

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Funny Louis and Happy Jack

The Choctaw are a Native American people that originally inhabited parts of the Southeastern United States (such as, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana) since the pre-Columbian era, and their language belongs to the Muskogean linguistic group. Choctaw ancestors built a great earthwork mound about 1,700 years ago, considered sacred by their people. The Choctaw are considered one of the "Five Civilized Tribes" because of their inclination to adopt European customs into their culture. Historian Henry Halbert believes that their name is derived from the Choctaw phrase *hacha hatak* (meaning "river people").

French ethnographer and explorer Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz, in his *Histoire de La Louisiane* (Paris, 1758), recollected that when he inquired "from whence the Chat-kas (his spelling of Choctaws) came, to express the suddenness of their appearance, they replied that they had come out from under the earth." Although not a literal creation account, this was possibly the first instance of a European recounting part of the Choctaw origin story.

Today, Choctaw words and names abound in and around the parishes bordering the Greater New Orleans area.

The name *Tchefuncte* (pronounced Che-funk'-tuh) is derived from the Choctaw word *hachofakti*, which denotes a kind of shrub oak tree that produces a small edible nut called *chinquapin*, which is much akin to a chestnut. During the early days, these trees lined the banks of the *Tchefuncte* River, which forms part of the border between St. Tammany and Tangipahoa parishes.

St. Tammany was named for *Tamanend* (circa 1628 – circa 1698), chief of the Lenni-Lanape Indian nation in the Delaware Valley at the time Philadelphia was established. And Tangipahoa comes from an Acolapissa Indian word meaning "ear of corn, corn cob or those who gather corn". The name Acolapissa means "those who listen and see" in the Choctaw language.

The *Tchefuncte* meanders through western St. Tammany, flowing in a southerly direction and is joined by the 28-mile long *Bogue Falaya* River in Covington. *Bogue Falaya* is derived from the Choctaw words *bogu*, "stream, or creek", and *falaya*, "long". One can easily see from this that the *Atchafalaya* River, Basin and Swamp comes from the Choctaw word combination also meaning "long river", from *hacha*, "river", and *falaya*, "long". Remember, Choctaw is said to come from *hacha hatak*, meaning "river people".

There's also the town of Bogalusa (birthplace of Henry Roeland Byrd, aka Professor Longhair), meaning "Black Creek", from the Choctaw words *bogu*, once again for "stream, or creek" and *lusa* for "black". *Bogue Chitto* similarly means "large stream or creek", as defined by the Choctaw. *Chitto* means "large".

Professor Longhair had a big hit in 1950 entitled "Bald Head", which could have been subtitled "Pontchatoula" (which means "falling hair" from the Choctaw words *pashi* meaning "hair" and *itula* or *itola* meaning "falling"). Of course, the Choctaw were referring to the abundance of beautiful moss falling, or hanging, from the trees.

Chinchuba means "alligator" in Choctaw, as in *Chi pisa la chike, Chinchuba!* (See you later, Alligator!). The name Abita (the town where Abita beer is made) aptly comes from the Choctaw word *ibetap*, meaning "the source of water, or springs". Panola, the name of a street in Carrollton (as well as several U.S. counties) comes from the Choctaw word for "cotton".

Amite (in Tangipahoa Parish) means either "friendship" (a corruption of the French *amitie*) or "young" (according to William A. Read of LSU who theorizes that Amite was a French corruption of *himmita*, a Choctaw adjective meaning "young"). Governor Claiborne favored friendship, writing that in 1699 Iberville "gave names to the lakes and streams they still bear. Amite, in token of the friendly reception he there had from the Indians ... "

Perhaps the most easily recognizable word of Choctaw origin is the word *bayou*. It is defined as a body of water, such as a sluggish meandering creek or stream, that is a tributary of a larger body of water. It slowly wends its way through lowlands, marshes or plantations. From the Louisiana French *bayouque*, *bayou* is believed to have evolved from the Choctaw *bayuk*.

The first recorded meeting between the Choctaw and the French was with French explorer, Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville in 1699. Extracts from the Journal of Captain Harry Gordon, Chief Engineer in the Western Department in North America (reprinted from *Pownall's Topographical Description of North America*, London, 1776) reveal the

engineer's observations on this body of water:

"We left New Orleans ... and lay that night at the Bayoue."

From its Choctaw origins to its French conversion, the word *bayou* has been celebrated in song more than once. Hank Williams crooned and mispronounced the word in "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)", singing "by-oh" when the correct pronunciation is "by-you". But he had to make it rhyme with "me oh my oh", as in:

"Me gotta go pole the pirogue down the by-oh"

and

"Son of a gun, we'll have big fun on the by-oh".

