Anthropology professor, students unearth pieces of Acadian history, proof of settlement

Mark Rees, Ph.D., speaks to Leesville citizens about the New Acadian Project at an fundraiser event on April 1.

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A University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor has enlisted students' help to excavate and find the first settlements of the Acadians, who trekked to the area in the late 1700s.

Mark Rees, Ph.D., who teaches anthropology courses at UL Lafayette, said the project would allow people to understand the lives of early Acadians, from what their first summer was like, to what they were eating and the kind of structures they built. "We're talking about just over 200 people who arrived in the late spring, early summer of 1765," Rees said. "Over 30 of them died of yellow fever in the first few months and were buried at the home sites that they established along the Bayou Teche." Excavations started in May 2014 along the Teche Ridge, where artifacts dating back to the 1700s were found among eight archaeological sites.

"A year before that," Rees stated, "I gave a presentation in Vermilionville and pointed out that one man was doing any research to find lost settlements, and I pointed out that it was a real shame that Louisiana state its connection to the Acadians without knowing where they first settled. It was really a lack of knowledge."

As a result of this speech, the Acadian Heritage and Culture Foundation spurred the New Acadian Project Steering Committee. The committee reported that, as of December 2016, it had raised an excess of $150,000 for the project, which was well above their initial funding goal.

Rees is not currently on the committee, but said he attributes the program's success to the people who support the project and recognize the impact such discoveries would yield. "It would bring cultural tourism; people from Canada and people of French ancestry," he said. "It would also improve the economy of the area that people would take pride in the fact that the settlement is there, that we know where the settlement is, and I think there would be restaurants and other businesses, including craft businesses that would benefit from the fact that this is an area that was settled by the early Acadians."

One student who has helped on the project is Katherine LeBlanc, a senior majoring in anthropology. She said she has found it rewarding to be able to discover the history of her ancestors. "It puts people one step closer to understanding the Acadians," LeBlanc said. LeBlanc became involved with the project for 6-8 months when she was approached for a potential internship on the New Acadia Project. During that time, Donny Bourgeois, an archeologist who also works on the project, conducted field surveys with her.

LeBlanc was also able to enroll in a winter intercession course with other students for college credit. LeBlanc said it was similar to graduate work. According to LeBlanc, a typical day in the field for those classes involved getting up around 7 a.m. and working until 8 p.m. LeBlanc said the team performs tasks such as shovel testing, where they dig until they hit clay and then filter dirt through a screen for artifacts. Artifacts are then processed at a field lab in Cade or at UL Lafayette. The archives are there, though, LeBlanc explained, so people can analyze everything and make connections. She said the daunting volume of archives requires patience and tenacity to sift through.

"You have to hold optimism," LeBlanc stated, "because it's easy to get discouraged when you don't find anything."

Rees said the funding for a summer session on the New Acadia Project has not been completely provided yet, but the National Park Service is soon to confirm whether or not it will help fund the project. Volunteers are also able to work on the project.

"Volunteers are absolutely needed," Rees added. "Volunteers won't get the project done because we are talking about eight-hour days for eight weeks. It's not what people expect; it's not large excavations under a canopy. It's hiking through sugar cane fields in high heat and excavating little trial holes to try and find artifacts."

"They can contact me, but it's a bit premature because we don't know about funding," he continued.

LeBlanc said anyone who is in an archaeology-related field at the school has a great opportunity to be able to conduct field studies without having to go out of state.

"In another three years, we could potentially have around 75 sites in this 10-mile area," Rees said. "And if that were the case, I would say confidently that we would have one of the settlements that was established in 1765."

ACADIANs
continued on page 16

ACADIANs
continued from page 2

Rees said housing development in the area may make the project inaccessible. He said the venture's continuity is urgent. Recently, the project's steering committee submitted a video to USA Today Network's "A Community Thrives" initiative, a contest to promote change. There are three categories to vote for, including wellness, arts and culture and education. The winners of each category based on vote count will receive grants of either $50,000 or $100,000 from a panel of judges.