

# Lo! the Rich Indian

by SYDNEY MAYERS

**I**N addition to being unusually picturesque, the Seminole Indians are self-reliant, perseverant, and (according to a recent news report) potentially rich. This is the doughty tribe that, having fought the American Army to a standstill for seven years, agreed to a cease-fire in 1842, but never surrendered, never conceded defeat, and never signed a peace treaty with the United States.

Not that they lost their warrior spirit, but they did decide that if they were to beat the paleface, it would have to be with his own weapons. So they took their battle to the courts, where they eloquently complained that 32 million acres of land had been taken from them (i. e.: over 90 percent of the total area of Florida), and demanded the return thereof—or payment therefor!

Fighting as fiercely as of yore, but with writs and briefs rather than arrows and tomahawks, the Seminoles seem to have won. After protracted litigation, the U. S. Court of Claims has upheld their petition, and unless the Federal Government appeals, which is unlikely, all that stands between these patient redskins and their "compensation" is a determination of the "fair value" of the land involved. Fortunately for the taxpayer, this value is to be fixed as of the time the Indians last held the territory. Nevertheless, it is estimated that the U. S. treasury will be tapped for as much as \$40 million, which is a lot of wampum.

But the Seminoles are not the first (or the last) Indians to learn to face the white man on his own ground. A Wall Street Journal article discloses that

over \$29 million was awarded to a group of California Indian tribes for the 60 million acres they claimed in that state; the Cheyenne-Arapahos won \$14 million in payment for their one-time Western holdings; and over \$12 million was granted to Sioux organizations recently for 29 million acres they once controlled. So far, reports the Journal, judgments awarded by the Indian Claims Commission to Indian tribes have totaled \$208 million.

Some of us have long admired the Indian for his resolute refusal to recognize private ownership of land; for his insistence that the Great Spirit gave the earth to all his children for all time. Apparently, however, the modern Indian is of a more cynical breed, having been well taught the ways of his ancestors' conquerors. At that, perhaps there is a kind of twisted justice in compensating the remaining remnants of the great Indian nations for the inequities inflicted on their progenitors. Yet it is a bitter justice; it is the compounding of a past evil, rather than an atonement for it.

So the poor Indian is, in a number of cases, turning into a rich Indian. More than 500 Indian claims still are pending on the Claims Commission's docket; and a number of Indian, Aleut and Eskimo residents of Alaska are pressing their claims to large areas of that state. But the Indians never "owned" the land they occupied any more than the landowners of today actually "own" the property to which their deeds give them title. *All* the people own *all* the land, and those who love true justice can only look to the day when the equal rights of everyone will be recognized.

**Among notorious chapters in American history is the struggle of New York's Iroquois to maintain the comparatively few acres they now control. Their attitude toward the fraud, force and double-dealing is expressed by one Indian who said, "The land is my mother. You cannot sell your mother!"**