THE CHET IMACHAS
OF
CHARENTON

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There are many different ways the name of the tribe has been recorded; I have found nine, the first spelling being T’Chettimacha. During the last two centuries it has changed to Chitimacha. I still use the second way of spelling, Chetimacha. When the Europeans invaded the New World, the Indians called themselves Pantch Pinunkanch (men altogether red.) This was to distinguish themselves from any other race.

The Chetimacha Reservation is located on highway 326, one mile west of Charenton, St. Mary Parish, Louisiana. The reservation consists of approximately 283 acres, with 45 families residing on or near it. The membership roll consists of between 500-600 members, which is much larger than the resident population, due to the fact many of the members had to leave their native land in order to obtain an education, find jobs, and secure homes.

The Chetimachas believe they have always been here. Children are taught orally about their ancestors, beliefs and customs since there was no form of writing. Teachings were written in the memory and on the heart of every child. According to legends handed down from generation to generation, the Great Spirit made Mother Earth and places the Chetimachas here to have, hold and protect. The older Indians respected their legends as much as a non-Indian does his Bible. Their belief in the Great Spirit is far greater than man today. They had the privilege of seeing Christ ascend from a Cypress tree at Lake Dauterive. This tree was sacred to the older Indians, also many non-Indians. This might prove the Indians were here before the time of Christ. Their legends tell how the Great Spirit would teach them many of their cultures in person.

The Chetimacha’s religion came first in all their teachings and customs. They recognized a creator of all things, along with their Great Spirits, (a great one, and a lesser one.) Couldn’t this have been God and his Son? The Indians were taught under pain of death to adore them as their Master, Creator, and to preserve all things He had created. They were to honor their brothers and to respect their bones. The Great Spirit held an important place with the Indians. It was He who on his journeys taught the Indians how to provide their food, clothing, tools, and cures for their ill. It was in honor of their Great Spirit they danced, sang and drank
of their tea. Ceremonies were held in the large religious house on the rise of a new moon. The religious house was surrounded by a wooden fence. There were no idols in the worship house; only the garments of the religious dancers were kept there. The Na'ta was the one who performed all duties connected with the Great Spirit, however, every Na'ta had a younger man working with him. Upon the death of the Na'ta the Nete'x mec met and replaced him.

One year after the death of the head Chief, the men in charge would dig up his bones, clean them thoroughly, wrap them in a newly made mat, carry them to the Worship house, have a ceremonial dance, then bury the bones in the Worship house. The burials of the other members were performed in the same manner, only their bones were buried at their village, in a mound. Indians in their aboriginal stage knew there was a supreme being, and religious teachings were taught by legends. To an Indian, the Great Spirit, had no eyes or ears, and knew everything that was done or said. They needed no one to teach them to love the Great Spirits. No one other than the Great Spirit could have created Mother Earth, animals, trees, celestial beings and the Indians. They respected His creations.

Some people think the Indians worshipped celestial beings. Indians used the phases of the moon and the rising and setting of the sun as their calendar. Every morning an Indian would face the rising sun and give thanks for another new day. Each evening they faced the setting sun and thanked the Great Spirit for protecting them one more day. At the change of the moon's cycle, all members would gather and sing songs and dance with joy for the rewards the Great Spirit had given them. Two or three times a year, at the sign of the new moon, all bands of the tribe would meet at the large worship house for religious ceremonies. Indian religion was not a cult, nor worship of idols.

Their was a universal natural deity, symbolized by the works of the Great Spirit, the sun, moon and stars. The rituals associated with their religion was one with great sincerity for the Great Spirit. The Indians believed there were two spirit worlds, a good and a bad. The children were taught to obey, respect each other and never speak with a forked tongue.
There was a strict punishment for any maiden or woman who committed adultery, one that no one would agree to today. However, it was a very good system of enforcing one of the ten commandments.

Most of the people in this great universe have been taught the Bible. How many follow their teachings, and go for the love of God and His blessings? I dare say, many worship their worldly goods more than their creator, and never pause to give one moment of thanks to God for seeing another sunrise or sunset.

