

WILD CAT'S DEATH AND BURIAL

By Kenneth W. Porter

That Wild Cat (Coacoochee), son of King Philip (Emathla), noted leader in the Seminole War and of the Seminole migration to Mexico, 1849-1850, died of smallpox in Coahuila in 1857, has been well-known for sixty or seventy years to anyone sufficiently interested to turn to the easily accessible printed sources,¹ but details concerning his death and burial have been lacking. The circumstance that the sources for the bare facts, while readily available, are not well-known to the layman, has resulted, further, in some positively erroneous conceptions which, while probably not wide spread, are nevertheless worthy of correction.

The official historian of the 8th U .S. Infantry, for example, in a publication of 1873, stated that Wild Cat was brained "on the banks of the Rio Grande" by a whiskey-bottle in the hands of "Gopher John," who, for this or some other unspecified offense, met death by the rope in Northern Mexico;² Gopher John (nickname of the Seminole Negro chief more properly known as John Horse, John Cavallo, or Juan Caballo) was, at the time of publication, actually living on the military reservation of Fort Duncan, Eagle Pass, Texas! It is probably only a coincidence that a shadowy tradition exists among some of the Seminole Indians of Oklahoma that Wild Cat was somehow made away with by the Seminole Negroes in order that they might gain possession of the land granted to the Seminole by the Mexican government.³

This rumor is contradicted not only by all the known circumstances of Wild Cat's death but also by the esteem in which he was held by the Seminole Negroes whom he led, and which their descendants still display at any mention of his name. The suspicion is based on the circumstance that the Seminole Negroes of Naciminto, Coahuila, near the headwaters of the Rio Sabinas, in the Santa Rosa Mountains, now occupy half of the land granted in 1852 to Wild Cat's followers (the other half is in the possession of Kickapoo Indians) and on a false conception of the circumstances of the grant, which is derived in turn from a misinterpretation of the relations between the Indians and Negroes who followed Wild Cat to Mexico. This misinterpretation, finally, results from the assump-

¹ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1870, pp. 328-329; *Reports of the Committee of Investigation sent in 1873 by the Mexican Government to the Frontiers of Texas*, N. Y., 1875, pp. 407-412.

² Wilhelm, Thomas, *History of the Eighth U. S. Infantry*, 2 vols., Headquarters, Eighth Infantry, 1873, vol. i, pp. 159, 173-174.

³ Thanks are due to C. C. Patten, Wewoka, Oklahoma, who in 1921 accompanied a party of Seminole to Mexico to investigate the possibilities of recovering the Wild Cat land-grant, for informing me of this tradition. Mr. Patten states that "A-ha-la-chochee," Wild Cat's grandson, who was in the party, did not think that the Negroes had murdered his grandfather, but was under the impression that they had improperly acquired the land-grant.

tion that "slavery" among the Seminole Indians, in Florida and the Indian Territory, was similar to the "Peculiar Institution" of the *ante-bellum South*, and that the Negroes with Wild Cat were "slaves" to the Indians among his followers.

The testimony of contemporary observers—Indian agents, army officers, and others—is unanimous that, among the Seminole, slavery, so-called, was a mutually advantageous arrangement, a sort of primitive democratic feudalism, whereby the Negroes, through being claimed by Indian "masters," were protected against seizure by outsiders and, in turn, paid a tribute in kind to their protectors; but lived in separate villages, possessed their own fields, flocks, and herds, carried arms, and were commanded by Negro chiefs, subject, of course, to the orders of the principal Indian leader, whoever he might be. Thus the Indians who migrated to Mexico were directly commanded by Wild Cat and the Negroes by John Horse, but all obeyed the head-chief, who was Wild Cat. The grants of land by the Mexican government to Wild Cat and his followers were accordingly made not to the Seminole Indians alone, but to the Seminole, the Kickapoo who acknowledged his authority, and the "Mascogos"—the last designation referring to the Seminole Negroes.

