HOLY ROSARY INDIAN MISSION

Philadelphia, Mississippi

Holy Rosary Indian Mission was founded in 1884. The Choctaw Indians had been removed to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears but some had remained. They were mostly unseen working as share croppers or eking out a living. Then, Fr. Bekkers arrived from Belgium and established the first of three mission churches located in Central Mississippi to serve the Choctaws. In 1927, the Federal Government recognized those who remained behind as the "Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians". The Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, founded the same year the tribe was officially recognized, came to Holy Rosary Indian Mission in 1944. The Missionary Servants work by preference with those who are poor and abandoned. The Choctaw people are both. I have worked on the Choctaw reservation for 22 years now. The work is both exciting and exhausting. Some days the poverty and problems the Choctaws face are overwhelming, but there are also days when they are inspiring and hope endures.

Once each year in the middle of the hot Mississippi Summer the seven reservation communities that are spread out in four rural Mississippi counties gather for the Choctaw Indian Fair. They come to dance the traditional tribal dances that speak of their history and their close relationship with Mother Earth.

The colorful Choctaw dresses and shirts are decorated with x's and o's, the symbol of stickball, the brutal game unique to the Choctaws. The diamonds that

decorate traditional Choctaw dress represent the diamondback rattlesnake. One of the Choctaw dances is the "snake dance" representing the role the snake has played in their lives. You may have seen Native American dances in movies or TV. The dances of the western tribes are loud and fast. Choctaw dances are not like that. They do not jump or stomp the ground for the earth is their mother and they tread respectfully on her.

Weeks before the Choctaw Fair the stickball tournament begins as each community vies for the title of World Stickball Champions. The game is very physical and only for the brave of heart. Each team has 30 players armed with two "stickball sticks" that are similar to lacrosse sticks only smaller. The goal is to capture a leather ball the size of a golf ball in the sticks, run down the field and throw the ball so it hits a 4x4 pole. While you are trying to do that, the 30 players on the other team is trying to stop you by any means. The game is played with no protection and often in bare feet. The game is so violent that the Choctaws call it "the little brother of war". In earlier times only Choctaw warriors played stickball, but today children and Choctaw women play stickball.

The Choctaws are known for their beadwork and baseket weaving. During the Choctaw Fair Choctaws exhibit and sell their crafts and show off their skills. Also during the Choctaw Fair the tribe choses the young woman who will serve as the Choctaw Princess for the next year. It is a great honor. This year three of the candidates were from the three reservation churches.

Lanena John was chosen. You can see the traditional Choctaw basket she is carrying and the beautiful beadwork adorning her Choctaw dress.

As I watched the tribal dances I smiled seeing the very small children dancing with their elders and learning the dances that will teach them who they are. As I walked around I noticed so many young children with stickball sticks sticking out of their backpacks. The Choctaws cherish their history and culture. They are one of very few Native American tribes who speak their traditional Choctaw language and English as a second language. One tribal elder once told me, "Our language is one thing they could not take from us!" For four days there is a spirit of pride and joy that fills every tribal member, but then the Fair is over until next year and reservation life goes back to the way it is.

The Catholic Church has played an important role in the lives of the Choctaw Indians. We serve as advocates as they try to deal with the world outside the reservation. The Church is a sacred place, a safe place, a place where they are important, a place that offers them hope of a better future. Holy Rosary is a mission, actually three missions on the Choctaw Indian Reservation and it depends on donations from outside for over half of the money it needs to be here and minister among the Choctaws. 20-30 times a day families come to the Church needed help for food, gas to go to the hospital, help paying utility bills, or school supplies. It often surprises Choctaws that people who are not Choctaw care enough to help them.

Father Bob Goodyear, S.T.