

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Big Chief

Everything in New Orleans seems to be “Big”. After all, it *is* called the “Big Easy”. There are bands and musicians, like “Big Sam’s Funky Nation” and “Big Al Carter”. There’s “Mr. Big Stuff” and the “Big Shot” of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, and (last, but definitely not least) there’s the “Big Chief”.



Here comes the “Big Chief”!



Peacock Proud

Not just any old run-of-the-mill Chief, but the “Big Chief”. New Orleans has had numerous police chiefs and fire chiefs, and “*Chef Menteur*” means “Chief Liar”. Locals chanted “Who Killa Da Chief?”

after Chief David Hennessy was assassinated in 1890, resulting in eleven men being killed by mob rule. And "Recovery Chief" Ed Blakely made "big promises" of "cranes in the sky" after Hurricane Katrina. Chiefs have come and gone, but there's nothing like the "Big Chief".

His role stems from the rich Mardi Gras Indian tradition in the Crescent City, one that goes all the way back to the nineteenth century. The ancestors of these richly beaded and befeathered revelers took special notice of the appearance in town of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, beginning in 1884. This spectacle of seeing real Indians increased interest in the African-American community of masking as Indians for Mardi Gras. Also, they shared a deep affinity with Native Americans as both being minorities, and (according to some sources) the tradition began as a tribute to American Indians for aiding runaway slaves in the pre-Civil War era.

Collectively, their organizations are called "tribes" (about 38 in number). In the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the Mardi Gras Indians had a reputation for skirmishing with each other. Today, the violence has greatly subsided and many people love to make it down to Shakespeare Park (at the intersection of LaSalle and Washington) to watch the Indians strut their stuff on Super Sunday (the Sunday closest to Saint Joseph's Day). The Indians also parade on Mardi Gras Day and for special events like the annual New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, but Saint Joseph's Day (for more than a century) has held a special significance. Some chiefs say that the evening of Saint Joseph's Day was a natural time for Indians to celebrate in a very Catholic town. Others reflect that Italian storeowners and restaurateurs would celebrate Saint Joseph's Day (March 19) at their establishments, and that the Indians would go from place to place dressed in their suits, eating and drinking in celebration. In 2012, Super Sunday was held on March 18.

Today Shakespeare Park is A. L. Davis Park, named for the civil rights activist and first African-American to serve on the New Orleans City Council, Reverend Abraham Lincoln Davis. In 1900 the park was changed from Morris Park to Shakespeare Park, named for Mayor Joseph A. Shakspeare (1837 - 1896), who was in charge of the city back when Chief Hennessy was sent on his "Big Sleep" (note the variant spelling of hizzoner's surname). Papa Celestin sang about Shakespeare Park in his 1954 recording, "Marie LaVeau":

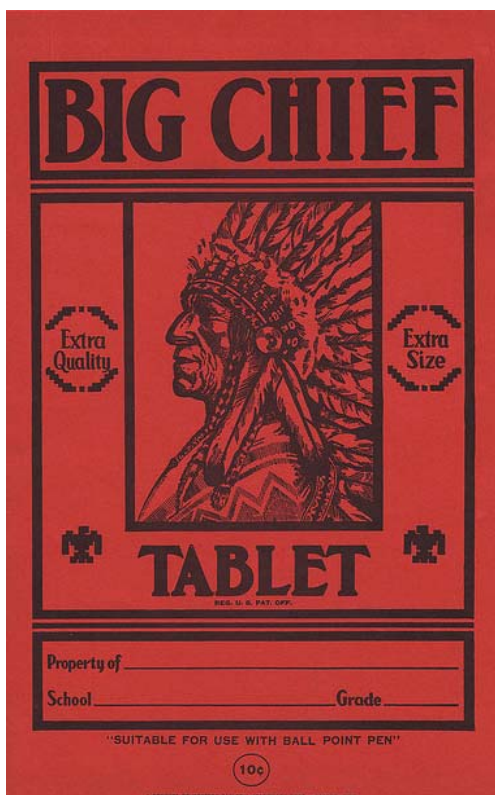
"She snapped her fingers and shake her head,
Then tell 'em about their lovers, livin' or dead.

An old, old lady named Widow Brown,
She asked why her lover stopped comin' around
The "Voodoo" gazed at her and squawk
I see him kissin' a young girl in Shakespeare's Park

Standin' near an oak tree in the dark.

Oh Marie Laveau, Oh Marie Laveau,
Oh Marie Laveau, Oh Marie Laveau,
Oh Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen,
Way down yonder in New Orleans."

One must also recall New Orleans' love for the once ubiquitous "Big Chief" tablet. In Tennessee Williams' play, *Suddenly, Last Summer*, the poet Sebastian Venable is said to pen his annual *Poem of Summer* on a "Big Chief" tablet. In John Kennedy Toole's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Slob *Extraordinaire* Ignatius Reilly writes down his rambling manifesto on "Big Chief" tablets, recording his take on the fall of humanity. A lesser-known fact is that Ignatius also uses Blue Horse Loose Leaf filler sheets and Venus Medalist pencils.



Big Chief Pad from the 50s

Intricate hummingbirds in flight

The distinctive red tablet featured widely spaced lines, easier to fit the words in for those learning penmanship – and only ten cents in the 50s. Its biggest feature, however, was the pad's cover art of a Native American in full headdress, thereby making him a certified "Big Chief". The original "Big Chief" tablet was manufactured by the Western Tablet Company of Saint Joseph, Missouri (not the reason Saint Joseph's Day is important to the Mardi Gras Indians), but was later sold to Mead Corp. A huge stationery manufacturer, Mead produced

the popular pads for a number of years. In early 2001, Everett Pad and Paper purchased Springfield Tablet, the latest manufacturer of "Big Chief". Sadly, their plant operations closed after eighty years, and "Big Chief" is currently out of production.

