



Market Bulletin

Bob Odom, Commissioner

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be safe and designate a driver.



Happy New Year!

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From seed to shining tree!

A historical Louisiana tribe of Native Americans is helping re-establish the once-forgotten longleaf pine tree by planting and selling hundreds of thousands of seedlings every year.

By Sam Irwin

How many folks remember transistor radios, rotary dial telephones, vinyl music records (LPs, 45s and 78s), black and white televisions, kerosene pumps in front of grocery stores and wringer washing machines?

All of these items are obsolete and have been replaced by more practical, efficient products.

That's progress, they say, but how many people realize agricultural products – steeped in history and tradition - can become outmoded as well?

The Beauregard sweet potato is the number one yam on the market, but you can't find the old Puerto Rican any more even though some swear it's the sweetest potato they ever tasted. Scientists develop new varieties of sugarcane every year with hopes the stalk will grow faster and resist pests better. Lesser cane varieties fall by the wayside.

And when the booming turn-of-the-century Louisiana timber business felled the old growth native longleaf pine tree it was quickly replaced with the faster-growing and more efficient loblolly.

Old Native American Louisiana cultures were not immune to the same type of displacement. By the early 20th century, Choctaw, Attakapas, Houma, Chitimacha and Caddo societies were either assimilated or destroyed by the dominant European order.

But sometimes cultural ideas thought to be outmoded and old-fashioned survive. The United States Forest Service found a need to preserve the longleaf pine and efforts were made by Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana to reforest and protect longleaf habitat.

The Clifton Choctaw Indians also found a way to persevere.

By migrating into Louisiana's forgotten "No Man's Land" east of the Sabine River the Clifton Choctaws were somehow overlooked by the U.S. government when Choctaws, Cherokees and Creeks were being deported to Oklahoma via the notorious Trail of Tears in the 19th century.

The Clifton Choctaw Native American Tribe has lived in the heart of Louisiana's longleaf habitat for more than 200 years and started their own longleaf pine nursery 20 years ago with the help of the U.S. Forest Service.

The Clifton Choctaws, recognized by the Louisiana government as a sovereign nation in 1974, is some 400 strong. Most of the tribe lives along
See Longleaf pine, continued on page 2

Longleaf pine seedlings await harvest at the Clifton Choctaws longleaf pine nursery in Rapides Parish. The Native American tribe has been supplying longleaf seedlings to the U.S. Forest Service and private landowners for 20 years.

Longleaf pine, *continued from page 1*



Trentalee Shackleford watches as sprinklers irrigate longleaf pine seedlings. The Clifton Choctaw tribe hopes the seedling nursery can become a moneymaker and provide income to supply the group's basic needs.

a nine-mile patch of Clifton Road off Hwy. 28 in Rapides Parish.

The tribe is not involved in the gambling industry and not rich by any stretch of the imagination. The village of Clifton is remarkably ordinary and has the same hopes, dreams and problems as any small rural American community.

Still somewhat remote, life in Clifton is challenging. The only business in the area is a gas station 10 miles away in Hicks. Clifton Road is prone to washout by gully-washers rushing down the ridges and hills of the Kisatchie Forest.

Economic opportunity in Clifton is limited. The tribe's young people find work in the retail sector of nearby Alexandria. If they're lucky they complete high school and go to college. The older generation worked as laborers in the timber business.

Trentalee Shackleford, 63, was one such timber laborer. Currently, he is the foreman of the tribe's 40-acre longleaf seedling nursery located on the north side of Hwy. 28.

"I used to do the short wood," Shackleford said. He's referring to the days when a mill would buy short logs of chopped pine. "Then we got to the big stuff. You can't make any money doing short wood anymore.

"If the Choctaw weren't working in the trees, they were working on the railroad."

It's only fitting the Choctaws, who have lived under the ancient canopy of the longleaf for more than 200 years, are helping to re-forest the Louisiana landscape with longleaf seedlings.

The seeds the Choctaws planted last March sprouted into marketable seedlings this month. The tiny plants grow in a gridded tray with 96 individual 4-inch deep cylinders. The longleaf seedling grown in a container has a much better survival rate when transplanted than bare root seedlings.

The Choctaw nursery plants 250,000 individual seedlings annually and they sell out every year.

From a distance the green longleaf pine needles sprouting up from the trays resemble a lush, verdant lawn. But after years of slow and steady growth, the needles will mature into their full potential.

It's not difficult to grow longleaf seedlings — plant the seed in the tray's compartment, seeds sprout, growing pine needles are hedged for even sunlight distri-

bution, irrigate and monitor — the trick is to make a profit selling the tiny trees.

"It's a niche market," said Charles Matherne, Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry reforestation chief. "There's not a big commercial demand."

The longleaf market is so small, Matherne said, LDAF's nursery grows and sells in excess of 30 million loblolly pine seedlings annually, but only plants 350,000 longleafs.

The first 12 years the Choctaws' nursery was open, the U.S. Forest Service bought all the seedlings for re-establishment efforts. Currently, the seedlings are sold to private landowners.

