

Billy Bowlegs

Billy Bowlegs did not come by his name from riding a horse or any other deformity of his legs. As a matter of fact, they were reported to be perfectly straight. It was a family name passed down to him. It is believed that the original English version of his name was Billy Bolek and slaves who escaped into the Florida swamps would pronounce the name as Bowlegs. His Indian name was Halpatter Micco, or Halpuda Mikko, meaning “Alligator Chief”, and he was born sometime around 1810 to Secoffee and his wife, full-blooded Mikasuki Seminoles.



Billy (**Photo at left**) learned about war early in his life. The first of three Seminole Wars, also known as the Florida Wars was fought in 1817 and 1818 when General Andrew Jackson, future seventh president of the US, led the US Army in an invasion because the Seminoles were attacking American settlers moving into Florida and because they were also providing a haven for escaping slaves. A treaty was reached later in 1818 and some of the Seminoles were moved to reservations west of the Mississippi River. Although Billy was only a child at the time, he learned of the treacherous ways of the US Army and the US Government.

The US Government and the Seminoles signed the Treaty of Payne’s Landing on May 2, 1832. Basically, the terms of the treaty called for seven Seminole chiefs to travel to the proposed reservations and inspect the land to determine if was acceptable for them to inhabit. If acceptable, the Seminoles would give up their Florida land, be paid \$15,400 and other benefits such as blankets upon arrival and a blacksmith. The chiefs did not depart Florida until October 1832, and after traveling the area for several months and conferring with the Creek tribe that had been relocated earlier, the seven chiefs signed the agreement on March 28, 1833, at Fort Gibson, Arkansas Territory. Upon returning to Florida, most of the chiefs renounced the statement claiming they did not sign or were forced to sign.

The Second Seminole War was a long drawn out war and, with a cost of \$20 million and more than 1,500 soldier and civilian casualties, may have been the most expensive Indian War the US ever fought. It began in December of 1835 under the presidency of Andrew Jackson and did not end until 1842. During this war, Billy would grow to manhood and become a hereditary chief at the age of 20.

In December of 1835, Major Francis Dade would march 110 soldiers from Fort Brooke near Tampa, Florida, toward Fort King in north central Florida. As many as 180 Seminole warriors attacked the soldiers on December 28. Two solders managed to make it back to Fort Brooke and one of those died a few days later.

As the battles dragged on for almost seven years, Billy fought alongside the tribes most skilled chiefs and warriors, including Osceola, Micanopy, Jumper, Alligator, Sam Jones, Prophet and others. He learned to negotiate with Army officers and when the negotiations broke down he would raid white settlements at night and hide in the swamp during the day.

The Army was growing tired and frustrated chasing Bowlegs and his band of warriors around the Florida swamps. They found traveling and fighting difficult in the southern swamps and they were losing the battles because of weather, sickness and lack of adequate supplies. The army changed their tactics. They began displaying a flag of truce and then kidnapping the chiefs and sending them to the Indian Territory. By 1842, most of the leaders had been captured or killed and their followers surrendered and also moved west.

On May 10, 1842, President James Polk announced, "The further pursuit of these miserable beings by a large military force seems to be as injudicious as it is unavailing." The war formally ended on August 14, 1842, when the US Government recognized Billy Bowlegs as principal chief of the few remaining Seminoles in Florida. Bowlegs made a concerted effort to keep the peace. He went so far as to turn in his own people for punishment when they depredated. The government continued its efforts to transplant the Seminoles. They went so far as to offer Bowlegs \$215,000 to move his people to Arkansas. Bowlegs was tired of fighting and was amenable, but the rest of his tribe refused. The government brought in Seminoles from Arkansas, but they still refused to leave their homeland. In 1851 the government brought in a removal specialist who had persuaded the Cherokees to relocate. He was to be paid \$10,000 dollars, \$5.00 per day, and \$800 for each warrior and \$450 for each woman and child. After three years he had relocated twelve men and twenty-four women and children and he was fired. Bowlegs and two of his sub-chiefs were taken to Washington for wining and dining. They could see no reason to leave.



The Seminoles led as peaceful an existence as possible until December of 1855 when Lieutenant George L. Hartsuff and a party of twelve soldiers were assigned to locate villages in the Everglades and provoke no actions. Instead they completely destroyed Bowlegs' prized garden of fruits and vegetables. Bowlegs retaliated with forty warriors who killed four soldiers, wounded four others, including Hartsuff, and totally destroyed their camp and the Third Seminole War, also known as Bowleg's War, was underway.

The Seminoles, under Bowlegs, conducted a guerilla type warfare and were primarily victorious. Their attacks were disorganized and always against weak points in the US Army and occurred whenever the opportunity presented itself. The Indians would attack small army parties and then dissolve back into the swamp. They made maximum use of what was known as hammocks which were small islands in the midst of the swamp. These hammocks could usually support bands of 50 to 200 Seminoles for a short period of time. Because they were surrounded by water, Bowlegs and his people could see the army as they approached and escape to another hammock. The third war only lasted two years and Jefferson Davis, then the US Secretary of War and later Confederate President, said, "The Seminoles had baffled the energetic efforts of our

army to effect their subjugation and removal.” The government again brought Arkansas Seminoles in to lure the Floridians westward. On May 8, 1858, the last Indian War west of the Mississippi ended. A small number of Seminoles avoided being relocated west, but Bowlegs and his followers were put on a ship to New Orleans and then on to the Seminole reservation where they would become one of the “Five Civilized Tribes.”

According to the Harper’s Weekly of June 12, 1858, Billy Bowlegs arrived in New Orleans with two wives, one son, five daughters, fifty slaves and \$100,000 in cash. Harper’s Weekly assigned a correspondent to cover Billy and show him around New Orleans. Billy took such a liking to the fellow that he offered his daughter Betsey to him in marriage. “Betsy—good squaw—never married—you have her—come with me—I make you great chief—next after me.” The correspondent turned him down, so Betsey was made available to any white man who would offer a \$10,000 dowry. In his stay in New Orleans, Billy was so inclined to drunkenness that he lost a lot of his prestige. People went to look at him as they would a wild animal in a cage. The visible parts of his body showed 32 battle scars.

Little is known about his life in the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) after his arrival there. There were several Bowlegs in the territory and they are often confused. The town of Bowlegs, Seminole County, Oklahoma, is named after one of his grandsons and not after Billy as many suppose. One Bowlegs was to become a captain in the Union Army during the Civil War and though some claim this to be Billy, it is probably not true. It would be hard to imagine the slave-owning Billy joining the army that he had fought so long. Some claim the Billy that is buried in the Ring of Honor in the Fort Gibson National Cemetery is the US Army Captain and not our Billy.



Sources: Hubbard, George U. “*Billy Bowlegs: The Seminole Chief Who Wouldn't Be.*” *Old West*, Winter 1998, p. 22. *Everglade biographies* at <http://everglades.fiu.edu/reclaim/bios/bowlegs.htm>. *Harper’s Weekly* of June 12, 1858