The Indians were forced to give up their religion when Bienville came here. He demanded all people must become Catholic in 1726 or be persecuted. Some of the older Indians were persecuted and the Indian religion was completely abolished by the early 1800's. A few of the older members who have passed on in this century still remembered some of their religious teachings and ceremonies. Their way of speaking of religion indicated they were still Indians at heart in their beliefs.

Much of Indian culture is lost because few realized they could be bi-lingual and bi-cultural. People should take pride in sharing their differences with others. Indians did not realize their customs were unique and should have been preserved. They accepted non-Indian ways and non-Indian culture. Almost too late, Indians discovered they must salvage their culture if they are to remain a distinct and individual people.

The Chief and Princess aristocracy was comprised of descendents from generation to generation, until the 20th century. The custom of the Chief has been discontinued, as are the days when the Chief would sit in council with members of the tribe and discuss their problems. There is a five man council now that handles all of the tribe's affairs, making decisions that are best for members of the tribe. The last Indian Princess, Delphine Stouff, passed away in 1940. I still have older non-Indians ask me about Princess Delphine. Indians have customs unlike any other race, and only Indians or those dedicated to Indians really understand them.
According to the custom of the burial ceremonies, a feast would be held for the family of the deceased to show how all shared in the sorrow. Some of the food and clothing of the deceased was placed on the grave, as a tribute to honor the soul. The Indians offered their sacrifices in humility to their dead.

Totemism existed only in clan names, usually that of an animal. The Indians respected all animals particularly the animals for which their clans were named. Children were considered to be in the same clan as his mother. Old Chief Benjamin Paul explained this to me in the late 1920's. His paternal grandmother was of the Wolf clan, which made his father of the Wolf clan.

Early Indian housing included palmetto huts for the summer, and tepees in the winter. Later came the log cabins put together with mud and moss plaster to seal out the weather, the last one being on the reservation until late 1800's. After Indians saw non-Indians using their trees to make homes, they began to build homes of hand hewed timber for the frame and split pews for the walls. By the 19th century, there were saw mills on what once was their land. Indians built more modern homes, the frame work was still of hand hewed timber, morticed and pegged, but the walls were of rough lumber upright boards. There are two such houses on the reservation today, they have been remodeled, but still have the old framework. These two houses may be an eyesore to many, but to the ones who value the labor and love that went in building these homes, it would be like removing the last achievement of the older generation, and cutting off all ties of their ancestors. These houses are over 150 years old, pure cypress, and far better than lumber you buy today.

The Indians dressed as most Indians, in summer they wore scanty garments, in winter garments made of tanned leather. They used beads and shells for decorations and adorned themselves with bracelets, shoulder and breastplates. Later when the white men came, they said, "you have to wear more clothes," and the Indians began to dress like the white men. Both sexes wore their hair in
braids, the men tied feathers at the end. Women decorated themselves with beads and sometimes braided a string in the hair.

Most of the Indian's cookery is lost or too hard to prepare today. They made their own corn flour, moistened it and added homemade lard, made it into cakes or biscuits, placed it in a clay pot, and cooked it over hot coals. Pumpkins were cooked the same way, but sugar was added later. A favorite of many of the members today is a cereal made of parched corn, either eaten dry or with milk. Persimmons were mashed and mixed with parched corn, baked or eaten with a cereal.

Indians loved a clam bake, they would all gather in a group and have a big picnic. The clams were placed over coals covered with wet green moss to form a steam, the clams were then dipped in a dish of salt water and eaten. They ate all kinds of fish and shell fish, except flounder. They always said the Great Spirit told them not eat of this fish. After they were taught the Bible, many thought the reason for not eating the flounder was because it was the fish that Christ fed the multitude and was therefore sacred.

