Ancient La. Indians may have opted for cannibalistic cuisine

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By the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, an ancient Indian clan shunned the pop-buff Louisiana dishes of crawfish, crab and oysters—choosing instead to eat small clams, some fish and, well, maybe each other.

Anthropologist J. Richard Schenenk suggests that, if cannibalism was practiced, the dishes savored by the Indians may have included human brains served in their own cracked-open skulls.

"I found an inverted skull cap in a fireplace area, as if they were cooking it in its own natural cover," Schenenk said.

Schenenk, of the University of New Orleans, has dug up and examined pottery, bones and other artifacts from Big and Little Oak islands near the lake's south shore since 1972.

The islands are really landlocked modest hillocks in the once-remote swamp of eastern New Orleans.

They served as village and workplace for a group of about 20 to 30 Tchouctches from about 500 B.C. to just before the time of Christ, Schenenk said.

When he began his work, Schenenk figured he'd find an Indian tribe not extraordinarily different from the area's present natives.

"I expected to find the Indians eating what the Cajuns now eat," Schenenk said.

Surprise.

The Indians at that time utilized resources that are completely different.

The Tchouctche clan didn't touch the south Louisiana big crab, crawfish, trout, redfish and oysters—and put New Orleans on the culinary map.

Instead, Schenenk said, they made their home near beds of small, brackish-water clams, eating them and the things that gathered around them—including drum, catfish and an occasional muskrat or spread.

What Schenenk calls "the evidence of possible cannibalism" emerged from the muddy underground where most of the artifacts and bones were found. It included in one 9-by-9-foot area, the remains of about 25 people, along with pottery and other items buried with them.

Each of the skulls was broken at the base, where the head meets the neck, Schenenk said. Arms and legbones were also broken off at each end. Most backbones and ribs weren't there at all. Schenenk doesn't know why.

The bones were sent to Louisiana State University, where experts in physical anthropology will make a final decision in about a year on whether cannibalism was practiced, Schenenk said.

It's not as if eating human beings was unheard-of in the region.

"Cannibalism was extremely common in Mexico and Louisiana. From Laferouche westward was once referred to on an old French map as 'The Land of the Cannibals,'" Schenenk said.

Some of the bones unearthed by Schenenk had been buried in little bundles and had cut marks to indicate they were "defleshed."

It is similar, he said, to remains found in cultures where the dead underwent "charnel house preparation"—a practice in which the bones are stripped by priestly types dubbed buzzard men who then returned the bones in a package to surviving relatives.

What did the Buzzard Men do with the flesh?

"That's never mentioned," Schenenk said. "At least I've never heard."

He said Little Oak, still reachable by a wet 300-yard path through sun-filled marsh, probably served as tribe's village. There Schenenk and resident archeology teams found most of the ornate pottery, digging tools and other evidence of homeland.

It included a drained inlet area earmarked for a vast urban subdivision. It most likely served as a "food processing center" for Little Oak and perhaps other villages, Schenenk said.

It was at Big Oak that diggers unearthed big piles of clamshells, heads and big, rough pottery for making the seafood to Little Oak.

"The men went to Big Oak (from 9 to 5) and got away from the wives, mothers-in-law and the dodging old folks. They had a 'beach time' and had high old time," Schenenk said.

Settlements of Tchouctches, a tribe of tall, robust and muscular Indians, stretched from well into coastal Mississippi to the east past Lafayette, La., on the west.

It was a male-dominated group, with wives brought into catch small fish from other clans, Schenenk said.

He said the settlement at Big and Little Oak was eventually forced to move elsewhere for two main reasons: a shrinking lake and a shift in the path of the nearby Mississippi.

The build-up of shore left the settlement too far inland as siltation at the mouth of the river virtually choked off the bay from the Gulf of Mexico. The loss of the salty Gulf water meant the end of the plentiful clam crop, he said.

The Indians moved, as many New Orleans residents do today, to now-urban Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes.