

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

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LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2024, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of selected Florida Baptist men and women, who through their Christian commitment, have demonstrated Legacy Leadership in their ministry service on the Florida Baptist mission field. These persons, could join with the Apostle Paul, in declaring as "God's fellow workers" they have "laid a foundation" for God's kingdom on earth and upon which "someone else is building" [II Corinthians 3:9-10NIV].

Josie Billie – Seminole Indian Medicine Man To Baptist Preacher

Muskogee Seminole Indian Katcha Nokofti (better known by his English name of Josie Billie), was raised and steeped in the ways and traditions of his Mikasuki-speaking Panther clan. [James Covington notes there are four other Muskogee clans that include the Bird, Tallahassee, Deer and Snake.] Billie grew-up and lived his entire life within the tribe's 42,000-acre Big Cypress Indian Reservation located in Hendry County.

For the first 56-years of his life, Josie Billie was consumed by being hard working and alcohol-drinking, three-times married, the murderer of a cousin, and trained to serve as the tribe's key spiritual leader and respected aiyik imi-fosi or medicine grandfather. As the Chief medicine man, Josie Billie was the official intermediary and spokesman to the "white man's" world.

However, in the Providence of God, during a revival service led by J. B. Rounds of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, **Seminole Indian medicine man and spiritual leader Josie Billie (b. 1887; d. 1980) stepped forward to accept Christ as his personal savior.** It was an act that turned his lifestyle around 180-degrees and changed his message from the power of the nature's spirits to the power of Jesus Christ.

Billie's Early Life

Josie Billie's father [Billy Koniphadjo] was reportedly Florida's first educated Seminole, having learned to read and write English. Seminoles did not approve of learning the "white man's ways." However, when a trading post owner gave young Josie a piece of a lead pencil, Josie started copying figures and letters from an old newspaper. His father caught him writing and took away the pencil and warned Josie that "he must not learn to read and write, as the Indians will kill both of us."



However, Josie's curiosity took over. His natural inquisitiveness and resourcefulness led him to discover the possibilities of writing using elderberry plant juice and a sharp end of stick. **In spare hours Billie would go into the woods and secretly write on bark or scraps of paper the names of his friends and other words, then take the writings to one of the non-Seminole ladies who lived in the trading post.** In this relationship, Josie Billie came to formally learn how to read and write English.

Three Marriages and a Murder

Josie Billie was married three times by his own account. About 1916 he married an Otter tribal woman named Louise Doctor by whom he had six children. After ten years of marriage he took Louise back to her tribe and left her. Years later Billie said he was talked into marrying the woman, although he never really loved her. This action was later sanctioned by the tribal council and this constituted an approved divorce. Soon thereafter he married a widow named Lucy Tiger, with whom he lived for several years. Lucy apparently had an addiction to whiskey and in a drunken fit stabbed Billie in the neck barely missing his main artery. Without hesitation Billie left their lodging and declared his divorce from Lucy. He then married another woman also named Lucy Tiger, but of a different clan. They remained married until Billie's death. His last two marriages were without children.

During those family years Billie practiced traditional medicine as well as hunted alligators for their hides which provided income to support his family and his love for liquor. It was during one of his alcohol drinking bouts that he got into a fight over money. In 1928 Billie stabbed to death a Mrs. Billie Roberts a member of the Tiger clan. Such a criminal act came under the jurisdiction of Seminole law. Those violations were handled during one of two five-day Green Corn Dance.

Those sacred gatherings – consisting of ceremonies, ancient rites, feasting and fasting – also provided for the judgment of crimes between tribe members by a small council of elderly medicine men with the chief medicine man being the acknowledged leader. Making his case before the group, Josie Billie was able to exonerate himself. It was speculated by later historical accounts that Billie was not held accountable for the death because of both the prestige associated with his medical and ceremonial knowledge and the woman's family did not press for retribution.

Becoming the Tribe's Medicine Man

Josie Billie's training in the herbal medicines and other traditional healing ways began in the winter of 1905, according to Joseph Casagrande's narrative. Billie, along with three other unmarried men, began their "medical internship" with the Seminole's medicine man Old Motlow. The four would gather the various plants and roots for the senior Seminole doctor. **This training taught Billie the healing potential of plants, herbs, roots, among other things, that were used as healing potions.** The "interns" observed how the potions were mixed and how they were applied, accompanied by the uttered chants and songs made by Old Motlow.

Between 1907 and 1911 Josie Billie served as an apprentice to Tommy Doctor, another medicine man trained by Old Motlow. In 1911 Josie Billie was permitted to "hang out his shingle" as a full-fledged Seminole doctor, although he would continue to consult with Doctor Tommy. New patients were slow in coming until about 1920 when Tommy Doctor died and his many former patients became patients of Josie.

However, the most significant event to occur in Billie's medicine man career happened when Old Motlow died in 1937. According to the account told by Billie to unofficial biographer William Straight, **Old Motlow before he died passed to Billie the sacred medicine bundle which contained all the secret ingredients, "charm medicines," and ceremonial potions only to be used by the chief medicine man.** By being bequeathed the bundle, Josie Billie became Chief of the Miccosukee Indians.

