From left: Terrance St. Julien, Pan Breaux, Rachel Mouton, Joseph E. Colligan and Lela Gordon Mouton spent last Friday morning at the Mouton family’s 40 acres along the Vermilion River near Carencro. The property is part of what Rachel Mouton says was one of the first Indian land grants in the area, having been acquired by her great-great-grandmother, Catherine “Ton Ton” Pierre. Photos by Brad Kemp

Tracing ancestry can be tough, but when you’re Atakapas-Ishak, it’s even harder to prove you exist. Now, tribal members are determined to show Acadiana they ‘are awake once more.’

By Benjamin Leger ben.leger@timesofacadiana.com

Rachel Mouton cringes when she hears people use the phrase “Cajun Country.” She acknowledges the impact of Cajun culture in Acadiana, but she thinks people are forgetting something.

Mouton knows a story and culture that predate the Acadians’ arrival. “This is Atakapas country,” she says. “We share it with the Cajuns.”

Her sentiment seems to be the mantra for a group of people, from Acadiana and spanning west into southeast Texas, who are working with the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. to get federal recognition.

They are the Atakapas-Ishak — a tribe with a mysterious history dating back before European settlers set foot in the state. They are a people with a tarnished image based on rumors of savagery, cannibalism and even their own disappearance.

One of the biggest obstacles the tribe faces in getting federal recognition is how much it has changed and mixed with other tribes and other races over the years, leading many to believe identifying traits are now buried beneath years of racial intermingling.
More than 80 people showed up for a tribal gathering at Hefmann Park in Lafayette on June 16. It was the second such event in two years. The tribe had its first official meeting of both Louisiana and Texas members in 2006 — which some say was the first time the tribe had come together on such a scale in more than 100 years.

Atakapas-Ishak chiefs from Texas to Grand Bayou, members from all across the Gulf states, officials from Lafayette Consolidated Government, an anthropology professor from UL and even Kaliste Saloom Jr. and his wife Yvonne met for food, music and to discuss ways to preserve the tribe's heritage.

"We know so little [about our area]. We have so little information," Kaliste Saloom Jr. told the tribe at the event. "We must start with the Atakapas Indians."

Their territory is said to consist of Acadiana and Southwest Louisiana, though they slowly shifted further westward into Southeast Texas. They weren't nomadic, but moved within their region based on the seasons, establishing villages along the coastal bayous and traveling northward to the heads of the Calcasieu and Atchafalaya Rivers.

The tribe had few dealings with government or settlers, but the earliest descriptions of them came from the Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca, who may have lived with the tribe from 1528 to about 1535 after his ship ran aground.

For one thing, most historians and tribespeople agree the name "Atakapas," which has several spelling variations, was used by Spanish and French settlers as a derogatory label for the tribe. "Atakapas" comes from a Choctaw word for "man-eater."

While rumors persist that the tribe was cannibalistic, there isn't any historical data to back it up. Most modern historians agree the term was used as freely as "savage" or "uncivilized" to indicate danger for European settlers and to alienate Native Americans from the greater society.

Among themselves, the tribe was known as "Ishak," or "The People." By way of repetition, the Atakapas name stuck.

Recent generations have taken on the full name Atakapas-Ishak — pronounced "Uh-tack-uh-paw Ee-shack."

While the tribe had little contact with Europeans, even less known is its relationship with other tribes.

The Coushatta, Jena Band of Choctaw, Chitimacha and Tunica-Biloxi are all federally recognized tribes in Louisiana — though the state has recognized an additional 7 tribes — and there is some debate on whether the Atakapas-Ishak branched off from a more prominent tribe, or if it had once been a larger tribe dating back thousands of years before any other in the region.

Hugh Singleton, an Atakapas-Ishak elder and tribal historian originally from Lake Charles, has spent years researching the tribe's history, particularly documents from a Smithsonian Institute language expert who compiled an Atakapas Language Dictionary in the late 1800s.

"It's a unique language," Singleton says. "And it has no relationship to any other known language" and specifically, the languages of any local tribes.

This, plus other Smithsonian documents that presumed the tribe's territory extended down into the Western Gulf Coast, led Singleton to a theory that the Atakapas-Ishak were an ancient tribe.

To some, that might be a far-fetched statement, but considering regional archeologists have found evidence of human habitation in Louisiana dating almost 15,000 years, it's not entirely impossible.

State Archeologist Chip McGimsey was the regional archeologist for UL when a Lafayette attorney asked him in 2004 to examine some artifacts he'd been collecting near Rockefeller State Wildlife Refuge.
For nearly 15 years, Robert Cole had been fishing at the state park with his sons and also uncovering fragments of pottery, paddles and even human bones that amassed nearly 3,000 artifacts. With a radiocarbon analysis, McGimsey was able to put a date on the items — about 1500 A.D.

Based on the date and location, McGimsey deduced the materials might have belonged to a tribe of early Atakapas-Ishak.

