

SEWING SEMINOLE SUCCESS



In the winter of 1880, a visitor to the Catfish Lake Seminole community on the north side of Lake Okeechobee spotted a hand-operated sewing machine in the camp of Me-le (John Willis Mikko). The visitor reported that Me-le could take the machine apart and put it back together flawlessly, as he knew the machine so well. By the 1890s, sewing machines were a common sight in Seminole camps, bought from trading posts operating in and around Seminole land. Tribal Members quickly learned the tricks of the trade from post owners and their families, such as the Stranahans and Browns.



Before sewing machines, clothing was sewn by hand and required a lot of time for Seminole crafters to produce. The machines not only sped up the process, but also allowed for more exploration. Creative trends emerged from Seminole camps and innovative styles and techniques began to transform Seminole clothing. Appliqué work, or sewing ornamental pieces of fabric onto clothing, had previously been reserved for special garments but became common on everyday clothing once the sewing machine was available. The capes of women's dresses grew in length and ruffled fabric was added to the dress. Similarly, men's long shirts took on more elements, such as a sewn-in waistbands and ruffled fabric along the edges.



The greatest innovation in Seminole clothing came just before 1920 when women in Big Cypress camps invented Seminole patchwork. According to Tribal Member Sam Tommy, patchwork began out of necessity when fabrics preferred by Seminole crafters became unavailable during World War I. Seminole women devised a creative solution to the problem by stitching together patches of solid colored cloth to create unique designs, and Seminole patchwork was born.

Tourists began flocking to Florida in the 1920s and Seminole Tribal Members capitalized on them as an opportunity for growth. At exhibition villages, such as Musa Isle, and tourist camps run by Seminole families, Tribal Members sold their crafts, including their patchwork to this willing group. The addition of sewing machines to the Seminole communities enabled the creation of ingenious designs that captivated tourists and fed into the Seminole's entrepreneurial spirit.

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