Excavating Under Way
Near Grand Coteau

LAFAYETTE, La. - A prehistoric village near Grand Coteau, La., is being excavated by University of Southwestern Louisiana students. For the past six months USL archaeology students have been systematically excavating an old Indian village (dating around 700-300 B.C.) which is to be the site of a modern housing development.

Dr. Richard Saloom and Jim Bell, Lafayette, reported the site. During land clearing operations Dr. Saloom found a number of pottery fragments and projectile points on the area. Dr. Gibson, on inspection, recognized these artifacts were made during a prehistoric era known as the Tchefuncte period, a time during which certain Louisiana Indian groups experienced considerable de-evolution.

Dr. Jon L. Gibson, faculty archaeologist, is director of the USL archaeology research facility which is sponsoring the continuing field program in which the students are participating. Students receive three hours of academic credit at USL by enrolling in a Sociology 303 course (Archaeology) for their work at the Indian site.

"A decision was made to excavate," Dr. Gibson said, "and was accentuated by the probability of imminent destruction of the old village by construction." A contour map of the site was made and the village extent was determined by boring. Layton J. Miller, USL assistant professor of Geography, and his field methods students did much of the work for the contour map.

Following the preliminary work, the map was grided into five-foot squares and a statistical random sample of test pits was selected.

"These pits," Dr. Gibson said, "represented 1 per cent of the total site area, a percentage considered minimal for any sort of adequate interpretation."

The actual digging of the test pit was also done by USL students and they succeeded in recovering a number of pottery fragments with a variety of designs; stone projectile points, which were used to tip hunting javelins; stone drills; a stone head; and a number of small fragments of baked clay which the Indians had used in pit baking.

Dr. Gibson hoped that, based on these artifacts and their distributions, some preliminary reconstructions of the life styles of these ancient people could be made.

"It seems fairly clear that Tchefuncte peoples were non-agricultural," he said. "They made their living by hunting, fishing and collecting plants, especially those plants that today are called 'weeds.' They used stone tipped spears, probably propped by an atlatl or throwing stick to ambush deer, which was the principal game animal. "These people were in the process of changing their mode of cooking food in earth ovens, using hand-molded clay objects, to cooking directly over open fires in their new serviceable pottery vessels." Dr. Gibson said, "These vessels were small, sometimes had four legs around the bottom, and were often decorated by incising, punctuating, rocker stamping and drag and jab techniques. The Tchefuncte culture was the first to really make extensive use of pottery in the Lower Mississippi Valley."

Dr. Gibson said, based partly on the findings at Grand Coteau and partially on work in adjoining areas of Vermilion basin, it seems apparent that the Tchefuncte culture represented a period of cultural de-evolution. The preceding culture, known as Poverty Point, had attained a high level of development with sophisticated political and social machinery.