Technology reaching back to probe old Indian mounds

By BOBBY ARDOIN
Advocate correspondent
PALMETTO - Twentieth-century technology is being used to explore prehistoric mysteries and structures left hidden for centuries in several remote areas of St. Landry Parish.

Three LSU archaeologists are using computer technology to measure and map well-preserved Indian mounds in order to discover secrets buried in several prehistoric mysteries and structures.

Malcolm Shuman and Dr. Robert Jones of Geoscience, of the state's prairies in St. Landry, are surveying the mounds.

Their work is part of a continual study, sponsored by the LSUMuseum of Geoscience, of the state's prehistoric Indian cultures, Jones said.

Since November, Dennis Jones, Dr. Malcolm Shuman and Dr. Robert Carnes have traversed woods and prairies in St. Landry, surveying the mounds.

The archaeological survey will be completed June 30 when the three scientists finish a written report featuring the computer graphics of each mound.

Approximately 28 mound sites in the parish have been measured since the project began, and the work in St. Landry is "about three-fourths complete," Jones said.

Utilizing previously published U.S. Geological Survey maps and locations given by parish residents, the archaeologists visit each site and sketch a mound's dimensions, Shuman said.

After plotting the dimensions on charts and graphs, three men return to LSU, feed measurements into computers, and the evidence then evolves into a more high-tech form, Jones said.

"We make maps, outline mounds and then input the information into the computer, which is already programmed to interpret the information," Jones said.

"Once information about a particular mound is fed into the computer, we tell the plotter what angle and what view we want," he said.

He said the computer will then draw the contour of a mound, plotting precisely its elevation and shape.

"If I wanted, I could make printouts of 360 different views of each mound," Jones said.

He said the computer mapping used in the currently funded program is the first of its kind to study the state's Indian mounds.

The use of the computer is essential for several reasons, Carnes said.

"Even with the surveying tools we use to determine the shape of a mound, it's difficult to get a precise view. Many of the mounds are covered with foliage.

"The shape of a mound is vital because it tells us what it might have been used for," Carnes said.

"For instance, conical shaped mounds were usually burial places, while those that are flat were ceremonial and perhaps a tribal man of importance lived." Jones said.

The three archaeologists said much of their fact finding is occasionally speculative since they examine remains of prehistoric cultures that flourished as many as 1,000 years ago.

"We don't know very much about these people or what tribes they were from," Shuman said. "They were gone from these sites long before the explorers came to the area.

"With the exception of a probe to test the soil, we don't touch anything. On the surface we may find shards of clay pottery or some other vague artifact, but we are not treasure hunting. Most people think archaeology means excavation," Shuman said.

"Communities lived in proximity to a mound. The garbage that went out the back of the hut is what we are finding now," Shuman said.

No excavations have been done at any of the mounds, Jones said.

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"The mound was four feet high and, from its remains, it may have been as old as 2,000 years," Shuman said.

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Most of the sites are along waterways, especially in the higher elevations on the northern end of the parish near Palmetto, Melville and the Big Cane area north of Lebeau.

Frequently a site as tall as 17 feet is hidden among trees and dense tangles of brush and vines, but that is usually to a mound's advantage since they are less visible to looters, Jones said.

Still, some of the parish's most treasured sites have been destroyed carelessly, Jones said.

He said one site located near the confluence of bayous Current and Rouge was destroyed by a large farming operation after the land was purchased last year by its present owner.

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