From pigeons to profits

Little known about birthplace of Mr. McIlhenny's sauce

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Project 2000 Editor

Old bricks buried beneath what has grown into a bamboo grove may yield important information about the birth of one of Acadiana's most identifiable exports. They are pieces of the foundation of the first Tabasco factory, and a team of anthropologists is carefully digging around them to see what they can find.

They expect to find at least a sampling of old Tabasco bottles and other such relics. But they hope also to find out something about the workers who first began to mix vinegar and peppers and Avery Island salt into the spicy concoction, and maybe discover some war history, too.

The building that was the actual birthplace of the world-famous Tabasco sauce, was razed in the 1920s after it had fallen into disrepair. McIlhenny Co. archives contain several photos of what the building looked like at various stages during its lifetime. But there is precious little data about exactly what went on in that building when Edmund McIlhenny began experimenting with hot red peppers, and then began manufacturing the stuff that half the world thinks is the only thing necessary to turn a recipe from ho-hum to "Cajun."

Ian Brown, professor of anthropology at the University of Alabama, is heading the team that is carefully sifting each spadelful of dirt taken from around the foundation. They began the excavations last week and will continue for about a month.

According to McIlhenny family tradition, the building began as a pigeonhouse, a two-storied structure with tall, louvered windows typical of those found in local pigeon houses. A third story was added during the Civil War, when Avery Island became a prime supplier of salt to the Confederacy, the family believes.

According to the family stories, the third story was added so that Confederate soldiers guarding the saltworks could use the pigeonhouse as a watchtower for Union boats that regularly surveyed the island and the waterways that surround it.

In November 1862, two Union gunboats and a transport ship fired at the Avery Island saltworks. The Avery Island Times reports "the saltmen were frightened and ran away to save their lives." This is the only news account of the conflict in the area that Ian Brown has come across.

Wes Shaw hopes to unearth the foundation of a former pigeonhouse that served as the birthplace of one of Acadiana's most recognizable products — Tabasco. Below, David Bailey holds relics he unearthed from his 1-meter square.
Ian Brown, professor of anthropology at the University of Alabama, is heading the dig on Avery Island.

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Pigeons

family homestead, apparently mistaking the house for the saltworks. Confederate troops returned fire with rifles and cannon from trenches near Bayou Petite Anse, and drove the boats off. The retreating gunboats became mired in the mud in Vermilion Bay, and one of the Union officers was eventually court-martialed for making such a snafu of the operation.

Five months later, Union troops under Gen. Nathaniel Banks did what had to be done. They marched from New Iberia, captured the saltworks and destroyed them. Col. William Kimball of the 12th Maine Infantry was in charge of the expedition.

"On the night of (April) 17th," he reported, "I left New Iberia for the salt-works operated by the Confederate government ... I reached the island upon which the salt-works were situated early on the morning of the 18th ... and found the enemy had evacuated the works and removed his guns ... I proceeded at once to destroy all the buildings, 18 in number, connected with the salt-works, steam engines, windlasses, boilers, mining implements, and machinery of all kinds; also 600 barrels of salt, ready for shipment."

The Avery and McIlhenny families who lived on the island fled when the Union threat became too severe. They returned to the island in June 1865 and began to revive the sugar cane and salt mining operations that had been their livelihood before the war.

Edmund McIlhenny, who was married to the daughter of Judge Daniel Dudley Avery, for whom the island is named, went to New Orleans to try to revive his banking career. He couldn't find work, but, according to McIlhenny archivist Shane Bernard, "research suggests that while Edmund was in the city he met a traveler, possibly a Confederate soldier, who gave him a few pepper pods obtained in Mexico or Central America, which McIlhenny planted back on the island.

"Seeing the peppers ripen to a bright red, Edmund resolved to make a pepper sauce for spicing up the post-war South's bland food. He used the pigeon house as a workshop, calling it the Laboratory. In 1868, Edmund harvested his first commercial crop of peppers, and the next year he sold his first bottle of sauce."

Over the years, the Laboratory became a center of social activity for the Avery and McIlhenny families — activity punctuated by the pungent odor of vinegar and pepper mash fermenting in the basement of the building.

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The laboratory served as the Tabasco factory from 1868 to about 1905, when a new and larger factory was built on the island. Until then, children and visitors often had tears in their eyes as they danced in the upstairs room.

Sometimes, they would take a break to go down to the basement and help strain the aged sauce into bottles that were then dipped into green sealing wax, creating an identity recognized throughout the world today.