Travel around our state with *Magazine* and visit contemporary Native American communities

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Myths: Native Americans live in teepees, ride horseback, eat rats, wear feathers and don’t speak English very well.

These are perceptions that have been expressed to some of the Native Americans interviewed for *Magazine*'s series on the Native Americans of Louisiana.

**Reality:** The majority of Native Americans living in Louisiana are no different from residents of any small community or neighborhood — except that they are descended from people who lived on the continent before the arrival of the European explorers.

Four of the state’s eight tribes have received federal recognition: the Chitimacha, Coushatta, Tunica-Biloxi and Jena Band of Choctaw. To receive federal recognition, which makes the tribe a sovereign nation, a tribe must prove through documentation that its members are Native Americans, must have evidence of a tribal language and must have a land base.

The other tribes — Choctaw-Apache, Clifton-Chocow, Louisiana Band of Choctaw and the United Houmas Nation — have achieved state recognition and have applied for federal recognition.

Federal recognition provides tribes opportunities to apply for federal aid to improve medical care and education and to obtain HUD housing for members’ families. Three of the four recognized tribes have turned to casinos to generate income that has turned impoverished people into middle-class people. These tribes are looking at other avenues of economic development for the future.

The head of a tribe bears the title of chief or chairman, usually an elected position. He (or she) is assisted by a council of elders who meet to discuss business related to the tribe. Some, like the Chitimacha, are run like corporations, with the chairman as CEO.

While the lack of education for generations has limited tribal members to blue-collar jobs — offshore oil rigs, carbon plants, mechanics, fishing — recent educational opportunities have made it possible for more tribal members to go to college, majoring in education, archaeology, law, medicine and other fields of interest.

At the same time, there has been some resurgence of interest in the ancient traditions and values of the tribes, and older members are trying to generate interest among younger members in learning the crafts, mainly basketmaking and wood carving. Some members make the rounds of powwows, either as vendors selling their crafts or as dancers or musicians.

Still, many of the state’s Native Americans are content to blend in with the mainstream, earning their living and carving for their families. They either don’t have time for or are not interested in the past. Native American blood runs in the veins of more Louisianians than most people realize.

This series of stories in the coming weeks will interview members of each tribe about Louisiana’s Native Americans as they face a new century, exploring their crafts and traditions that have been preserved or revived—or lost forever. The series will end in June with issues facing Native Americans.