Choctaw, like most eastern tribes, had little control over own destiny

Choose woman guards heritage of Jena band

Jena was only a place along the way to Oklahoma

---

I------------:;----------_-:r--'- _

---

CHOCTAW TRADITIONS KEEP THE TRIBE

CHOCTAW TRADITIONS KEEP THE TRIBE

FOURTH IN A SERIES ON
LOUISIANA'S NATIVE AMERICANS

No member of the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians has ever graduated from college.

Only three tribal members are over the age of 35.

The long-awaited federal recognition that the Jena Band of Choctaw obtained in 1995 was supposed to open the doors to funding that would help the tribe send their youth people to college and provide adequate health care so members could improve their quality of life.

Nothing magical happened, though, said Chief Jerry Jackson. "In fact, it was a letdown," he said.

"I expected more. I thought the Bureau of Indian Affairs would be down here. But you're on your own. You're in competition with other tribes for a slice of the financial pie from BIA. Funding is a very complicated thing. Most of the expense for federal recognition came through the Administration for Native Americans.

"Not one thing has changed since getting federal recognition. Most benefits are tied to land, which tribal members do not have," he said.

After receiving recognition, the tribe received a one-time lump sum payment from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The funding formula from BIA of $1,700 per capita for the 188 members should have brought them funding of $319,600, but BIA sent only a little more than a third of that sum, $126,840, Jackson said.

Federal monetary benefits are few, Jackson pointed out, but federal recognition enables a tribe to apply for grant money to improve tribal members' educational opportunities and medical care.

Scholarships would enable young people to go to college. As it is, Choctaw students start college, attend a year or two and then have to drop out because the students and their families can no longer scrape up the money to pay for tuition and expenses, he said.

Education

High school graduation is a big event among tribal members.

When Cheryl and Rusty Smith's son, Robin Allen, as well as tribal classmate Elizabeth Berryman, graduated from Jena High School on May 17, family members turned out in full force, filling a large section of the gym's bleachers - with one great-uncle, Jerry Jackson (same name as the chief, his nephew), traveling from Alabama especially for the event. He is a brother of Allen's grandmother, Mary Jackson Jones, matriarch of the tribe and a council member.

A surprise party for Allen after his graduation was a special time of joyful hugs, good food, teary eyes blending with smiles. Still wearing his graduation gown, Allen opened his gifts, mainly cards of congratulations containing $100 bills from family members who regarded this as an event worthy of a special gift, even though many could ill afford such generosity. His parents gave him the real surprise, a hunting rifle. Allen said he will work at the tribal center, where he had been working part time while attending high school. College is not in his immediate future. Berryman will also work at the center.

Having only two graduates is not unusual, Cheryl Smith, also a tribal council member, said, because the tribe is so small. A couple of students the age of the graduates dropped out of school to work. The last big group of graduates was in 1990, she said, when four tribal members graduated. "They come along in batches," she said. The six who are sophomores now should graduate in two years, she said.

If high school graduation is such an important occasion to celebrate, one wonders what the tribe will do when they get their first college graduate. "That will really be something special to celebrate," said Jones, eyes sparkling.

Education was not always available for the tribal children, though, Chief Jackson pointed out. They were not allowed to attend public schools early in the century, and there was no Indian school nearby for them to attend.

Things began to change, back in the 1930s. "Mrs. Charles Penick saw some Indian children playing in a creek and wondered why they weren't in school," Jackson said. "She found out that Indian

Continued Page 18
Jena Choctaw Jerry Jackson stands near the old Whatley store on Bailey Drive in LaSalle Parish. Jackson remembers waiting for his father to return from the fields on the porch of this old store.

Robin Allen's grandmother Mary Jackson Jones, left, looks on as Allen hugs his stepfather Rusty Smith during a graduation party for him at his parents' home in Jena. At far right is Smith's mother, Jody Smith, while behind Jones is Dustin Jackson.
Choctaw, like most eastern tribes, had little control over own destiny

BY SARAH SUE GOLDSMITH
Associate Editor

To illustrate the bewilderment and anger experienced by Native Americans who were forced to leave their homelands east of the Mississippi River to relocate in the West after 1830, Chief Jerry Jackson of the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians offered the following analogy: "Suppose that you have a comfortable home, plenty of food, family and friends all around you in your community. Suddenly a bunch of strangers come in and tell you they want your home; you have to leave. Not only that, but you are told to go to a place called Oklahoma in the West. You don't know where West is, much less some place called Oklahoma," Jackson said.

