Coushatta Indian speaks to anthropology club
The struggles and state of the modern Indian

by Eve E. Dawkins
Staff Writer

According to Ernest Sickey, a member of the Coushatta tribe of Indians in Elton, Louisiana, the most eminent goal of the modern Indians is to become competitive and self-sufficient in today's society.

Sickey spoke about the state of the modern Indian recently at a lecture sponsored by USL's Anthropology Club.

As well as being the chairman for the Coushatta tribe for twenty-one years, Sickey is also a consultant for the Intertribal Council of Louisiana.

One of the highlights of the lecture was a slide presentation of artifacts from what is now known as the Tunica Treasure.

Sickey explained that the Tunica Treasure was a group of a little over two tons of artifacts that were originally collected over about a ten-year period by a guard from Angola prison.

The site itself is along the banks of the Mississippi River, fifteen to twenty miles from Angola.

When the Tunica-Biloxi tribe discovered the artifacts had been dug up on their land without their knowledge, they went to court.

The case, which was in litigation for over ten years, was decided in favor of the Tunica tribe.

Sickey said, "We feel it's a landmark decision by the courts and I think it's going to set a precedent around the country on what these artifacts mean to Indian tribes."

Presently there is a $275,000 museum under construction at the Tunica-Biloxi tribe which will house these artifacts.

"We hope to make it a regional Indian Museum, not only housing Tunica-Biloxi but other tribes in the state which have a significant impact on the state of Louisiana as well as neighboring states," Sickey explained.

Sickey said that he feels that the academic community deserves credit in the Tunica's fight to recover the artifacts. This, however, according to Sickey, was not always the case.

"For many years, the academic world has, quote, taken advantage of Indians. They usually come around with a camera and a little notebook and sit on the porch and ask you questions. They want to know where you come from, what you ate and why you're still alive. Then, they would disappear."

He continued, "But a lot of times, a lot of information is taken out of the Indian communities, and that used to present a problem to me because they would never share with us their study.... If you learn something, share it with us so that I too may learn something that I didn't know about."

According to Sickey, the modern Indian tribes are changing and responding to the demands of a modern world.

Sickey's involvement with the Intertribal Council in Baton Rouge reflects these changes.

"Our job in Baton Rouge is to provide economic development opportunities," he said.

"Education is going to be the key. For many years the tribes sort of down-played that because they thought 'We're going to lose our traditions; we're going to lose our culture,' but every society is going to lose something," he added.

Sickey is also involved in a new ad campaign called "Jobs for Indians '87."

This campaign emphasizes developing opportunities within the tribe. Sickey believes this appeals more to the heavily traditional Indians.

"There are those who are going to be so traditional, they're not going to leave their grounds—that might be their security blanket.

But, I know at the same time, we have to cross the street one of these days so we are preparing our people to be competitive people, to get degrees," he said.

Some Indian traditions and principles, however, remain unaffected by change—for instance, their reverence for burial mounds.

"I am against excavating such mounds," Sickey responded. "My personal feeling is that you shouldn't go in there and that's a very strong position of all Indians in this country."

He continued, "A burial ground or site is very ceremonial and sacred to an Indian. To me it's very personal. We believe in certain traditions after death."

He added, however, "If you do find a burial site, we would certainly like to know to become aware of it. Let us see if we can jointly work together in preserving it."