Coushatta Return to Federal Fold After 20 Years

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A high incidence of marriage within the tribe contributes greatly to the high rate of diabetes among the Coushatta.

The application for adult education funding was cleared at the state level but shot down in Washington. Sickey says the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare withdrew its permission for the application's rejection. Lack of money available to HEW is a probable explanation.

Hopes to Use Experience

Sickeys acknowledges that most of his efforts thus far have been directed at helping his own tribe, but says he hopes to use the experience he's gained to help other Louisiana Indians.

He sees the lack of leadership among some of the tribes as a major henderance to progress, "The Office of Indians Affairs must have a leadership structure with which to work," he says.

Another problem is that many Indians in the state don't live in a recognizable community. National Indian organizations have taken this into account and are trying to get federal thinking around to aiding urban Indians as well as reservation Indians.

Sickeys and Garrison say one way Louisiana's dealings with the Indians can surpass the efforts of the federal government is making state government more responsive by taking direction from Indian leaders.

The Coushatta received the valuable asset of two national Indian organizations in regaining federal recognition. The Association of American Indian Affairs Inc., researched the Coushatta claim and donated 10 acres of land to be placed in trust for the tribe. The Native American Rights Fund did the legal work.

Brother Leeds' Church

A thousand acres of land was recommended as a good land base for the Coushatta. Sickey says the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs will settle for 25 acres.

Not Optimistic

Neither Garrison nor Sickey is optimistic about obtaining anything near 1,000 acres, but Sickey believes 500 acres are within the realm of possibility.

Garrison and Sickey speak of a 20-year plan for the Coushatta. The plan is in a very formative stage with firm guidelines yet to be drawn. Both men say they are staking their hopes on help from the legislature.

Though some state officials see Indian development primarily in terms of tourism, the tourist business is very important to Sickey's list of priorities.

"For better buying, education and jobs first," he says. "I'd hate to see state money go just for tourism and dressing up in feathery business today."

More than half of the Coushatta live in a few miles of a Congregational Church built in 1917 by Paul Leed, a Congregational minister. Many Coushatta began their education and learned to speak English at the Leed Memorial Indian School which was started in 1939 by the Rev. and Mrs. Donald K. Johnson who live a few hundred feet from the school.

Brother Leed's work with the Coushatta contrasts greatly with the approach the Commission on Indian Affairs plans to take in developing the Coushatta as a tourist attraction and preserving tribal customs.

Coushatta Essay

Leed's wrote in an essay on his work with the Coushatta, "Their determination to forget the things which are behid press on to those things which ar before was manifest at one time when recreation police wanted them to stay part in a pageant by putting on their old dances; they refused promptly, saying hat the Gospel inspired them to have better ways and they did not wish to go back to those dark old customs, and bring to the new generation the things which Christ had put away from them, which were now but sorrowful memories.

Leeds writes that the "dark old customs" that Leed's mentions are the ones Dr. Fred B. Kniffen, LSU Boyd Professor of geography and anthropology emeritus, has been working on. Kniffen sees his job as retaining old cultural ways. His work will have tourism possibilities, but he approaches his task from a cultural standpoint.

Kniffen is quick to add that his work will be successful only if the Indians want to preserve their tribal customs.

"You can't do a great deal of restoration unless they want it. If they want to live among the poor white people, as many of them do, that's their choice. There's pride, especially among the young Indians, however, and they hold the key," Kniffen says.

Melting Pot 'Thing of Past'

Kniffen, in his career as an anthropologist and geographer, has seen a complete turn around in the thinking of cultural geographers. "The melting pot theory is a thing of the past," he says.

Minority groups should be encouraged to maintain their old ways if they want to, he says. "It makes for a much more interesting world.

A slightly biased version of what the melting pot theory was put forth by a young Indian activist. "The good sinks to the bottom and the scum rises to the top," Kniffen says don't know if Garri- son's commission can prevent the deterioration of Indian ways by pushing the reservation concept. "You go around to reserva- tions in the United States and it's not encourage- ing," he says.

"We owe it to them to give them a chance to preserve their culture," Kniffen says, "not from obligation so much as cause a culture is in danger of passing away entirely."

NEXT WEEK: The Tunica and Houma are the stepchildren of Louisiana Indians.