Digging up clues

Archaeologist may be unearthing major breakthrough at Monroe dig

By C. Richard Cotton
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MONROE — Reca Jones likes to dig in a few piles of dirt near her home. The dirt was piled there centuries ago, long before there was a Jones or a Monroe or much of anything else in the forested Ouachita River flood plain.

Jones' playground is 11 Indian mounds, varying in elevation from 3 feet to 25 feet. They are arranged in a roughly oval shape, almost 500 yards from one side of the site to the other.

From her perch atop the Indian mounds in southern Ouachita Parish, the 66-year-old amateur archaeologist is at the leading edge of what may be a major breakthrough in the study of ancient North American civilizations.

Most of the mounds are connected by raised ridges, or "runways," around the circumference. The forest long ago covered the mounds and runways, making them virtually unknown except to the few residents in a sparsely populated area south of Monroe.

"Most days Jones may be found deep in a study site," a meticulously dug rectangular pit with perfectly straight, smooth walls, looking for traces of a long-ago vanished civilization of mound-building Indians.

"During the past few years, Jones has uncovered plenty of evidence that the area around the mounds was inhabited by people who don't fit the formerly accepted archaeological stereotype. "Formerly" because Jones' mounds and several other ancient mounds are forcing a change in accepted archaeology theory."

"It's what Jones hasn't found, however, that has raised archaeological eyebrows and even resulted in a couple of grants from the prestigious National Geographic Society."

"I carry dirt samples from the middle (the once-inhabited surfaces), looking for organic material — charcoal and seeds," said Jones in her "digging" area.

Jones displays two artifacts, an Evans point, left, and a clay block, that help date the mound complex as one of the oldest in America.

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she hiked around the giant complex of mounds.

She's found charcoal. She's found seeds (muscadine and hickory nut), which point to a society of foragers, or gatherers. She's discovered that some mounds were built in one stage while others were built in several stages, maybe through successive generations.

She's found pounds and pounds of the small shells of freshwater snails and evidence of virtually every other edible animal - clams, mussels, turtles, snakes, small mammals, birds, deer and possibly black bear - that walks, crawls, swims or flies through Louisiana woods and waters.

Jones has found what seems like tons of fire-cracked rock (FCR), rock shattered by the heat of a meat-roasting fire and important to archaeologists because FCRs indicate that a civilization controlled fire and cooked food using the hot rocks.

She's even found arrowheads, strong evidence of a hunting society.

But, she hasn't uncovered some key archaeological artifacts.

"There's no pottery here, and there's no evidence of agriculture," said Joe Saunders, state archaeologist for the northeastern region of Louisiana.

Pottery, of course, indicates a more highly developed society, but the lack of corn, squash and bean seeds - archaeology's "triad" that has for decades decided whether North, South or Central American ancient societies are agricultural or non-agricultural - flies in the face of accepted archaeological theory.

"Poverty Point is really the first kink in the armor," Saunders said of that intricate mound system, dated 1700-1300 B.C., northeast of Monroe. "But one site does not violate a law."

Saunders explained that accepted theory held that it took a highly civilized society, agrarian with food surpluses, to have the time to build mounds. It also took a clearly structured hierarchy, with someone in charge to decide when and where mounds would be built.

Then, along came Jones' mounds, which have been carbon-dated older than 5,000 years or built around 3900-3300 B.C.

Reca Jones and archaeologist Joe Saunders examine a dig at Watson's Bend.

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"They pre-date the oldest mounds in Mexico," Saunders said. "There's no evidence of the triad. These folks ate anything that moved," he continued. "This showed that they could hunt, gather and fish for food and still have enough time to build mounds."

Jones has uncovered strong evidence that the old notion of hunter-gatherers being strictly nomadic, moving from place to place as the seasons changed and the game roamed, might be just that, an old notion.

She's sunk much of her own money and all her time into the painstaking excavations of the site, even sometimes paying helper Gloria Swoveland out of her own pocket. Most of the financial burden has been eased recently, however, with the receipt of two National Geographic Society grants and some other state money.

"Ideally, I'd like to see it become a state park so everyone could enjoy our pre-history heritage," Jones said. For now, she and Saunders are keeping secret the mound complex's location, even though there is no pottery or other artifacts to be stolen.

Being designated a state park is definitely a possibility, Saunders said. It could happen within a few years, though he wouldn't elaborate on that aspect of the mound complex.

"It's awesome," said Rebecca Saunders, curator of anthropology at LSU's Museum of Natural Science. Saunders (unrelated to Joe Saunders) said the site could be instrumental in rewriting the theoretical model of anthropology for cultural evolution and social complexity.

"Our models say you don't get mounds from hunters," Saunders said and added that the professional archaeology field has "always relied on amateur archaeologists" like Jones.

"The work Jones is doing is beginning to rewrite the mound building culture," said Tom Eubanks, Louisiana's state archaeologist. He said other archaic mound sites, similar to the one Jones works (It is jointly owned by a lumber company and a private individual.) are "beginning to turn up."

It's none too soon for Jones, who laments the loss of archaeological sites like the one she fought to preserve and study.

"The sad part is so many are being destroyed," said Jones. "They aren't making any more of these," Joe Saunders added.