

**Pre-Historic Man Inhabited Marshes**

AVERY ISLAND—Archaeologists say they have definite and uncontradicted proof that early man with his menagerie of animals, including the giant ground sloth, were linked early in time with the flat prairie and marshland of southwest Louisiana about 8,500 years ago, according to a LSU research report.

Sherwood M. Gagliano, researcher with the Coastal Studies Institute, said that radiocarbon dating of bones of long-extinct animals unearthed atop rock salt in a fossil-rich valley on Avery Island, proved that Paleo-Indians knew about the salt and were gathering it in baskets about 8,500 B.C.

Gagliano said that bones of a giant ground sloth, a contemporary of the mastodon and located in the same sediment strata where a cane weave basket was found, tested out to be 8,500 years old. The dating supports previous assumptions that the artifacts represent the oldest culture thus far recognized in Louisiana, he said.

**Early Link**

The time in pre-history of the basketry and the giant sloth bones is linked with that of the "Natchez Man," so-called for a human pelvis find in Mississippi, dating back to the Lithic period from 9,000 to 10,000 B.C., Gagliano said.

The find, although an old one, is unique in that it tied together the co-existence of the long-extinct animals with man-made artifacts. The basketry and the bones were discovered during the Civil War in the course of strip-mining operations. Up to now, they had never been analyzed, Gagliano said.

In addition to the basketry, a curious series of tiny tools, made by hammering small chips and flakes from pieces of gravel, were found in the ancient deposits. Most of approximately 600 pieces found were about the size of peas and chips and are believed to have been used in cutting bone and wood, Gagliano said.

**Fossils Found**

An unusual amount of fossils of extinct vertebrates and other artifacts have been found in a depression appropriately called "Salt Mine Valley." The valley, surrounded by gently rolling sandy hills in the southern part of the island, receives the drainage of the major stream system, Gagliano said.

The valley first attracted attention in the 1860's, when mining crews turned up the curious fragments of a basket mingled with some animal remains.

The basktry has since been in the hands of the Smithsonian Institution. LSU researchers obtained a very small portion of the basket for radiocarbon dating. Laboratories dated it to be at least 4,200 years old.

Gagliano said absolute dating of the basket is not possible without being able to cut into the basket itself. A similar artifact found in a Texas burial, he said, indicates that the basket was from the middle of the Pleistocene period, 150,000 years ago or more.

**Take Refuge**

These early Indians who took refuge and continued to thrive on Avery Island, proved that much early history is still to be discovered, said Gagliano. They were attracted by the salt springs, rock salt and gravel pits from which they fashioned crude implements. Hardwood forests covered the island. Pecan trees abounded.

"It is little wonder," Gagliano said, "that there are abundant archaeological remains on the island." They are unearthed in a remarkable state of preservation.

Geologically, the island, now famous for its production of "red hot sauce," is part of a trend of five similar salt domes in the area in which the salt is at shallow depths or has reached the surface, Gagliano said. It is only two miles in diameter, but elevations reach 100 to 150 feet, he said.

**Bowls, Pots Found**

Beds, potters, and caldrons, suitable for such an industry, were found in the sediment. Many were pieced together from potsherds. It is doubtful, Gagliano said, that these Indians of a later era knew about the rock salt then covered by sediment formations. They were attracted to the island by the salt beds and the salt springs.

Mound building on the island is put at an "intriguingly early date," he said. One significant formation, "Banana Mound," remains a "site without a culture," he said. The gravel chipping industry on the island also needs to be analyzed, he added.

Gagliano said Avery Island Inc., provided labor and other facilities for the excavation. Humble Oil & Refining Company also performed radio-carbon analyses. Members of the Louisiana University Archaeological Society assisted in surface collections. Many area residents also helped in the project, he said.