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## Interpretation of the Artifact

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Interpretation of the Artifact

By

Jasmijn C. van Bruggen

A paper submitted to the

American Cultures Studies 105: History of Ethnic America class

Spring 2014



(A Seminole Family Group)

What does an artifact reveal about historical problems and realities faced at the moment it was produced? Edward H. Carr claimed that history was a dialogue of the past and the present, and that historical texts are products and evidence of history, which an historian interprets. In this way, he creates and preserves history. For the duration of this project I became a public historian, and learned the craft of interpreting the past, by using an archival postcard.

I chose this particular card because it depicted a particular Seminole family in, what seems to be, their natural habitat. However, when I examined the card more closely, I noticed a fence around one of the trees and the unnaturally festive way the family was dressed. Consequently, I commenced to wonder whether the picture was staged. I knew that the commonly held scholarly opinion about American Indians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was that they were seen as an “exotic” and “vanishing race,” which had to be preserved like an endangered species. This view was reinforced by popular culture of that time, such as in movies and art. As my archival postcard is an artifact of cultural nature, I reasoned it to be evidence for this popular perception. However, I knew that the Seminoles were warriors and fought battles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to keep their land and ways of life. Therefore, I could not accept that the Seminoles had just become mere species preserved in reservations. I found myself very intrigued by the unusual scenery on the card, thus I determined to test to what degree the early 20<sup>th</sup> century perception about American Indians, that we had learned, was indeed correct, or if I could interpret the artifact differently from the scholarly and popular opinion about that time.

My investigation consists of two parts: dating the card to verify the time the postcard represented, and reconstructing social settings in which the card was made, to interpret the card's content.

The card I studied is most probably authentic, as it is owned by and stored at the official Archive and Special Collection of the Loyola Marymount University library.

The postcard is made out of a somewhat thicker material; it is a linen-weave. The front is in good condition and the color has a high quality. It is colored with watercolors and by hand (Becht). The back does have a stain, but everything is readable (A Seminole Family Group).

Description of the front of the artifact:

*“A SEMINOLE FAMILY GROUP 106”* (A Seminole Family Group)

On the card is a Seminole family depicted. The man and the children are making little boats. In the background trees and houses are depicted (A Seminole Family Group).

According to Clay MacCauley, the Seminole Indians made their houses of materials taken from the Palmetto tree, and the platform is elevated about three feet from the ground to serve with a dry sitting when as often happened, the whole region is under water (63). As MacCauley’s description of the Seminole’s natural habitat coincides with the depiction on the postcard, it seems to be a natural, free living area, however, we clearly see a fence around the tree on the right. This suggests that they live in a reservation.

Description of the back of the artifact:

*“The Seminoles are the survivors of the Indians who were here before the Europeans came. They dress in brilliant garments consisting of a long skirt with short waist or jacket, decorated with silver and gold coins.”* (A Seminole Family Group)

Firstly, the back of the postcard has a dividing line printed on it, which provides for writing both correspondence and address. According to Dr. Rachel Wen-Paloutzian, the dividing line indicates that the card must be produced after 1907.

Description of the dividing line:

*“Tichnor quality views” made only by Tichnor brothers. Inc Boston, mass.”* (A Seminole Family Group)

The back of the postcard shows that it had been mailed by an individual, because of its handwritings:

*“Am taking a vacation here for a while away from the cold weather.*

*Wish you could be here with me.*

*Best wishes,*

*Juliette A. Nallace*

*Edge water Hotel*

*1R Av. + Beach drive”* (A Seminole Family Group)

*“Miss C. Harris*

*Ritch Field*

*Conn. Box 454”* (A Seminole Family Group)

Furthermore, the stamp is not printed on the back of the artifact; it is a hand-made stamp. According to Dr. Wen-Paloutzian, this shows that the card was privately produced and commercially sold. Therefore, it is a postcard, and not a postal card.

The stamp contains the following text:

*Saint Peters Org*

*FEB 10*

*230 PM*

*1940*

*FLA* (A Seminole Family Group)

The stamp on the postcard shows that it was mailed in the year 1940. Due to this and a workshop conducted by Dr. Wen-Paloutzian, I determined that this date should coincide with the date of the card production, and I confirmed this by analyzing the characteristics of the postcard, and consulting handouts, websites suggested by Dr. Wen-Paloutzian, and two

additional Library websites, which provided information about the publisher of the card.

I determined that the artifact I am studying is made out of a linen-weave, as it is really colorful and I can see the raised grain of the original card (Postcard Era History). Andrew J. Morris describes this material as a higher quality paper, resembling linen. The texture of the surface exists of hatch work lines, dots or small squares, and a characteristic is that it has been colored and printed to the edge. According to Morris, during the Linen era, non-linen cards were produced too. However, the Linen card was numerically dominant. The years 1930 until 1945 are known as the Linen era (Morris), and as the postcard is made out of linen, the date of production could coincide with the date of the stamp, thus this is evidence for the fact that the postcard is produced in 1940.