"Blue Bayou" is a beautiful ballad written and recorded by Roy Orbison in 1963 and again by Linda Rondstadt in 1977. She took the song to No. 3 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart:

"Where those fishing boats
With their sails afloat
If I could only see
That familiar sunrise
Through sleepy eyes
How happy I'd be"

Think back on earlier sunrises and one can almost hear the echoes of early Native Americans in the area. They caught fish, hunted deer and wild fowl and gathered wild persimmons, *chinquapin* nuts and berries from the verdant banks of *bayous* and rivers.

Speaking of wild persimmons, I must mention Plaquemines Parish, which is bordered by Orleans, St. Bernard and Jefferson parishes. Interestingly, the name Plaquemines (the parish and Plaquemine, a town in Iberville Parish) is derived from the French Creole via the Atakapa word, *piakimin*, for persimmon. The French used it to name a military post they constructed on the banks of the Mississippi, a site surrounded by a number of persimmon trees. Eventually the name was applied to the entire parish and to a nearby *bayou*.

The Native American Atakapan people had a name that was also Choctaw in origin. Also rendered *Attakapa*, *Attakapas* or *Attacapa*, it means "man eater". They lived in areas from Vermilion Bay, Louisiana, to Galveston Bay, Texas. Attakapas County was a former county in southern Louisiana and was one of twelve counties in the Territory of Orleans (that's right, counties and not parishes), defined by the United States government following the Louisiana Purchase in

1803. The Attakapas trading post, now St. Martinville, was at its core. In 1811, Attakapas County was divided into the parishes of St. Martin and St. Mary; and the region was later subdivided to create Lafayette, Vermillion and Iberia parishes.

But further up in La Salle Parish is the strangest Choctaw name of all, "Funny Louis". According to the census records of 1850 and 1860, John Frazer, William Frazier, David Baggett, T. J. Casey and the Carraways were all living in a settlement known as "Funny Louis". It was also the name of a *bayou* that runs into Little River about three miles downstream from Zenoria, and goes all the way to French Fork. You are surely wondering, "How is "Funny Louis" a Choctaw name?" Sounds more like the name of some jokester named Louie than a name of Indian origin. A clue lies in the name Bogalusa.

Lusa, you'll remember, means "black". The rest of the answer lies in the fact that animals figure prominently in Choctaw mythology, as they do in many myth cycles. For example, in Choctaw history, solar eclipses were attributed to a mischievous black squirrel (*fani*, or *funi*, in Choctaw means "squirrel"), which they believed was trying to devour the sun. They also believed that the only effective means to prevent so terrifying a catastrophe befalling the world as the blotting out of the world's light source, was to bestow upon the little menace a tremendous scare. The women shrieked loudly and made noises upon cups and pans, as did the children. The men, acting as brave warriors, fired their weapons at the sky. Hopefully this last shot would be the successful one. The "black squirrel", the *funi lusa*, was scared off. The sun was saved and not consumed by this hungry little epicure.

The Choctaw were happy. Conditions were happy. And down in Plaquemines Parish, there was "Happy Jack".

"Happy Jack" is the name of another unusual place name in Louisiana. It was there in Happy Jack, Louisiana, that Ruth Udstad spent her childhood years near the mouth of the Mississippi River. According to her son, she was of "Alsatian descent" and "her family for generations had been farmers, hunters, fishermen — and great cooks." She became the valedictorian of her high school and earned a degree in chemistry and physics at LSU. After getting married, she and her husband were in the racehorse business. Ruth was the first woman in Louisiana licensed as a thoroughbred horse trainer. But after two sons and a divorce, she became a single mom who mortgaged her home for \$22,000 to make a business investment. That was 1965, and the investment was a New Orleans steak restaurant started by a restaurateur of Croatian descent, Chris Matulich.

The restaurant became Ruth's Chris Steak House, and you'll recognize Ruth Udstad's by her married name, Ruth Fertel (1927 – 2002). Her

ex-husband Rodney ran unsuccessfully, but memorably, for Mayor of New Orleans by making a campaign promise to obtain a gorilla for the Audubon Zoo. Ruth grew her business, set up franchises, and when she sold the company in 1999, there were eighty-five "Ruth's Chris" restaurants around the globe with annual sales in excess of \$300 million.

Under the terms of the purchase agreement, the original "Chris Steak House" name could not be transferred to any other location, but the original restaurant suffered damages from a kitchen fire and Ruth did not want to lose customers already familiar with the "Chris" name. She relocated the restaurant nearby on Broad Street and renamed her establishment the unusual combination of "Ruth's Chris". Unusual, yes — but not as strange as "Funny Louis" and "Happy Jack".

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