PREHISTORIC INDIANS IN ACADIANA LEFT CONSIDERABLE EVIDENCE OF THEIR PRESENCE.

Your backyard may be an archaeological trove. It’s not a well-known fact, but the Coteau Ridge (that’s the slightly hilly area) running through St. Landry, St. Martin and Lafayette parishes is “Indian site city,” as Dr. Jon Gibson, professor of anthropology and director of the USL Center for Archaeology, describes it.

In the course of development in modern times, prehistoric Indian mounds, campsites and villages have been built over or plowed under. The archaeology center has been trying to save these sites, and it’s about to get a lot of help.

The state has hired an archaeologist from the Florida State Museum whose job will be to identify and record sites in the area and work with the landowners to preserve them. Seventy percent of the money to fund the position is coming from a fed-

USL STUDENTS LIKE LISA COLEMAN PAINSTAKINGLY SORT, CLEAN AND LABEL ARTIFACTS.
eral grant, 30 percent from USL. Dr. Michael Anthony Russo will be at USL in March.

Dirt work in Acadiana has been invaluable in unearthing sites and artifacts of archaeological importance, but farmers and contractors are not always able or willing to stop work until USL faculty and students can get around to a proper assessment or excavation. Gibson says it can be very frustrating when, for example, a farmer uncovers something, excitedly calls USL, and Gibson, who does much of this work on his own time, can’t get to it for a few weeks. But the new archaeologist will.

“The farmer that calls and says, can you come look at my property—he can go, and he can go immediately,” Gibson says.

Some of the most important archaeological finds in the Lafayette area have been discovered by pure chance. “We wouldn’t know a lot of what we know if it weren’t for people finding old stuff,” says Gibson.

Take, for example, the 11,500-year-old projectile point (the preferred term rather than arrowhead), from the Clovis people that is the oldest evidence of the presence of humans in the Lafayette area. “That was found off Kaliste Saloom Road in a guy’s yard,” says Gibson. The man
showed it to Gibson at a meeting of a now-defunct local archaeological society and still has it.

The Clovis people apparently were the first people in the area, but today's subtropical climate did not exist at the time. The Clovis people were migratory hunters of Ice Age animals long extinct.

In 1972, workers digging a waste pit at the Trappey plant on the banks of the Vermilion River uncovered the remains of a mastodon nearly 12,000 years old; fortunately, they immediately stopped work until Gibson could remove it.

Other sites have been lost before full-scale excavation could be done. What was probably the biggest village in the area was on the property of the Lafayette Airport. "It's underneath the North/South runway," says Gibson.

Shortly after he came to USL, he learned of the existence of the site and the runway plans and persuaded the Airport Commission to let him do some digging on the site before construction began. In what obviously was an ancient trash dump, some human bones and teeth were found, giving some credibility to the theory that the Attakapas were cannibals, Gibson says.

Under federal law today, construction projects involving federal funds cannot commence until the site is checked for archaeological significance. If the site is determined to be important, either the design has to be changed to go around it, or a full-scale excavation must take place before construction can begin. Gibson lately has been involved in the Interstate 49 Connector study. But that requirement was not in place at the time of the airport work, nor does it apply to projects funded privately.

Also lost were several Indian mounds in the area now occupied by the River Oaks subdivision near the airport. (One of the streets is named Indian Mound Road.) An important site in the area was bulldozed for an apartment complex. Another mound apparently existed on the site of Paul Breaux School. For decades the descendants of the original owner of the property collected pottery fragments and points, and about 2,000 points were later donated to USL.

Projectile points have been found by the bathrooms in Girard Park and in the area of the Beaver Park boat landing. Gibson says he even looks on the ground when he goes from his USL office to the bank across the street.

What's so special about this area? For the wandering and hunting tribes of Paleo-Indians, the Coteau Ridge, which split the upland prairie to the west and the floodplain to the east, served as an excellent place to exploit the advantages of both. "In terms of the way they got their food, you couldn't ask for a better place than Lafayette would have been at the time," says Gibson. "Lafayette has a long and rich history of Indian occupation."

In the archaeology center, the priceless history—points, bits of pottery, animal bones and the like—of this area and other parts of Louisiana sits in cardboard boxes on floor-to-ceiling shelves. Much of it is from the Poverty Point commemorative park in northeast Louisiana, where archaeology students from around the state conduct excavations as part of their course work. A state depository for these artifacts has been in the state capital projects budget for years, but the funds have not been available.

"These are state treasures," says Gibson. "That broken bit of pottery is tantamount to a piece of art in the Cabildo."