





Back in 1979 when I first became Chairman, one of my dreams was to expand our reservations around the state of Florida. The areas where I wanted to go were industrial-type cities, and Tampa, with all its shipping, was one of them. And one other thing that came to mind back in those days and who really helped me establish the Tampa Seminole Reservation were 144 Indians.

Of course, they'd been gone for more than 150 years. They were buried underneath the cement over there right in the center of Tampa. When I needed help, they came out to help us and it was, "Here we are." I never dreamed I would see the day when it would look like this.

Anyway, we have gone through a great transition here in Tampa. We started out with a bingo hall that used to be on the other side of this behemoth Hard Rock Hotel building. The original situation here has really been cannibalized, I think. We started out with just a little old tin building and I remember back in those days when we had finally got the reservation in place and we were desperately trying to open up a bingo hall. We were literally pouring the concrete beams and watching the clock. It was 24 hours and then you could put some weight on it.

Well, after about 23 hours and maybe 59 minutes, the damn thing collapsed, so we had to build it all back up again. That was a crazy situation.

This property that became the Tampa Reservation, when we first came here, there was an abandoned J.M. Fields over along Hillsborough Avenue, and right over there where the tall building is today, was the location of the Indian village where Bobby Henry and his family lived. I'm not sure what year it was, 1980 or maybe 1981, and they were living someplace else. I went to that village and I said, "We are gonna start an Indian reservation over in Tampa. I would like you all to come over here and help me establish it. We need to let the white people know that Indians live around here."

Me and another guy named Stanford Jumper - a tall guy, I'm only about 5'6" or 5'7" and he stands about 6-foot-6 or something - we were sort of an odd couple staggering around there. We started pushing down trees, building chickee huts and all. One year went by and the Henrys had not come over yet. I thought, "What the heck is going on?" I thought they would be glad to come on over.

So I made a trip back down to Bradenton, where they were. I said, "How come you all are not comin' here?"

Back in those days Ruby Osceola was still alive. She was the matriarch of the family in the village. And Bobby Henry just comes over and says, "James, no one wants to leave here because we got a pig that we want to bring."

That damn thing stood up like Hogzilla or Pigzilla, I don't know which it was. And, for some reason this pig was holding up my plans to bring Seminoles to the Tampa Reservation.

So, I said to Bobby: "So how come you guys don't want to come without this pig." And Grandma walked up and said, "When we leave here, (the pig) is gonna have to be at the village." So mean ol'

Stanford Jumper went out and got a U-Haul trailer and we pushed that doggone pig in there.

And I forgot it breathes. So we slammed the door back there, drove from Bradenton to here, and we were gonna put it in a pig pen. I opened the trailer and that pig was laying on the floor, "Hahh ... Hahh ... Hahh ... breathing just like that. Oh my God. Like the pig was breathing its last breaths. We were gonna kill it . . . but wait a minute. It revived and the whole village finally came on over here and we established ourselves, in Tampa, and we have been here since.

We made the reservation and we were doing all right, living in chickee huts, letting people know we are an ethnic group. Bobby Henry and his family are very ethnic, very traditional, you couldn't ask for a better bunch of people. So time came, Hard Rock came in and it expanded and now we needed the whole reservation.

So I went to Bobby. I said, "Hate to tell you guys but you are gonna have to leave the reservation and find you a home some place else."

So, we went and found homes for everyone nearby because Hard Rock was getting to be very big, and it still is today, and it seems like we are pretty big around the world. So we'd like to keep it that way. I want to thank everyone who contributed to this effort, particularly one guy who really helped us make it. And that is Jim Allen. Thank you very much, Jim, for bringing this whole atmosphere here. We are very proud of you.

Sho-naa-bish.

*James E. Billie is Chairman of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. These remarks were taken from his welcoming address March 11 at the 10th anniversary celebration for the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Tampa.*

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