Old Chitimacha Chief Laboring To Preserve Indian Heritage

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CHARLESTON — One book critic reportedly said about the current trend in books that all one needs to write a best-seller is "a new Japanese tape recorder and an old Sioux chief."

What he probably meant was the public is so hungry to learn about the disappearing culture of the American Indian that any memoir, regardless how banal, is embraced if it sheds any light at all on the Indian's lifestyle. It could be the finality of our times has sparked this awakening of interest in the Indian. It isn't long ago that writings of early Europeans and white settlers who lived among and exploited them. Better than half the time, these witnesses didn't know what they were seeing and their reports are vague and often fictitious.

Near Charenton

Take the great Chitimacha Indian whose reservation is located at Charenton, for example. Some say that the tribe's cooking vessels' Others say the tribe's woodcutters came from a tribe that was supposed to be called 'Savannahs.' Their tribe's land was taken away and they were moved to the west.

Like the critic said, the rush to kill and pick his brains before he joined his ancestors. And so he told the legend of a young white boy, probably one of the early French settlers, who was fishing in the river and caught a fish which he called a 'fish-boat.' Chitimacha boy happened along, according to the old man, and said that the fish had an Indian name. The boy was anxious to know the Indian name, which he casually glanced at the meter in his fish and recorded. Being the teacher's name in the Indian language. Now, the authentic Chitimacha word for fish was 'fish.'

"Fish doesn't mean 'fish'" said Mrs. E. A. Stouffer, wife of a former Chitimacha chief who lives on the Charenton reservation. "When I read that word, I always pass it over. It's not authentic."

Mrs. Stouffer said that was the problem with white men trying to learn the legends — they tend to have a little fun at the researcher's expense.

"If you want a story, they'll give you another," she said.

Mrs. Stouffer has a little room, not a legend room, in her house where the Chitimacha legends are kept. She said she feels the old people were straight with her and that the legends they told her are authentic. They don't however, match with the Chitimacha legends she has found in books, she said.

"Chitimacha Reservation — Chief Emilie A. Stouffer and his wife, Faye, above, stand in front of their home on the Chitimacha reservation at Charenton. The Chitimachi have lived on the banks of Grand Lake since before Columbus first saw the West Indies. The chief and his wife are shown in a picture such as the intricate basketwork shown below. (See other picture on page 18. (Advertiser Staff Photos)"

Tourist Development

In addition, the Chitimacha reservation could be given publicity through the United Acadiana Tourist Development Effort, which is scheduled for today. The basis behind this effort is that each Acadiana attraction can be supplemental to the others and help contribute to the over-all economy.

Long-range plans for the reservation include a camper facility and recreation area near the bayou and a simulated Chitimacha village. Such an attraction, promised by a regional tourist bureau, would not only help boost Acadiana's economy but also provide future generations of Chitimacha with a sense of their rich heritage and give others a taste of a way of life from the past.

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