This is what happened to the Choctaws, Cherokee, Creeks and Chickasaws, mandated by an act of Congress in 1830. The forced migration became known as the "Trail of Tears."

Some people did not make it all the way to Oklahoma. Little family groups stopped along the way, for reasons not recorded. The Jena Band of Choctaw ended their westward walk in the community of Eden, near Jena. Since this tribe was able to document it has had a continuous form of government for many generations, could establish the genealogy of its people and still has a language, the Jena Band of Choctaw was recognized as a sovereign nation last year by Congress. It did not suddenly become a sovereign nation, however. Federal recognition acknowledges that the tribe has always been a sovereign nation.

Several state-recognized tribes — the Clifton Choctaw, Louisiana Band of Choctaw, Caddo-Adai and Houma — are working on documenting their backgrounds in an effort to be recognized as sovereign nations and receive the benefits that go with such status. Most of these groups were apparently part of the removal after 1830.

The proposal to remove Native

Continued on Page 19

Jena Choctaw member Robin Allen, center, is congratulated by his great-uncle, Jerry Jackson, as from left, Chief Jerry Jackson, Allen's aunt, Hope Jones, Allen's aunt, and Allen's mother, Cheryl Smith, welcome Allen to a graduation party at his home in Jena.

Jena Choctaw

Continued from Page 17

children were not allowed to attend public school."

Mrs. Penick — who had been a teacher until her marriage (married women were not allowed to teach in public schools) — decided she would teach the Choctaw children to read and write in English. She persuaded a timber company to provide a piece of land and the lumber to build a schoolhouse, and she got her school, according to an issue of the magazine The American Indian Journal of the Institute for the Development of Indian Law, Feb. 1977. She became dedicated to teaching the Indian children, though she spoke no Choctaw and the children spoke no English.

Jones and her brother attended the Penick school.

"All the children loved Mrs. Penick," Jones said. "Anything she wanted us to do, we would do," Jackson said.

"I was 16 years old in second grade in 1942 or '43. It didn't bother me because I wanted to learn," Jones said.

Thanks to Mrs. Penick, "My brothers learned to write at Penick School and wrote letters home during the war (World War II). I had to quit in fifth grade so the younger ones could go to school," she said. The school finished for only a few years.

But then, said Chief Jackson, "The BIA sent a woman down to close the school. The BIA wanted to move us to Mississippi because it would be more efficient. We agreed to do that, but the plan fell apart."

In 1946, "the parish started allowing our kids to go to public school. In 1965 we had our first high-school graduate. One of the problems in becoming federally recognized was not having people internally with a knowledge of the English language," he said.

The extensive requirements phrased in complicated terminology would be difficult even for longtime speakers of English to comprehend, one infers. Having gone so long without education, the task of completing bureaucratic paperwork was a greater challenge than most non-Native Americans can imagine.

Health care

The tribe is now eligible for benefits from the Indian Health Services, said

Continued on Page 19
Jena Choctaw
Continued from Page 18

Cheryl Smith. "Once the tribe receives the funding of $140,000, it will set up an office in the tribal center. Major health concerns for this tribe are diabetes, heart disease, and cancer," she said. "Once you hire somebody to administer services and buy equipment and supplies, the money doesn't last very long," she pointed out. "The majority of people don't have health insurance. This health program is a real restricted program that will service members only in our area, and IHS is a last resort. If members have any health coverage, that has to pay first. There is only a limited amount of coverage," but it will help those who have no other resources, she said.

