





Chairman Howard Tommie speaks at the Indian Claims Settlement meeting. (Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum photo)

Known as “Mr. Self-Determination,” Howard Ernest Tommie was the third elected chairman of the Seminole Tribe of Florida after the signing of its constitution and corporate charter. Because, among other things, he attended Chilocco Indian School and Okeechobee High School and worked for a rancher as a high school sophomore, Chairman Tommie brought knowledge to the job from many worlds. The benefit of his hard-earned experience was an insightful understanding of the importance of self-sufficiency and sovereignty and so began the initial foray into money-making enterprises: gaming and tax-free sales.

The Seminole Smoke Shops, created during the chairmanship of Howard Tommie, profited by offering tax-free cigarettes. They helped increase the annual budget to \$4.5 million along with paramutual industries, yet brought their own set of problems - mainly with the local and state governments. SMP’s book, “Celebrating 50th Years of the Signing of the Constitution and Corporate Charter,” says, “the economic battle for survival was so fierce that the late 20th century might be termed the fourth Seminole War.” Even so, the groundwork was laid for future Seminole bingo. And annual Tribal member dividends went up to \$600 per year.

Chairman Tommie pressed on and served on committees and boards of organizations dedicated to helping all those in Indian Country. His work on the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975 and the Indian Health Care Improvement Act benefitted the Seminole Tribe of Florida as federal dollars from the Great Society programs and the War on Poverty under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations flowed in for increased social services on the reservations. He was president of USET from 1973 - 1975, still a powerful organization in the political fight for continued sovereignty. And he served on the Catholic Service Bureau.

Chairman Tommie was not above making the hard decisions leaders have to make. In Harry Kersey’s, “An Assumption of Sovereignty,” he states that in a review of his chairmanship almost a

decade after leaving the position, the former chairman “spoke of the difficulty in developing progressive policies and programs to benefit the Tribe, while preserving and honoring the traditional conservative values of his people.” Howard Tommie’s determination to lead is a testament to his integrity and fortitude. Under his leadership, adult and remedial education received new facilities and the health and social needs of Elders were addressed. Recreation programs were instituted and housing offices were set up. In a bold move, the BIA was relieved of some of its duties and Tribal members were given the jobs.

Kersey concludes in his book that Howard Tommie “exploited every facet of the Indian self-determination movement and delivered the Seminoles to the brink of economic and political independence while guaranteeing their sovereignty.” The determination it took to lay the foundation for sky-rocketing prosperity and ever-increasing independence is the legacy of Chairman Howard “Mr. Self-Determination” Tommie. 30

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