what happens when I’m gone,” lamented the full-blooded Seminole. “Tribe’s culture may die. I need to train people.”

I have many fond memories of times I spent with Bobby Henry: driving all over Connecticut seeking a restaurant to satisfy his ungodly urge for fried chicken; waiting hours in Miami trying to secure a passport for a man born in a palmetto thatch with no birth certificate; watching him jump from his pickup truck and scale the banks of a ditch to catch a scared alligator with his bare hands; joining hands with an entire mall full of people in Singapore to perform the traditional Seminole Snake Dance. . .

One memory, however, stands out among the rest: I will always remember Bobby strolling through a thick fog on the football field at Jacksonville Stadium in 1994. The fog was a precursor to a huge thunderstorm a weatherman said was coming in off the Atlantic. By all predictions, it would wipe out the festivities for hundreds of Indian dancers from all over the country and for thousands of spectators. They were at the stadium that day for the Seminole-sponsored Discover Native America (DNA) Pow-wow.

West of Jacksonville, an organization which claimed to be American Indian had scheduled a competing pow-wow, hoping to cut into the crowd at the DNA. The organizers were upset with the Seminole event because the DNA rules limited pow-wow participation to “card carrying” Indians – those who were members of federally recognized Tribes. Dancers who could not prove their federal affiliation were not allowed in the arena.
Thunder could be heard in the distance. As one of the DNA event producers, I saw months of hard work about to be drowned. Suddenly, through the fog, Bobby walked by. “Bobby,” I implored, “can’t you make it not rain?”

He suddenly pulled a gigantic knife from a scabbard hanging on his side.

“Sure,” he said. “Cut the clouds.”

He walked off by himself, holding the knife high and still, as if slicing the atmosphere as he strolled. For a good hour, he walked back and forth the length of that football field, through that smoky fog, saying words no one could understand, thinking thoughts no one will ever know, holding his knife high. Indians from all over North America, in traditional Tribal garb, stood silently on the sidelines watching him in awe.

Suddenly, the sun peeked and then came gloriously out. A great cheering commenced among all present. Even the weatherman on TV was amazed the storm passed Jacksonville by in such a manner. Swelled with rainwater, the black thunderhead traveled more than 100 miles west, where it finally stalled and dumped the predicted deluge right atop the other pow-wow.

I was there. I saw it. It’s true.

I went to shake his hand. The fog was gone. He saw me running across the field. “Bobby Henry!” he yelled his own name out to me, his ruddy face all twinkling and smiling; the gods having come through for him once again.

“Bobby Henry! Good medicine!”

Portions of this story have appeared in FORUM, the magazine of the Florida Humanities Council.

For more on Bobby Henry, read “Bobby Henry Celebrates 75th Birthday”

Please follow and like us: