Lafayette Youth Discovers Attakapas Indian Skeleton

by Mario Mamalakis

Discovery of a skeleton to some people may seem a gruesome incident. To one Lafayette youth it was the climax of years of interest in and search for traces of a tribe which once roamed, in proud possession, the marshes and prairies of this Attakapas country.

Paxton "Pat" Johnson, Lafayette High School senior and son of Mr. and Mrs. Emile Johnson, first became interested in searching for traces of the Attakapas Indians when he was in the eighth grade.

"Indians always fascinated me," Pat said. President of the Lafayette High Senior Class, member of the football basketball and baseball teams, Pat still admits hunting for Indian remains is his chief interest.

In addition to discovering the skeleton two years ago of the Attakapas Indian warrior, Pat has found over 500 arrow heads, beads, tomahawks, stone axes, utensils and other Indian objects. His younger brother, Thomas, as well as his parents were infected by Pat's enthusiasms and joined in the search to develop their own Indian collections. Tom, who is also president of his class, is a junior at Lafayette High and is also on the basketball, football, and baseball teams. He has collected several hundred arrow heads, bird joints and war points as well as other Indian objects.

"Some days you can find as many as 26 arrow heads," he said. The two brothers say they know where the are many Indian mounds along the Vermilion Bayou and can always locate some arrow heads. Both are former Boy Scouts of Troop 20.

The Indian skeleton was discovered by Pat on the Vermilion Bayou bank one day as he was digging with a knife. The skeleton was in a seated position, Pat said, with the head bent forward. Pat surmises the Indian was a warrior killed in battle, since he found an arrow in his skull. There were many arrow heads and other objects found near the skeleton.

The Indian skeleton was found under a layer of clam shell about a foot thick. Pat reports that Dr. Paul Salles (from a study of the teeth) estimates the age of the Indian to have been 50 at the time of death.

It was like the beating of Indian war drums in the neighborhood when Pat decided to attempt to assemble the skeletal remains on the garage floor. Neighborhood friends gathered around, wandered in and out as they watched. Pat abandoned the project before it was completed, because he discovered some of the bones were being taken for souvenirs. Now he keeps the remains in a box in the house along with his large collection of other Indian finds.

Indians Disappear From Area

The coming of the white settlers here in 1700 marked the beginning of the end for the Indians of Louisiana. However, there is evidence that they were beginning to disappear even before the coming of the white man. In 1700 there were about 13,000 Indians in Louisiana. Today there are only about 1,500.

The remaining Attakapas tribe, a few in number, are found living now around Lake Charles.

Except for discoveries such as Pat's and Tom's, our only reminder of them are the Indian Place names in the area. The term 'Atakapa' or 'Tuckapaw' is still in use. As a matter of fact, the word 'Atakapa' is derived from the Choctaw 'hatak' (man) and 'apa' (eater). 'Calcasieu' (crying eagle) and probably 'Mermentau' are examples of the Attakapa dialect. 'Mermentau' is thought to have been derived from 'Immanatu-a', the name of an Attakapas chief. There are those who believe that 'Calcasieu' is not Indian at all but rather a corruption of the French 'quelques choux' (some cabbages).

Whether it is a search for Indian weapons, tools or utensils or a search for the key to their dialectic the fascination of solving the mystery of a people who once lived here in great numbers will always find young and old keenly interested.

According to Pat there are still many answers to be found in those mounds along Bayou Vermilion. If you know where and how to look.

Searching for traces of the Attakapas Indians of this area is a hobby with Pat, left, and Tommy Johnson, sons of Mr. and Mrs. Emile Johnson of this city. Here they display part of their large collection of arrowheads, stone axes, skeletal remains and other objects found in the Indian Mounds along Bayou Vermilion.