

EPIC OF WILDCAT: COACOOCHEE
BY JAMES E. TOKLEY, SR.,
POET LAUREATE, TAMPA

INTRODUCTION

I

Silent grows the mud-soaked land
as if it were, indeed, asleep
Or as if a prayerful, mothering hand
had bade it softly, "Do not weep!"
But what lies buried in the swamp
Cannot be silenced by the pomp / &
Circumstance of Modern Day/ that
Would have us put our past away.
For, I come not, here, to turn a thorn
But to bear a legacy reborn!

II

Wild Cat, I sing . . . Coacoochee!
King Philip's proud boy-child, who, but he,
Brown-eyed, but deadly, slender-built
A saw grass palm that would not wilt,
But was wild & rangy. Playmates named / him
Panther-Child with Eyes of Flame!
His closest friend was Gopher John
Whom Osceola leaned upon. . .
O! Gopher John whose speech was slow
But whose back was built like an archer's bow...
Black Seminole, dark as sun-scorched lead!
Could eat deer meat off of Wild Cat's head
Then Osceola, he, whose fame was played/ &
replayed throughout the Everglades. . .
Some say his blood flowed Black & Red
With a scarlet sash 'round his handsome head
With ostrich feathers black & white
Which made the Chief resemble a bird in flight!
& Together with courageous Seminole Braves,
They fought such men who would make them slaves!

III

So, hear me, Swamp Fox, Red-tailed Hawk! / &
Panther Cat who screams each time she talks,
Gruff Alligator, drowsy-eyed,
Who sleeps to ambush by surprise,
Wake up my old friend Manatee
So he can sing this song with me
As I weave the tale of Coacoochee . . .
Wild Cat, young Seminole, tried & true

IV

You mechanized men with your painted wives/ &
Your children like honeybees 'round a hive,
What could you know about the dead
Who sleep with anger, yet, unsaid. . .
Whose flesh now festers in the mud
Of countless fierce torrential floods
& rainy days when storm clouds screamed
in anguish of tormented dreams?
Unknot your tie and sit by me
T'is a story, no doubt, t'will fascinate you

CHAPTER ONE (DAYS OF CALM)

I shall begin when there was peace
When Seminoles were not hunted beasts
& the Cypress swamp was a refuge place
For people of a darker face.
Their children gathered berries wild
In every hand, a Seminole child
Cupped breakfast fresh from where it grew:
Sweet berries clustered, midnight blue!
No coral snake had need to strike &
Rattle snakes hunted only at night
For, harmony ruled this fertile land
Of Seminoles and Africans, as one clan! / &
It was here, young Osceola fell
In love with a woman who could not tell
His color, save she loved him back
For, he was almond-skinned though she was black,
A runaway slave from a whipping field!
He found her & their love set sail
In the eyes of all who saw the light

Of a love that was colorless, in God's sight!
In fact, t'were many tales to tell
Like theirs, in the canebrakes where they dwelled
Where Spain left Red and Black alone
To begin a nation of their own!

CHAPTER TWO
(TROUBLE ON THE HORIZON)

I

But directly north was another land
Whose subjects favored darker plans
& lived by a creed that cursed black skin /&
That saw all Africans as less than men! / so,
They hunted their brothers & sisters down
& Black folks ran where they couldn't be found
Like Osceola's wife, they flew to the South
& Proclaimed their Liberty with one mouth,
One heart to beat
One song to sing
One life to protect despite the sting
Of white fists pounding savage drums
Of human bondage, blood & guns!

II

Black runaways lived
With their newfound friends,
They who were also wanted men/ &
Women whom the Creeks had sought
To re-enslave, should they be caught!
Thus, Black & Red would dwell in peace
As Blacks had done, in a land Far East
Before white men with fire-sticks
Plucked skulls like berries children pick.
& the oak trees of Florida saw it all
But would not speak though slave catchers called
& used their boughs on many a night
to stretch black necks they caught in flight!

III

But Osceola & his wife,
Sweet Cher-to-Cher, lived an ideal life
Till slavers stole the one he craved
To drag her back as a common slave!
Then Osceola – shattered man –
Put down his pride & sought his friend
Coacoochee, King Philip's son,
& Tearfully told what thieves had done!
T'was then he begged the Great Wild Cat
To rescue his wife & bring her back!

