Students, professor resume quest for exiles’ settlement near Loreauville

Archaeology may conjure up images of exciting excavations that uncover human remains and rare historical items. In reality, archaeology involves a lot of research, grunt work and sweat to find potential dig sites that can yield few results. But it’s a necessary process to learn about our identities and origins.

Mark Rees, a University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor of anthropology and archaeology, is leading two research assistants this summer in field work along the Bayou Teche near Loreauville. They want to learn where the Acadian exiles first settled in Acadiana some 250 years ago. It’s all part of the New Acadia Project, or Projet Nouvelle-Acadie, a long-term, multidisciplinary project that could set the record straight about Cajun heritage.

“We want to provide some measured facts and places of interest that speak to people in terms of...
their identity, who they are," Rees said.
Rees worked Friday with UL graduate assistant Maegan Smith and undergraduate research assistant Christian Sheumaker on private land along the Bayou Teche near Loreauville.

Oral tradition says descendents of Joseph Broussard — the Acadian freedom fighter more commonly known as Beausoleil — are buried in an abandoned cemetery there and that there are unmarked graves nearby.

"We have not found anything alarming or any red flags yet," said Rees, a descendent of Beausoleil's brother. "It's really a matter of systematically excluding places that might be potential camp sites or burial places of Acadians who arrived in 1765."

Rees, Smith and Sheumaker used a machete and bow rake Friday to cut through overgrowth at the small cemetery. They picked up tiny fragments of pottery to study in the lab at UL. They surveyed the land for disturbances using a cesium magnetometer and mapped using a pulsar total station.

"If we don't find anything," Smith said, "we're at least saying where it isn't. We can at least define the boundaries. We're at least doing something good."

Smith, who is a descendent of Beausoleil, will be researching and presenting materials on the project throughout the school year as she pursues her master's degree.

The team began shoveling testing at the site this week, which involves digging small holes in search of decomposed materials, ceramics and any items left behind by humans.

Once there is more to do, the team will welcome volunteers.

"Right now, you're either going to be standing here with a pole or helping us use a machete to cut," Sheumaker said. "There's nothing really fascinating right now, and we want to make sure we're engaging the public."

Rees, Smith and Sheumaker will conduct field work periodically over the next two years, for about eight weeks during school summer breaks and for about four weeks during the winter breaks.

Rees expects the New Acadia Project, which launched about a year ago, to span three to five years. The project includes locating the original Acadian camp sites, uncovering artifacts, dating the discoveries and determining how the relics fit into the Acadian story.

"I am related to both Beausoleil brothers, so it is a family thing and is somewhat on a personal level," Smith said. "But it's also so great to be involved in something so groundbreaking, something that is local and exciting for us Cajuns."

Although the Louisiana Board of Regents didn't recommend the New Acadia Project's grant request earlier this year, Rees and his team decided to move ahead with the project on a smaller scale, funding the work through nearly $100,000 of donated money.

Most of the money came from a $50,000 made by Iberia Parish and a $25,000 donation made by the McIlhenny Family Foundation.

The donations are being used to pay for summer stipends for Smith, Sheumaker and Rees, tuition for Smith during the school year, travel and equipment.

"Even if we would have gotten the grant, there's always another grant that you're not going to get," Sheumaker said. "You're always going to have to battle with obstacles. It's about making the most of what you have."

Loreauville Mayor Al Broussard is excited about the project, not only for his village's cultural economy, but because he is a descendent of Beausoleil.

He is also chair of the project's steering committee.

"Loreauville needs something to put it on the map. It's sort of off the beaten path," Broussard said. "This is a big step because we've been raising money for a year or so now and we finally have enough to get the boots on the ground."