Indians called Lafayette ‘home’

People have been living in Lafayette for a long time — about 12,000 years, according to a USL anthropologist.

That’s about when Indians moved into Louisiana, professor Jon Gibson told the Lafayette Rotary Club Thursday.

Like the white man, “even the Indians were immigrants,” Gibson said. “They came from Siberia in Asia,” he said.

Artifact finds have been made along Bayou Vermilion, behind the airport and north of the city, Gibson said. He added that the findings, mostly arrows, are all found at 16 feet below the surface.

The Clovis Culture, as Gibson called the Indians, is believed to have lived on the high ground near Kaliste Saloom Road.

He theorized that the 16-foot level was probably the surface 12,000 years ago.

It was at about that depth that engineers building a pollution control system at Trappey’s Co. along the bayou two years ago unearthed remains of a mastodon, a huge elephant-like mammal now extinct. Tests put the remains at 6,000-12,000 years old.

Gibson explained why most finds are made at the 16-foot level.

Following the Ice Age, a period of hurricane-like winds pushed dust and silt, and built the surface up to its present level, said Gibson.

The Indians here hunted saber-tooth tigers, ground sloths and 1,000 pound turtles, he said. He said the Indians are known as part of the Clovis Culture.

Gibson pointed out that the Mississippi River once flowed between Lafayette and Breaux Bridge. He said that in addition to the large settlement here, perhaps the largest settlement in North America was located at Poverty Point about 3,500 years ago. Poverty Point is a state historic site north of Monroe.

“It was the New York of its day. Minerals, stones and other materials from throughout the continent were brought to Poverty Point, and then distributed to areas such as Lafayette for refinement,” Gibson said.

Gibson estimated the population of Poverty Point to be 5,000.

Over the last 3,500 years, different Indian tribes have flourished here, including the Attakapas, who are believed to have been cannibalistic. Gibson said split human bones were unearthed south of the airport, where Attakapa probably lived. They liked to eat bone marrow, he said.

Eventually, the last of the local Indians, the Chitimacha, were run into the Atchafalaya swamp by settlers, he said.

That tribe is asking the state if it could operate the I-10 rest area at Butte LaRose.