DULAC — Roy Parfait, like most American fathers, knows the value of a good education, and tells his son, Roy Adam, that he will need an education to find good work someday.

The elder Parfait, a Houma Indian, and director of the United Houma Nation's Dulac Community Center in Terrebonne Parish, should know. He and five other students were the first Houma Indians to graduate from Dai- lenville High School 23 years ago. It was another year before Indian youths attended integrated Terrebonne Parish public schools.

Parfait had an advantage that 88- year-old Lawrence "Mutt" Billiot was not accorded during an era when education for the Houma Indian was left to the back seat of an arbitrary practice.

Illiteracy and poverty are problems that also affect the Houma Indian community. The Houmas are the largest group of Indians living in Louisiana. Two-thirds of the 12,000 American Indians counted in the 1800 census are of Houma descent. Some Indian leaders have estimated that actually about 20,000 Indians — including 12,000 Houmas — live in the state.

Tribe members are concentrated primarily in Terrebonne, Lafourche and St. John the Baptist parishes, with the majority in Terrebonne.

The majority of the 3,500 Houma Indians living in Terrebonne Parish are a seafood port located at the end of La. 57, 17 miles south of Houma.

Houmas were farmers when they migrated to Louisiana north of Baton Rouge centuries ago. They turned to fishing, hunting and trapping as they moved inland north and farther south by other groups.

Their first known contact with Europeans occurred in 1682 when the French explorer La Salle met them in the area now known as Wilkinson County, Miss., and West Feliciana Parish near Angola.

The Houma, a mix-up French from traders and gradually adopted the language and Roman Catholicism of their French neighbors along the bayous Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes. In recent years, the Houmas have placed more emphasis on maintaining their Indian heritage.

In recent years the Houmas have had two separate tribal governments: the Houma Tribe of Louisiana and the Houma Alliance Incorporated in Dulac. The two groups merged several years ago into the United Houma Nation, with headquarters in Golden Meadow.

Giving its youth a chance for good education and skilled jobs remains a major goal of the tribe.

"Most people don't realize it's only been 21 years since Indians could graduate from (any) high school in Terrebonne Parish," Verret said.

Before then, Indian youth "only went to the eighth grade" unless they moved from the parish or attended another school.

He said the parish then operated separate schools for white, blacks and Indians.

Because many Houma Indians have married outside the tribe, "your name was the key to which school you attended" in Terrebonne Parish, Verret said.

"It was an unwritten rule," he said. "If your father was Indian and your mother white, you went to the Indian school. But, if your mother was Indian and your father white, you could go to either the Indian or the white school."

Parfait and Verret ticked off the circumstances for sending Indian children to the parish: Billiot, Parfait, Dean, Dion, Verdin, Dardon, Naquin, Pierce, Solet, Greigo, and sometimes Verret, Dechase, Dubuis, Fitch and Trescol.

While most of the names indicate connections with the French and Acadian cultures, Verret added, "If you were a Houma (still marries within the tribe), Verret said. "Our bloodlines are Houma."

The United Methodist Church, concerned about the lack of education among the Indians, arrived in Dulac in the 1930s, Verret said.

The tribal chairman said there was limited public education available at the time for Indian children, and the Methodist missionaries "started pushing hard for educational benefits for the Houmas."

The majority of the area's Indians remained Catholic, Verret said, and the Methodists came in, the Catholic Church also opened Indian schools.

Instead of brick building housing the Dulac Community Center in the Methodist Church, and the church still sends "short-term" missionaries to assist the Indian people.

In 1981, the Methodist Church told the Houmas "the community must grow from within" and turned its operations over to the Indians, Parfait said. Now, he said, the facility, which is not in need of repairs and has its windows boarded up because of vandalism, "is working with the Indian community to help all the people in the Dulac area."

The center, generally open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., provides services to the community "directly and indirectly," Parfait said. It houses a craft shop, a used-clothing room operated by workers, a rotating job training funded through the Inter-Tribal Council of Louisiana. It also offers a home start preschool program and other services.

Two workers with the preschool program, financed through state matching funds with the center, go into the Indian homes, help families teach their young children "school readiness."

Because schooling wasn't available to the Houmas for so many years, education generally hasn't been emphasized in their homes.

"If they're not familiar with something, it's hard to get people into school," Verret said. "It's said to put the blame on the guy who didn't want to go to school" when he knows his parents didn't want to go to school and managed to make a living.

"I hear that all the time," Parfait said. "At one time it was true. You could get a job on a shrimp boat, but about two years ago the boats began giving up."

Clyde Dion, a field representative for the Inter-Tribal Council of Louisiana, works out of the Dulac Community Center in a special program to help the Houmas obtain jobs that "will get them into the mainstream."

Using funds provided through the Job Training Partnership Act, Dion's program provides recruitment - employment for Houmas in jobs.

Because the Indians have been excluded for so long from educational programs available to other state residents, they should have special consideration for grants for which they don't have to compete with non-Indians, Verret believes.

Only one such program is available for the state's Indians, and its finances are drying up, he said. Twelve to 15 Houmas are on grants provided through the Governor's Commission on Indian Affairs.

"When we can't find public dollars (for education grants), we appeal to churches," Verret said.

Parfait, in addition to his duties as the center's director, also is the coordinator of a Terrebonne Parish school program through the Inter-Tribal Council of Louisiana, which sends Indian children to crafts to school children. The Indians produced many household items they needed by weaving palmetto and sweet grass, making baskets, making mattresses and dolls from dry Spanish moss, wooden gifts and duck decoys and digging out cypress cypress trees for Louisiana uses that are traveling in the marshes and bayous.

The team goes to schools for three times a week teaching native crafts and the history of the Indians, Parfait said. In addition, they give demonstrations to the parish at other schools and at churches.

As manager of the Houma Indian Arts and crafts cooperative and the crafts shop in the center, Parfait also attends to the store, which sells items that are arts and crafts items, to artisans and craftsmen, for who are mostly elderly.

The craft shop generally is open from 9 a.m. to noon and from 1 to 4 p.m. weekdays and by appointment only weekends and holidays, but before making a trip to the center, visitors should call 563-7435, Parfait said.