



Perdido Bay Tribe

Native Paths Cultural Heritage & Resource Center

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"We Must Never Stop Dancing"

www.perdidobaytribe.org

Micco Bobby Johns Bearheart – Founder

Perdido Bay Tribe of Southeastern Lower Muscogee Creek Indians, Inc.

A Biography & Tribal History 1979-2008

Early History: Bobby Thomas Johns, born deep in the forests of South Georgia on March 24, 1936, was raised with roots deeply embedded in Muscogee Creek Indian culture. From an early age, he learned the ancient skills of his people - to hunt and fish, to survive in the forest and swamps. He learned the oral traditions and history of his people, and he learned the traditional arts and crafts. His teachers were his elders - parents, grandfather, and most especially, his devoted clan uncle, Tone Evans, who taught him that the most important lesson he would ever learn was how to live like a real human being. Bobby knew the joys of a boyhood in a nearly idyllic setting, but he also knew the sting of prejudice against his Creek Indian heritage. Taking Uncle's advice, Bobby resolved to live his life without bitterness, to believe always in the brotherhood of man and to participate fully in the world around him.

For all his years, Bobby has never feared to explore the unknown. As a mere infant he launched himself into a life of exploration, adrift on a log, alone in hazardous waters - and ever since, life has been filled with adventures. As a teen, though never openly revealing his Creek heritage, he enthusiastically joined in school activities - sang in a quartet, played sports, flirted with the girls, worked as a radio DJ, and marched as drum major with the band. But sometimes he went alone to explore the swamps and creeks and sacred places of Georgia to listen for the voices of his ancestors. Bobby joined the navy to see the world. He worked as a ranch hand and hunting guide in Nevada, but sometimes, he went alone to the reservations to sit for a time with the elders. Even then, the vision for his heart's work - to treasure, preserves and live his Muscogee Creek heritage - was becoming clear.

Back in Georgia, marriage and the responsibilities of a young family required his attention, but there was also time for building his craft skills, teaching skills and leadership skills. Bobby began by visiting his son's school to talk with pride about the Creek people. He joined the Jaycees to learn how to get things accomplished in the real world. Bobby served with the Jaycees, receiving numerous awards for service and leadership at the highest level. His proudest achievement was helping to lead the drive getting the Sabin Polio vaccine to every county in Georgia. In 1979, Bobby responded to a long-time inner calling and took an opportunity to move to Pensacola, Florida. There his work continued as he perfected his craft and reached out whenever and however he could to teach others and make friends for his ever-growing dream.

Within a few years, Bobby suffered two major heart attacks, the second one nearly fatal. To grasp his only slim chance at survival, Bobby flew to Milwaukee to undergo an experimental surgery. His family prepared for the worst, but true to his style, Bobby went in fighting and came out the victor. It was then that his older brother, Cayoni, honored him as a warrior - sending word that all would be well, saying, "You have the heart of a bear." From that day on, Bearheart's life was forever changed. Forced into retirement, he dedicated his life full-time to his art and his dream.

Beginnings of Perdido Bay Tribe: In 1989, Bobby was designated Master Folk Artist by the Florida Folk Life Division of Cultural Affairs. He was winner of a \$5000 Individual Artist Fellowship in 1990 and served as Artist in Residence for all Escambia County middle and high schools in 1991. In 1993, he became the first Creek to be honored with the Florida Folk Life Heritage Award. He also served as a member of The Florida Creek Indian Council, funded by the State of Florida. Bobby has been very active as a teacher, mentor, guest speaker and Creek Indian historian. Over the years he has served on numerous civic and cultural committees. In 1990, as a continuation of his previous work, Bearheart gathered his family and a handful of Creek Indian friends, and Perdido Bay Tribe of Southeastern Lower Muscogee Creek Indians, Inc. was born.

As the tribe's founder and Chief, Bearheart reached out to inspire and welcome new members, many, fellow artisans and educators. Most are Native Americans of Creek heritage; a few are proudly adopted non-native supporting friends. For several years, PBT maintained a small Cultural Center and Museum on Perdido Key for the exchange of cultural information. Bearheart's library and other resources have been made available to students from grade school to university level. With the help of other members, Bearheart continued to offer cultural programs wherever they are requested. Serving in partnership with the Pensacola Historical Museum, Bearheart helped to create a Creek Classroom and Indian History Program available to area students.

News Article:

February 11, 1998 PENSACOLA, Fla. (NWSA) -- Construction work at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla., has put the facility in the forefront of the Navy's program to comply with federal laws protecting Native American graves and archeological sites on federal property. Site preparation in December 1995 for a new building unearthed Native American and European human remains and other artifacts dating from the late 1600s and early 1700s. Station officials preserved the site so the remains could be returned and given a ceremonial burial in accordance with American Indian traditions and the Native American Grave Protection and Reparation Act.