Let it be hastily admitted that "Mascogos" is a term which would more properly apply to Creek Indians than to Seminole Negroes, but the fact remains that when Mexican officials and official documents used the word, they meant "los negros libres (Mascogos)"—probably in reference to the fact that these Negroes were "Mascogos" linguistically. An approach to an understanding of the Wild Cat *hegira* can be attained only at the cost—in some cases doubtless a heavy one—of realizing that among the Seminole Indians a "slave" was not a slave in the sense understood by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Gone with the Wind*, or any slave-code, ancient or modern, and that although "Mascogo" *should* mean Creek, in this particular connection it signified, Humpty Dumpty fashion, a free Seminole Negro. An insistence that words must be and always are used in their dictionary-meanings can result only in utter confusion. I was informed in all gravity and sincerity, by a gentleman of Muzquiz, that a large element of the Wild Cat immigrants were Creek Indians, and that the Negroes "came as slaves of the Seminoles, with fetters on their wrists and brands on their faces"—so strong the influence of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* pattern—despite the notorious opposition of the Creeks to Wild Cat's enterprise and the contemporary evidence that the Negroes actually came as allies of the Indians, under their own chief, with guns across their saddles and dirks in their sashes.

The Seminole Negroes of Nacimiento, consequently, occupy their land simply by virtue of the Mexican government's grant to the "Mascogos" and not because, by force or fraud, they "done away" with Wild Cat or hocus-pocused "the papers" out of the possession of the Indians.

In the spring of 1857 Wild Cat and some of his followers were out scouting against the wild Indians, performing the military service by which they held their land. On their return from this expedition they camped at a place called Alto, near Muzquiz. There the smallpox struck them and many died (a newspaper account says 40), including the chief. Just north of Muzquiz, on the road to Nacimiento, is a two-story building, with a vacant lot next to it, not far from the cemetery and on the opposite side of the road. There Wild Cat and his followers were camped; there they died and were buried on the spot. Later the Mexicans dug up their bones and carted them away "the way they do."⁴

There was mourning in Nacimiento at the news, and particularly at Wild Cat's death. "We all just cried and cried," an aged Seminole Negro woman remembered over seventy years later, "he was so good!"⁵

The Seminole of the Indian Territory had in 1856 been granted their independence from the Creek Nation, and this doubtless was influential in causing all, or nearly all, the Indians to return to the Territory during the few years following Wild Cat's death, 1858-1861. The Mexican government then persuaded the Negroes to remove to the south, to the Laguna de Parras, on the plea that their diminished numbers would expose them to raids from Texas filibusters, but actually, it is probable, to employ them as scouts against the Apache who were ravaging that part of the country. Early in 1865 a large band of Kickapoo entered Mexico, seeking to avoid involvement in the Civil War, and at the invitation of a few fellow-tribesmen who had come to Mexico with Wild Cat and had remained when the main body returned to the United States; they were granted the land which had been abandoned by the Seminole. Part of the Negroes had already returned to Nacimiento from the Laguna, and more were to follow, frequently after a sojourn of greater or lesser duration in Texas, where they served as scouts for the United States, as formerly for the Mexican government.

Nacimiento de los Negros now has a population of about 500, perhaps 350 of whom are to a greater or lesser degree of Seminole Negro blood; *Nacimiento de los Indios*, five miles up the river, is populated by about the same number of Kickapoo. John Horse's burial-place no one knows—he died in mysterious circumstances, ca. 1885, while on a mission to Porfirio Diaz—but Wild Cat's last campground is still pointed out. Both men are remembered with gratitude and affection by the people of Nacimiento and their several hundred kinsfolk in Brackettville, Texas.

⁴Mrs. Charles (Sarah Factor) Daniels (1850-), Nacimiento, Coah.; Mrs. Adams (Rosa Dixon) Fay (ca. 1860-), Brackettville, Tex.; *San Antonio Texan*, June 18, 1857.

⁵Foster, Lawrence, *Negro-Indian Relations in the Southeast*, Philadelphia, 1935, pp. 42-49.