Student Archaeologists Digging Indian Mounds

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PECAN ISLAND — Intense anticipation became ecstatic excitement as the first shovel of rich dirt was turned, and the pottery fragment appeared.

There was the prize, a soiled, time-worn, brick-red potsherd — an insignificant piece of debris to laymen, but an intriguing discovery to archaeologists.

It carefully was labeled and bagged along with similar bits of clay-like pottery. All of them will be washed and examined. Experts will speculate as to their former uses, ages and origins, and the facts will tell about the men who left them behind.

Indians. A tribe that probably inhabited the marshlands thousands of years ago. A tribe whose story largely is undocumented.

Perhaps the dig under way at Pecan Island Indian mounds will help write some of that story. Student archaeologists hope so. But even if their excavation project only confirms what researchers know, the novices will have gained valuable experience, their teachers say.

They will have learned first-hand the archaeological process.

About a dozen Vermilion Parish students in grades four through ten are participating in the summer archaeology project. During the school year they are enrolled in a program for talented and gifted children labeled TAG.

“It all began with the King Tut archaeological find,” teacher Madeline Broussard says. “The children were interested in the archaeological techniques, and we decided it would be a good experience to find out ourselves.”

The study began with classroom research on Indian culture, then students simulated an archaeological dig, she says.

Some classes created cultures and buried artifacts to represent them. Other students acted as archaeologists, uncovering the objects and attempting to classify the make-believe people.

“The big difference here (at the Pecan Island mounds) is precision,” Ms. Broussard said. The work is meticulous. Measurements must be exact. Digging is slow with a flat shovel, one 10-centimeter layer of soil at a time. The discovery of every suspected potsherd or bone must be recorded and placed in the proper bag.

Jim Moorehead, an experienced archaeologist, is the on-site consultant for the project. And he is receiving help from Harvard University experts who are studying an Indian mound about 100 yards away.

The Harvard team compiled detailed maps after an extensive topographical study, Moorehead said. The two groups are working together, sharing maps and comparing findings.

“Archaeology by its very nature is a destructive process,” said Moorehead. “Exactness is a must. And a good archaeologist will not dig up an entire site; he will leave something for future archaeologists because techniques are always getting better.”

The archaeologist speculated, never resting his shovel, that the soft ground where he was digging previously had been plowed. If so, most of the finds would be about eight inches deep, he said.

“As we get deeper, are we going to find more fragments or fewer?” one student asked.

“We really don’t know yet,” Moorehead patiently answered. “That’s why we’re digging.”

Although almost all of the potsherds looked much alike, each elicited new responses from the amateur archaeologists. A couple of valuable rim sherds — fragments broken from the rim of a cup or jug — were found, and some of the chips were stamped or incised.

“Rim sherds and stamped pieces are more valuable because they give clues as to the shape and use of the vase,” teacher Mary Sagrera said, plunging her fingers into the muddy clay speckled with pottery pieces.

Although the Harvard archaeologists have not identified the Indian culture that lived in Pecan Island, Ms. Sagrera says they conjecture that the tribe lived during the Marksville period — from Christ’s birth to about 200 A.D.