The greatest art of the Chetimachas is their basket weaving. It is almost a lost art, and only a very few still make the single baskets. Only one of the younger Indian women can make the double basket. The process of making a basket is a long drawn-out task. First the basketmaker must go out to the cane break, cut a certain age cane for each color, split the reeds by hand, and peel them by the teeth and hands. Next they are cured and dried and the process is repeated. This takes weeks to prepare the canes for weaving. Every basket has a different weave, the same as in crocheting, etc. The tribe is known the world over for their unique weaving, especially the double woven baskets, which is like making four baskets in one. An expert in basket weaving will never put out a basket whose design does not meet perfectly. On the double woven, an old basket is used for a pattern. Some baskets over 100 years old are saved for this purpose. The tribe lost their beadwork, with only one original design of beadwork left. They do modern bead work, such as split necklaces, and to identify their work from others.
The language of the tribe was distinct from other tribes, but unfortunately it was not learned by the younger generations and is lost. Martin Duralde in 1803, did some research on the language, but he took it from an old colored man who is said to have spoken the language. Gatchet in 1886, also made a study of the language, but there is no record of it being taught to anyone, or trying to be saved. Swanton made a small study of the language at two different times.

The only complete study of the language was made in 1934-35, by Morris Swadesh. In his writings, Swadesh states there was a different dialect between Delphine Stouff and Benjamin Paul. Delphine was raised by her aunts who were full blooded Chetimachas, while Benjamin Paul was part Tunica and Chetimacha, and this could have been the difference. These were the last who spoke the language fluently. Benjamin Paul passed away in 1935, Delphine in 1940. With their passing, the language did the same. There are a few of the older members living that know a little, but not enough to converse.

Few people know little about the Chetimacha's herbs and their uses. Most people have a very dim view at what once was called "Medicine Man". Webster's dictionary defines a medicine man as a person who professes to cure sickness by drugs, charms and fetishes. In other words, it was just a fake or superstition. Yet where do most of the medicines that doctors use today come from? The medicines are derived from herbs the Indians used centuries ago. Chamber's Encyclopedia of 1888, states that in the science of medicine proper, Indians have vast knowledge (empirical). Doctor Dumont wrote, "These men without science and study of drugs and ordinarily without preparation, cured their sick many times as surely as the most skillfull physicians could do." Doctor Du Pratz, in his writings tells how Indians cured eye sickness through herbs. He also states that during the war of the French and Spanish, the Chief of the Tunikas was wounded by a ball from a musket, the ball pierced the Chief's cheek and came out under his jaw. French doctors claimed it would take weeks to cure him, but the Indian Medicine Man cured him completely in eight days. De la Vente states, "Soldiers
were wounded with as many as four or five bullets or arrow heads, some in the stomach, all were cured by Indian doctors through the knowledge of simple herbs which they had learned from their fore-fathers. They also cured hands, arms, and feet that the best surgeons would not have hesitated to cut off.

I have seen Delphine Stouff cure such illnesses as pneumonia, tuberculosis, asthma, lock jaw, black widow spider bites, snake bites, and many other kinds of sicknesses. The one that remains in my memory the most, is when a man came here in a boat from Texas to see if Delphine could cure him. He had been bitten by a rattlesnake over a year before and had been to every doctor or hospital he thought could save him. His leg had been cut so much, infection had eaten the flesh beyond the shin bone. He said he had spent thousands of dollars for hospital and doctor fees. Delphine hesitated, she had never seen anything like this before, but promised the man she would try. He lived at the Bayou side for about two months, while Delphine treated him. He left here cured walking as if he had never been a cripple and without paying a fee. The Indians said the Great Spirit gave them the knowledge to cure, and you do not charge for the work of the Great Spirit.

Delphine was the last Indian doctor in the tribe, and wanted to hand down the secrets to an Indian, but no one cared to learn. I asked her to teach me. She stated, "If you promise to not ever give it to the white man, this is the only thing we have left that has not been taken away from us," I promised; it took many an hour of walking through fields, ditches and woods learning each and every herb, weed, leaves and branches of trees and their uses.

The practice was finally taken away from the Indians, but not the secret. In 1938, we were warned by a noted physician in Franklin, Louisiana, that the AMA was investigating us. They came out and told us we could not treat unless we had a doctor's license. The doctor in Franklin, had always sent his snake bite patients to us for cures, and he tried to get a license for us. The AMA said they would if we would show them what we used. Of course, Delphine refused. We were told if we treated any more people we would go to jail. Rather
than give the last secret the Indians had to the white man for them to make a fortune on, and claim they had made a great discovery, our family will go to the grave with us.

There are many more customs and cultures of the Indians that will not be published or handed down to the younger generations, as the lack of interest will let it die with the other customs.

Before the Europeans came the Indians lived in peace and harmony with each other, regardless of tribe. There was enough land for all their members, with over 15 different villages. These Indians enjoyed their land, fresh air, birds, fish and animals that the Great Spirit had given them. They had their own possessions and passed them down from generation to generation, but not their land. It was for all Indians to enjoy. Little did they realize when the Europeans came their land livelihood would completely change. The Indians welcomed the white man and helped them in every way possible, but they could not understand their ways, which seemed to be an idiotic and depraved system of taking Indian's land. The Europeans caused discord among other tribes by giving gifts and fire water to assist them in attacking the Chetimachas.

Many of the earliest settlers saw the Indians as rugged individuals, others as savages. Some writers state the Chetimachas were one of the more peaceful tribes, living in harmony with each other. The Europeans wanted the Indians' land, and caused distrust among different tribes, who were previously known as blood brothers. Almost from the beginning of the discovery of the New World, the Indians were pushed back, exploited, despoiled and many exterminated by the ones they had trusted and befriended. The leaders from foreign countries did not have to report any of their activities or crimes to their nation. All they had to do was report their gain of riches and loss of Indians. No wonder they encouraged wars, the more Indians killed or sold in slavery, the more land they took. This was their way of justifying themselves to their country, but did killing the Indians, selling them into slavery and taking their land, justify them in the eyes of their God? Tribal wars were increased by the change in all Indians. Although the Chetimachas were a peaceful nation they were attacked the most and lost the most.
In 1700, they possessed all the territory south of the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to the Vermilion Bay, from Opelousas down to the Gulf of Mexico. With over 4000 warriors, the exact population is not known. In 1703, St. Denis made an expedition against them with the aid of two other tribes. The Chetimachas suffered their first loss, which was many warriors, women and children. The women and young maidens that were not killed were sold in slavery.

In 1706, the Taensa invited the Chetimachas to come eat corn of the Bayogoulas. When the Chetimachas arrived they were attacked. This attack was brought about through the influence of the non-Indians. Once again their loved ones were slain, their loss heavy. Later that same year, some Indian warriors from the Donaldson band were out searching for some of their loved ones, came upon four white men, and killed them in revenge not knowing one was a priest. News of this reached Biloxi, on January 1, 1707, through M. Berguier, whose Chetimacha girl, a slave, told him about it. Bienville immediately sent gifts to all Indian nations along the lower Mississippi Valley, to induce them to declare war against the Chetimachas. In March of the same year, Bienville along with warriors from the Abyogoulas, Biloxi, Chawash and Natchitochas tribes, crept upon the Chetimachas early one morning, and made a surprise attack on them. The ones that were not slain were taken to Mobile and sold into slavery. The greater part of slaves in those days were Chetimachas. By now the Chetimachas had lost most of their land, members were either dead or dying from hunger. The battle had lasted years and the Chief knowing their fate, agreed to make peace with the white man. Bienville agreed and set a meeting place to smoke of the calumet. When the Chetimachas arrived at the meeting place, they came singing the song of the calumet. They ceased singing when they were in front of Bienville. Then the Chief said, "Is it you, then I with you?" The Governor (Bienville) answered, "Yes". The Indians seated themselves on the earth, resting their faces in their hands, the Chief without doubt trying to collect himself before making his speech. The others were to keep silent. Some moments later, the Chief rose with two other members, one filled the pipe of the calumet with tobacco, the other brought fire and lighted the pipe. The
Chief smoked the pipe and after wiping it, presented it to Bienville, that he might do the same. The Governor and each Frenchman did the same one after the other. The wordbearer (Chief) stood alone, others reseated themselves near the presents they had brought for the Governor. The Chief was dressed in a robe made of many beaver skins, fastened to the right shoulder and passed under the left arm. He began his speech, with a majestic air, addressing his words to Governor Bienville.