The dividing line at the back of the card shows that the postcard is published by the Tichnor Brothers Incorporation. According to an article on the website of the Boston Public Library, this incorporation published a lot of color postcards with a linen texture between the late 1940's to 1960's. The concentration of the card images was on American vacation places (Postcard Collection). The hand-written text: "*Am taking a vacation here for a while away from the cold weather*" (A Seminole Family Group), indicates that this was indeed the case. These aspects thus coincide with the initially determined date too.

According to the official website of the Metropolitan Postcard Club, the Tichnor Brothers Inc. produced their view-cards on a national level. It is therefore possible that this is a legitimate Tichnor Brothers Inc. card, as the company is in Boston, and the card is sent from Florida (Petruilis).

Furthermore, the image of the postcard itself provides evidence for the date of production, as a fence is depicted around a tree on the right side of the image. Hence, I infer that this Seminole family lives in a reservation. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Florida Seminoles re-established limited relations with the US government, and they received 5,000 acres of

reservation lands in 1930 (Mahon, Weisman 185). However, according to John K. Mahon and Brent R. Weisman it was not until the 1940's that the Seminoles moved to the reservations (185). Thus, as the family is depicted in a reservation, it is very possible that the card was made in 1940.

On a website specialized in dating postcard stamps, suggested by Dr. Wen-Paloutzian, I have searched for the date of usage of the stamp box. However, the stamp back of this card was not listed on this website. I did find a stamp back that looked like the stamp box on my card, and this one was dated between 1924 and 1953 (Real Photo Postcard Stamp Backs). This implies that this stamp could be evidence for the production of the card in 1940. Nevertheless, this evidence alone would not be sufficient as this stamp box is produced by the Gowan Sutton Company in Canada, and it is not certain if the Tichnor Brothers Inc. knew of this company and copied it in the same time period (Real Photo Postcard Stamp Backs). However, the price on the stamp provides more evidence. Table 1, from the article "How to Date U.S. Postcards by Postage Amount" provides evidence for the postcard being made in between 1928-1951, as the stamp on the postcard says that the card was one cent.

Table 1

How to Date U.S. Postcards by Postage Amount

Postage Rate	Valid for Years
One Cent	1898 – 1917
	1919 – 1925
	1928 – 1951

Source: "Real Photo Postcard Stamp Backs." *Playle's*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Sept. 2013. Table 3.



By consulting these various sources, I have confirmed that the year 1940, is the production year of this postcard. Next, I will investigate socio-historical settings of the Seminoles during the 1940's, in order to interpret the postcard in my own way. Firstly, I will consult the demographics of the United States, the state Florida, and the Seminole tribe from this year.

In the 1940's:

Total population USA: 132.2 Million ("1940-2010 How has American Changed?")

Total American Indians: 350.000 ("1940-2010 How has American Changed?")

Total population Florida: 1.897.414 ("Resident Population and Apportionment of the U.S. House of Representatives")

Indians in Seminole area: Table 1

Table 2

Village, town, and city population changes in the Seminole Area, 1920-1940

Agglomeration	1940	1930	1920	Change 1930-1940	Per cent of Change 1930-1940	Change 1920-1930	Per cent of change 1920-1930
<b>Village</b>							
Asher	507	653	370	- 146	- 22.3	283	76.5
Bowlegs	303	464	---	- 161	- 23.7	---	---
Earlsbro	486	1,950	317	- 1,464	- 75.0	1,633	515,4
Francis	370	607	911	- 237	- 39.7	- 304	- 33,3
St. Louis	326	493	---	- 167	- 33.9	---	---
Sasakwa	532	781	355	- 249	- 31.8	426	120.0
<b>Towns</b>							
Allen	1,389	1,438	1,377	- 49	- 3.4	61	4.4
Konawa	2,206	2,070	896	135	6.5	1,174	132.1
Maud	2,036	4,326	637	- 2,290	- 52.9	3,689	579.1
Tecumseh	2,042	2,419	1,429	- 377	- 15.7	990	69.2
<b>Cities</b>							
Ada	15,143	11,261	8,012	3,882	34.5	3,249	40.6
Holdenville	6,632	7,268	2,932	- 636	- 8,6	4,336	147.9
Seminole	11,547	11,459	854	88	0.8	10,605	1,241.8
Shawnee	22,053	23,283	15,348	- 1,230	- 5,3	7,935	51.7
Wewoka	10,315	10,401	1,520	- 86	- 0,8	8,881	584.3

Source: Morris, John W. *Population Changes in the Greater Seminole Area 1920-1940*. Rep.