In addition, from 1937 to 1944, Chief Josie Billie served as spokesman for the Miccosukee Indians to the outside world by sharing the Seminole culture and practices with anthropologists and by sharing with medical doctors the medicinal healing power of various plants. As chief, Billie also arbitrated interpersonal strife between the Indians and most importantly supervised the tribe's annual Green Corn Dance.

From Medicine Man to Baptist Preacher

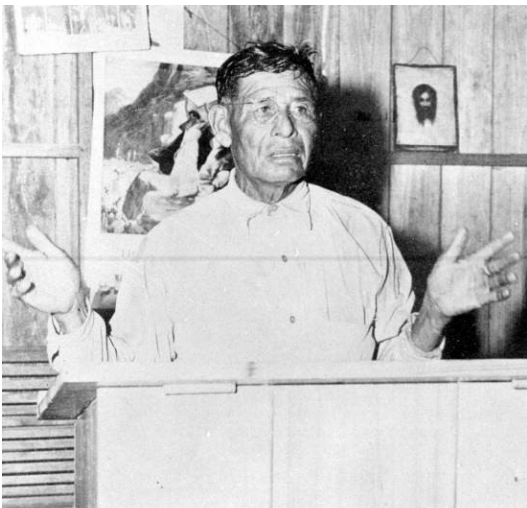
Southern Baptists were the only religious group, at the beginning of the twentieth century, who had a desire and commitment to take the gospel to the Muskogee branch of the Seminoles. That effort was led by Willie King and other Seminole Baptist missionaries from Wewoka, Oklahoma. Their efforts focused on the various Muskogee camps and the Dania Reservation in southeast Florida. Their mission was to help the Seminoles with their livestock, sickness, financial and legal problems as an opportunity to share a witness for Jesus Christ. The ministry of King resulted in the organization of the first Seminole Baptist congregation in Florida.

Several decades later, Southern Baptists had a renewed missionary vision to take the gospel to Florida's Seminole Indians. J. B. Rounds, superintendent of Indian Missions for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in the fall 1944 was visiting with Seminole Indian missionary Stanley Smith who worked in the several Seminole Reservations in South Florida. As was his practice, Rev. Rounds conducted revival services in several of the churches – Brighton, Dana, Indiantown – located near the Seminole tribe. Present at one of Rounds' preaching events was Seminole Indian medicine man Josie Billie who stepped forward to accept Christ.

Subsequently, **Billie and 21 other Seminoles were baptized into the Southern Baptist Mission Church held at the Big Cypress schoolhouse on January 21, 1945.** His life now made a 180-degree turnaround, and by his own testimony, Josie Billie began preaching to his own people almost immediately. He passed his medicine bundle to his brother Ingraham Billie, a symbol that he was passing the tribe's leadership to someone else.

Within the year, Billie told Missionary-Pastor Stanley Smith of God's call to ministry. Soon thereafter Smith assembled an ordination council of Anglo pastors to confirm Josie Billie's ministry call. **Billie received his license as a preacher and later was named the assistant pastor of the Big Cypress Baptist Church when it opened in 1948, as the third Seminole congregation.** Earlier in 1945 Billie had started the first of many annual trips to Oklahoma to preach to the Seminoles living there.

In addition to Josie Billie, five other newly converted Seminoles responded to the call of the preaching ministry. They were: Sammie Tommie, a former tribal chief; Billie Osceola, reputedly a "a great-grandson of Chief Osceola of Seminole War fame;" Barfield John; Junior Buster; and E. J. Tiger.



These newly ordained Seminole preachers knew they needed basic knowledge of the Bible and the basic skills to be a pastor. As a result of arrangements made by J. B. Rounds, the Home Mission Board provided scholarship funds to send the six to the fledgling then called Florida Baptist Institute (the early predecessor of the Baptist University of Florida). The group attended classes for three months for three years – from learning to read and write English to the practical skills of preparing and delivering a sermon.

Until his death in 1980: Josie Billie faithfully served his Big Cypress church; continued to travel annually on a revival circuit among the Seminole tribes; shared with outsiders the oral traditions of the medicine man's healing arts; and operated a small convenience store to support his family.

[RESOURCES: Roger C. Richards, *Still Telling the Story of Jesus: The Diamond Anniversary of The Baptist College of Florida*, (2018); Albert DeVane, "A Brief Biographical Sketch of Josie Billie;" William M. Straight, M.D., "Josie Billie, Seminole Doctor, Medicine Man and Baptist Preacher," *Journal of Florida Medical Association*, August, 1970; Joseph B. Covington, "Brighton Reservation, Florida, 1935 – 1938," *Tequesta*, (1976); Donald S. Hepburn and E. Earl Joiner, *Favored Florida* (2013); Edward Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists* (1972); photographs sourced from the State Library and Archives of Florida, <https://www.FloridaMemory.com/PhotographicCollection>]