"Digging for an understanding of the past"

'The students who have come here to help excavate are getting hands-on experience in paleontology, soil science and archaeological techniques.'

— Dan Cring

Lisa Coleman measures profile, "Backhoe Bob" Theriot waits in background

USL crew unearthing clues on island site

JEFFERSON ISLAND — Mastodons, large prehistoric horses, and man — did the two co-exist here in Acadiana at one time?

If so, when did the larger-than-life animals arrive? What brought them? What was it like at the time? Why did the creatures become extinct?

These are baffling questions for many, including scientists and others interested in unlocking keys to the past.

This search for clues to days gone by is the motivation for Dan Cring, USL anthropology instructor, along with students and volunteers who are working on a site at Jefferson Island in Iberia Parish.

The site is just a few feet underground, on the shore of Lake Peigneur — which 10 years ago caved in, or "disappeared," during an oil rig disaster.

"It's not just the recovery of artifacts that interests us as archaeologists," Cring said, "but rather the information that these artifacts give us."

Finding bones "in situ," or in place, gives answers to many questions. Such data can be used to determine an animal's age, when it roamed these lands, the environment at the time of death and everything that has occurred to the remains in the meantime.

"The bone preservation is poor in this area," Cring said, "due to poorly drained, heavy soils." Still, there is plenty of information to be unearthed.

Cring found out about the site from Mike Richard, manager of Live Oak Gardens at Jefferson Island, who had sighted a mastodon molar tooth and mandible washing out of the banks of Lake Peigneur.

With the cooperation of others, most of them volunteers, Cring has been on the island digging for clues.

The team also has incorporated a backhoe, something of an unconventional tool in archaeological excavations.

"The backhoe enables us to uncover a large area very fast," Cring said. "It's not the tool you use, but rather how you use it.

With Bob Theriot at the backhoe controls, the dig proceeds as a paleontological excavation until pertinent archaeological data are found.

So far, teeth, mandible (jaw) and bones of the prehistoric American horse "Equus Complicatus" as well as bones of a mastodon, a prehistoric elephant, have been found.

The prehistoric horse is considered to be as large as..."
today's modern work horse; whereas the mastodon is smaller than today's African elephant, about six feet at the shoulders and 15 feet in length.

Remains of both the horse and mastodon were found about 30 inches below the surface.

According to Lee Burras, USL soil scientist, the depositional environment was probably a lake environment of low energy, due to the texture and content of the soil surrounding the bones.

The animals probably came between 20,000 and 10,000 years ago, because of the salt in this area, Cring said.

Louisiana, at that time, was similar to the African savannahs: A sparsely forested, extensive grassland environment — yet cold and humid.

Interestingly, mastodons, considered browsers (leaf eaters) and horses, considered grazers (grass eaters) are found here at the same time in the same location.

These large creatures were part of a late Pleistocene extinction event which occurred at the end of the last ice sheet advancement.

"Ideally, we are here to establish an association between early humans and mastodons," Cring said.

There is evidence in Florida that humans and mastodons were contemporary. As yet, there is no good association in Louisiana between the two, although humans might have been hunting these early animals.

"Education is more than what you can get out of a classroom," Cring said. "The students who have come here to help excavate are getting hands-on experience in paleontology, soil science and archaeological techniques."

While students are learning, the population in general also benefits from knowledge unearthed at this site, through clues to the state's past.

The bones which already have been excavated are on display at Live Oak Gardens, open to the public for viewing.

Meanwhile, the work continues both at the site and in the laboratory, where the clues are being pieced together.

"We're still looking for these answers," Cring said. "That's why we are here."
Cring documents feature location at excavation site

Candace Gossen, left, Coleman move water from pit

Andrew Barron, l., Burra calculating

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