

REMEMBERING BUSTER

A nurseryman recalls the days when he built a chickee with the Seminole who was the last to dwell in one on the Treasure Coast



BY GARY ROBERTS

I don't remember exactly how I met Buster Tommie, but it was in the early 1980s and it undoubtedly had to do with chickees. Buster lived in one at the Tommie family camp on Midway Road about a mile west of the I-95 exit and I wanted a chickee built on my property, which was less than 2 miles from Buster's.

My plan was to build one for posterity's sake and to record the process. I recall driving into Buster's camp, with his family dogs announcing my arrival. Buster, who spoke broken English, was happy to assist with my construction plans for a price of which I was happy to pay.

Buster's first order of business was to correct my Creek mispronunciations. Although everywhere I read or heard that an indigenous Seminole home is a "chickee," Buster sternly and proudly shared that the correct pronunciation was "chi-goo." He continued my lesson by telling me that Yeehaw Junction should actually be pronounced "yah haw," not the cowbody-sounding "yeehaw" and that ya haw was the Seminole word for wolf. I thought maybe he meant coyote because I was not aware that Florida ever had native wolves. I further pondered the possibility that Buster might have been pulling my leg.

When invited into Buster's chickee, I couldn't help but think how difficult it must have been to live there, with no air-conditioner or fan and no mosquito netting to fight bugs. His only nod to modernity seemed to be chicken wire he arranged around his four cypress uprights to keep critters out. Besides a

well and a pump in the middle of the camp, I could find no other essentials we all take for granted.

By the time I visited Buster's family camp, only about three or four chickees remained, each about 20 feet apart. Each open-air lodge was about 18 by 16 and stood about 12-feet high at the peak, with the traditional raised platform about 4 feet high in the interior middle, which served as living room and bedroom.

While building my chickee, I picked up Buster on Saturday mornings. Buster didn't drive. Our first weekend was spent locating a dense native bald cypress hammock in a friend's ranch to select tall, thin and straight specimens about 8-10 inches at the base. The stouter bottom would create the main corner poles and the thinner ends made up the structure's connecting cross beams. We got the materials back to our construction site, and Buster showed me how to swing a machete to skin the small branches and bark off the hammock hardwoods so termites would not destroy it later.

After erecting the cypress poles, our next task was to collect the roofing materials — native green fronds from cabbage palms. We traveled to another friend's ranch and along the way Buster pointed out the general area of Seminole burial grounds. He wouldn't disclose exactly where his ancestors were buried, but he indicated that he still walked several miles there to remember and honor them. Buster lamented that the burial ground was now on private property and he could not understand how people could "own" land. "How far down and how high up could they own?" he

asked rhetorically.

I was surprised at the amount of fronds we needed for the roof. It took at least four truckloads one day and a return on another weekend to fulfill the required quota. When attaching the roofing materials, Buster showed me how the first and bottom row went down with a special fold and how tightly together the rest lined up. Each frond was evenly spaced and lined up vertically about three inches apart. The frond stalks are connected to 4- to 6-inch thick cypress crossbeams and overlap the row below with each new row above.

Job done, we both stood admiring our completed work. To me it looked perfect, but I sensed he saw a few imperfections he wasn't happy about. Buster told me the thatched roof would last for five to seven years before needing to be replaced, but the cypress framework would last for many years.

After the chickee project, I returned to Buster's camp several times. On one occasion, I gave him a gift and he returned the favor, sauntering out to his garden to pick the choicest tomatoes he had grown.

Buster's life at the camp did not continue much longer after our time together, as the property that was promised to his Seminole princess mother was taken away by lawyers when the land's value became too great. Buster later moved to the Brighton Reservation and lived in traditional housing. He died a few years ago. The thought of him living within the confines of four walls was a disturbing one. *✍*

Gary Roberts is a former columnist for The Tribune and is the owner of Gary Roberts Nursery & Landscape in Fort Pierce.