The Houssattas were the poorest tribe in the state — with an average family income of about $1,000. Their rate of unemployment was 56 percent.

Precisely how long the tribe had been in Louisiana is a matter of dispute. The official histories say that the Houssattas came here about 1795 from their home-lands in Alabama and Georgia following incursion into their lands by English settlers. However, according to Sickey and other members of the tribe, a more accurate date for the first appearance of Houssattas in Louisiana is more than two centuries earlier.

The tribe — part of the Creek confederacy that controlled half the Eastern seaboard — began migrating southward to avoid raids by northern tribes allied with the English.

The Houssattas' troubles began in earnest after the Treaty of Paris in 1783 ended the American Revolution. The Creek tribes had sided with the English, fearing unchecked American expansion. After a treaty between the U.S. and Spain in 1795 placed the Creek tribes within the American boundaries, Thomas Jefferson sent agents to the tribes to teach them animal husbandry and cash farming. It was one way — the more humane — of getting the Indian to subsist on less land.

Historic New Orleans Collection

THIS RATHER idealized portrait of an Indian brave was published in "The History of Louisiana" by Alexandre Le Paige Du Pratz in 1758.

At that point, Red Shoes, a tribal chief, led about 100 of his people to the lower reaches of the Red River in Louisiana, in order to once again be under Spanish rule. Since the U.S. eventually detached the lands of the Houssattas who remained in Georgia, Red Shoes was remarkably far-sighted. Those who stayed were forcibly settled by Andrew Jackson into two small villages — both of which were totally depopulated by the end of the century.

In Louisiana, the Houssattas thrived at first — trippling their numbers within a decade. But they were still caught between European powers, forced to re-settle in the neutral ground on the middle course of the Red River, during boundary disputes between America and Spain after the Louisiana Purchase.

The Houssattas were drawn by the U.S. into the War of 1812 against the British and their Spanish allies. A force of about 300 Houssatta and Alabama Indians took part in the Battle of Salado and the capture of San Antonio. Cousshatas migrated into Texas — where a small group still remains — but increasing difficulties with settlers and the state government there led to their return to Louisiana.

After moving their settlements several times due to encroachment by homesteaders, the Cousshatas bought vacant land and in 1844 moved to their present site a few miles from Elton.

Louisiana laws made the alienation of Indian lands relatively easy. And, as with Indian marriage ceremonies were all technically "adulterous bastards" with no right to their fathers' lands, even with a will in their favor. Consequently, most of the tribal lands was by failure to pay taxes and also by the law of "open Succession," which required that those succeeding to the land must make a declaration at the courthouse of his "succession." By neglecting written procedures required by the white man's law, Indians who inherited the old crowns had once possessed a perfectly good patent.

The government renewed interest in the Cousshatas when it was realized that the tribe had been in trust for them, and through the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, providing some education and medical services. Then, when the tribe had made efforts to regulate the Bureau's activities, the government terminated the Cousshatas' tribal status in 1952.

"I don't know what the thinking was at that time," says Sickey. "The U.S. just wanted out of the Indian business..."

The Bureau of Indian Affairs discontinued its meager services and for 50 years the tribe was completely left to its own devices. "It was a struggle," says Sickey. "Especially after the lumber industry faded out here. That had been a major source of employment for us."

But following a year-long effort, the Cousshatas regained federal recognition and eligibility for funding in 1973 — though it required the poverty-stricken tribe to set out and find its own financial salvation. We proved that the termination was an illegal move on the part of the U.S. government," says Sickey. "We worked with our loggers to purchase about 1,500 acres of land. It's a closely-knit community and the tribe has been able to wholly preserve our spoken language. Children learn to speak it in the schools until they begin attending the public schools. Tribal medicine beliefs are still practiced, and religious beliefs remembered, if not actually practiced.

"It's not just that the Cousshatas, Sickey says that he's often angered that so few Americans understand the Indian heritage — or even know that they're there."

"We've got an Indian bureau in the state now for the first time since the early 1800s," says Peter Mora III, the 26-year-old Chitimacha who heads the department. "When the bill went through, quite a few legislators told me they didn't know there were any Indians in Louisiana."

Neglect by lawmakers isn't exactly a new problem for the Louisiana Indians. Education of the Houma Indians in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes was totally ignored until the 1950s, when various religious missions finally began to visit the Hooka children. When federal officials became aware of the problem years earlier, the Indian affairs director responded that the Houmas were "too far down the road of progress." The federal taxpayers, the Houmas were excluded from white schools as "mixed breeds" while federal and state officials wrangled for years over responsibility, but there has been some progress in helping Louisiana Indians in recent years. Age limits for aid to the elderly have been lowered for Indians — in recognition of their greater mortality rate. The federal government has paid to set up handicraft courses among the Chitimachas and Houmas. "One of the main problems now," says Mora, "is that there's not enough awareness of our culture.

The original funding for the bureau in 1973 was $14,500. It's still a one-man department, but Mora is considering moving it to Breaux Bridge soon."

"They created the bureau, but there hasn't been much follow through," says Mora. "When I go to conferences, they tell us about this program and that program, but they only give us money for, but then getting the funds is a different matter."

About 50 Tunicas live in Averyville Parish near Marksville, including several families who live on the reservation. "They do a lot more than just hunt and fish," says Mora about the state — after the Cousshatas — though some sell arts and crafts products at a trading post located there. The Tunicas used to receive a small Spanish grant in 1786, ownership of their land remains under a cloud. When important Indian artifacts were discovered there a few years ago, the state took part of their lands to form the Marksville-Brethren Indian Park.

Now the Tunicas have to pay admission — along with the tourists — to visit their own tribal burial grounds. As Mora observes, "It's a hell of a deal, huh?"