OF NOBLE ANCESTRY — Young Chitimacha descended from former tribal rulers display the intricately designed baskets woven by their Indian ancestors. The children, who live on the "reservation" in Charenton, are (left to right), Eloise Mora, Robie, Dar- den, Anita Mora and Vicky Mora. (Advertiser Staff Photo)

Chitimacha Indians Have Few Vestiges Of Old Days

By JOANNE RAY
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CHARENTON — The dark-eyed children seem much more enthralled by the antics of television卡通 characters than by tales of past tribal glory. Thatched huts long ago gave way to modern middle class homes along a winding black-top road. Many of the men now dig for oil on lands where their ancestors once staked deer.

There is indeed little left in this small country settlement to indicate to the visitor that he is now looking at the only remaining Indian Reservation in the state of Louisiana.

The vanished culture of the 200 Chitimacha Indians who lived here left in its wake only a small collection of intricately woven cane baskets and a few scattered legends.

The baskets, most of which now belong to Miss Edna Delhaye of Charenton, testify to the patience and effort these people must have devoted to their art, but the legends tell much more about the once-rich Chitimacha heritage.

Bayou Teche

Perhaps the most famous of the legends is the one which explains the creation of the Bayou Teche, whose name was derived from the Indian word "Tecche," meaning "snake."

According to this bit of Indian folklore, there was once a huge snake whose body stretched from Morgan City to St. Marysville. All the best Indian warriors gathered together and attacked the reptile with spears and arrows. As it died, it sank into the marshy soil to form the winding river bed of the Bayou Teche.

The story of "Okoopush," an Indian legend familiar to many Acadianas throughout the region as well as to the Chitimachas, is often told on chilly fall nights at sunset when packs of baying hounds are heard in the distance. Okoopush was an Indian brave sent out by his aunt to kill a wild turkey. Before he left, his uncle advised him to kill only the turkey highest in the tree, but the young Indian missed and shot the one below. When the turkey hit the ground, Okoopush and his dogs burst into flames and disappeared. Now every fall, he is heard passing with his howling dogs, but none of the Chitimachas know the magic word which will bring him back.

The Deluge

These Indians also have their own version of a "great flood" story. According to this legend, the tribe received a warning that a deluge was coming soon. Each family built a big clay pot which would float like a boat. When the floods came, families climbed into their clay pots and rode out the storm. Some rattlesnakes also sought shelter in the clay pots, but they proved harmless if left alone.

Since huge clusters of Spanish moss are so prevalent throughout the Chitimacha land, it seems only logical that a legend should have evolved to explain this existence. A Spanish soldier once fell in love with a Chitimacha princess. However, her father, the chief, disliked the Spaniard and had him scalped. When his scalp was hung in an old oak tree, the hair began mysteriously to spread from one tree to the next, thus creating what today is called Spanish moss.

Also found among Chitimacha legends is the claim that the best way to cure blood poisoning is to drink a mixture of ground raccoons and whiskey.

The Reimaker

The legends of the magical rain-bringing powers of the Chitimacha Holy Tree became so famous that centuries ago Indians from Texas once traveled all the way to the shady banks of the Bayou Portage to break a branch from it. This legend says that once during a serious drought, a group of Indians watched as a tall, handsome brave climbed to the top of a cypress tree and descended toward heaven. The brave was never heard from again, but moments after he disappeared a hard rain started to fall. Indians concluded that the warrior had reached heaven and implored the help of the Great Spirit. They claimed that dipping a sprig from the Holy Tree into water would always make the rain fall. The truth of this legend is now impossible to ascertain, because several years ago the ancient tree was felled by a hurricane.

These legends aren't heard very often in Charenton today. Like the way of life from which they sprang, they belong to a distant and dead past.