MONROE, La. (AP) — No one knows what, but something tragic happened in the small Indian community in Northwest Louisiana, where dozens of people died within a few days or weeks.

There were so many bodies that normal customs apparently were abandoned and the dead were respectfully but hurriedly piled on the ground and covered with dirt.

Now, centuries later, a group of amateur archaeologists is spending sweaty weekends trying to figure out who those people were, how they lived and why they died.

“We’re trying to restore the past,” said Dwain Kirkham, a leader of a group of workers at the Ollinkraft paper mill in West Monroe who have been on the archaeological “dig” for three months.

Kirkham and Butch Duke had found Indian relics and seen a low Indian mound while hunting in south Richland Parish. One day they dug a test pit and found skeletons several feet down.

They returned with helpers and a pair of advisors from Northeast Louisiana University and began digging in earnest.

They marked the area off into five-foot squares and began carefully stripping the soil away with trowels, layer by layer. After only a few inches, they hit more bones — a mass grave.

Kirkham also said, “the whole thing is just full of broken pottery and animal bone — deer, turkey, fish and numerous shells of fresh water mussels from a nearby stream.”

Even after three months of digging every weekend, there are more questions than answers.

Kirkham and Duke speculated that an epidemic — possibly cholera, smallpox or measles — caused the mass death. However, it could have been a war, they said.

The Northeast Louisiana University archaeology department has not had time to run carbon 14 tests on bones from site, so it’s uncertain that all of the dead were even buried at the same time, said Dennis Price, a NLU professor.

Price said little is known about the Indians who lived in the Ouachita River valley, which was situated between two Indian cultures — the Mississippian and the Cadcoan.

Price said that at the South Richland site, pottery and other artifacts from several Indian cultures have been found, raising the possibility that different tribes may have lived there in succession.