Chief Fears Tribal Heritage Is Fading

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this week’s Off The Beaten Path feature, reporter John Alan Simon visits the Chitimacha Indian reservation and talks with Chief Leroy Burgess about the tribe’s declining interest in its own culture. In next week’s feature, Simon will examine the remnants of that culture, including the practices of the tribe’s last “medicine woman,” who is only half-Indian.

By JOHN ALAN SIMON

There’s only one road through the Chitimacha Indian reservation.

Driving along that road near Charenton, La., the tribal land preserve seems like any other residential community. There’s a small field where teenage boys are clearing land for a baseball diamond, an old-fashioned white-frame country school house, a playground, and a row of modest but well-kept homes and trailers on spacious green lots.

In his role of tribal administrator, Chief Leroy Burgess has seen to it that his people have not fallen far behind the American Dream. Even in this period of economic uncertainty, the Chitimachas enjoy a high employment rate and hopes for increasing prosperity.

But standing by the side of the reservation road, Chief Burgess expresses the one concern that more trips to Washington or Baton Rouge can’t solve—a fear that his people have already lost most of their tribal heritage and will soon lose even their identity as Indians.

“It looks like the Chitimachas are on the way out,” says Chief Burgess.

The threat that Chief Burgess talks about has been there for a long time—a kind of footnote to the history that began when white men first came to the Atchafalaya Basin hunting and fishing land of the Chitimachas.

Before the arrival of the French and Spanish in Louisiana, the territory of the Chitimachas extended from Opelousas on the west to the Mississippi River; from Baton

Cont. in Sec. 1, Page 6, Col. 1.