

Jones, Mary Jackson



Chinaberry Necklaces and Ribbon Shirts (1934-2005)

Ms. Mary Jackson Jones, one of ten children, was born, reared, and educated in the LaSalle Parish area. An elder and member of the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians from Trout, Louisiana, Ms. Jones was educated from the ages of 12 to 18 at the Penick Indian School. She spoke no English when she entered school, but did learn some English through her education. She was reared speaking the Choctaw language, which she taught to the younger generation of her tribe. Noticing how the Choctaw culture was beginning to disappear because of assimilation, Ms. Jones became a proponent of spreading and retaining her culture.

Ms. Jones was well known throughout Louisiana as a Chinaberry seed necklace maker and a maker of ribbon shirts. These shirts, usually worn by men and children as casual shirts, were previously used as a ceremonial shirt. Ms. Jones used woven cotton and ribbon to make her shirts. With her necklaces, she used the Chinaberry seed, a soft, mushy seed that she boiled down to extract the harder, center seed. She learned her craft from tribal heritage as a child. She performed these crafts at festivals and tribal events.

Not only was Ms. Mary Jones famous for her crafts, but she was also a fluent speaker of Choctaw language and traditions. She often worked with linguists and tribal officials in preserving the history and language of the Choctaw Indians. She has been on the tribal council, was a mental health referral trainee/consultant for her tribe, and was a renowned folk artist. She has traveled around the U.S. urging Native American people to maintain and preserve their cultures.

Ms. Jones participated in many festivals, including the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival, the Louisiana Folklife Festival, the 1985 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington D.C., the Grand Natchez Village at the Natchez State Park, and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

Because of Ms. Jones, the Louisiana Folklife Center has been able to help retain and document the native Choctaw culture, heritage, traditions, and language, so that others might see and understand the importance of preserving these diminishing cultures. Ms. Jones was inducted into the Louisiana Folklife Center's Hall of Master Folk Artists in 1993.

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