Digital Library of Oklahoma, n.d. Web. 29 Sept. 2013. Table 7.

Having consulted this table, I was able to determine that the population in Seminole areas increased between 1920 and 1930 to 78,872 people, but decreased to 75,886 people between 1930 and 1940. According to Roger Daniels' research in "Coming to America", the number of immigrants and the total population of American Indians in the United States decreased between 1930 and 1945, due to the Great Depression of the 1930s and the World War (23). These numbers suggest that the Seminole tribe was indeed a "vanishing" and "exotic race", and this would imply that the commonly held scholarly opinion about these American Indians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century would be accurate.

In order to find out more about what my postcard reveals about the problems and realities that the Seminole Tribe in 1940, I will analyze the Seminole's history. I will begin years after the Third Seminole War (1855-1858), in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there was only a small population of Seminoles, who lived on the fringes of society. On the official website of the Seminole Tribe, I found that the Seminoles already made livings being guides and curiosities for tourists (Steele). This could explain why the writer of this postcard chose this card; she was on vacation and might have visited the Seminoles.

Furthermore, I researched the policy studies regarding the Seminole tribe in Florida. In 1907, The Department of the Interior set aside land for Seminoles to use, and in 1911, President Taft set aside lands too. However, the State Governor of Florida vetoed this to happen, as he did not want the Seminoles to have citizen rights of Florida. Nevertheless, by 1913 there were 18 Indian reservations in Florida (Steele). Thus, according to William Steele of the Seminole website, people shared different opinions about the Seminole Indians on a level of the nation and on the level of the state. On a national level, the government tried to give the Seminoles the opportunity to have land, but the government of the state Florida was not in favor of this to happen. Also, the Seminoles themselves resisted life on these reservations. This led to the dividing of the native peoples into a group that accepted the

reservations and left the state, and a small group which stayed in Florida, and held their traditional views (Steele).

In 1930, the Florida Seminoles had re-established limited relations with the US government and it received reservation lands. However, most Seminoles did not move to these reservations until 1940. The tribe had resisted life on reservations, as the idea of land ownership had long been “a point of contention between the red and white races” (Steele).

After their move, the Seminoles reorganized their government. Mahon and Weisman claim that the 1950’s could thus be seen as a turning point in the history of the Florida Seminole people. Tribal leaders found themselves having to address many significant issues during this period (Mahon, Weisman 186). In 1953, the US Congress passed legislation to terminate federal tribal programs. While the State of Florida supported termination of services to the Seminoles, Tribal members and their supporters were able to successfully argue against termination. Instead of being terminated, Tribal leaders moved forward and by 1957 had drafted a Tribal constitution. (Steele).

In 1957, the Florida Seminole Tribe of Indians was granted legal status as a federally recognized tribe. However, according to Brent R. Weisman, its membership was primarily drawn from populations outside of Florida, and many families living in the Everglades and in the West did not join the Seminole tribe at that time. They gained federal status as the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians and were granted a small reservation, in 1961. Later, the state of Florida granted the Miccosukee’s additional acreage adjacent to the Seminole reservation (149).

After researching the policy studies regarding the Seminole tribe in Florida, I commenced to think that the Seminole tribe was not necessarily regarded as an “exotic race” in 1940. On a federal level, the government wanted to recognize the Seminoles as citizens, which would mean that they would be an “equal race.” However, the governor of Florida

opposed that proposition. From this information, I concluded that the Seminole tribe was rather looked at with great confusion; their position in society was not determined.

Whilst doing research for the public opinion on the Seminoles around 1940, I could not find journals or newspapers with articles regarding the American Indian tribe in 1940. However, the American Indians had a big influence in the art of cinema in this year. In order to find out what the public opinion about American Indians in this time was, I have analyzed how American Indians were portrayed in films versus the white men.

In 1940, Kenneth Roberts released his film 'Northwest Passage' about the French-Indian War, which impressed critics and pleased audiences. In this film the Indians are portrayed with white crosses painted across their chests, torn bodies, and children being mutilated. At one point, they are even being referred to as 'red hellions'. When a white general and his men want to sneak in the Indians Village, they do so without the Indians hearing or seeing them. According to Bob Herzberg, throughout their sometimes dubious tenure in American films, the Indians of the movies would attain many persistent disabilities, especially when Caucasians were sneaking into their camps. Though actual Natives are historically known for having the eyes of an eagle, the ears of a fox, and the feet of a gazelle, Hollywood Indians have the clumsiness of an ox, and ears filled with cotton-balls. 'Northwest Passage' was one of the most successful films of the year, therefore patriotic themes would abound in the films ahead, as Hollywood continued its lionizing biographies of great white warriors, and foolish Indians (70). The film 'Kit Carson', which was released in 1940 too, also had a message of patriotism and promoting an agenda of military intervention on foreign soil. This seemed to be an appropriate analogy for the times. Herzberg claimed that these movies addressed patriotism and heroism, which were at the order of the day. However, questioning governmental authority was also a prominent theme in other films, and this vision was also translated in history books, films and television (89).

