Elton Tribe's Needs Voiced in Lafayette

By Nick Cariello
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The black-and-silver-headed Indian chief sat straight in his chair, his nut-brown eyes alert, his coppery skin reflecting the health of those who live in the open. Although he wore a traditional Indian shirt and headdress, he was without the Hollywood weapons of tomahawk, knife, or bow and arrow.

The chief said simply but with an emotion-soaked voice, "My people need help, badly."

Chief Martin Abey, 54-year-old leader of the Coushatta tribe near Elton in Southwest Louisiana, was in Lafayette this weekend visiting his good white friend, R. A. LeBlanc.

Besides coming to Lafayette to see his friend, the chief had a secondary but important purpose. He is attempting, in his own way, to drum up public support for his tribe which is in desperate financial and economic straits, according to Chief Abey and LeBlanc.

This is the plight of the tribe, pieced together from information slowly extracted from the chief who speaks English well but cannot express himself very lucidly:

The Coushatta tribe, divided into 40 families, the leader to be the only organized tribe in the state, lives in a six-square-mile area about four miles north of Elton in piney woods.

No Reservation
They are without a government reservation.

Some 200 Indians make up the tribe, divided into 40 families. About half the families own a few acres of land but the soil is poor and only a few crops such as potatoes, corn and peas are raised.

Those who do not own land work in surrounding lumber mills and cut logs, for what he termed relatively low wages. Since most of them are uneducated to any degree, they are unable to obtain jobs except the most menial.

The women attempt to increase the family larder by making intricate baskets from pine needles and grass. It is eye-wearing, finger-fatiguing work, taking all day to make a single small basket. They are then sold for only $1.00.

"Most families," said the chief, "are so poor that they can't even purchase hunting licenses. If they could hunt, it would relieve their constant food problem."

The tribe receives no financial aid either from the state or federal governments, although the state does provide a doctor who is supposed to make weekly visits to the reservation. No hunting or fishing licenses are required. They could hunt and fish as much as they pleased the year around.

The only sanitation are primitive pit toilets, where hordes of flies spread filth and disease in the summer, according to the chief.

Another pressing need of the tribe is dental care. Most of the work performed on their teeth but the high cost and their lack of money force them to forego that protection.

The chief maintains that the dirt roads in the area are in "pitiful condition." Most of them are so narrow that only one auto can pass at a time. When it rains, the roads are converted into a morass of mud.

The homes of most of the tribe's families are mere wooden shacks with crude clay chimneys, thrown up as protection against the weather. The dwellings are windowless. No screens are fastened to the doors to keep out insects -- they cost too much.

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Against Intermarriage

"That's one of the reasons why we want a reservation so badly," declared the chief, "because our children mix with the whites and they want to marry. We want to keep up tribe as a unit and we don't like intermarriage."

The tribe, mostly First Congregationalists, attend church in a chapter house once a week. Rev. Paul Lee from Kinder conducts services.

The chief said what the tribe needs and wants most is a small reservation and some sort of monthly subsidy to ease their desperate financial situation.

"We would like to have the reservation where we are living now," said the chief, shifting nervously in his chair, "but we would be willing to move to some other place that has piney woods."

The leader doesn't blame the state or federal governments for not doing something about the tribe's plight. He feels that they just don't know about it.

"I'm getting to be an old man. I'm not too educated and I don't quite know the proper methods to obtain help."

(Direct care for all American Indians falls under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The office of Indian Affairs, a branch of the Interior Department, has the authority to act in behalf of the Indians. The state government, if it wishes, can provide aid in the form it desires, providing it does not encroach upon the powers of the Interior Department. There may be some question about state aid; however, as the Coushatta tribe is not native, it migrated to Louisiana from Texas about 100 years ago.)

Chief Abey became the leader of the tribe last March upon the death of his father, the former chief, at the age of 97.

Abey could, according to tribal tradition, have taken over the "chiefship" without any question. But he called a democratic election and was elected without opposition.

"I believe in democracy," the chief said laconically.

Abey, after his election, appointed Elton's Mayor C. L. Marcenel as honorary assistant chief to advise the tribe.

Sons in Action

The chief lost his wife about 11 years ago after she had borne him seven children-four girls and three boys. Two of the oldest boys were drafted in World War II and saw action in Europe. One of them is now in a hospital in Gulfport, Mississippi, suffering from shellshock.

His youngest son is fighting somewhere on the Korean front.

One of the chief's proudest possessions is a miniature gold key to the city of New Orleans. The key is kept in a small plastic case near his heart. It was presented by officials when he and 10 others went to New Orleans last October upon invitation.

The group set up a model village in a New Orleans park to demonstrate the "Indian way of life." They brought tents, horses, mules and Indian cooking utensils. The women made their baskets and sold them to the curious New Orleanians.

Abey and LeBlanc, his Lafayette friends, became acquainted when LeBlanc displayed a sound film to the tribe, entitled, "The Last of the Mohicans". LeBlanc is a distributor of movie films.

"Fine Show"

"The tribe was the most considerate audience I've ever seen. Even the smallest child sat quietly as they watched, imbibing the film's action," declared LeBlanc.

While in Lafayette (his first visit here by the way), the chief was taken to St Mary's orphanage and presented to the children.

"They couldn't believe at first that he was a real Indian," LeBlanc said. "They kept touching him and finally were convinced that he was the real McCoy—or rather the real redskin."

At the end of the interview, one felt that this was a descendant of the only real Americans, historically speaking, was perhaps simple in speech but not in mind or soul.

He was, in his own way and through short sentences and gesture, attempting to dramatize the desires of his sorely pressed tribe.

And although somewhat inarticulate, he nevertheless conveyed his seething emotions with a final restrained, but emphatic, "My people need help."