



FLORIDA STORIES
By Florida Humanities Council

**Remembering a
legendary woman**

“At times my memory goes back to the days when I used to see old people sit around a campfire,” recalled Betty Mae Jumper, an elder of Florida’s Seminole Indian Tribe. “After the evening meal is over, children gather around for older people to tell them stories. This was the way that young people were taught the rules of life and their clan’s ways.”

Those old days and old ways lived in the memories of this legendary Seminole woman, who died a year ago (Jan. 14, 2011) at the age of 88. Betty Mae Jumper helped lead her tribe’s transition from the grinding poverty of its isolated rural existence during the first half of the 20th century to its current prosperity.

Born in 1923, she was almost killed by a few Seminole men who called her a “half-breed” because her father was white. They claimed she would bring bad luck to the tribe. Her great-uncle, a powerful medicine man, grabbed his rifle and drove them off.



The little girl grew up to become the first female ever elected to lead a federally recognized American Indian tribe. She also was among the first members of her tribe to master reading, the first to receive a high school diploma, and the first to earn a nursing degree.

As a young woman, she used her education to bring modern medical treatment to her people, when many of them still didn't trust white-man's medicine. In the 1950s she helped organize the tribe's governmental structure.

In 1967 the tribe elected her to be its chair, or "chief"—its top leadership position, which she held for a four-year-term. She also founded, and for many years edited, the tribe's newspaper, the *Seminole Tribune*.

Throughout her life, she also was a tribal storyteller, recounting the traditional Seminole legends that she heard as a child sitting around the campfire in the backcountry of South Florida. She strived to pass on this heritage to the tribe's young people, to make sure the legends didn't die when she and other elders died. She put them in writing in the book, *Legends of the Seminoles*.

In reflecting on the 20th century, Betty Mae Jumper said that for a long time outsiders had outdated impressions of Florida's Indians. "Before we learned how to work within the system, people liked to see us wrestle alligators, make patchwork, operate a few stores, and work in commercial tourist villages where people pay to go see Indians.

"Some people still like to see us as we were back in the 1920s or 1930s. But many young [Seminoles] are interested in a higher standard of living, as in the outside world. The money we make from cigarettes and bingo [and now



casinos] goes into tribal improvements so in the future [we don't] have to sit by roads trying to sell little baskets or dolls.”

Yet she savored aspects of those old times. When asked what she missed the most about them, she said, “The quiet. We used to sit outside and you could hear the hawks and owls and whippoorwills. We would sit around a campfire and listen to the birds and frogs. The peaceful sounds. That was wonderful. That’s what I miss the most. The quiet.”

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