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Chief...

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An oral history of the Butte Tribe chiefs: Chief Rodger Lee Collum

By Belinda Brooks

When asked, "Why after all these years have you decided to go public with your tribe?" Chief Rodger Collum replied, "My ancestors raised me for such a time as this. It is time to reveal the secrets and tell the story of my people."

The secrets of the Butte Tribe began at Bayou Bourbeaux over two hundred years ago. Only a handful of warriors at any given time knew the secret of Butte Hill. The few that did spent a lifetime guarding it.

Butte Tribe of Bayou Bourbeaux is rich in oral history. To bring a better understanding of this oral history and the leadership that has revealed it, the life of the present chief, Rodger Collum, will be discussed first. In the following weeks, this journalist will reveal the story of the remaining five leaders/chiefs of the Butte Indians. The details described in the history of this chief were provided in interviews with numerous family members and Chief Collum, himself, in several sessions throughout late 2019 and early 2020. In the following weeks, the tale of each of the remaining five chiefs will be opened for all to read.

Chief #6 - Rodger Lee Collum (1953 - present)

Collum was born March 3, 1953, in Natchitoches. Rodger was the first son of Alford Lee "Duck" and Olla Mae Desadier Collum. Collum's mother, Olla Mae, was the daughter of the family leader/chief at that time, Clarence and Louella Waters Desadier.

Leaders of the family tribe at the time of Rodger's birth were, Victoria "Fee" Desadier aka "Grandma Fee" and her son, Clarence Desadier. There were a multitude of descendants to choose from when looking for the next leader of Butte Tribe. Through oral stories told by cousins today, it is rather easy to understand

the reasoning behind the choice of choosing the little towheaded grandson, Rodger Lee, to be the leader and protector of the family at demise of the current leaders.

Collum was constantly into things, always asking questions, always moving forward, never retreating, never going backward. He was born to lead. That was easy for any and all to see. Whatever was happening, Collum was into it and leading it. At an early age, Collum's father, told him that there were only two types of people, those who lead and those who follow. Collum had no doubt who he was. He had no desire to follow. Yet, he knew the importance of doing what he was told and following the instructions of his elders. When Grandma Fee and/or Louella called out "Rodger Lee!" everything stopped and they had all his attention.

Following his elders is what he did. At the early age of five, Collum was called into the meeting of the family elders. From that day forward, whenever the elders met, Collum was at their feet while the other children were sent out to play. For a five-year-old, that was hard for him to understand. Why he could not go out to play with his cousins? The elders told him that he was special. Hard for a little boy to understand, but he obeyed. He was told that it was very important for him to listen carefully, remember the stories that were told, the songs that were sung and always remember family came first. He was told one day he would tell these stories to his family. At the end of the meeting there would always be a big dishpan of homemade teacakes with a dish towel on top to keep the flies off. The ladies always made sure that Collum had his belly full before he left to go play.

At the age of five, Collum



Chief Collum on his stud horse, Rock.

was allowed to hunt by himself. He remembers going into the woods by himself, killing a deer and dragging it home with the help of his dogs. That is only one story of hundreds because Collum never went hunting without bringing home game. From the age of five until today, when a cousin needs meat to put on the table, they do their best to get Collum to hunt with them.

As Collum grew into his teenage years, he lived his life on the bayou next door to his Grandma Fee, Grandpa Clarence aka "Parrain" (French for Godfather) and Grandma Louella. He observed the importance and the burden that was placed on the leader of the family. Should a family have hardships, they would go to Parrain for help. Should a couple wish to marry, they would ask permission of Parrain. It was nothing unusual for anything of importance to a family member to ask permission of Parrain. Clarence would grow community gardens for all families to gather food. Clarence had a herd of milk cows that the family and community were allowed to milk to feed their families. Collum took note of all of this. He felt the

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responsibility of family that would soon be his.

In the summer of 1969, Clarence Desadier passed away at the age of 70. Collum, at age 16, was not ready for the responsibility of leadership of the family. His grandmother, Louella, became his mentor and family leader until he came of age. For the next six years, Collum was available for his grandmother's bidding. Living his entire life next door to his grandparents, life was full of demands regarding family issues, including family sicknesses, leathes, arguments and more. When there were deaths in the family, Collum was in charge of seeing to the burials. There were specific rituals that were involved in burying family members. Rodger and specific cousins would dig the graves. Family members would sit up all night with the body of their dead loved ones during the wake the night before the funeral at Christian Harmony Baptist Church in Pace Community in Natchitoches Parish. During the funeral, the family would normally Collum to drive the hearse to the graveyard. In his lifetime, Collum counted 69 family members that he had buried. Collum told one story about burying a family member that was interesting. Collum did not have time to go to the graveyard to show the funeral director where to dig the grave of his uncle so he sent his cousin. The cousin pointed out the wrong plot to the funeral director. The funeral proceeded.

Grandma Louella's son was buried in the wrong plot. A few days later, an old woman began calling Grandma Louella complaining that Louella's son was buried in the old

woman's plot. One week after the burial, Grandma Louella had Collum dig his uncle's body up and bury him beside Rodger's brother who died years earlier.

On Aug. 11, 1975, the birthdate of Collum's first-born son, Shannon, he was called to Grandma Louella's house. Grandma Louella told Collum, "It's time for you to take over, Rodger Lee. Go to the back room and look in the cedar chest. Get the buffalo robe and bring it to me." Inside the buffalo robe were old family pictures from early 1800s, arrowheads, documents, and old photobooks that were crumbling. The buffalo robe itself was crumbling.

From that day until today, Collum has borne the burden of the leader/chief of the family tribe. Today there are multiple clans attached to the family. There have been separations through family squabbles, but with Collum's leadership the families have stuck together. When there is trouble, Collum is the one that the family calls. When there is death, Collum is called first. Often times, he, himself, has met the expense of the funeral. He has provided food through community gardens. In natural disasters, local law enforcers call on him to help gather his people together. In local and parish elections, candidates bid for his support to win elections. There have been times that the entire bayou community has been shut down and guarded from outside forces by the family tribe. At times like this, no one was allowed to enter and no one was allowed to leave until the threat to the family was gone. In the early 1950s, a cousin went hunting and did not return that night. His two

dogs returned without him. Grandpa Clarence shut the bayou down because he had no idea what may have happened to his grandson. He thought that someone might have abducted him. A large search party began a 24/7 search for fourteen days while the bayou was shut down. No one entered. No one left. On the fourteenth day, the grandson's body was found. He had drowned in Bayou Bourbeaux.

Collum has held many tribal meetings over the years in the old schoolhouse to build and retain bonds amongst the family, discuss any issues, raise funds for the tribe, teach tribal history, and repeat the stories that were shared with him so many times as a little boy in the meetings with the elders. The importance of this to Collum cannot be understated because the stories need to continue to live on with future generations as requested by the elders. Just as his forefathers have, he upholds the Butte Tribe religious beliefs, cultures, and enforces respect for the elders within our tribe. He recently taught some of the old songs to interested tribal members who sang them at our family tribal meeting in hopes that they will not be forgotten. When Collum speaks, the tribe listens. His opinions are well respected and followed. Any issues that arise within the family, he is the one contacted for guidance.

There are many stories to be told during this time of leadership, much more than we have time to reveal in this petition.

See more stories on past chiefs of the Butte Tribe of Bayou Bourbeaux told by Collum in an upcoming article.