Representatives from Six Tribes Meet in Lafayette

By TRENT ANGERS

LAFAYETTE, La.—A statewide survey to determine the economic status of the Louisiana Indian is scheduled to begin in April.

Representatives of six Louisiana Indian communities turned out for a meeting here to iron out procedures to be used and questions to be asked in the survey.

The meeting, called by the Governor’s Commission on Indian Affairs, marked the first time in Louisiana history that the state has sponsored a meeting of Indian people and government officials, according to Commissioner David L. Garrison Jr.

Representatives of the Coushatta, Chitimacha, Houma, Cherokee, Choctaw and Tunicas tribes attended the gathering, along with representatives of two South Louisiana community action agencies and two economic development district groups.

LITTLE DOUBT

Garrison indicated after the meeting that he has little doubt as to the general economic status of the Indian in Louisiana. He said specific information is needed before federal financial assistance can be secured to help improve the Indian’s economic lot.

A 1970 survey shows 33 of 38 Coushatta Indian families had annual incomes of less than $1,000, Garrison stated. A survey of Houma Indians shows the average adult Houman has completed less than three years of formal schooling, he said.

Inadequate housing is a problem for Indians throughout the state, Garrison said, noting that he recently tried to secure economic help from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to curb this problem. He said HUD officials said the request could not be considered without data proving the need exists for improved housing.

The survey will be conducted by Indians themselves, or Indians will accompany other persons conducting the survey, Garrison said.

SURVEY TROUBLE

Indians would be skeptical of government agents conducting the survey, said Helen Dardar, a Houma Indian of Metairie. Houma Indians being surveyed by government agents would either not answer the questions or would not answer them correctly, she said.

Government agents have conducted similar surveys in the past and have promised that the information would be used to help improve the Indians’ quality of living, she said, adding that in no case have the promises been fulfilled.

One woman attending the meeting predicted surveyors will have trouble in their work because many of the old Indians can neither read, nor write nor speak English.

Asked how the surveyors will determine who is an Indian and who is not, Garrison said that anyone who identifies himself as an Indian or whose neighbors identify him as such will be considered Indian for the purposes of the survey.

DATA TO GSRI

The data gathered in the survey will be turned over to Gulf South Research Institute (GSRI), whose personnel will compile it, analyze it and prepare a report on it.

GSRI has secured a pledge from the U.S. Economic Development Administration for a $2,500 grant to help fund the survey, Garrison said, adding that the money is expected to arrive in Louisiana within two weeks.

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