"The Atakapas were known to be there only 200 years later, so it's not an unreasonable conclusion that the people at that site were Atakapas," he says. "Clearly, there were people living down there as early as 3,000 years ago. Around 1100 to 1200 A.D., you see a group of people move out of the Vermilion Bay area and on to Pecan Island, Grand Chenier, and essentially to the Mermentau."

This migration, McGimsey says, links up with known Atakapas villages in those same areas.

Cole has declined to have the artifacts placed in a local museum. With McGimsey's help, he had them all labeled and properly stored in his home until the tribe can come up with its own way to store and display the collection.

Whatever its origin, it was the tribe's given name that may have eventually helped lead to the Atakapas-Ishak's purported "disappearance."

Though the tribe's population at various times was speculated in tens of thousands, historians agree those numbers had dwindled to mere hundreds when Louisiana was undergoing colonization in the 1700s and different bands migrated westward.

The tribes that stayed were branded as violent, uncivilized and savages by colonists — or "le savage" as the French referred to the Atakapas-Ishak.

Ray Brasseur, a UL anthropologist who researches Louisiana tribes, says while these terms were often the product of colonial efforts to contain natives, it also served more political reasons, such as scaring other settlers away from prime property.

Folldore says the tribespeople were cannibals, and were eventually massacred, a story Brasseur says isn't uncommon for other tribes across the country.

"That concept of the Indians becoming extinct — there's an elaborate tradition offered about even where and by whom they were massacred, but there's no historical information," Brasseur says. "It's a folk explanation of history."

Mark Rees, another UL anthropologist, says Americans have a history of writing off groups as having disappeared or migrated elsewhere.

"That they may have roamed off to the West sort of clears us of any responsibility," he says.

Both Rees and Brasseur spoke about a well-known statue in St. Martinville erected in the 1960s of an Atakapas-Ishak warrior. The statue created some controversy when residents complained it was celebrating a violent, cannibalistic tribe that had long-since been forgotten.

Brasseur says these monuments tend to perpetuate the myth of a tribe's extermination.

"What it does is stamp 'postmortem' onto the group," he says. "It's a typical strategy of dominant cultures and their treatment of PF\L7( Whatever its origin, it was the tribe’s given name that may have eventually helped lead to the Atakapas-Ishak’s purported “disappearance.”

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Want to help the tribe?

If you have information or artifacts pertaining to Atakapas-Ishak tribal history or want to find out more on what the tribe’s doing, contact Chief Michael Amos at chief.m.amos@sbcglobal.net or Public Relations Director Rachel Mouton at rmouton6575@yahoo.com. Write to them at Atakapas-Ishak Tribe, P.O. Box 891, Port Arthur, TX, 77641-891.
subordinate groups."

Singleton has seen first-hand how those myths continue today.

During research in 1992, Singleton says he spoke to a priest in the Archdiocese of Lafayette who had been canvassing public records to develop a regional genealogy. "I asked him for some ideas on the Atakapas and how many there were," Singleton says. "He said, They are all extinct. They all died out from the white man's diseases. And I said, But my grandmother was Atakapas!"

Brasseur says because of institutional racism and disacknowledgment, the tribes suffer.

"It's the people themselves who are born with the brunt of this negative political reality," Brasseur says. "Having 'disappeared' and now having to try to reemerge with some kind of identity."

A portrait hangs up in the entrance hall of UL's Dupre Library. It's of a dark-skinned woman in a graduation gown and hat, holding a diploma. Below it is a plaque acknowledging this woman as the first African American graduate of the university, in 1956.

Her name is Christiana Gordon Smith, Rachel Mouton's aunt. "It's weird that she's hanging up there as African American, but she's really more Atakapas," Mouton says. "We don't want to take anything away from that ... we just want people to know that like many people of color here, she was, in part, Atakapas."

That Mouton and her aunt could be considered both African American and Native American — and have ancestors of both races — is a problem plaguing tribes today, particularly those trying to gain federal recognition.

Native Americans, like African Americans and other groups besides Caucasian, were once labeled as "colored" in public records, marriage licenses and other documents.

In Louisiana, the term "Creole" often seemed to lump these groups together as well.

This makes the already complicated process of researching tribal genealogy more difficult — leaving many to rely on the oral history passed down from elder relatives.

"My grandmother was very proud of her people," says Singleton. "She was distressed that they were so obscured. She'd often let her people know, We are le savage."

Mouton, too, had to rely on elder family members to develop an understanding of her heritage. "My family is one of the more fortunate ones," she says. "My great-great-grandmother had an Indian land grant in the 1880s. That land is still in the family today."

Ten minutes from Carenro, the 40-acre land grant is situated along the Vermilion River. Mouton's great-great grandmother Catherine Pierre lived on the property.

With the land come the stories, and Mouton and
"All of those Creole people will have to look back and see 'What are my origins?' Of course, this has the potential to affect all of us. If this becomes a successful movement, we'll have to begin to recognize what were the Indians' contributions."

— Ray Brasseur, a UL anthropologist who researches Louisiana tribes

her mother, Lela, know quite a few.

Pierre was called "TonTon" and was known as a medicine woman who traveled up and down the river by boat collecting herbs and plants.