According to Herzberg, the image of the Indian changed as the war continued, as they became supporting players in the stories of white heroes. The themes of intervention on foreign soil would be promoted, and the Natives were villains, who were euphemistically triggering such intervention. The Western was becoming more like the newspapers of the day (90). However, Hollywood would never attempt to accurately recreate history; they would occasionally claim to enlighten the public, but entertainment and money were their most important goals. Therefore, the public was often incorrectly informed about American Indians, and this negatively influenced the public opinion about them (Herzberg 102). Thus, these films, which were the most important films of 1940, did not use the popular, scholarly opinion of the “vanishing” and “exotic race.” Also, as American Indians were portrayed in different manners, I determined that the media as well as the public was confused about their position in society.

Having consulted different sources, I was able to determine the positioning of American Indians within the US society at the moment the card was made. By seeing that the population of the Seminoles in 1940 decreased, I found that the influence of the Seminoles tribe decreased. Also, the total American Indian population consisted of around 350.000 people in 1940, but many American Indians fought in the war, so this amount decreased (1940-2010 How has American Changed?). Therefore, I determined that the American Indian population could indeed be regarded as an “exotic race.”

By consulting policy studies of the US government and the reactions of the Seminoles, I found that there was a lot of confusion about their position in US society; On a national level, the government recognized the problem of the American Indians, and it took action by setting aside land for reservations. However, on a level of state Florida, the governor did not want to give recognize the American Indians and give them citizen rights (Steele). These developments resulted in different opinions and views of the public. In the tribe itself, the

thoughts about US government and its setting aside of reservations, were divided too (Steele). The tribe did not have a structured organization yet, so decisions about where to live, could not be made. Thus, I conclude that the Seminole tribe was confused about its position too (Mahon, Weisman 186).

Furthermore, Western Americans' opinion about how to handle the American Indians was divided, which became clear in the media, in 1940 especially in films. Films were patriotic and heroic. American Indians were portrayed as wild, primal and foolish due to their disabilities. Later in the year, an agenda of military intervention of foreign soil was promoted too (Herzberg 93). The questioning of governmental authority became a prominent theme in the media. As Hollywood did not recreate history accurately, the audience was often incorrectly informed (Herzberg 102).

All in all, my research led me to an unexpected conclusion; the Seminole tribe was not necessarily regarded as an "exotic and vanishing race" in 1940. Rather, after making my own interpretation of the postcard, I concluded that there was confusion about the situation of the Seminole tribe in Florida. After analyzing the postcard, I do believe that this is recognizable in the image. At first sight, the family in the image seems to live in their natural habitat. However, when I analyzed the picture, I noticed that a fence is built around the tree and the Seminole family was in unnaturally festive clothes. This implies that the family was living in a reservation, and the image on the postcard was staged. This might provoke confusion to the consumers of the postcards (A Seminole Family Group).

In the image (A Seminole Family Group), the Seminole family is peacefully illustrated. In my opinion, this vision is influenced by the time period in which it was made, as there was no clear or extremist opinion about the Seminole tribe. Most of them moved to the reservation in this year, and they were used as guides or attraction for tourists. This becomes clear out of the writings on the back of the postcard too (A Seminole Family Group).

There was no conflict about the tribes between the federal government and the governor of the state anymore, as the majority moved to the reservations. It seems like the Seminole tribe and the government finally made an agreement about where to live (Steele).

As Carr quoted that every civilized man, is molded by society and the society is molded by him, the historian is influenced too. By consulting the sources I used, I determined that the producer of the image of the postcard is influenced. Due to media, the historian does not have a clear, extreme meaning about the situation of the Seminoles. Rather, the producer is confused, probably due to confusion in the government and so in the media. Carr also claims that the knowledge of a historian is developed by the knowledge of the generations before him, hereby Carr means that the historian is also influenced by the past. Before the year 1940, it seemed like the government and the Seminole tribe could not come eye to eye, as the government itself did not agree how to handle the American Indians on a state and national level, and the Seminole tribe itself had different opinions about whether to agree with the government and settle at a reserve. There was a clear conflict in the opinion of both sides, and therefore we can retrieve this conflict and confusion in the image.

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