Last year the one-two combination of Hurricane Rita and drought ruined all but 30,000 of the longleaf seedlings the Choctaws planted.

"The power was out for three weeks after Rita," Shackleford says. "Then there was the drought. We couldn't water the trees for three weeks. We lost nearly all of them."

To be sure, the Clifton Choctaws are not going to strike it rich selling longleaf seedlings and Shackleford and Matherne know this. Matherne, a Chitimacha with a soft spot for the Clifton Choctaws, is serving as an advisor to the tribe to expand their services. He is optimistic the Choctaws can start mayhaw and button bush seedlings, a wetlands shrub used to stabilize river banks, and make a profit.

The Choctaws' longleaf nursery was subsidized by the U.S. Forest Service for 12 years, but has barely been on a break even keel for the last eight. Shackleford hopes to be in charge when the 20-year-old nursery finally starts turning a profit.

"I want to keep this growing and going as long as possible," Shackleford says. "If it makes some money I want the community to buy food to stock our kitchen. We just built a new kitchen, but we haven't started serving because we don't have any food yet. You've got to pay a percentage when you go to the food bank."

Some old-fashioned and outdated items gain value as antiques, but how does society measure the worth of a forgotten natural resource or a people's culture? The Clifton Choctaws are fighting to preserve their culture and renew the nation's lost longleaf pine forest. It's something they think is worth saving.

Re-establishing the longleaf pine

The longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) once covered nearly 60 million acres of forestland in the South.

Most of the old growth longleaf was cut for the rapid expansion of 20th century America and replaced by the loblolly pine.

The longleaf takes more than 100 years to reach its full maturity and can live for 300 years. The tree's needles can reach 18 inches long.

When new seedlings are planted they grow in a form called the grass stage for five to 12 years. The longleaf grass stage resembles a green fountain of needles, but vertical growth is very slow. It may take a number of years for the tree to reach ankle-height. Then it makes a spectacular growth spurt, especially if there is no tree canopy above it.

Part of the reason for the tree's early

success is its remarkable resistance to fire, especially in the grass stage. A grass fire may burn off the ends of the needles, but the flames cannot penetrate the tightly packed needle base to reach the bud.

Even though the tree is a slow grower, Charles Matherne, reforestation chief for the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, says there are several reasons why private landowners are restocking their land with the ancient tree.

"The Federal Conservation Reserve program is offering incentives and payments to re-establish

longleaf habitats," Matherne said. "But a lot of landowners are naturalists in their own right and want to re-establish the longleafs that were there when their grandfathers owned the land.

"It's an interesting and unique tree."



Shackleford with a longleaf pine seedling.

Meet the Clifton Choctaws



Clifton Choctaw Office Manager Betty Tyler holds a basket woven with longleaf pine needles at the tribe's community center.

The Choctaws are Native American people who occupied Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama before the arrival of early European explorers. Known as one of the "Five Civilized Tribes" because of their adoption of some European cultural practices and technologies, their Muskogean language forms were well known to many of the early 19th century American frontiersman.

The ancient Choctaws believed the Choctaw Nation emerged from the ground from a cave called the Nanih Waiya which is in modern day Winston County, Miss. Modern Choctaw populations are now located primarily in Oklahoma, Mississippi and Louisiana.

Though the Choctaws sided with the fledgling United States in its war for independence from England, the young country's desire for

land evicted the Choctaws in 1830, along with the Cherokee and Chickasaw onto the Trail of Tears to the Oklahoma Territory. This policy of forcible removal from traditional Choctaw habitats continued into the early 20th century.

The isolation of the Clifton Choctaws, settled deep in the piney woods of Louisiana's "No Man's Land," a remote area west of Alexandria in Rapides, Vernon and Allen parishes, most likely allowed the tiny band to exist without any real detection by government authority until logging companies moved in during the early 1900s.

Many of the Clifton Choctaw band found employment with the lumber interests.

Despite hardships inflicted on the Clifton Choctaws by the Civil War and the modern influence exerted on them by logging interests, the Native American identity persisted within the Clifton community. In 1974 the group organized.

The State of Louisiana acknowledged the sovereignty of the Clifton Choctaws as a Native American government in 1977 and the tribe registered as a non-profit corporation.

The Clifton Choctaw tribe currently owns 45.5 acres of land with a 4.7 acre tract of reservation land. Most of the 400 tribe members live on Clifton Road off Hwy. 28 near Gardner.

To become a member of the tribe one must show ancestry to one of six family surnames: Shackleford, Tyler, Neal, Smith, Clifton or Thomas.

The tribe has no gambling interests and remains relatively isolated in the same patch of woods where they have lived for the last 200 years.

-Sources: Clifton Choctaw Tribe, *History of Clifton Choctaw in Louisiana*; The Delta Endangered, Spring, 1996 Vol 1., *Nanih Waiya: Mother Mound of the Choctaw*; Wikipedia, *Choctaw*.