Lela Mouton says TonTon married a white man with the last name LeBlanc — another example of the tribe's amalgamation. Some members of the tribe were still living in the area when the marriage occurred, and moved further up the river near Opelousas in protest.

Rachel Mouton says she's had trouble dealing with the many facets of her ancestry, which includes African American heritage.

"It's a sticky thing when you are dealing with black people," she says. "When you've been raised that way, you don't wake up one day and say 'I'm not black' or 'I'm not African American' — 'I'm really Atakapas.'"

Brasseur says as the tribe begins the process of seeking federal

Online:
See photo galleries from the tribe's visit to Atakapas-Ishak land near Carencro and the tribal gathering at Heymann Park in June.

timesofacadiana.com
For a tribe to begin the process of gaining recognition, tribal leaders must first submit a letter of intent to the Department of the Interior, which oversees the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The Atakapas-Ishak has already submitted a letter of intent, signed off by all tribal officials, including Mouton. According to the BIA, 314 groups have stated their intent to seek federal recognition since 1978. Only 82 have submitted what the BIA regards as a completed petition. The remaining 232 are still not ready for evaluation.

Of the 82, the DOI has resolved 41 and Congress or other processes have resolved 19.

The DOI currently is actively considering 10 petitions, while 9 are "ready and waiting for active consideration."

The DOI's Office of Federal Acknowledgment says two groups are in the "post-final decision appellate process" and two resolved decisions are "in litigation in Federal court."

As of Feb. 3, 2006, 14 Louisiana tribes had submitted petitions for federal recognition. Nyna Konishi, based in Washington, D.C. and also a member of the Atakapas-Ishak tribe, has been working as a liaison between the tribe and the DOI.

"The recognition process is really the responsibility of the tribe to prove they are who they are," Konishi says. "This process can take years to complete and to date there are more than 50 tribes waiting for their recognition and have been waiting for over 3 years."

A tribe has to meet seven main criteria to be eligible for federal recognition:

- The tribe has been identified as an American Indian entity on a continuous basis since 1900.
- A predominant portion of the tribe comprises a distinct community that has existed from historical times to the present.
- The tribe has maintained political influence or authority over its members from historical times to the present.
- The tribe has a governing document including membership criteria.
- The tribe's membership can prove it is descended from a historical Indian tribe.
- Membership consists mainly of people who aren't members of any acknowledged tribe.
- The tribe is not the subject of congressional legislation that has expressly terminated or forbidden a Federal relationship.

Once accepted as a federally recognized tribe, its members are eligible to receive some assistance for education, health care and housing, though most of it requires additional paperwork and more lengthy processes.

"This is not for trying to get reparations," Mouton says. "But for the ongoing generations, it could allow us to have aid for education. And anything I can do to help the poorer people of the Atakapas get education is worth it."

Still, it seems the Atakapas-Ishak tribe has a long legal road ahead of it, that may well lead nowhere.

It's a system Brasseur and others call "ludicrous" in its scope and tendency to cater to tribes that have well-documented history of relations with the U.S. government — essentially, the easy ones.

And it's a system that's even harder for rural communities in Louisiana to deal with.

"The Bureau of Indian Affairs has not been very open to many Indians in Louisiana because they were anonymous. They were unusual. They were not the same as other Indians. There were anonymous — Never were lists of members," Brasseur says. "It all starts out by this outside political force demanding Indians identify themselves and justify themselves, so that we can tell you what you are and tell you what you're not, when the tribes don't have that information to begin with."

Mouton says her tribe realizes the odds are stacked against it.

Still, the research involved in getting recognition has served to ignite a fire among tribal members.

"It became clear to us that if we want to get anywhere as a people, we've got to start doing our ancestry and documenting our history," Mouton says.

At the Lafayette gathering in June, it was clear tribal members were ready to face the path ahead of them.

"This is really an exciting time for the Atakapas," Mouton told members at the event.

For one thing, the tribe gave permission to have its name attached to a 25-mile hiking and biking trail planned to link Lafayette, Breaux Bridge and St. Martinville.

Lafayette Consolidated Government is working with local non-profit TRAIL, or Transportation and Recreation Alternatives in Louisiana, on getting grants for the first part of the Atakapas-Ishak Trail — a segment from the Acadian Cultural Center to Lake Martin Road.

Sanjay Kharod of LCG and Scott Schilling of TRAIL gave a presentation at the gathering, showing how the trail would include informational kiosks explaining the tribe's history.

Kharod says the project will be completed in sections, as funding becomes available and residents begin to rally around the need for a recreational trail system in Acadiana.

The tribe also hopes to work with city officials to develop a small museum at the trailhead, possibly to exhibit the Atakapas-Ishak artifacts Robert Cole discovered.

It's another move toward showing the state the tribe is alive and well. Because even though the tribe is talking a lot about working to gain federal recognition, Mouton says that isn't her people's main concern.

"Even if just the people in our area recognize us as a tribe, that would be enough for us," she says. "Maybe even get a chapter in the history books before the Spanish get here."