Oldest Chitimatcha tribe member dies

Todd Billiot
tbilliot@theadvertiser.com

CHARENTON — Lester Darden, 94, the oldest member of the Chitimatcha tribe, died Monday of natural causes.

A retired worker at a nearby carbon plant, Darden was known on the reservation as a devoted husband who took care of his bedridden wife for many years until her death, said Tribal Chairman Alton LeBlanc on Tuesday.

Outside of the reservation, Darden is known as the namesake of the popular Mr. Lester’s steakhouse at Cypress Bayou Casino on the tribe’s reservation in Charenton.

Darden was born in 1908, during an era when American Indians in Louisiana were swindled out of their land and widely discriminated against.

According to American historians, the Chitimatcha tribe dates back to at least 1682 when Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle explored the Delta region of south Louisiana, and possibly back to the explorations of Hernando DeSoto from 1539 to 1542. The tribe was formally recognized in 1917 by the U.S. government.

“He knew so much history just because he lived so much of it,” LeBlanc said. “He believed in carrying on the legends and stories and liked talking about the old days.”

Through the years, at election time for tribal council and chairman, young candidates would often seek out Darden’s advice.

“He insisted you spend time with him if you ran for office,” LeBlanc said. “And you definitely wanted his blessing.”

Darden liked to smoke cigarettes, drink beer, and eat a meal of boiled salt meat, boiled potatoes and green beans, said 47-year-old LeBlanc, who knew Darden all of his life. Darden lived next door to LeBlanc’s grandfather, close to Bayou Teche.

“People always asked him the secret to longevity, and he said if you drink three beers a day, you would have a long life,” LeBlanc said.

At Mr. Lester’s steakhouse, the staff kept a stock of Darden’s favorite beer on hand, Old Milwaukee, even

See TRIBE on Page 8A

Continued from Page 1A

Tribe

though few customers ordered the brew.

Darden was especially fond of his baby blue Chrysler Imperial. Even after he gave up driving two years ago, Darden took special care of the car, LeBlanc said.

Darden was the oldest son of Lucy Darden, the one-time matriarch of the tribe. He did not have any children.

Visiting hours are from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. today at Ibert’s Mortuary in nearby Franklin, followed by a service at Immaculate Conception Church in Charenton, and burial in the church cemetery.