Pros and cons of a tribal casino
Gov. Foster recently rejected the Jena Band of Choctaw's request to open a casino.
Chief Jackson is convinced that a casino would boost tribe members' standards of living.
"We have only 188 people, making ours one of the smallest tribes in America, which means a smaller budget and less help. There's no money from BIA for land. I think it's our right to set up a casino. I don't hear that there's any Mafia involved. I do hear that jobs are created and the community benefits. With the profit, I could send some kids to college, build new houses, buy property," Jackson said.
"We don't have any land. The casino would buy land, and having land would make it possible to provide other services, like new homes and a medical center for the tribe," he said. He'd like to make it possible for tribal members working by necessity in other parts of the country to return home to good jobs, nice homes — and family.
Another possibility that he favors is building a casino near Alexandria and I-49, which would make the casino accessible to many.
"My message to Gov. Foster is this tribe will be here long after he's gone. I think all minorities have something to contribute," Jackson said.
"We're being treated unfairly by the BIA. We're being treated unfairly by Gov. Foster. We try to give a positive message to our young people, yet have to face the realities," he said.
"The casino has one interest for me: it makes land available, and that opens up a whole new world. Gaming will not last forever, but we would have the land," he said.
"It's hard to make a living making baskets. We have to get them good jobs so cultural pursuits are their leisure activity," he said.
Tribal members have jobs offshore and work for the state, for gas and oil companies and as laborers.
"No one in the tribe has ever held a job as a fireman, policeman or elected official. We're coming from there to establishing a major business to benefit the whole community. There are all kinds of wonderful opportunities out there once we have the land," he said.
The Whatleys (land owners for whom the tribe worked as sharecroppers) and the tribe have been compared to a man and his mule. They were stuck. That's why they were trying to get to Oklahoma," he said.
He would like to open a museum and make a film about the tribe to air on PBS. "We've got a wonderful story to tell," Jackson said.
Continued from Page 18

Jena High School teacher Robin Windham, left, and student Betsy Corley, right, help Jena Choctaw member Elizabeth Berryman before the start of the Jena High School graduation ceremony.

Preserving the Choctaw language
"There are only 12 fluent speakers of the language," said Chief Jackson. "We purchased some computers last year. We're trying to get some members into management. My aunt taught a language class. I'm trying to get the language classes on the computer."
"I'm trying my best to keep the language alive," Mary Jackson Jones, the chief's aunt, said. "I am the eldest of this tribe. I speak this language and I want to keep this language alive. I sometimes teach a history class for Indian kids."
Though she has only a fifth-grade education, Jones is internationally renowned as an expert on the Choctaw language, speaking about it at universities throughout the United States and Canada. She spoke at a language conference at LSU in 1993. "Mary Jones speaks the purest form of Choctaw known," Bill Day, curator and director of the Tunica-Biloxi Cultural Center and Museum, said. The reason? Jones thinks it's because her family valued the traditions so highly and because the tribe was isolated from the outside world for so long that the language changed very little.
"I can also understand a little of the Coushatta language," she said. "It has similarities to Choctaw."
Keeping the language alive is Jones' greatest concern as her tribe moves into the next century. The young people get so involved in activities outside the tribe that they do not speak Choctaw; in fact, most children do not know the language. [19]
Mary Jackson Jones loves traveling the back roads and reminiscing about the old days. The family home where she lived with her parents and nine brothers and sisters still stands, far back from the road, now abandoned and deteriorating. Her brother Jerry, visiting from Alabama, was obviously moved to see his old home again.

"We had a big garden then," she said, "tomatoes, okra, peas.

"My daddy was a farmer. We grew cotton and corn. Life wasn't all that hard. Mama worked as a housekeeper. We had plenty of food. Mama canned a lot of stuff in jars, and we did our laundry with soap and water.

The silence around the house was broken only by bird song and an occasional lowing of a cow. It was easy to imagine children running, laughing, climbing trees and bending them over; one of their favorite games. Jones said. "I'm surprised all the trees are not permanently bent over," she said, smiling.

"Over there's where Mama had her flower garden," she said. "We had fig trees, a chicken house, barns, milk cows, hogs.

The house has a metal roof. It was never painted. Jones recalls shutters on the windows before glass was installed. They could be opened or closed, depending on the weather. "In summer, we slept on mattresses on the front porch. We were living here when my brothers went in service (World War II) and when they came out of service. We always had cats and dogs. I had a pet chicken that followed me everywhere.

"Sometimes when I dream about the house, it always looks the way it used to, high off the ground," she said. She doesn't think of it in its rundown state.

"I'm 65. I've had a good life. I used to make baskets. I traded baskets for ribbons and dress material. I've been sewing all my life. My sister told me to sew when I was 10, and I love it. I sell ribbon shirts and ceremonial and dancing dresses. I make chinaberry seed necklaces. I've always had a strong sense of keeping the heritage alive. Whenever Mama and Daddy went to sit with sick people, we all went," Jones said.

