



TAMPA — Tribal Historian Willie Johns gave a Seminole Moments presentation on Seminole dugout canoes to Tampa elders on March 13.

“Growing up in Brighton and the Okeechobee area, my family didn’t really use canoes. We preferred our cows and horses,” said Johns, who showed an enlarged historic photo of a Seminole family - father, mother and child - poling a dugout canoe through an area that appeared to be the Musa Isle Indian Village tourist attraction on the Miami River in Miami.

“My mother remembered how you could take a cowhide and five pieces of wood and spread the hide across, and you could put something, even your baby, in there and push it across the water. But you could not get in it,” Johns said.

The canoe builder Johns remembered best was Tom Tiger, Betty Mae Jumper’s grandfather, who lived around Indiantown. Tiger was killed by lightning one afternoon while he was building his canoe.

“He made big, long canoes. So they sawed the canoe in half, put him in there like a grave,” Johns said.

Henry John Billie, a Florida Folk Heritage award winner, was the most renowned of the Seminole canoe builders, Johns said.

“The Miccosukee were the ones who really used canoes,” he said. “They traveled everywhere with canoes. They were the great gliders in the Everglades, but us Creeks, we didn’t really go that way. Like I said, we preferred our horses.

“Most Brighton folks are cattlemen. They look at a 22-foot dugout canoe and they ask, ‘Who is going to drive it?’”

Johns also described the process of making a canoe, which could take years.

“These guys would go out in the woods, find the perfect cypress tree and chop it down,” he said. “Then it might stay there two or three years until the swamp gets high and they float it out to the village or nearby where they carve them. Then it may sit there for years waiting for the tree to fully dry before they start shaping it.”

An audience member asked how many people could fit in a Seminole canoe.

“They are all sizes and shapes and styles,” John said. “I’ve seen an entire family, six dogs and a sewing machine in a canoe. They can really pack a lot on those things.”

Johns pointed to the photo. “Understand, that’s their car. That’s how they got around. That’s a Porsche.”

Seminole ancestors put sails on dugout canoes and traveled to the Bahamas and Cuba, said Johns, who described a colony of Seminole ancestors who fled the state during the Indian Wars and sailed to live on Andros Island in the Bahamas.

Andros Island Seminoles have invited Seminole Tribe of Florida members to a celebration this August, Johns said.

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