The "Big Chiefs" spend thousands of hours and dollars on their elaborate costumes each year, always creating a "New Suit". It's all a magnificent artistic challenge to see who's "the prettyest".



Every "Big Chief" became immortalized with the eponymous hit song by Professor Longhair in 1964, on Watch Records. Arranged with orchestra conducted by the late great Wardell Quezergue, Earl King (1934 – 2003) delivered the strong vocals. It featured a whistled first chorus in Longhair's rollicking piano style and lyrics written in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. Like "Iko Iko", the tune became iconic in New Orleans, frequently performed by such masters as Dr. John and most brass bands and musicians in the greater New Orleans area.

The song refers to any one of the leaders of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian tribes, including the Wild Magnolias, the 7th Ward Creole Hunters, the Golden Eagles, the Geronimo Hunters and many others.

And if you've always believed in the adage that warned against "too many chiefs and not enough Indians", that's just not the Mardi Gras Indian way. "Chief of Chiefs" Tootie Montana once explained:

"You've got first chief, which is Big Chief; First Queen; you've got Second Chief and Second Queen; Third Chief and Third Queen. First, Second, and Third chiefs are supposed to have a queen with them. That's just tradition. I found them doing that. Your fourth chief is not called fourth chief, he's the Trail Chief. From there on it's just Indians, no title."

Of course, they do have the "Spy Boy", a type of scout, the "Flag Boy" and the "Wild Man". "Your Spy Boy is way out front, related Chief Tootie, and the "Flag Boy is one block in front so he can see the Spy

Boy up ahead and he can wave his flag to let the chief know what is going on." Montana continued, "Today a Spy Boy looks like a chief and somebody carrying a big old stick. It's been years since I seen a proper flag. The Wild Man wearing the horns in there to keep the crowd open and to keep it clear."

Guess there can be "too many chiefs" for Indians after all.

"Big Chief" Tootie Montana (1922 – 2005) of the Yellow Pocahontas Hunters acted as the "Biggest Chief" for decades, having made his own Indian costumes since the age of ten. Montana (always considered "the prettiest") died "on the battlefield" just after speaking of his fifty-two year involvement with the Indians at a New Orleans City Council special session. The meeting was held to go over complaints of police misconduct during Saint Joseph's night in 2005. Montana was struck by a fatal heart attack. He breathed his last breath surrounded by other chiefs and followers who instantly broke into song.

There are many other "Big Chiefs", both living and dead; and many are musically proficient.

"Big Chief" Theodore Emile "Bo" Dollis began masking as an Indian in 1957 as a member of the Golden Arrows. In 1964 he became the "Big Chief" of the Wild Magnolias, and six years later the Wild Magnolias recorded the Mardi Gras Indian classic *Handa Wanda*, a perennial favorite. "Big Chief" Joseph Pierre "Monk" Boudreaux of the Golden Eagles has collaborated with Dollis and the Wild Magnolias since the mid-70s and is active today in promoting the vital Afro-Caribbean rhythms of the Mardi Gras Indian culture. They resonate with "call-and-response" style chants.

Also in the 70s, The Wild Tchoupitoulas were a group formed by George Landry, who sang vocals as "Big Chief Jolly". With musical accompaniment by The Meters, The Wild Tchoupitoulas recorded a stunning album with reverberating Indian chants. It was produced by the widely acclaimed Allen Toussaint. Another hit recorded by The Wild Tchoupitoulas was the popular number "Meet de Boys on the Battlefield", also the title of HBO's *Treme's* second episode. In it, Clarke Peters stars as Albert Lambreaux, the "Big Chief" of a Mardi Gras Indian tribe who is attempting with gutsy determination to bring home his scattered fold and revitalize his damaged neighborhood.

"Big Chief" Alfred Doucette of the Flaming Arrow Warriors has been inducted into the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame twice. He is also a master carpenter, race car driver and owner of the Nite Cap Lounge in New Orleans. Percussionist and songwriter Chief Smiley Ricks is founder and the "Big Chief" of the Wild Renegade Hunters.

Other "Big Chiefs" in the pantheon include Larry Bannock of the Golden Star Hunters, Joe Pete Adams of the Seminole Indians, Ferdinand Bigard of the Cheyenne Hunters, Donald Harrison, Sr., of the Guardians of the Flame, "Lil" Walter Cook of the Creole Wild West, Lawrence Fletcher and later Jake Million of the White Eagles, Victor Harris of the Spirit of Fi-Ya-Ya, Percy "Chief Pete" Lewis of the Black Eagles and Charles Taylor of the Yellow Jackets. They have kept alive this rich and vibrant tradition.

"Big Chiefs" are everywhere. There's a "Big Chief Snowballs on North Galvez, and "Big Chief" beverages have been marketed through the years in various markets. *Heap Big Chief* is a 1919 silent comedy short featuring comic actor Harold Lloyd. And there's the "Big Chief VIP Experience", marketed as "the most luxurious way to enjoy the Jazz & Heritage Festival". Seating is first-come, first-served, but "Big Chief" ticketholders get semi-private access to a viewing area at the Congo Square Stage, the Jazz Tent and the Blues Tent. What's a "Big Chief" pass any way without tent privileges?

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