The site, now named the Fort San Carlos De Austria Cemetery, was formally dedicated July 10 by Navy officials and representatives of the Perdido Bay Tribe, the Creek Confederation of Florida, the Florida Tribe of Eastern Creeks, the Santa Rosa Tribe of Creeks and the First American and Early Settlers Foundation. According to Chief Bobby Johns, Principal Chief of the Perdido Bay Tribe, the Navy is helping to ensure the site remains untouched. "We are grateful for the navy's respectful and willing cooperation. Not only is this important to my people that our ancestors are getting the respect they deserve, I think it sets a precedent for the whole country."

Northwest Florida Daily News: by Jenny Mattheiss

Website and Educational Outreach: A website was created extending Bearheart's outreach to students all over the world. To respond to growing numbers of inquiries, PBT's internet correspondent created files of resources and compiled information suitable for all age levels. From this beginning, an educational booklet "*Life Ways of the Early Southeastern Muscogee Creek People*" was compiled and published in 2004 with a grant from the Florida Humanities Council. This booklet in both print and PDF format was made available free of charge to educators and within a few months had been accepted for inclusion in the online teacher resource services of two Southeastern State Boards of Education as well as many individual school districts. This outreach effort is ongoing.

Outreach to Native Americans in NW Florida: In the fall of 2000, PBT was awarded a vocational endowment grant to serve Native American Indian people with disabilities in Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties in Northwest Florida. With a grant from The Able Trust, PBT moved forward with **VISIONS**, a program to help qualified applicants attain a greater level of independence through job training, educational opportunity and job placement. In January 2001, Native Paths, Cultural Heritage and Resource Center opened in the historical district of Pensacola. For the next year, Native Paths, a multi-purpose facility, served the VISIONS program as well as the tribe's older programs. During the year, VISIONS brought community services to more than 75 Native Americans with disabilities...far exceeding expectations. For a number of reasons, including health issues, funding and staffing problems, PBT opted not to apply for a continued grant for 2002. The tribe's museum displays and furnishings were put in storage, while informally Chief Bearheart continued to use PBT's resources and connections to assist all who came for help. In 2004, PBT applied for and was awarded a second grant from The Able Trust to support a continued outreach to Pensacola's Native American population through the "**Paths to Creative Living for Native American's with Disabilities**" project.

Beginnings of the Mobile Museum & Outreach Vehicle:

The Three Rivers Resource Conservation and Development Council was instrumental in assisting PBT apply for a 34 ft. government surplus Winnebago field office vehicle which was received in August of 2004.

In June 2005, Mr. Charles Adams, Director of the USDA/NRCS National Employee Development Center and his team came to Pensacola to meet with members of PBT. At this meeting, Mr. Adams announced that his team had selected PBT to serve as an example to non-Federal tribal organizations nationwide of the kinds of programs that can be carried out to serve the local NA community and foster a better understanding of NA history and culture in the community at large. The plan the team laid out was to provide the necessary assistance and 'know how' to bring the 10-year-old Winnebago vehicle up to the highest performance and outfitted with all necessary equipment to elevate PBT's programs to their highest potential.

The plan was for the vehicle to be outfitted to serve PBT in a variety of community outreach activities. As a small mobile office and educational facility, it would be instrumental in taking our 'Creative Living' services to clients throughout the two County service area. It would also serve as a traveling museum & educational facility to visit schools and community events.

PBT's programs would be documented and promoted nationwide to serve as a template for other non-Federal groups to learn from and emulate in their own communities. PBT accepted the responsibility to help identify our needs, accept the assistance offered, seek additional sponsors to assure continued financial support to bring our programs up to the expected level.

Cooperative Associations with Other Organizations: On several occasions in 2004, Chief Bearheart was invited by the NRCS to attend meetings around the Southeast to speak about the work of Perdido Bay Tribe or meet with representatives of other tribal organizations. At each opportunity he made a steadfast appeal for unity and parity among all American Indian peoples for the benefit of all. In February of 2005, Chief Bearheart was appointed by NRCS to serve with leaders of Indian Nations across the country on a National Employee Development "Design Team" for the development of a new American Indian Program Delivery Initiative.

He attended a preliminary meeting at the Poarch Creek Reservation, AL in May Of 2005. The Design Team was to plan workshops to provide immediate training for NRCS employees and partners focusing on issues and concerns that must be addressed to eliminate barriers that preclude access to participation in USDA programs.

