Anthropologist is Studying
Iberia Parish Indian Mound

WEEKS ISLAND – An LSU anthropologist has begun the first systematic archaeological study of an Iberia Parish mound, which may be guarding evidence of prehistoric Indian cultures spanning a period of 2,500 years.

Robert W. Neuman, curator of anthropology in LSU's geography-anthropology department, is conducting excavation on the Weeks Island Morton Shell Mound located along Weeks Bayou in Iberia Parish.

Rare Shell Site

He says the mound is a rare stratified marshland shell site where archaeologists can examine several prehistoric Indian cultures in a single setting.

Neuman hopes it will help explain man's adaptation to the marshland environment.

The mound, he said, was formed by prehistoric Indians who deposited the mussel and oyster shells they collected from the marsh, gradually creating a plateau that is more than 700 feet long, 12 feet high and in some areas 90 feet wide.

Several Levels

Because the bayou is eroding the shell mound, Neuman has been able to observe several layers of shell deposits. He has seen evidence of roasting and fire pits within the shell wall and has already uncovered potsherds and deer, fish, turtle, small mammal as well as human bones.

The earliest men on the mound were apparently the Tchefuncte Indians who arrived around 500 B.C., Neuman says. In addition, there are remains from the later Marksville, Troyville, Coles Creek and Natchez cultures.

Other Shell Deposits

Although shell deposits are common along the Louisiana coast, most represent the occupation of a single Indian culture. Neuman attributes this lack of stratified deposits to the soft, moist marshland soil which causes the shells to sink and to the streams and bayous, which deposit fresh layers of silt along their banks.

Neuman believes the mound holds the key to determining the ages of various pottery styles found in the single occupation mounds.

Archaeologists have known of the Morton Shell Mound's existence for more than a century but have made only surface excavations, which revealed the promise of much valuable material below. Last month, Neuman began work under a $2,500 grant from the Morton Salt Co., owner of the company, which owns the Weeks Island Salt Dome.

Dug Test Pits

After mapping the area with the help of the U.S. Department of Agriculture officials, Neuman dug three test pits. Although he has only penetrated a few feet into the mound, he hopes to eventually dig trenches, even below the water level, to observe the entire structure of the mound.

During the fall and winter, Neuman hopes to return to the mound with groups of graduate and undergraduate students to collect additional artifacts, which he will analyze and classify in his search to understand prehistoric man's life in the marshes.

Salt Co. Helped

Newman explained that the Morton Salt Co. has assisted archaeological studies for the past four decades in various parts of the country. The company, which owns the Weeks Island Salt Dome...