"My heart laughs with joy at seeing myself before you. We have all heard the word of peace which you have sent us; the heart of all our nation laughs with joy even to trembling; the women forgetting the past have danced; the children have jumped like young fawns, and run about as if they have lost their senses. Your word will never be lost; our hearts and ears are filled with it, and our descendants will preserve it as long as the ancient word (or tradition) shall endure. As the war has made us poor, we have been compelled to hunt, in order to bring you the skins and prepare them before coming. Our men did not dare to go far on the hunt for fear the other nations had not yet heard your word, and they are jealous of us. We ourselves even have followed our course in coming here trembling until we have seen your face. How satisfied are my heart and eyes to see you now, to speak myself, without fear that the winds carry off our words. When you speak, you will see our legs run and leap like young stags to do what you wish." The Chief raising his voice, began with gravity.

"Ah! How beautiful is the sun now in comparison with what it was when you were angry with us. How dangerous is a bad man? You know that one single person killed the Frenchman, whose death has made fall with our best warriors; there remains to us only old men, women and children, you have demanded the head of the bad man? You know that one single person killed the Frenchman, whose death had made fall with our best warriors; there remains to us only old men, women and children, you have demanded the head of the bad man in order to make peace and we have sent him to you, and there, is the only warrior who dared to attack and kill him. Be not surprised at it, he has always been a true man and a true warrior. He is a relative of our sovereign, his heart wept day and night because his wife and child are no more since the war; but he is satisfied and I also now, because he has killed his enemy and yours. Formerly the sun was red,
the roads filled with brambles and thorns, the clouds were black, the water was troubled and stained with our blood, our women wept unceasingly, our children cried with fright, the game fled far from us, our homes were abandoned, our fields uncultivated, we all have empty bellies and our bones are visible. Now, the sun is warm and brilliant the heavens are clear, there are no more clouds, the roads are clean and pleasant, the water is so clear that we can see ourselves within it, the game comes back, our women dance until they forget to eat, our children leap like young fawns, the heart of the entire Chetimacha Nation laughs with joy, to see that we will walk along the same road as you all. Frenchman, the same sun will illuminate us, we will illuminate us, we will have but one word, our hearts will make but one, we will ear together like brothers. Will that not be good, what say you?"

To this discourse, pronounced in a firm assured tone, with all grace and propriety, the Chief bowed. Mde. Bienville replied in a few words of a common language, (Mobilian) Bienville had the Indians eat, placed his hand in that of the Chief as a sign of two friendships. Before the signing of peace there were some demands of Bienville's to be met. He demanded the man responsible for the death of St. Cosme, the priest, be brought to him. The Indians obeyed. Bienville made an example of him, had his men beat the warrior to death, scalp him and throw his body in the lake. All slaves that had been taken from the Chetimachas should not be returned, but the Chetimachas must return all the French whom they might have captured. The Chetimachas should abandon their present homesite and go to a place which should be designated to them. The Chetimachas accepted, shook hands with Bienville and left. Fifteen days later the Chetimachas descended with their families in canoes with their personal effects and moved with the tribe on Grande Lake. By the 18th century the whole territory of the Chetimachas had dwindled to one section on Bayou La Fourche and two on the Bayou Teche.