PBT has enjoyed a long-term association with the Three Rivers Rural Conservation & Development Council (RC&D), working together on a number of educational and environmental projects over the years including the Creek Classroom at the Pensacola Historical Museum and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Earth Team volunteer project. In addition Chief Johns serves on the NRCS Florida Rural Opportunity Group which has the challenge of getting the word out to farmers of opportunities available through their local conservation offices.

In June of 2005, Chief Bearheart was invited to speak of his ongoing life's work to preserve and honor his Creek cultural heritage through his art and educational programs at a statewide gathering. The "Arts and Aging Meet and Retreat on the Suwannee" was sponsored by the Florida Center for Creative Aging, in partnership with Advent Christian Village, the Society for the Arts in Healthcare, the Center for Arts in Healthcare at the University of South Florida, and the State of Florida Division of Cultural Affairs. Chief Bearheart was accompanied by Vice Chief John Hartley Standing Bear and Jeremy Reichmann who shared their flute songs with the group.

Out of this meeting came a new avenue of service and the group was very supportive of the idea of including recording the stories of the elders as a part of our mobile outreach program. Bearheart himself participated in two studies of the region's elders: documentation of Florida's woodworkers and documentation of the turpentine industry in South Georgia.

PBT Goals and Member Activities: PBT members have long had the opportunity to grow steadily in their personal understanding of Creek history, life ways and spirit of community. Inspired by Bearheart's able leadership, we are making great strides towards preserving our Creek cultural heritage, and fostering the general well-being of all Native American people through art and education. Perdido Bay Tribe continues to work diligently toward our ultimate goal of developing a comprehensive Native American

Cultural Center in Pensacola to house and facilitate all of our educational outreach and service programs for all citizens and visitors to our community.

In addition to ongoing tribe member activities centered in Northwest Florida, PBT has many supporting members scattered across the country. As Georgia is at the very heart of the Creek homeland, as well as Chief Johns' home state, PBT has especially strong ties there in both member strength and in spirit. Even though the role of the Creeks in southeastern culture has never been an official priority in Georgia, and indeed, is nearly invisible, there are signs that this is changing.

In August of 2003, Chief Johns was invited to speak at the National Convention of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) in Savannah, Georgia. The theme of the convention was "Coastal Processes in Time of Global Change" addressing consequences to coastal ecosystems from such sources as upland uses, rising sea level and pollution from connected river basins. Chief Johns was invited to give his insights from the perspective of a Native American with a lifetime of experiences amid the richness of Southeastern waterways, swamps and coastal areas and the changes over time he had witnessed.

Then in October of 2005, came an especially rewarding honor for Chief Bearheart when he was invited to appear as a demonstrating artisan at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society held in Atlanta. Long recognized as a Master Folk Artisan in Florida, this occasion was a long-awaited 'homecoming' filled with warmth and honor in his home state as he was greeted by appreciative folklorists from all over the world.

The year 2006 was an especially productive year. Leaders from among PBT's membership in Georgia stepped forward and initiated an effort to strengthen and expand our sphere of influence and service. Vice Chief, Stan Cartwright, 'Quiet Dog' of Warm Springs and Vice Chief Robert Johns 'Cedar Bear' of Atlanta formed the Georgia Extension Council of Perdido Bay Tribe. We look forward to many new friends and opportunities for service as we vigorously reach out to honor our Creek Heritage in the ancient homeland of our beloved ancestors.

Development of Mobile Museum: In Pensacola, many new members and Friends of PBT have come on board to help further the mission and goals of the tribe. With completion of the mobile unit in the spring of 2007, two major events funded by the Florida Humanities Council served to introduce the new mobile museum.

Completion of Mobile Museum: On April 28, 2007, Muscogee Creek Culture Day, a special public event hosted by the Pensacola Historical Museum was the setting for the unveiling and dedication of the "**Bearheart Native Paths Museum,**" **Mobile Museum of Southeastern Muscogee Creek History and Culture.**

On May 19, 2007, the new traveling museum made its first road trip to Bonifay, Holmes County, FL to help our sister organization, The Keith Cabin Foundation, celebrate its annual Pioneer Day. The Keith Cabin is Florida's only original pioneer log cabin listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Keith family was a blend of a son of a Scottish immigrant and his wife, a Muscogee Creek.

Beginnings of Cooperative Program with Escambia County: Even as work was progressing on the mobile museum, much activity was taking place on another front. In 2006, a proposal was submitted to the Escambia County Commission for a 'footprint' of land within the Bill Dickson Eco-Park for the future **Muscogee Creek Cultural Heritage Museum and Learning Center**. The proposal was accepted by the Escambia County Commission and momentum continued to build over the months as PBT and friends reached for the ways and means to develop and carry out the project.