"I tried to teach my children what Mama taught me—things to pass on to the children. Mama knew how to use plants to cure things. I've taught my children to respect their elders and to listen to them. You don't ask an elder a question without offering something as a token of respect. You don't pick up a rock off Mother Earth unless you offer sage or some other offering. You must always give something back," she said.

"Daddy taught the boys how to make bows and arrows, blow guns and toys like trucks and wagons carved out of wood. Kids today are a little bit too smart," she said.

Her brother moved away from Jena in 1951, in search of a job. "There was not much work available around here," he said. "I met this girl from Alabama. A year or two later I married that girl, and her daddy helped me get a job.

Jackson, who is a dredge-boat captain, has lived in Norfolk, Va., Houston and Morgan City. He has four children; one of his sons, who works in Germany as a furniture mover for American servicemen, has bought some property near Jena and considers it home, even though he was brought up in Alabama. He visits about twice a year when he gets time off.

The brother and sister sat down on the porch of the old Whatley store, just down the dirt road from their family home.

"We used to come in here and buy oatmeal cookies," Jones recalled, with a faroff expression in her eyes, remembering her childhood. The store is ramshackled and boarded up, but new brick piers gleam brightly beneath the weathered boards. Jones did not know why the old building had been given such attention.

The few remaining older members of the tribe treasure the old days and would like the younger people to value the stories and traditions.

At the same time, Chief Jerry Jackson wants to see his people move into the next century on an even par with the non-Native American community.

"One mile from here to Main Street in Jena is 150 years," he said. "Jena was only a place along the way to Oklahoma. A number of years ago, a group came from Mississippi after 1830, Jena Choctaw Chief Jerry Jackson said. "In September of 1830, the United States forced the Choctaw to sign the treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. The Choctaw gave up 36 million acres and moved to Oklahoma.

This was the Indian Removal Act passed by Congress that called for the relocation of Eastern tribes to Oklahoma. According to Reader's Digest's "Through Indian Eyes," the Senate Committee ruled in favor of a Cherokee appeal in 1832, but President Andrew Jackson ignored it and "forcibly" sent the Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole people to the West. Most of the Seminoles disappeared into the Florida Everglades to avoid the move. On the way to Oklahoma, "Five families wound up here in a town called Eden," said the chief of the Jena Band of Choctaw. "They located on a farm owned by the Whatley family, who had some knowledge of the Choctaw language. The chief was allowed to perform all marriage ceremonies and funerals, and they retained their language. All they had to do was work." This they did as sharecroppers.

"The Dawes Act tried to identify the tribes that got missed in the move to Oklahoma. Our people walked to Muskogee, Okla., and worked along the way to pay expenses for a journey. Nine months later, they arrived in Oklahoma and gave their testimony through interpreters — and this was a big aid in getting our recognition later," the chief said.

"They thought they were going to stay there. A couple got sick and died. The others walked back to Eden. A letter waited for them, saying, "Come on back; you've been approved." That was in 1922," he said. They could not afford to travel right back to Oklahoma, however, so they stayed in the community near Jena.

"In 1915, a group headed by Thomas Williams — about half the tribe — went back to Oklahoma, determined to join them. It was 30-40 people in the Allen and Williams families. By the time they got there, the rolls had been closed a month or two earlier. They settled there anyway and married into that group," he said. With everyone in the remaining tribe being so closely related, members had to marry non-Native Americans. Then a Choctaw family joined the community.

"Bill Lewis and his 15 kids came here around 1919, probably from Bayou LaBranche. It probably saved us from becoming extinct," Jackson said. Tribal members married Lewis' children and preserved their identity.

"In 1962, the Mississippi Choctaw included us in one of their grants. In 1985, we wrote our first grant and hired genealogists to do our research. The BIA told us it would take 10 years to be considered because there were 130 groups ahead of us waiting to be recognized. We met with Sen. Bennett Johnston's staff in 1988. He agreed to sponsor a bill on our behalf. It went through three Congresses. President Bush pocket vetoed our bill. Everyone examined our case and could not find a flaw. They promised to put us on top of the list for the next year," Chief Jackson said.

"We had our signing ceremony in Washington, D.C., in May 1995. It became official on Aug. 29, 1995," he said.