A day's work and then some

A day's work and then some. The truck carrying tired, hot, sweaty bodies brakes in front of the kitchen quarters. There is a polite race for the showers. It may be difficult to imagine how thoroughly dirty a body can get on an archaeological dig; these people don't have to imagine.

After working all day, "Everyone's so wiped out we don't do much," Ann Whitmer said. She sits in the truck with the door open — writing in her journal about the day's activities. It's quiet. No interruptions. "I like to do this while everything's still fresh in my mind," she said.

Much of the staff's free time is spent talking about archaeology or looking over recently found artifacts in the lab. But other leisure-time activities creep in occasionally. One Saturday night they all went down to the Red River to have a picnic complete with bonfire and frisbees, Whitmer said. Sometimes the locals stop by to chat, or students are invited to locals' homes.

The whole group trooped out to see the Green Corn Ceremony of the Tunica/Biloxi Indians in Marksville and have made field trips to other sites in the vicinity.

"What kind of sandwich do you want for tomorrow, Ann?" shouts Carey Cox as Ann Whitmer emerges from the women's quarters, freshly showered and changed into clean shorts and shirt.

"Make it roast beef with mayonnaise," Whitmer shouts back above the hubbub of scattered conversations and general milling around in the kitchen house. It is late afternoon, and while the next day's lunch is being made, dinner preparations are still under way.

Sandwiches are made to each person's specifications, wrapped and initialed on the packages. (One order got parceled, and Becky Aspino opened her lunch to discover two pieces of bread spread with peanut butter and filled with a graham cracker.)

Along with sandwiches, the next day's lunch might include boiled eggs, apples or bananas, chips and baggies of sliced tomatoes, lettuce, cheese slices and pickles. One of the big trestle tables is strewn with the makings for sandwiches and their accompaniments.

"We are extremely fortunate in our accommodations," Ann Ramenofsky said. "We are housed almost luxuriously in three houses provided by Louisiana Delta Plantation. One is the kitchen house and women's house, one is the men's house, and the third is where our lab and VIP quarters are set up."

They are living in tenant farmers' houses, but they don't look like the tenant farmers' houses that most people call to mind. They are sparkling clean and ultra-modern. "Several people have referred to our living conditions as the Vick Hilton," Ramenofsky said. Vick is the name of the tiny community in which they live. "Conditions here are not like the ones in Oklahoma where Ann Whitmer and Gail Fritz worked — tents, a two-burner stove, no showers," Ramenofsky said.

Usually a cook is hired to handle all the kitchen chores. This year the participants are taking turns cooking and cleaning. A duty roster posted on the wall lists who is to cook, clean or make lunch for the next day.

"We've had some pretty decent meals," (Continued on Page 21)
Ben Bryant, left, and Carey Coxe work on assembling pieces of a pot.

Kathy Joiner, left, and Ann Whitmer have a quiet talk in their room.

Field school staff and students gather for the evening meal.

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this summer," Whitmer said, "crawfish etouffee, a crawfish boil, steak." Not typical fare for a crew digging up an Indian site far from the nearest town, which is Marksville at 25 miles.

One farmer stops by several times a week; sometimes he brings fresh-caught catfish as a real treat, Ramenofsky said. "Gail (Fritz) told of a friend who had gone on a French dig in Africa," Ramenofsky said. "It was a special occasion — somebody's birthday — and they

had brought out the china and linens and candles and the table was laden with elegant food."She believes her staff's dining experience this summer is comparable.

"Becky (Asente) was a nutritionist before she was an archaeology student at LSU," Ramenofsky said, so it made sense to put her in charge of planning the meals.

"We have a lot of people who enjoy cooking," Whitmer said, so we put one person who can cook with one person who assists. Becky plans and shops for one week at a time. We bought staples in 25-lb. bags at the beginning of summer.

Each week, menus are planned and supplies purchased — always with a little extra for the volunteers who turn up on weekends.

