Amateur archaeologist responsible for dig

As students scrape soil and remove it from their excavation pits, a pickup truck stops near the site. As field workers become aware of who has arrived, it is obvious that this is a special visit. Heads swivel toward the dirt track. Voices call the news to others farther away: "Bill Baker's here!" as an elderly man wearing a jaunty cap makes his way to the pits.

The LSU team of archaeologists would not be excavating at the farm if it were not for the generous assistance and advice of Bill Baker, one of the managers of Louisiana Delta Plantation. Ann Ramensky points out.

"Bill Baker is an avid amateur archaeologist. His interest in archaeology is well known by farm people. He says there are more than 250 sites in the 98,000 acres of the farm," she said. Baker was a member of the original Louisiana Archaeological Society and was president of the group. He received an award for conservation from then-Gov. Edwin Edwards.

Bill Baker lives near Jonesville with his wife, Pat. Illness has slowed him down, but his enthusiasm for archaeology has not diminished.

The objects he has collected in the past 20 years are carefully labeled and stored in his workshop (known as the "Bone House") in back of his home. Sitting at his dining room table discussing the current dig and his years of finding Indian artifacts, topics of conversation lead him to fetch a whole pot he had reconstructed or an especially fine projectile point.

Baker credits his boss on the farm, Norman Haigh, with whetting his interest in archaeology.

"Norman Haigh had the knack for recognizing artifacts on the ground," Baker said. "He took me out and showed me some arrowheads and potsherds, and that was it. I was hooked."

His friend Bill Spencer is also an avid amateur archaeologist. He had known of Ann Ramensky when both lived in California — he worked for a museum, and she taught at Oakland. When she took some college students to Wild Horse Canyon in the Mohave Desert, the two met briefly.

I was Spencer who in 1983 alerted the LSU Department of Geography and Anthropology to the erosion of the Indian burial site on Louisiana Delta Plantation's property, shortly after Ramensky completed her doctorate and arrived at LSU.

A flood in 1973 brought on the erosion of the burials. Ramensky was persuaded to excavate them in 1984 since the remains would have washed away and been lost forever. Her work resulted in the removal of 30 individuals, the oldest of which was a female buried in a fetal position in a dog grave. This skeleton was dated to 3,300 B.C., making her the oldest burial found in Louisiana and the earliest date established in excavating the Catahoula Lowlands — so far.

"There's late prehistoric all over the farm," Spencer said, "from 1,300 A.D. to European contact (the arrival of the Spaniards in the 1500s) — the Plaquemine culture. You can't go on a site here without picking up Plaquemine ceramic."

"And that's just what's lying on the surface."

"This is the first Plaquemine village I've excavated here," Ramensky said. "They could have had fishing areas or duck-hunting areas in addition to living areas. There were probably 100 people at the village site and thousands within the property of Louisiana Delta Plantation," she said.

"I can't get over how lucky society is to have LSU and Ann do the work they have done." Bill Baker said. "Ann (Ramensky) and Doug Owsley (physical anthropologist with the Smithsonian Institute, formerly at LSU) and Bill Spencer — it's just amazing the cooperation among the people," he said.

Baker started with an arrowhead and has expanded his collection of artifacts to the entire culture.

"It took a long time for me to get the attention of an institution," Baker said. "It wasn't until the Cowpen burials came about that I got the attention."

"The burials were eroding out of the bank," Baker said. "We knew we had things being lost, but I didn't have the one to salvage it because I didn't have the experience to do it. But some amateurs convinced me to try, he said.

The Cowpen burials are the only ones of that type that have ever been found in the Mississippi Delta, Ramensky said.

"I still get excited every time I go out to look at sites," Baker said. "It's an excitement to find something where no one else has picked anything up for a thousand years," he mused. He held up several fish hooks, an especially fine long spear head and a partially reconstructed pot.

Several of Baker's shards are beautifully decorated. "There are pertinently artistic stuff," Ramensky said, "beautifully made by anyone's standards. There's nothing but ceramic yuck. It's just awful. The pots are soft and poorly fired and break easily. At the Josh Paulk site we're also getting decorated styles that have never even been described in Louisiana," she said.

"It took Baker and Haigh to preserve those sites," Ramensky said. "A mound got bushwhacked by mistake, and afterward Baker told me that if it ever happened again he would be fired.

It's obviously a mutual admiration society — the farm managers and the LSU archaeologists. Funding for the dig is provided by Louisiana Delta Plantation and the state division of archaeology. As all of those involved say repeatedly, it's that type of team work that led to the major breakthroughs to understanding the early residents of North America and of the Catahoula Lowlands.

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