Gueydan Priest Unearths Many Interesting Indian Artifacts

By MARY ALICE FONTENOT

GUEYDAN — Many historians believe there were Indians in this section of Louisiana as long as 2,000 years ago.

Rev. John Engbers believes they are right.

Father John, as he is known to his parishioners at St. Peter's Catholic Church, terms himself an amateur archaeologist. Be that as it may, he has unearthed an amazing collection of Indian artifacts and relics, some of which he believes antedate the birth of Christ. These he has excavated with expertise, skillfully cleaned, assorted, labeled and shelved. Object: to establish a museum for the people of Gueydan.

Father John has not yet dug up a whole piece of Indian pottery. But if he could put together all of his pottery shards he would have enough pots for an entire tribe. He also has a respectable collection of fire balls or heat lamps (the earthen lumps Indians formed with their hands, heated in the fire and thrown into pots to warm water) many arrowheads, and a fine specimen of spearhead.

Human Skulls

His most important exhumation uncovered large fragments of two human skulls — a male and a female. The skull parts were in such condition that it was possible to put the pieces together and form whole skulls.

The larger of the skulls was interred with other human bones in a layer of shell under the clay. The smaller, the female skull, was found nearby but deeper down in a stratum of dirt. In each case the skull rested upon a pillow of sorts — a pillow made of white shells, seemingly selected for the purpose.

Finding these skull fragments has brought some questions to the priest-archaeologist's mind. These, and all other skull fragments he has unearthed, have a hole in one temple. He can only speculate as to the reason for this. It could have been, he agrees, a part of some macabre burial ritual.

Another bizarre note: when he uncovered the skulls, each had a finger bone in an eye cavity, as though placed there by design. Also, in all the Indian teeth he has examined, not one has shown a sign of dental naries. The molars are usually worn down and have accumulations of petrified tartar, but no cavities.

Near Gueydan

The Indian relics were dug at an isolated spot on Shell Island, south of Gueydan. Father John believes the place to be an ancient Indian burial ground.

Father John has begun an Indian burial ground of his own. Human bones and fragments that he cannot use in reconstruction, he buries. He is presently working at reconstructing the skull of a young child; if he isn't successful, "then I will bury it with the others," he says.

The place where the skulls were exhumed is believed to be the site, or near the site, of an Attakapas Indian village named for Chief Lacassine, who died about 1799. The Attakapas Indians lived in the general vicinity for more than 300 years, then abandoned their village and re-located on the Mermentau River, their last known village.

The Attakapas Indians were the most primitive of Louisiana tribes. During the early years of Spanish and French exploration, these Indians were greatly feared by white men because of their reputation as cannibals. Some historians believe that this reputation was largely undeserved, that evidence to the contrary points only to a symbolic form of cannibalism used in tribal rituals.

Cannibals?

Father John has found some evidence that will substantiate the belief that the Attakapas were cannibals. First, he points to animal bones, cracked to extract the marrow — a reasonable assumption to attribute to primitive humans. Then he shows human bones cracked in the same manner, presumably for the same reason.

The Indians had a primitive type of art, shown in designs made on pottery. Father John has photographed series of the shards showing similar patterns: evenly spaced rows of indentations made by a fingernail, or round holes made by a reed, either pushed straight into the soft clay, or in an oblique direction.

OLD POTTERY — Crude designs, made with a fingernail and a reed, are shown in these photographs of pottery shards. The pottery fragments were found at Shell Island in Vermilion Parish by Father John of Gueydan.