Sleeping bags tucked under their arms, volunteers bunk in on weekends. The type of help they give depends on their expertise. Novices are put to work at water screening; more experienced volunteers can dig — under close supervi-

sion. All of them are fascinated by the project. Ramenofsky set up a kids' pit this year and plans to do it again next time she has a field school.

It's dinner time. Staff and guests line up to fill their plates with crabmeat and sausage fettucini, steamed broccoli and cauliflower, tossed salad with mandarin oranges, brownies and a choice of tea, milk, lemonade or wine.

Conversation around the dinner tables still runs along archaeological lines. "Is that just a rock on the table, or is it a significant rock?"

"That's Whitmer's granite,"

"Well, it was dark," Ann Whitmer said sheepishly. (Finding granite at an archaeological site in Louisiana is virtually impossible.) Her rock is quartzite.

Sometimes vacation plans are related to archaeology.

"I hope to find some prairie turnips (a food resource) in eastern Colorado," Ramenofsky said.

"After prairie turnips bloom, the leaves fall off and blow away and you can't find them," Gail Fritz said, dashing the project director's hopes.

"We were at a site last week which was solid ceramics," Ramenofsky said. "You couldn't put your foot down without stepping on ceramics."

The Catahoula Lowlands is so rich in artifacts that locals have been picking up choice pieces for years, Ramenofsky said. They are the ones who have told LSU researchers where to look.

"We've had some pretty elegant meals this summer — crawfish etouffee, a crawfish boil, steak."
Each participant in the archaeological field school has his own reasons for attending, and backgrounds and ages vary considerably. Beverly Wilson, a graduate student in art education, used to teach in the gifted and talented program in East Baton Rouge Parish schools. "I lived in Turkey for awhile," she said, "and visited the ancient Greek and Roman sites. I got my M.A. in art education a year ago. There were two things I had always wanted to do: study under Frank Hayden and go on an archaeological dig."

She was very fortunate, she said, that she has been able to do both. Hayden died several months ago.

"When I created my Ph.D. plan of study, I was able to count this course for my degree," Wilson said. Students sign up for the field school, pay $650 in fees and get course credit for it (6 hours credit). "I feel like our American schools system is not on the right track," she said, getting into her particular field of interest. "One of the things I want to do is have more hands-on experience for students...." Her program would contain not only art but also theater, dance and music. "We need a return to Renaissance thinking, not just compartmentalized learning," she said. And archaeology is one of the cultural tools that fits into her program.

Ricky Mitchell got into archaeology by mistake, he said, smiling. After working as a carpenter for seven years, he enrolled at LSU.

"I signed up for astronomy," he said. "I went to class the first day, not knowing I was in the wrong class. And Ann (Ramenofsky) walked in. She started talking, and I was taking notes. I thought it must have been destiny. After 10 minutes I was hooked. It was just great. I switched my class from astronomy to archaeology.

"We got to be friends and talked a lot after class. I'd always had a romantic interest in archaeology..." She's a wonderful person to work with," he said. "She educates and trains you," he said. "It's incredible. She's real precise with everything she does -- about measuring and bringing it back to the lab."

Long-range plans for Ricky Mitchell? First, of course is to complete his undergraduate degree and find employment in archaeology. "I want to work within archaeology for the next six or seven years," he said. "I'd like to get another degree in education, and I'd like to teach in EBR Parish schools. I'd like to give something back to the community. There are a lot of problems in the state, and I feel like I'd like to teach social studies."

"Archaeology is a wonderful thing, and Louisiana has so much to offer in archaeological sites," Mitchell mused. "I call everyone out here information bees. They all gather information and then bring it in and study it."

Things begin to wind down after dinner dishes are cleared up and washed, the lecture on plants concluded and the day's artifacts tucked away in the lab. A few will stay up late to sort through the items. Most go to bed early -- 9:30 or so -- because a new day -- with the hope of new archaeological discoveries -- will begin for them at 5:30 a.m.