In 1712, the king of Spain began trading in Louisiana, importing negroes from Africa to work the mines of which were once the Indians. At the same time they were trading three Indians for two blacks, until they had so many blacks that it resulted in Civil War. In 1724,
the Black code was passed by Bienville, and remained in force until 1803. We grant to manumitted slaves the same rights, privileges and immunities which are enjoyed by free-born persons. It is our pleasure that their merit in having acquired their freedom, shall produce in their favor, not only with regard to their persons, but also to their property, the same effects which our other subjects derive from the happy circumstance of their having been born free. Article number 54 gave the slaves their freedom. What about the Indian who was born free in their own country, given to them by their Great Spirit? They were not even mentioned. In 1726, Bienville expelled all religion in this New World except Catholic. Indians were forced to not hold their religious ceremonies in the open any longer. In 1729 the new Governor Pierrier, allowed a band of negro slaves to attack the Chawasha and destroy them. In the mid-18th century the Chetimachas were again at the fate of the Frenchmen, who bribed the Houma Indians, former friends of the Chetimachas to assist them in attacking the few Chetimachas left.

In 1750, during the war between the English Party and Carolina Traders, an English party was formed among the Choctaws, assisted by the Chetimachas. The Choctaw party was led by a noted Chief Soulier Rouge, who was the Chief of the Chetimachas. The crown or band that the Chief wore had been handed down from generation to generation. By 1760, there were over a million and a half people in the New World. The so called American citizens, who made fortunes in land speculations 'taken from the Indians, were now considered the only American citizens.

1776--What A Year! The Declaration of Independence was drawn up in writing by Thomas Jefferson; adopted by Congress of the United States on July 4, 1776, stated, "All men are created equal; all have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". What equal rights did the Indians get? They were discriminated against their lives that had been changed to white man's ways. Their liberty to do what they wanted was granted as long as they stayed away from white people. Their pursuit for happiness was confined to their reservation. They could not get a haircut in a white man's shop,
go to a public school or even sit and worship in white man's church, unless they sat on a pew marked "Indians". Is this what the Declaration of Independence was intended to be? An act of June 19, 1767, signed by Governor W. Aubry of Louisiana, under the French dynasty, recognized the Chetimachas as the owners of the territory they occupied at that time. The area of which was determined by survey was 754,462 acres of land. On September 14, 1777, Gov. Marquez Galvez signed a petition, granting the Chetimachas their land. The Commandant and other subjects of the Spanish Government were to respect the rights of the Chetimachas Indians on their land and to protect them of their possessions. In 1867, the Constitutional Convention passed the right to vote bill, but it was not until 1924 that the Indians would be allowed to vote. I could go on and on about the injustices the Indians have had. I feel some should not be written because it would involve many persons whose ancestors had a part in prejudices, cruelty and refusal to let an Indian be an Indian. Here lives the oldest and only Federally recognized tribe until 1973, where giant oak trees, old and bearded with Spanish moss stand erect and beautiful, holding their limbs out to welcome anyone, just as the Indians did.

In this treatise, I have attempted to furnish a little information on the history of the Chetimachas, and ethnological facts. The literary work connected with the present effort, has been undertaken only in tribute to the Indians who respected, trusted and shared some of their history with me. I am aware of the fact, to have a complete history, it would be necessary to get manuscript material from France and Spain.

The Indians always said, "As long as the eagle was left to fly over their mother earth, there would always be an Indian on it". I wonder being wards of the Federal Government, where the Government has the final say in most matters. I often wonder if they haven't decided the best way to exterminate the Indians, is kill them with kindness. The Indians are getting benefits long over due, but somehow it has caused discontentment in all. Members have little respect for each other's trials and sorrows anymore. Such was the case of Wounded Knee. I close with an old prayer:
O Great Spirit whose voice I hear in the wind and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me. I come before you, one of your many children. I am small and weak. I need your strength and wisdom. Let me walk in beauty and make my eyes behold the red and purple sunset. Make my hands respect the things you have made, my ears sharp to hear your voice. Make me wise, so that I may know the things you have taught my people. The lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock. I seek insight, not to be superior to my brothers, but to be able to fight my greatest enemy, myself. Make me ever ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes, so when my life fades as a fading sunset, my spirit may come to you without shame.