IS Avery Island a cradle of civilization?
A salt-mining complex in the coastal marshes of south-central Louisiana, Avery Island has a diameter of approximately 2 miles. Its hilly terrain is created by an assortment of gullies, slopes and ponds. But below that surface lurks mysteries of time in the form of objects the ages of which are beyond guesswork.

Thus in January, 1962, the Coastal Studies Institute of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, with assistance from Avery Island, Inc., embarked on the task of determining the ages and significance of these objects. Excavations and further research confirmed earlier reports of the fossil nature of some objects, with CSI noting that man may have inhabited the island for “at least 10,000 years.” Operations of the International Salt Company suggested a need for more research, and CSI followed up with its report, “Occupation Sequence at Avery Island,” stressing the significance of fossils and artifacts found there.

EXCAVATIONS from early 1968 through mid-1970 turned up teeth from the extinct mastodon, a gigantic elephant-like creature, and the prehistoric horse. These indicated that horses were there before the Spanish explorers, and that elephant-like animals aren’t foreign to America.

Vegetation from the Pleistocene era was found preserved by the island’s briny waters, even to the point of retaining coloration. And if radiocarbon tests are accurate, cordage and matting remains may prove to be the oldest found in North America, says Dr. Sherwood M. Gagliano, associate professor of anthropology at LSU. He is associated with CSI and is conducting geological experiments along with Monty Walden, a CSI field and laboratory technician. Dr. Gagliano feels the island’s rugged terrain is one reason that ancient materials were found there.

“Streams cut across the valley about 12,000 years ago,” he says, “carrying sand and gravel, and exposing the rock salt. Today’s coast was well inland, and the area around the island was probably open prairie. Horses, mammoth, ground sloth and other animals grazed the area. The animals were probably attracted by the natural salt licks. Man, at that time comparable to the present-day Australian aborigines, was probably attracted to the area because nearby stones made natural hunting weapons.”

D R. Gagliano says that deposits of sand and gravel accumulated over the years have yielded many bones and artifacts. He says that the remains of mammoth, horses, saber-toothed animals, bison and giant turtles have been found. The discovery of pottery dating probably around 1500 B.C. prompted him to speculate that Indians used the pots to boil brine water to get salt. Evidence? Bits of charcoal and pottery found scattered near a stream.

Dr. Gagliano adds a small historical note to the island, its Salt Mine Valley in particular.

“About 1812,” he says, “a New Iberia hunter began operations near the salt springs. John C. Marsh set up industry with large iron pots, repeating the Indians’ boiling techniques to obtain salt. Years later his grandson, John Marsh Avery, dug out the springs in an effort to supply salt to the South during the Civil War. At first the business thrived. Several hundred wagons and mule teams transported the salt. Toward the end of the war, however, the North captured New Iberia and the salt supply areas.”

From 1856 to 1880 natural scientists toured the island, analyzing its layering and the basketry remains they found, according to Dr. Gagliano. It was during this period that the ground and ground sloth species were discovered.

In the early 1960s field work and research really gained momentum, Dr. Gagliano related.

“At the turn of the century a shaft was sunk in Salt Mine Valley, and the pits filled with water. The place was then virtually abandoned. For over 50 years, nothing of archaeological significance occurred on the island. It wasn’t until 1959 that Mr. and Mrs. Edward Simmons found old pottery and other materials. They invited LSU archaeologists to evaluate their findings, which included over 1,000 arrowheads.”

LSU accepted the proposal and in 1962 Dr. Gagliano initially concluded that man has been on the island “at least 10,000 years.”

A VERY Island provided the labor and the machinery for further diggings. After holding out a 25-foot cavity, workers found pottery, ground sloth remains and other artifacts.

The LSU professor relates that at 35 feet, workers reached huge salt deposits, uncovering previously undisturbed cores. Organic material was found deposited on top of the salt. He says the workers then drove a steel sheet piling 40 feet into the ground, striking salt deposits which “yielded bones, artifacts and teeth of the horse and mastodon.

“Perishable materials,” says Gagliano, “were found at 25 feet. One basketry and small twisted cords interwoven to form a loose fabric were found preserved by briny waters. Boring samples near one of the pits yielded objects 11,500 to 12,000 years old, as determined by radiocarbon tests.”

CSI, Avery Island and International Salt continue to probe the depths of the island in search of secrets of the past. The undertaking is noteworthy, involving industry, private enterprise and education in a concerted effort in the never-ending quest for knowledge.

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ISLAND... key To Yesterday?

ana Places—Marsh Island

The names and the sitting of that rise and fall and saunt, like many other Louisiana places, Avery Island is shaped like a marsh and is. At the exit of small 1,631 acres is a slow slope of the surrounding marsh. Source: Louisiana, A Guide to the State—Clare D'Artois, Leeper

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