Archeology student finds mounds may be an overlooked treasure

By VICKI FERSTEL
Suburban writer

Ages before English, French and Spanish settlers moved into the area, prehistoric Native Americans lived in the lands north of Lake Maurepas. Those areas, now covered in cypress swamp, are dotted with the remnants of those ancient cultures.

Some of those remnants, in the form of earthen mounds, could be hiding clues to what life was like in the area 3,000 to 5,000 years ago.

Four mounds in an area north of King George Bayou near French Settlement are being explored by LSU graduate student Fiona Vasbinder for her master's degree thesis on the four mounds and the crescent-shaped ridge at the site.

Kevin Pemberton, left, digs as Fiona Vasbinder, right, and Marian E. Coleman screen soil at the King George Island site near French Settlement. Vasbinder, an LSU graduate student, is writing her master's degree thesis on the four mounds and the crescent-shaped ridge at the site.

Vasbinder will try to determine about the lives of the ancient people who built the mounds.

"The mounds are so old, it's impossible to link them with a specific tribe," Saunders said.

The mounds are on property owned by C.C. "Hap" Crusel Jr., who owns and operates an insurance agency in New Orleans. Crusel's grandfather had the 1,600 acres of French Settlement land about 100 years ago.

"As a kid, I'd go out there and dig around and walk up those mounds," said Crusel, who grew up and still lives in New Orleans. "I'd go up and still lives in New Orleans. King George Bayou used to be a flowing stream from the Amite River, starting south of an old storehouse building."

"Until about 10 years ago, most archaeologists thought people of the middle to late Archaic period (7000 to 3000 B.C.) could not build mounds," Saunders said. The prevailing thought, she said, was that mound builders had to have leaders to organize the work and agriculture to feed the laborers.

"Middle to late Archaic folks were egalitarian and depended only on natural resources for food," she said. Puncturing the myth, Saunders said, "as a kid, I'd go out there and dig around and walk up those mounds," said Crusel, who grew up and still lives in New Orleans. "I'd go up and still lives in New Orleans. King George Bayou used to be a flowing stream from the Amite River, starting south of an old storehouse building."

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was research on south Louisiana mounds, notably the 5,000-year-old LSU mounds and the now-destroyed Monte Sano mounds north of the state Capitol.

One of the Monte Sano mounds, which was at least 6,500 years old, was the only Archaic mound with evidence of human burial, Saunders said.

Saunders said other research important in dating mounds to the Archaic era has been done in northeast Louisiana by archaeologists Joe Saunders (no relation to Rebecca Saunders) of University of Louisiana at Monroe and in southwest Louisiana by Michael Russo of Southeastern Archaeological Center of the National Park Service in Tallahassee, Fla.

Vasbinder, the graduate student, said two of the King George Island mounds were first recorded in the late 1950s by environmental consultant Sherwood Gagliano, owner of Coastal Environments Inc., of Baton Rouge. The mounds were surveyed in the 1970s by archaeologist Richard Weinstein, currently with Coastal Environments, for his master's thesis.

In the 1980s, contract archaeologist Dennis Jones of Baton Rouge and archaeologist Malcolm Shuman of Surveys Unlimited Research Associates of Baton Rouge further surveyed the site for the state.

Then, the work stopped until Vasbinder, 25, decided to investigate the mounds for her master's thesis, and has made some important discoveries.

"I've always been interested in the period between 7,000 and 5,000 B.C.," said the Fairfield, Calif., native.

Her first foray to the Livingston Parish site, located on an island surrounded by a cypress swamp, was in April. She and her crew performed "shovel tests" by digging a series of holes 80 centimeters deep at regular intervals throughout the 300-meter by 80-meter site. They also dug larger holes at the tops of both mounds.

Along a ridge near the mounds, they discovered a "midden," an old living surface that radiocarbon tests indicate dates to sometime around 3023 B.C., she said.

On Oct. 2-5, Vasbinder's 10-member crew returned to the site. They discovered that it has four mounds, not two as previously thought, and the mounds are connected by a crescent-shaped ridge, which the original builders made by heaping tons of dirt on the site.

"We had thought it was some old natural levee," Rebecca Saunders said. "Now, it's clear the ridge was constructed."

They determined this by examining the soil about a meter below the ridge. The ridge soil is different from the original soil under it, an indication it had been added by humans.

Saunders said she now suspects the site may have had a religious or cosmological use.

"It always seems like you find the most intriguing stuff, requiring follow-up, on the last day of the dig," she said of the Oct. 5 discoveries.

The King George Island site is similar to the six crescent-shaped ridges at Poverty Point in West Carroll Parish in north Louisiana, which dates to a more modern period, she said.

"Ours is a precursor, maybe, to Poverty Point," Saunders said.

The research team now will make a third trip to the site Friday to do more mapping of the ridge and the mounds. The trip ends Sunday.

Saunders said they are in need of a pontoon bridge to transport their all-terrain vehicle-mounted hydraulic coring rig over a tributary of King George Bayou to the site.

She said they plan to use the coring rig to drill PVC tubes into each of the mounds to retrieve deep soil samples.

Providing some unofficial assistance to Vasbinder's research is Reuben Keller, 64, of French Settlement, who leases the land from Crusel for the Indian Mound Hunting Club.

Keller, who grew up in the area, learned about the mounds when he hunted squirrel, rabbit, deer and turkey with his grandfather.

There has been some damage to the mounds caused by curious hunters who dug in them, he said.

Keller and his friends have been helping Vasbinder's crew transport their equipment.

"I'll help anybody that asks for help," said Keller, a "semi-retired" construction estimator.

"It's history," he said. "I'd like to know a lot more about it."

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