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Returning to Renew: Saracen Casino Resort The Quapaw Nation Returns to Arkansas in a Big Way

Pine Bluff, AR (September 23, 2019) – The history of Arkansas and that of the Quapaw Nation are deeply intertwined. And today, the Nation is returning to Arkansas in a big way to create brighter futures through investing in Jefferson County and the renewal of Pine Bluff.

History of Saracen in Arkansas

“The Quapaw have been in Arkansas since the early 1500s,” said John L. Berrey, Chairman of the Quapaw Nation. “We met Hernando de Soto in 1524 in Osceola. The Tribe had a long relationship with the French and the Spanish centered around the Arkansas Post.”

“The Quapaw are part of the Sioux family. We are related by dialect and culture,” he added. The Quapaw split from this larger tribe and moved down the Mississippi River into Arkansas.¹

The Quapaw, or “Downstream People,” were also called the “Akansa,” meaning “people of the south wind” by Algonquian-speaking Native Americans of the Ohio Valley. French explorers who encountered the tribe called the people as well as this region by this name. The word for the people and area, Akansa, became Arkansas over time.

The Saracen Casino Resort’s namesake is the stuff of legends. Saracen, once Chief of the Quapaw Tribe, gained favor and was awarded a presidential medal when he rescued a Spanish commander and his two children from a Chickasaw raiding party.

Saracen arrived at the Port of Arkansas just hours after the commander and his infant daughters had been taken. Madame Villar, the commander’s wife, was distraught, and Saracen, moved by her distress,

¹ Information from QuapawTribe.com



moved to rescue her family. He immediately traced the raiding party and recovered the infant girls without incident and returned them to their mother. Saracen also pledged to find Commander Villar, saying, "If I am killed, there will be but one dog less on Earth, but if I succeed, a whole family will be made happy."²

Saracen, along with several fellow Tribe members, negotiated with the Chickasaws and secured the release of Villar. This act of heroism garnered respect and reward for Saracen. He was later given 80 acres of land along the Arkansas River in Pine Bluff. A longstanding mural in downtown Pine Bluff depicts the return of the children, calling Saracen "Jefferson County's Legendary Hero."

The Quapaw lived in villages near the junction of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers — three of which were in Pine Bluff — and while they ceded their land in 1824 and were forced to move several times, Saracen and others returned to Jefferson County around 1830. He died there, and while the exact date of his death is unknown, he was buried in Pine Bluff. His grave stone reads: "Friend of the Missionaries. Rescuer of captive children." Pine Bluff pays homage to this hero with Lake Saracen and Saracen Landing.

Caring for the Community

Today, the Quapaw Nation consists of more than 2,000 members who maintain culture and traditions through oral and written history and events, including the annual Powwow, a celebration nearly 150 years old.

The Nation is no longer led by a hereditary chief, but is instead governed by an elected Chairman. Currently, Chairman John L. Berrey leads the Nation and is one of the most visible members in Native American leadership. Berrey also serves as chairman of the Downstream Development Authority, which has developed a number of enterprises, including the soon-to-open Saracen Casino Resort. While the casinos generate income for the Nation, they also serve another important purpose: investing in the surrounding communities.

"We wanted to be in Pine Bluff because it's our homeland. This is an opportunity to re-establish ourselves and to be a part of the resurgence in economic activity in Jefferson County," Berrey said.

Quapaw investments in Pine Bluff and Jefferson County began six months ago and have taken many shapes. The Nation helped meet the need for fresh drinking water during this summer's floods with a

² Information from "Who Was Saracen?" QuapawNation.com



large, commercial ice machine and two 18-wheel trucks of water. They've also made two significant donations to the First Ward Food Pantry.

"We've made much-needed improvements at several parks, MLK, Hudson and Townsend, replacing and refurbishing backboards, repairing, painting and replacing the roofs of several pavilions and replacing benches," Chairman Berrey said. "We've also made significant improvements at the Jefferson County Health Department. Additionally, the Jack Jones Juvenile Detention Center needed a face lift, so we made significant repairs in the recreation area and replaced more than 7,000 square feet of flooring."

Additionally, the Quapaw Nation invested \$300,000 in the opening of the Pine Bluff Aquatic Center.

"Our investment in Pine Bluff and Jefferson County represents our desire to return to the community to positively impact its wellbeing," Berrey said. "Any corporation can build. Our goal as Quapaw is to become a 'resident,' to contribute to the community in a meaningful way and to partner with community leaders to improve the lives of the residents. We've done that by investing our dollars in capital improvements that add to the value of life in our city. We wanted to be a part of the Aquatic Center as it is a gathering place for families.

"The Nation's biggest contribution is Saracen Casino Resort, a \$350 million development that is creating over 1,000 construction jobs, and upon completion, 1,100 permanent jobs. This represents tremendous investment in Jefferson County, an area in the midst of a revitalization. When completed in June 2020, the Resort will be the culmination of the Nation's return to roots, adding a crown jewel to the city's revitalization.

"We are proud to be a key player in this movement. Pine Bluff holds a lot of history for the Quapaw Nation, so it's important to us that this area thrives," Berrey said. "This region, in part, was once our land, and we are excited to have returned home to Arkansas."

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