She Knows the Indians' Secrets

EDITOR'S NOTE: In this week's Off The Beaten Path feature, reporter John Alan Simon concludes his story of the Chitimacha Indian reservation with a visit to the last tribal "medicine woman" and her husband, the retired chief of the tribe.

By JOHN ALAN SIMON

Most likely, the tribal secrets will die with her.

As the last "medicine man" of the Chitimacha Indian tribe, Faye Stoff решил that the old customs have had their day, and that it's not likely to come again.

Standing behind the counter of their crafts shop on the reservation located near Charenton, La., the Stoffes don't seem to fit the role of tribal traditionalists — preservers of the old ways and customs.

"I don't want to talk to the press about Indians. The white man's history has never told the truth about the Indians," says Emile Stoff, the 72-year-old retired chief of the Chitimacha.

Faye Stoff is more willing to talk than her husband — not about Indian history, but about her craftwork and the Chitimacha tribal lore that each generation has entrusted to the next.

Ten or fifteen years ago, Faye would use the traditional remedies to cure poisonous snake bites for the tribe and people from Charenton and other nearby towns.

"Then the medical society people came and wanted to know what was in the snake-bite cure," says Faye. "When I said I couldn't tell them, they told me that if I didn't stop doing it, I'd spend the rest of my years in the federal penitentiary."

She stopped dispensing tribal medicines and now the Stoffes spend most of their time working on baskets and Indian jewelry.

At one time, the Chitimacha Indians were noted for their basketry. Now the only two members of the tribe who know the complicated, ritualized weaving techniques are the Stoffes.

"I only learned basket-weaving three years ago," says the retired chief. "Indian men aren't supposed to make baskets, it's women's work. But I didn't want my wife to have to be making them all alone."

The Stoffes' small reservation craft shop is the last fortress of the Chitimacha culture — a way of life that has become lost with increasing contact and immigration — with the world outside the reservation.

None of the 230 inhabitants of the reservation speaks the Chitimacha language. The last member of the tribe who knew more than a few words of Chitimacha — an 87-year-old woman — died three years ago.

Emile and many of the younger women on the reservation have had the patience to learn the complicated weaving techniques that Faye Stoff learned from her mother-in-law almost 50 years ago.

Most of the baskets that Faye and Emile produce now are destined for museums in this country and in Europe. A single-weave basket that's being made to order for the Peabody Museum at Harvard University will take about two weeks to complete.

The baskets are made from sugar cane, painstakingly split, cured and dyed with herbs gathered near the reservation. Each basket requires exactly 256 two-jointed pieces placed in precise position and angle to form the intricate geometrical design patterns of the basket.

FOR GENERATIONS, the women of the Chitimacha Indian tribe have woven cane baskets. Mrs. Faye Stoff learned the craft from her mother-in-law, Delphine Stoff, shown here in a photo from their family album. Now she is the only woman on the reservation who knows the complicated weaving techniques.

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company offered to buy the rights to the Chitimacha designs in order to set up machinery for mass-producing the baskets — an offer that Faye Stoff can still laugh about.

Faye Stoff, who is half Osage Indian and half Irish, came to live with her husband on the Chitimacha reservation in 1926. In addition to teaching her how to weave, Faye's mother-in-law Delphine, the tribal medicine woman, taught her the medicine crafts that will probably be lost after her death. None of the younger members of the Chitimacha tribe is interested in learning the medicine craft — and there's no way to write it down and skip a generation.

"I know the medicine grasses by looking at them. But I don't know their names," says Faye. "I could get some professor from LSU out here to tell me what they're called, but I'd be violating the trust by even showing him the plants."

"Maybe the secrets will just die with me," says Faye, looking over at her husband.

"The Chitimacha's beliefs," says Emile, "are the only thing the white man hasn't been able to take away from us."