The vision of ALCASALICA – With the realization that it will take a major effort to continue to grow and accomplish our goals, PBT once again adopted the visionary inspirations of Chief Bobby Johns Bearheart. ALCASALICA, meaning 'Clay Pot Sitting There' and a beautiful painting depicting its significance by Maribeth Lewis, have become the promotional vision and watchword for both of Perdido Bay Tribe's museum projects.

Third Grant from The Able Trust: In the spring of 2007, Perdido Bay Tribe applied for and was awarded its third grant from The Able Trust to fund a continuing project, Paths to Creative Living for Native Americans with Disabilities or Special Needs in Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties. This multifaceted project will utilize the "Bearheart Native Paths Museum" as a service outreach to Indian people residing in the entire greater Pensacola area. The Able Trust grant has funded extensive mechanical repairs to the vehicle as well as support for fuel and other operating expenses to keep the mobile museum in operation at minimal cost to schools and the public.

Special Recognition: Nov. 19, 2007 - Perdido Bay Tribe members and volunteers were invited guests for Thanksgiving dinner hosted by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Niles Glasgow, State Conservationist, in Gainesville, Florida. PBT was honored to represent Pensacola, Perdido Key, Milton, and Pensacola Beach for this special occasion arranged by John Harper of Three Rivers Rural Conservation and Development Council. Eight artisans and educators made the trip with the Bearheart Native Paths Museum.

Nov 2007 In an exchange of gifts, Niles Glasgow presented Chief Bobby Johns Bearheart with a special HONORARY STATE CONSERVATIONIST award for his work as a Native American conservationist. In turn Chief Bearheart presented Mr. Glasgow with a hand made Southeastern Muscogean style pottery piece and named him an Honorary Member of Perdido Bay Tribe. The following day, the Mobile Museum and crew were guests of the City of Gainesville for a program at the main branch of the public library.

The "Bearnobile" in Summary: Following completion of the Bearheart Native Paths Museum in April 2007 through June 2008, PBT staff and volunteers provided meaningful learning experiences to more than 4,800 children and adults in 41 separate venues in Florida.

New Opportunity Offered by Escambia County: October 2007 the Escambia County Commission voted to offer PBT an even better opportunity than the 2-acres in the Bill Dickson Eco Park. PBT's board of directors gladly accepted. The beautiful property we have been awarded is a serenely peaceful site at the edge of the vast expanse of Jones Swamp in Southwest Pensacola and includes an existing structure in excellent

condition. Only 5 years old, the 1700 sq ft house stood high and dry, undamaged by the devastating hurricanes that hit Pensacola in Sept. of '04. In the short term, the house is being used for tribal offices, Heritage Museum and Resource Center. We will continue to explore all avenues to raise funds to build our planned facility. In the long run, the house can be adapted for many purposes, but for the present, it gives us an official place of our own.

The Big Picture: With funding support from both private and government agencies, the 800-acre Jones Swamp Eco-system, with its rich diversity of wildlife and rare plants, is to become part of the Northwest Florida Greenway that extends eastward to Apalachicola, and will be protected for low-impact recreational use only. Protection of Jones swamp is part of Florida's aggressive move to salvage and restore the integrity of its rivers, bays and aquifers – and PBT will have a key role. PBT's place in the scheme of things will be to serve as stewards and to manage this portal to the planned hiking trails in the Jones Swamp preserve.

This arrangement with Escambia County gives PBT the opportunity and the facilities to do all we have been striving for in service to Indian Heritage people and to our greater community - and much more. In addition to our Muscogee Creek Heritage Museum and Learning Center, we also envision such activities as nature day camps for children, classes to teach NA arts and crafts, soil and water projects etc. all within the framework of teaching the attitudes of the ancient Native Americans of the SE toward using and protecting the natural environment. Our new home in Jones Swamp will become a source of pride and service for all Native American peoples of our community. As we are able, it could even become a place of employment for Native Americans with disabilities.

On November 6, 2007, Chief Bobby Johns and members of PBT's Board of Directors met with Escambia County officials to discuss details of the Greenway Development Plan. At that time we learned more about the County's plan of action for developing the property we will occupy and PBT's role and responsibilities.

By July 2008, PBT was able to proceed with renovations and installation of furnishings while waiting for the county to go ahead with improvements to the access road, water and sewer lines, parking, landscaping, etc. This building in Jones Swamp, now called **Native Paths Cultural Heritage and Resource Center**, serves as tribal headquarters for administering all of PBT's programs and projects. Included also is a small library/media center and a gallery filled with art and artifact exhibits.

Edna P. Dixon,
PBT Historian
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