ON WEEKS ISLAND

Items Of Ancient Culture Found In Iberia Parish

NEW IBERIA — Well-preserved wood tools and other organic materials of an ancient culture have been uncovered by an LSU excavation project on Weeks Island south of here.

The project, underway for six months, was supported by a $31,000 National Science Foundation Grant.

Robert W. Neuman of the LSU Geoscience Museum, director of the project, said the items were found in a foot-thick stratum of peat. He said the layer of peat was found a second time some 500 feet away through core sampling, which indicated it is very expansive.

He said this makes it almost certain that ancient wealth of prehistoric information still remains to be found there.

The 12-foot high mound, composed mainly of shell remains of mollusks eaten by the early people, is 700 feet long and 120 feet wide.

Neuman said the project was the first extensive professional archaeological excavation of a shell mound to be conducted along America's gulf coast.

Work on the mound, called a "midden," was halted only because of the exhaustion of funds, he said. Trenching and stratigraphic cuts have been made at four mound locations.

Assistant archaeologist on the project was Robert S. Neitzel of Marksville, who had supervised numerous excavations in the South including one of the late prehistoric times.

David Mediatz, University of Kansas student, was the physical anthropologist on the project. The team also included eight workmen.

The peat was first discovered in an excavation made near the edge of the mound along the east bank of Weeks Bayou.

Although radiocarbon dating tests have not been completed on the items found in the layer of peat, they are believed to belong to the Tchefuncte Indian culture dating back to 250 B.C.

They include wood tools, charred wood and cane, animal bones, tortoise, teapot, and pollen spores, all in excellent condition.

It is unusual, he said, to obtain wood tools of this era because wood normally decomposes in the ground.

Analyses have been made on seeds obtained from the peat zone by Curator Hugh Cutler of the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis. Already identified have been squash and bottle gourds, used by the ancients as both food and containers.

The well-preserved organic finds are expected to contribute significantly to knowledge about the primitive culture represented as well as the climate and natural environment of the time, Neuman said. They may indicate for example, whether the area at one time had been a fresh water marsh.

Evidence of the Poverty Point culture dating as far back as 1250 B.C. was found beneath a layer of peat in a stratum of gray clay. Found there was a stone bead, a stone pendant, several stone projectile points, stone chips, and clay cooking balls. The latter were used as briquettes in primitive cooking techniques.

Found elsewhere in the mound were cooking hearths, stone projectile points, bone tools and pottery belonging to the Marksville culture, dating prior to 500 A.D., and the Troyville — Cole Creek culture, 700 to 1100 A.D. Nearer the surface were pottery and other artifacts.

The skeletal remains of some 150 Indians belonging to the Tchefuncte Indian culture were found in a large burial area at the north end of the mound. Unlike burial mounds in other parts of the continent, practically no artifacts were found in the graves.

As a general rule scattered bones were found, Neuman said, which indicates that bodies were kept for a long time and allowed to decompose before burial.

Perhaps Indian custom required that burials be postponed until the month or stars were in the right positions in the heavens or until certain natural events occurred on earth, he said.

Neuman said the countless mollusk shells in the mound represent the inhabitants' chief food source. A calculation of their numbers compared in light of human calorie requirements will give some idea on the Indian populations during the various periods.

Mollusks of the same species, Rangia Cuneata, are still abundant in the wetlands, but have no appeal as a food source for people today.

As indicated by the animal remains found at the site other food sources for the Indians were coon, possum, skunk, fish, muskrat, squirrel, turkey, turtle, dog, snake, deer, alligator, bear and birds.

Artifacts and other important finds from the mound have been added to the collection of the LSU geoscience Museum on the Baton Rouge campus.

Rendering assistance in the LSU project were the Soil Conservation Service of the USDA, whose personnel conducted the core sampling, and the Morton Salt Company, the Louisiana Research Foundation and the McIlhenny Company of Louisiana.

This year three other shell mound sites were located in Iberia Parish by members of the LSU excavation team. The sites had never been recorded or mapped before.

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