TRIBAL X

COMMERCEDOWN ON THE RESERVATION, THE CHITIMACHA INDIAN TRIBE IS MAKING MONEY.

By Marcelle Tessier

For scores of centuries, the Chitimacha Indian Tribe hunted and fished the land and bayous around Charenton in St. Mary Parish. For many years, this livelihood was enough to sustain the Indians and their lifestyle. But no longer. Plagued by soaring unemployment, the tribe is now actively seeking alternate economic possibilities—in some of the most unlikely places.

Bayou Teche Bingo, located on the Chitimacha reservation, is an example of the creative use of resources at hand. The Chitimacha project is a joint venture that is operated and financed by an investment company. The bingo is doing well, and the debt is expected to be repaid in two to three years. In the meantime, the facility employs 100 part-time people on weekends and a handful during the week on a regular basis.

Although Indians are given first preference for jobs, a number of non-Indians also work at the bingo. It’s an arrangement that benefits the entire community, says Gerard Perron, the economic development director for the Chitimacha tribe of Louisiana. “In a community, an Indian tribe is a big economic tool,” he says. “What we have to do is prepare ourselves to use it as such.”

Perron is employed through a federal program for Native Americans, and his role is to help the tribe become self-sufficient. The idea is that once the tribe is directed toward areas of economic development, it will then have the means to become independent of government assistance, and will be able to manage its own affairs.

The Chitimachas are actually at the forefront of this movement. According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, only about 40 of the 310 federally recognized tribes have economic development programs. But the aggressive approach seems to be catching on in tribes around the country, with increasing numbers jumping on the bandwagon. The Chitimachas aren’t the only tribe turning to bingo; a recent Newsweek article on the Las Vegas tourism boom says that bingo is now employing 20,000 people in a variety of businesses.

Economic development director Gerard Perron (left) and tribe chairman Daniel Darden are working together to reduce the Chitimachas’ 41 percent unemployment rate, hoping to solve other social problems in the process of creating jobs.

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In every other aspect, the reservation is similar to any other neighborhood. The school that’s owned and operated by the Bureau is for kindergarten through sixth grade, but Indians may choose public schooling if they wish. A general store opened in 1981, and the number of families has increased since then. The number of registered vehicles has increased from 1981.

The tribe currently has about 600 members; it is the only federally recognized native Louisiana tribe. Their status as the original inhabitants of the state is a source of considerable pride. To be considered a member of the tribe, a person must have 1/4 Chitimacha blood which can be linked to the original enrollment of the tribe in 1919.

Being classified as an Indian affords a person the advantage of living on a reservation rent-free, and about 300 Chitimachas choose this arrangement. The set-up, however, is something of a double-edged sword. Indians cannot mortgage a home on the reservation, since the land is in trust from the federal government and cannot be used as collateral. With only cash transactions, a possibility the consequence has been that most of the housing has been run-down and insubstantial.

About a year ago, a U.S. Housing and Urban Development loan program was made available for Indian reservations to borrow money for housing. About 20 new homes have sprung up since then, replacing the trailers and shacks that dotted the landscape previously. The neat brick structures are a testament to the fact that things can change if people work together. The construction also boosted the local economy as well.

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One of the drawbacks to doing business for the Chitimachas is the fact that it’s extremely difficult for an Indian tribe to borrow money. In an effort to circumvent this snag, a successful businessman, which he is. He owns four stores throughout South Louisiana that sell appliances and electronic equipment. Perhaps because of his background, he brings a wealth of ideas and enthusiasm to his job as Chitimacha leader.

“Indians aren’t lazy,” he says. Like many other tribal chiefs throughout America, Darden is working to find innovative ways to create jobs for his people. “Most Indians are ashamed to ask for help.”

ONE OF THE MOST PROMISING PROJECTS ON TAP IS A FUR MANUFACTURING company in Charenton, which will employ about 50 people during the first two years of existence. The nutria fur that’s trapped in the area would be sent abroad for tanning as usual, but the pelts would be returned to Charenton to be made into various items of apparel. Darden and Perron are scheduled to meet soon with a fur consultant from Canada who has been evaluating the situation, but things look encouraging, they say.

Another dream of Darden’s is to have a visitor’s center and museum at the reservation, depicting an original Chitimacha village. He envisions a boat dock and alligator pond, along with other things indigenous to the Chitimacha tribe’s way of life. For now, he says, it’s only a dream. But the bingo hall was just a dream once too.

The tribe also plans to reopen a restaurant that is currently abandoned. It would employ five people, which may not sound like much, but “with 41 percent unemployment and 100 people on the reservation, five people is a lot,” he says.

The tribe recently received a HUD grant for a fire station on the reservation that could house up to five people in the area. Other projects in the works are a nature village and museum at the Butte LaRose exit on Interstate 10, and the creation of a credit union. Future plans include a carwash, pharmacy, washateria, and an agro-aggregate business to sell road coverings.

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