INDIAN VILLAGE - University of Southwestern Louisiana archaeology students and volunteers have been systematically excavating a prehistoric Indian Village near Grand Coteau for the past six months. Here, Bill Lane, is clearing a suspected post-hole in one of the test pits.

NEAR GRAND COTEAU

Students Unearth Indian Village

GRAND COTEAU - A prehistoric village near here is being excavated by University of Southwestern Louisiana students. For the past six months, 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 Saleem and Jim Bell, Lafayette, reported this site. During land clearing operations, Salaeem had found a number of pottery fragments and projectile points on the area. Dr. Jon Gibson, on inspection, recognized that these artifacts had been made during a prehistoric period, a time during which certain Louisiana Indian groups had experienced considerable evolution.

Students Participate

Dr. 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) and working at the Indian site.

The decision to excavate the site was made in the hope that the Grand Coteau site might provide some insight into the reasons for cultural deterioration during the Tchefuncte.

A decision was made to excavate, Dr. Gibson said, "and was accented by the probability of imminent destruction of the old village by the planned construction."

Following the preliminary work, the map was gridded into squares and a random sample of test pits was selected. "These pits," Dr. Gibson said, "represented one per cent of the total site area, a percentage considered minimal for any sort of adequate interpretation."

The actual digging of the test pits 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 stone fragments which dated the culture of which the Indians had used these tools.

Dr. Gibson hoped that, based on the study of their distributions, some preliminary reconstructions of the life style of these ancient people could be made. "They made their living by hunting, fishing and collecting plant, especially those plants that today are called 'weeds.' The stones tipped appears, probably propelled by an atlatl or throwing stick, to ambush deer, which was the principal game animal.

Changing Styles

"These people were in the process of changing their mode of cooking food in earth ovens, using hand-molded clay objects, to cook directly over open fires in their own 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 added that, based partly on the findings at Grand Coteau and partly on work in adjoining areas in the 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 sophistication and social harmony.

The Poverty Point system declined into Tchefuncte due probably, Dr. Gibson said, to strain on the economic base and changing environmental adaptations. He added that no catastrophe such as disease, war or invasion was accountable.

"Tchefuncte peoples simply moved away from previously established towns and villages into vast areas of previously unoccupied swampland," he said. "Relocation of political centers to more accessible and productive sites may have hastened this emigration process."

This ultimate results of the population rearrangement was a reduction of social and political cohesion and the establishment of many smaller, self-supportive communities which archaeologists now call Tchefuncte. While the trend toward cultural complexity was reversed during Tchefuncte times, the culture itself set the stage for the rise of another complex culture, called Marksville about 200 B.C.

Dr. Gibson said the USL archaeology program will continue in an effort to make the prehistory of South Louisiana more understandable.

The work of these students was conducted under the direction of Dr. Gibson, Layton J. Miller, USL assistant professor of geography, and his field methods students did much of the work for the contour map.

Dr. Gibson hoped that the Grand Coteau site might provide some insight into the reasons for cultural deterioration during the Tchefuncte.