Tunica-Biloxi chairman sworn in for 21st term

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MARKSVILLE — Twenty years ago, the Tunica-Biloxi American Indians had their culture and each other, and not much else.

In 1978 they elected a chairman who eventually would provide them with the means to attain much more. On Sunday, Earl Barbray Sr. was sworn in as chairman of the tribe for the 21st consecutive year.

“I am proud to report to you today that the worst days for our tribe are over,” Barbray told tribal members, dignitaries and friends. “We have many tough challenges before us, but we will never again be without the economic tools to face them. We will be able to keep our promises to our children.”

The ceremony, held in the Mari Center of the tribe’s Grand Casino Avoyelles, was a mixture of the tribe’s heritage and its hard-won economic prosperity.

It began with the singing of the Tunica Daybreak Song by Donna Pierre, and continued in the shadow of a traditional tribal staff made by Alejos Lopez Sr. and his son, Alejos Lopez Jr.

Earlier Sunday, the modern room, situated in the middle of an exceedingly modern casino, was blessed in a traditional manner with the burning of cedar and sage to prepare for the display of the sacred staff.

Barbray said he remembers growing up on the tribe’s tiny reservation with virtually nonexistent health care, no jobs and substandard housing.

“There was a general feeling that we were living in a place with great people and culture, but no economic future,” Barbray said. “We had nothing but our traditions, and they were beginning to suffer.”

The young people of the tribe had a choice between leaving their homes or staying on the reservation to live in poverty, he said.

“We still had hope, but there was no real future for the young people here,” he said. “Our hope was to one day give them something to come home to.”

Eight years ago, Barbray decided that something was the economic development and opportunity the tribe could create with gambling. Many people scoffed at Barbray’s dream, said former U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston.

“But look around you and see the difference. What a difference a man can make if he believes and he won’t take no for an answer,” Johnston said.

Lovell Poncho, chairman of the Coushatta Tribe which owns the Grand Casino Coushatta in Kinder, said he sees the changes.

“Earl has brought his people a long way,” Poncho said. “I have seen many changes here, a lot of progress, a lot of things his people needed.”

But, Johnston warned, this period of prosperity is a time to be watchful.

“Things are good now, and getting better,” Johnston said. “And that means a lot of folks would like a piece of the action, maybe the whole action, whether it be folks at the state or the federal level.”

After the ceremony, Barbray said he is “not really concerned” about Gov. Mike Foster’s announced intentions to tax Louisiana’s three Indian casinos at the same rate as the state’s riverboat casinos.

“The think everything is going to work out just fine,” Barbray said. “I am very confident that our compact is going to be renewed, and it’s going to be acceptable to both parties.”

Direct taxation is prohibited by federal law, Barbray said, “but that doesn’t mean we can’t work something out.”

Part of the problem is a lack of understanding, on the state level, of the issue of sovereignty, Barbray said.

“Some on that level don’t understand that the tribes are sovereign nations and outside the jurisdiction of the state,” Barbray said.

The intense interest of state officials now is ironic, he added.

“As long as the Indians were keeping quiet and stayed out of the limelight, as long as they were wearing blankets and stringing beads, that was OK,” Barbray said. “Now that the tribes are making money, they’re trying to figure out how to get a piece of it.”

Franklin Keel of the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs said during the ceremony that he was glad to see so many central Louisiana officials at the event.

“I can see that you have learned what many people across the state and the nation must learn, that what is good for the surrounding community,” Keel said.

Barbray told the crowd that the tribe has put its gambling revenues into a scholarship program that will fund a full education for all tribal children, a loan program for members starting their own businesses, expanded health care and improved housing.

“We still have much more to do,” he said. “And we’re going to do it.”

Among the tribe’s future plans are a golf course, another hotel, a shopping mall, an industrial park and manufacturing facilities.

“Gaming is not the answer to all our economic problems,” he said. “But in our case it’s a stepping stone to solving them.”

Also sworn in Sunday were Vice Chairman Alfred Barbray, Secretary/Treasurer Marshall Pierite and council members Earl Barbray Jr., David Rivas Jr., Marshall Sampson and Harold Prieto.