The Secrets of Avery Island

By Jim Bradshaw

Midway along Acadiana's marshy coast, five "islands" rise in an arc from the northwest to the southeast. Geologists once thought they were created by volcanoes. They found later that the islands are huge plugs of salt. Water, not fire, formed them.

Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi were once covered by an ocean. This salt sea was some-where the ancestors of the Mississippi and other rivers running to the sea. They found later that the islands are huge plugs of salt. Water, not fire, formed them.

Several hundred thousand years ago, the weight of this sediment began to force columns of salt slowly upward. Acadiana's "islands" were born.

Weeks Island, Cote Blanche Island, and Belle Isle are relatively small. Jefferson Island rises 75 feet. Avery Island, at nearly 200 feet and the highest point on the Gulf Coast, is not only the largest and lushest of the islands, but also the most intriguing. It may hold the secret of when humans first arrived in south Louisiana.

Indian Tales

Old Indian tales tell of journeys from the west and north. The Chitimacha believed that their god chose Natchez as the first place to settle. An ancient Atakapas story says that survivors of a great flood landed in the mountains of northwest Texas beyond San Antonio. From these places they traveled to Acadiana.

The first Indians in Acadiana lived and died on natural levees, salt domes and beaches. They followed the whims of the Mississippi. As the river changed course, building in one area, burying the past in another, so also did man.

A prehistoric human skull and teeth, pottery, and bones of extinct animals have been found near Opelousas. Early cartographer William Darby describes little mounds "twelve feet taller than the surrounding territory" along Bayou Fuselier in St. Landry Parish. In 1819 surveyor James Catheart found an Indian midden (refuse heap) near Morgan City. A man-made mound shaped like an alligator on Chenuir du Fond along the southern shore of Grand Lake was once a conspicuous landmark. The Morton Mound, just north of Weeks Island, was also shaped like an alligator.

Geologist Eugene Hilgard found shell middens near Sulphur Mines in Calcasieu Parish in 1873. In the late 1880s, surveyor H.C. Ripley explored the route of a proposed waterway between Donaldsonville and the Rio Grande. He found middens at Sabine Pass and the mouth of Bayou Lacassine. Canal dredging on Belle Isle salt dome in 1889 uncovered a midden about 200 feet long. Two sites dating back a thousand years or more have been located on the Vermilion River...and the list goes on. A dig currently underway at Jefferson Island is unearthing Indian artifacts.

When did man arrive in South Louisiana?

The first discovery of rock salt on the North American continent was the first discovery of rock salt on the North American continent. The Five Salt Domes of Acadiana are just a few examples of salt formations there.

But what might be the most provocative finds in Acadiana come from Avery Island.

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Indian salt business there. Brine from salt springs was evaporated in large clay pots and the salt traded to other Indian tribes living as far away as central Texas, Arkansas, and Ohio. When Elizabeth Hayes settled on Avery Island in the early 1790s, her son, Johnny, found the salt there when he sipped from a brine-filled spring. The Hayes family apparently began the first crude salt brine operations there.

Jonathan Craig Marsh came to the island in the early 1800s. His descendants, the Averys and the McIlhenny's, eventually acquired the whole place and live on it today. Jonathan Marsh improved the salt works during the War of 1812, but later competition from imported salt all but put him out of business.

Time passed. Louisiana Circuit Court Judge Daniel Dudley Avery of Baton Rouge bought part of the island, and eventually acquired it all. The first of the island Averys married Sarah Marsh, Jonathan Craig Marsh's daughter, in 1837.

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Archeologists tell us that man may have moved to the island much earlier than 2,000 years ago, perhaps following the prey that once roamed there: ten foot high mastodons and mammoths, saber-toothed tigers, three-toed horses the size of a dog—all extinct species whose fossilized bones have been preserved in the island salt.

It is that perhaps that the argument has been about. Basket fragments, stone implements, and thousands of pieces of broken pottery of a type made in about 1300 A.D. indicate that there was once an Indian salt business there. Brine from salt springs was evaporated in large clay pots and the salt traded to other Indian tribes living as far away as central Texas, Arkansas, and Ohio.

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Avery described, in Harper's Magazine, what had happened when Avery began to tap the salt dome.

"In stripping away the soil several relics of human workmanship came to light," Warner wrote, "among them stone implements and a woven basket, exactly such as the Attakapas make now. This basket...lay upon the salt rock, and was in perfect preservation."

Findings Reported

In November 1863, Richard Owen, a Union army officer, had gone to see the salt mine. He found more Indian relics, including a basket made of split cane, charcoal, a rope made of bark, wooden hooks, stone axes, and pottery. Owen sent his findings to the St. Louis Academy of Science, and opened a debate on just when Indians first began to gather the island's salt.

The debate, though not so heated as it once was, goes on today. The issue is over whether the Indian relics are as old as mastodon and other animal bones found nearby. If the animal fossils and Indian relics are the same age, it means that men were here much earlier than we now believe.

Joseph Liddy reported to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia in 1866 that J.F. Cleu, who lived on the island, had found Indian basketry close to the bones of an ancient elephant, and reported more findings in 1889.

"The bones and teeth are stained chocolate brown and black, are otherwise little altered, and are not rolled or water-worn," he said. "They consist of remains of Mastodon americanus, Mylodon and of a Horse."

Arthur Veatch, visiting in 1889, "carefully searched in the bone bed for objects which could be unquestionably attributed to man," but was unable to find any. He reported: "Numerous pieces of cane were found in this layer, and some had a peculiar split appearance which was first thought to be artificial, but turned out to be due to unequal weathering." Veatch found the evidence that the animal bones and basketry were of the same age "unconvincing."

In January 1890 miners uncovered other Indian relics and animal bones, and Joseph Joor, a New Orleans physician and botanist, went to investigate. He found still more animal bones, shell and pottery, a four-inch-square piece of cane matting, and twisted strips of bark he thought to be basket handles. But he also reported: "I see no reason for assigning any very enormous antiquity to these relics."

Others thought differently: "Some...scientific gentlemen have reckoned that the mastodon, or mammoth was here with the (Indians)," Warner reported. "That they were contemporaneously has been demonstrated by finding pipes and pottery wares...with images of the mastodon engraved upon them. As the (Indians) had no written language, they could know nothing from having read of the mastodon, but must have gained their information from a personal acquaintance with his majesty."

Modern Scientific View

Most modern scientists say it is only coincidence that the remains were found side-by-side. Shifting sands and running water laid them together. The Indians came well after the animals, they say.

In 1960 and 1961, and again in 1968, Sherwood Gagliano tried radiocarbon dating on the relics and fossils. He found they were very, very old, but his dates didn't definitively answer the question of when Indians first arrived at Avery Island.

We don't know whether the mammoth and the Indian lived together in Acadiana. It is probable that they did not. But we do know that by the time of European exploration the Attakapas were one of a series of tribes living along the Gulf Coast from the Rio Grande to Tampa Bay.

And we think, from studying language and artifacts, it is likely that these played at least a minor role in an "international" network that included the Caribbean, Mexico, the Southwest, the Mississippi Valley and the Northeast.

We know that Indians of the Southeastern United States spoke each of the five major language families of eastern North America.

The scientists say that since so many languages were found along the Gulf Coast there once must have been some connection between its peoples and peoples of other nations. Artifacts dug from burial mounds and village sites tend to bear this out. Louisiana excavations have uncovered pottery from Florida, iron ore from Missouri, flint from Ohio, copper from Michigan.

But it is still guesswork mostly, and, study and argue as we might, we have yet to unravel all of the secrets of Avery Island.