Louisiana’s Chitimacha Indians

History Etched on Pages of Time

By GERALD J. DELCAMBRE
(Photos by the Writer)

Giant oak trees, old and hardied with the pointed daggers of Spanish moss, are bountiful as one gazes over the area in Southwest Louisiana, alive now with the greenery of summer. Bayou Teche borders the land on one side, and the little town of Charenton lies on the other.

This land is said to be almost unchanged from two centuries ago when the Indians first came to settle here. There is today at Charenton the very old Chitimacha Indian reservation. Its occupants are the last remaining descendants of a tribe whose history is etched on the pages of time of the state’s history.

TheルIDE now numbers about 600, including children. But not all the families reside on the reservation; they are scattered from Franklin to as far as Baton Rouge and New Orleans and farther.

The men are employed in tasks ranging from woodcutters, to construction workers, to oil field workers, and residents of the reservation claim one of their members helped design the heat shield now used in U.S. space capsules.

The Chitimacha reservation is an area composed of some 200 acres. The modern homes of the Indians line both sides of a road about one mile long, the reservation.

The land was given the Indians by the Spanish in 1777, in an act signed at Grand Lake, 11 miles from the present reservation.

A white wooden elementary school with grades one through seven sits next to the road. Here the Indian children receive their early education. High school students finish their education at Franklin High School.

The tribe is governed by a five-man council headed by Emile Staufio, who says the group meets whenever necessary. Some of the council members live away from the reservation, thus meeting often would prove burdensome.

A man who remembers much of the past history of the tribe is past chief, Ernest Darden, Sr. Now retired from cutting cypress in Louisiana's swamps, he, along with his son, reside on the reservation.

"As PAST CHIEF of the tribe, I was actively involved in all that affected my people in past days, most of the young men of the reservation used to work in the swamps cutting cypress," he said.

"The progress and growth that affects most towns through the years has been felt here on the reservation," the former chief said. "We now have modern houses with modern furnishings and have automobiles and other improvements."

"When asked if the tribe uses the tongues of their forefathers, he laugh'd and said: "No. The language was lost in the passing of time."

While interviewing the old chief at his home, a group of young boys passed walking in front of the house. They were speaking English words, but their facial characteristics remain the same: jet black hair, high cheek bones, dark eyes and olive-brown complexion.

Remaining as a monument to the Chitimachas of years past are three mounds located in St. Martin Parish. The mounds are in the land of Evangeline, along the old Bayou Portage and close to the Lake Dauterive area.

THE TWO LARGE MOUNDS are former sites of the Indians’ living quarters, when they lived in huts made of palmetto leaves placed over a framework of poles.

The third and smallest mound is called the “midden,” and it served as a burial place. The Indians gathered millions of clam shells to build this tempi-locational mound, and it remains today, almost as it was hundreds of years ago along the bayou, beneath old oak trees draped with gray moss.

In addition to the mounds, the Chitimacha Indians along Bayou Portage had a Holy Tree, a cypress, standing across in the bayou from the mounds. In times past, the tribe considered the tree as possessing certain powers and worshipped it. (The tree has since fallen. Hundreds of years old, the cypress tree was hard hit by past hurricanes and last year it fell into the bayou.)

Legend has it that one day a group of tribesmen saw a tall handsome man climb the tree. And according to the legend, when he reached the top, he ascended into the sky.

Another legend is that the tree could make the heavens open up and pour down rain. During periods of severe drought, the Indians would take a sprig from the Holy Tree and dip it into the water. This legend says would always result in rain falling.

Bits and pieces of Indian pottery are today still being uncovered from the mounds. Some of this pottery has been sent to Louisiana State University for authenticity of its age. Results of tests reveal that the pottery was fashioned hundreds of years ago.

THE CHITIMACHAS of old had a practice of bringing clothing to their deceased relatives buried in the burial place. They would leave clothing on the mounds, believing the dead might somehow find need for it.

History of the Indians handed down by past generations has it that the bayou savas of the area would use the clothing, and often would take it for themselves. The Indians, returning to the mounds, would see the missing clothing, and thinking their dead had returned for the clothing, would return home contented they were no longer cold. This belief of the Indians kept many a slave in warm clothing.

Recorded history and background of the Chitimachas shows that in the 17th century, a man named St. Denis, with some 50 Frenchmen, started a journey on old Bayou Lafourche. They encountered the Chitimacha Indians and were attacked and forced to turn back. (The first Indians came to Louisiana nearly 800 years ago.)

When the French settled in Louisiana near the Mississippi River, there were large numbers of Chitimacha there, and the French soon learned the white man was not liked by the Indians and followed suit.

In 1718, peace was established by dividing the Chitimacha area into four regions. The Indians were to stay in certain areas in St. Martin and St. Mary parishes, and along Bayou Lafourche and the Mississippi River.

Many of the tribe settled at Grand Lake near Charenton, and in 1771, the reservation was given to the Indians.

The Chitimacha men wore their hair in long plaits and sometimes let it fall over their shoulders. The women wore colored necklaces of beads, rings, and earrings. Some of the necklaces were made of dyed bone beads. The women wore their hair in long plait and used feathers as their ornaments.

For some of their food, the women collected palmetto seeds, wild potatoes and wild berries. From the streams they caught various kinds of turtles and fish. They used vines strong enough to make ropes. They cut wooden poles to make canoes and dugout canoes.

Hunting the Great Spirit, the Chitimacha believed he made the world and all that was in it from his own body. He did not look like a man, they believed, because he had no eyes and ears. But he could see everything and could hear everything and knew everything.

First there was nothing but water, hiding the earth. The Great Spirit made fish and shellfish to live in the water. The Indians believed he told the crows to come under the water and bring up mud to make the earth. As soon as this was done, he made men and called the earth and man “Chitimacha.”

They believed he gave men laws to live by, and for a time all well. But soon the men forgot the laws and...
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Their major means of transportation was by canoe. To build this, the Indians lighted fire around a large cypress tree, which they packed all around with wet clay up to a certain height. When the tree burned out up to the wet clay, it would fall down. They would build another fire along the fallen tree and let it burn to the desired depth of a canoe. They would trim the canoe with a thick, sharp cockle shell.

THE CHIEF GLORY of the Chitimacha Indians from an industrial point of view was their basketry—fast becoming a lost art among the members of the tribe. A material employed was cane which they split in two with their teeth and wove into two layers to form what was really two baskets. The natural color of the cane varied by the use of three dyes—black, yellow and red.

Distinction of rank was recognized among the Indians. The chiefs and their descendants were nobles, and the balance of the people were commoners. The nobles were not allowed to marry into the common class, and many remained single, unable to find a mate in their class.

The arrival of a boy to manhood was signaled by a ceremony in the temple. This was to make them insensible to the pangs of hunger and thirst. Dressed in breechcloths, their hands adorned with feathers, ribbons, red paint and small gourds, they had to dance for six days in the temple, while fasting without tasting a drop of water, led by their disciplinarians. No female was allowed to approach, although they had access to other ceremonial dances.

ANOTHER CEREMONY was the fast and confinement which each boy endured by his disciple in order to obtain a personal guardian spirit. They were confined until they dreamed of the animal which was to become their friend and helper.

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