IV

Ol' Gopher John, with his sable skin,
Who knew what drew those ghost-faced men
Who loved wild gopher, so, he stole
Fat turtles & the ghost-men ate them whole –
Ol' Gopher John laughed & loved to tell
How White-eyes even ate the shells
As they boiled the guts that tried to hide
In a turtle shell that had good meat inside!
But when his friend, Coacoochee
Told Gopher John what happened, then he could not see
to see for the angry tears that scratched his face
As he swore he would seek vengeance for his newfound
Race!

V

So, Coacoochee & Gopher John
Took up their knives & flint-lock guns
& with them, red and black men swore
To wage what we remember as the
Second Seminole War!

CHAPTER TWO (THE STRUGGLE)

I

How could you know, who slept straight through
The guns of World Wars One & Two . . . / the
Korean conflict . . . Vietnam
A Desert Storm of strife & sand
The terror and the agony
Of the slaughter of a folk who once were free?
Therefore, no doubt, you could not see

The vengeance of Coacoochee,
Which all his captains brought to light
In the savage wars they had to fight. . .
For wife & child . . . for home, they strove
For a legacy of life that Freedom loved. . .
For a story, too many years, has lain
In the silent tombs of countless slain!

II

So, let me tell you about the day
Chief Osceola went to pay
Respects to General Jessup who said he would
Receive the Great Chief & treat him good!
Instead, old Jessup laid a snare
He caught Osceola & Cher-to-Cher
& gave her to slavers to do with as they pleased
While he left poor Osceola a prisoner, on his knees!
Coacoochee was captured, too
But they say a Wild Cat saved him. So, to freedom
He flew
He fled like the stars, to come again
But when he came back, he brought brave men!
& Osceola, who would soon escape,
brought back with him Great Coral Snake
& Rattle Snake, he brought him, too,
with Alligator, stiff & crawling through
brown, brackish water to exact
revenge for his brothers: Seminole and Black!

III

Said Andrew Jackson, what he saw:
“This war was not an Indian war,
But a Negro-conflict, sable-skin’d
That the Seminoles just got caught up in!”
But what Old Hickory had not found
Was their skin was red, but their eyes were brown,
As were the eyes of Africans
whose blood was as red as a Seminole son’s!

IV

But they could not fight what they could not see
So, Seminoles fought like panthers, in the marshy Florida bush
Zack Taylor’s troops were murdered as they desperately
to push/ their Delaware and Shawnee scouts into a miry doom
beneath a muskeg moon!

V

Yet, slavers came & would not stop
T'ill they'd all, but overrun the lot
Of Seminoles who had fought them fair
Coacoochee was bested there
& Gopher John was forced to flee
His dreams of new-found Liberty!
So many died, their bodies left
In the dank swamp mud that ate their deaths
& cloaked their bones until such time
they might be raised in epic rhyme!
This, too, I tell, for, the time is right
As Seminoles rise again to fight!

VI

To remind us all, lest we forget
They have not been defeated, yet!
These words I sing to keep them free:
Chief Osceola, Coacoochee . . .
Chief Gopher John & the ones they loved
Brave Ghosts of a Great Time, I speak of,
Who march anew down modern streets
Who once walked footpaths in bare feet
& Children's arms with berries blue
as midnight, paint the morning dew!

CONCLUSION

I

How dare we say,
Who live here, now,
That we are the rightful heirs, somehow
Of all the property we survey
What price the blood we did not pay?
To have won this land that was not ours
With a foreign sense of greed & power
Taken from a proud-but-peaceful folk
Whose Freedom-love & lives we broke?

II

Coacoochee, young Wild Cat, hear
The song I sing, so sweet & clear
& If you could, but sense my plea,
Forgive this land, Coacoochee
& Billy Bowlegs, standing straight
Put down your anger; stem your hate

While awkward strangers roam around
Your gambling dens, more lost than found!
& With your winnings, take once more,
Those sacred lands, which once were yours!

III

I conjure you with poet's words!
A Golden Ibis (sacred bird
Of Paradise) / & a manatee weep
For a secret they no longer keep
But tell their children
while they can
Of Coacoochee, who was once a man!

For, he now is heard in the Everglades
With the voice of a Wild Cat,
Unafraid!
O' Strangers, do remember me
& The song I sing of Coacoochee!

##

Copyright © 2011 James E. Tokley, Sr. All Rights Reserved for James E. Tokley, Sr.

Estate