Taking advantage of casinos, crafts and tourism, Louisiana's only indigenous tribe finds opportunities to prosper

by SARAH SUE GOLDSMITH, Associate Editor

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM MUELLER, Staff photographer

The Chitimachas

A traditional Chitimacha name, in the French of Louisiana, is Chitimacha. Chitimacha is the name of the tribe, a name widely used when the tribe was forced to leave their homes by the United States government. The tribe is located in Louisiana and was the first tribe to establish a reservation in the state. The tribe is one of the oldest in the United States and is known for its traditional basket weaving and pottery. The tribe has a rich history and culture and is known for its traditional music and dance. The tribe is also known for its contributions to the arts and crafts, including basket weaving, pottery, and beadwork. The tribe has also contributed to the development of the region, with many of its members working in the oil and gas industry. The tribe is currently headquartered in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Traditional Chitimacha baskets draw buyers, recognition from all over country

by SARAH SUE GOLDSMITH, Associate Editor

Raymond Thomas splits cane for a basket weaving outside his home on the Chitimacha reservation.

In a typical suburban scene, Chitimacha resident Carla Neiman centers, ties the shoes of Scottie Darden, 7, as Damon Linder, 7, waits while students from the Chitimacha Day School participate in a bake-a-thon fund-raiser.

Chitimacha Roger Stouff dunks through a tangle of trees as he explores a Chitimacha shell mound site on the shores of Lake Fausse Pointe in St. Mary Parish. Stouff, an archaeology student at USL, plans to map the many shell mound sites around Lake Fausse Pointe and Grand Avolle Cove.

To find out more about the Chitimacha tribe, visit Louisiana's only indigenous tribe finds opportunities to prosper.
“People don’t realize it, but this is the original garden of Eden. The ancestors of the Chitimacha are scattered all over the roads of South Louisiana. I’d like to get the Chitimacha on the map before I go away.”

— Former tribal chairman Nick Stouff

“I worked for the cultural department last summer. I read about how much has changed in the past 100 years. The last speakers died away about 70 years ago. I want to do something here.”

“Being among other Indians is what influenced me to take pride and try to save the traditions,” he said.

Basket making is a tribal tradition that only a few tribal members still pursue, and it is what the tribe is most renowned for.

Baskets

He and Melissa Darden, another tribal basketmaker, use commercial dyes for greater variety, though they said they know how to use traditional dyes made from roots and berries.

Darden learned basketmaking from her grandmother, Lydia Darden, as a little girl. Now she has a waiting list of customers years long — including the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City. She makes baskets for customers in the order in which she received the requests — no matter who it is.

The Chitimacha baskets are highly valued, and buyers don’t seem to mind the cost. Darden said she charges $200 per inch, making a 3-inch-tall basket total $600. Most of her baskets are small, but she specializes in the double-weave style, which “is like making four baskets,” she said.

“Everybody thought double weaving was a lost art. All my designs I’ve got from pictures out of Chitimacha museums.”

Darden’s baskets come in such shapes as elbow, wall pocket, wall pouch, tray with leg, and brushweaves with either cross or bowtie designs.

Thomas receives as much as $16,000 per basket for the very large trunk-shaped ones. He has made a living at basket making for the past three years.

Darden makes baskets in her spare time. She deals roulette and blackjack at the casino and is rearing her three young children.

Darden is teaching her brother and sister-in-law the basketmaking craft, but one of her sons, who likes to weave baskets, does not like to do the tedious preparation work.

While she talked, one son was playing a computer game. Neighbors stopped by to see who her visitors were, pushing open the sliding glass doors from the patio.

“We’re just like everybody else,” Darden said.

“We just have an Indian cultural background. I pray for myself like everyone else. This is reservation land. I’m an Indian. They can’t make me move off.”

Jules Darden with his regalia at his home on the Chitimacha reservation.

Advocate staff photo by Tim Mueller

The reservation is set up as a corporation, with Darden as the CEO and a council of five members meeting regularly to discuss tribal business.

“Bingo created 150 jobs. We converted it to a casino which has 900 employees. Our employees are not allowed to gamble there. We want them to take their paychecks home and spend the income on their families,” Darden said.

“People are coming back because of job opportunities, education and health care. We are in the process of buying back property we used to own. We’ve just acquired another 900 acres. We now have more than 3,000 acres. We’re not going to last forever, so we’re looking at diversifying,” he said.

“We’re looking at the possibility of getting our own high school and a private school reserved for members and non-members. We’re considering such things as a residential community and golf course, factory outlets, Webavestompdances, which are contemporary elaborate.”

It’s poor and far from home?

High for you, and now people have nice homes and drive nice cars,” Darden said.

Indians,” he said.

Keeping with changing times, his annubustles designs are worked indyed stripsof cane. 

His way of expressing Indian culture. Dancing is mostly a tradition of Plains Indians,” he said.

His regalia includes a feather bundle, which represents eagles. His moccasins were made by a woman from Canada. His headpiece, or roach, was bought by mail order. “I was going to try to make it, but I didn’t go the way I planned,” he said.

His regalialudes leg buns and in, keeping with changing times, his arm bunsles have Cds in the centers.

He has set some ambitious goals for himself. “I would like to compose flag songs in the Chitimacha language, then teach them to others who are interested. They have a drum there at school. I’m just a beginner. We’re trying to start our own drum. People from Coushatta come over to teach dances” to young Chitimacha people.”

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