Those First Louisianians

A Bicentennial Special Report
No one will ever know when the first people set foot in Louisiana. It is certain, however, that men were living in our state long before Columbus left Spain, before the Middle Ages, and before there was a Roman Empire or an Egyptian Pyramid.

Louisiana Indians, the first men to see and enjoy the state's beauty and its bountiful natural resources, arrived here as long as 12,000 years ago, and maybe even earlier. They were the descendants of small bands of men who about 50,000 B.C. wandered from Asia, across the Bering Strait, and into what is now Alaska. Because of the vast amount of water which was then locked up in Ice Age glaciers, the sea level was considerably lower than it is today and what is now the Bering Strait was then a land bridge between the present day Soviet Union and Alaska.

Those early arctic adventurers, the real discoverers of America, moved steadily down the coast and throughout the interior of the rich new world. By 10,000 B.C. man had reached the southern tip of South America.

The first Indians to come into Louisiana were small hunting bands, consisting only of several families. They would stay in one area until they had used up the available food supply and then they'd pick up and move on. Because of this, they had few possessions, only the simplest shelters, and their numbers were small.

Early man was tied to nature in a way we in the modern world cannot understand. Like a wanderer lost in the wilderness, his life depended strictly on what he could make, find, or kill. The problem was simple, if he was successful, he and those who were dependent on him would live; if he wasn't, they'd die.

Even under the best conditions, early men in Louisiana must have had a very short life expectancy compared to modern man.

When these first small bands ventured into Louisiana they had only spears, which were either thrust or thrown, to hunt with. Later, the Indians combined the spear with the atlatl, or spear thrower, for more effective hunting. The atlatl is simply a stick with a notch at one end on which the butt end of the spear is hooked so that when the atlatl, which is held at the other end by the throwing hand, is slung forward the spear can be sent farther and harder than it could be if thrown only with the unaided arm.

The Early Indians also used bolas made of rocks with holes or grooves bored in them and tied together with strips of rawhide or vine. Bolas were used mainly to hunt waterfowl, a method long used by eskimos.

The bow and arrow came into wide use sometime between 950 and 1,300 A.D.

The European explorers wrote about the hunting and fishing techniques of the Indians they met, and it is logical to assume that many of the successful techniques used by historic Indians would have been in use by prehistoric Indians for thousands of years.

Dumont de Montigny in his Mémoires historiques sur la Louisiane published in Paris in 1753 and Le Page Du Pratz in his Histoire de la Louisiane published in Paris in 1758 recount how the Natchez, one of the most advanced and powerful tribes in Louisiana, hunted bears.

Both writers state that the most important part of the hunt was the thorough knowledge which the Indians had of the woods and the animal's habits. The Indians searched until they found hollow trees with claw marks on them indicating there might be a bear either hiding or hibernating inside.

Once the Indians had determined there was a bear inside the tree, they would throw bundles of burning cane or wood into the hollow trunk. The bear would be smoked out of the tree and have to back down the trunk where it was an easy prey to the Indians' arrows, spears, and clubs.

The two writers also tell how deer were hunted by careful stalking, which included the Indians using a deer's skin or head to confuse the animals, until the hunter could get close enough for a shot. Sometimes just wounding a deer would be enough to insure success since an Indian might follow the animal for days before it fell from its wounds.

Du Pratz describes a deer hunt in which as many as several hundred of the young men went out hunting in a wide crescent. As soon as a deer was spotted inside the crescent the Indians nearest the deer began the chase while those on either flank began closing up into a circle. The deer was frightened and ran back and forth from one line of hunters to another until it finally collapsed from exhaustion and was killed.

The Natchez also used dogs to hunt turkeys. The dogs forced the birds to fly up into trees where the Indians shot them.

Fire was one of man's most useful hunting tools. If the wind were blowing toward a body of water, the Indians would set a fire across a narrow neck of land so that the animals were trapped between fire and water.

The trapped animals which were not killed by the fire or by the hunters who trailed the blaze would flee into the water where they'd be killed by other tribesmen who were waiting for them in dugouts.

Indians also used fire for night fishing, much as today's fishermen do. A fire would be kept burning in a canoe and the Indians would slowly float on the stream looking for the fish which would be lured to the surface. The Indians would then spear them.

Louisiana's many bodies of water provided a ready source of food for the Indians. They fished with nets, traps, or drags made of branches, vines, or any other material that was suitable, collected clams, and trapped turtles and alligators.

One common way of fishing by entire communities was to block off a body of water with a net or fence so that the fish were trapped. The women and children might even begin herding the fish toward the net from miles away.

Once the fish were concentrated, they could be poisoned, speared, shot with arrows, or taken by hand or with a scoop net. If a drag was used, the fish were simply pulled up onto the bank.

The Indians used several natural poisons, including crushed buckeyes, green black walnut hulls, horse chestnuts, and a plant called devil's shoestring, to poison the fish.

The Indians also used a variety of hooks made of bone or wood to take fish. These hooks were even made up into trottines and strung across streams.

Ducks were plentiful in Louisiana and one of the techniques the Indians used to hunt them was quite ingenious.

One group equipped with large nets would go downstream and put themselves in the path they knew the ducks took when flying. Another group would go in the opposite direction, circle around
Indian craftsmen left us a legacy of stone and clay: from top, a pottery sherd from Cameron Parish; the design pressed into the wet clay with a wooden paddle before baking; a ceramic vessel from West Feliciana Parish; arrowheads from St. Tammany Parish; and two ceramic vessels from LaSalle Parish.

and come up on the ducks from behind and spooked them so that they took flight toward the Indians waiting downstream. Other men waiting along the sides of the waterway would throw sticks over the flying ducks and imitate the cry of a hawk. The ducks would dip low to avoid danger and fly right into the nets.

Small game, including raccoons, rabbits, muskrats, squirrels, and numerous different birds, were hunted with snares, traps, nets, blowguns, and even throwing sticks.

Were the early Indians truly successful hunters with their spears and atlatls?

In an article published in Florida Wildlife in 1956 Dr. Hale G. Smith points out that when the Indian first arrived in Florida he found the mastodon, an early type of horse, the camel, and the giant sloth. All became extinct shortly after the Indians arrived.

Dr. Smith says "there are indications that some animals, the mastodon for example, became extinct because men hunted them out. We know that these Ice Age animals had traveled the pathway to oblivion by about 2,000 B.C. Since there is little indication of major climatic and environmental changes in Florida since this early time, the evidence seems to point to the possibility that the presence of man in the state might have been a major factor in their disappearance."

At Avery Island the bones of numerous extinct animals have been found in conjunction with the remains of early man. These animals included the sabre tooth tiger, the giant big-horned bison, the plain horse, two types of ground sloth, the mammoth and the mastodon. Although Louisiana's climate did change about the time these animals disappeared, the ferocity of the early hunters must be counted as a strong factor in the animals' extinction.

The early Indians supplemented whatever food they could get hunting and fishing by gathering all the edible plants, roots, berries, seeds or whatever they could find, and with thousands of years of trial and error behind them the Indians had a natural supermarket all around them.

In Louisiana there was a wide variety of wild plant food available including numerous grass seeds, plums, persimmons, grapes, mulberries, strawberries, walnuts, hickory nuts, pecans, chestnuts, acorns, wild onions, wild sweet potatoes, and different types of cane and water lily seeds.

As time went on, the Indians began farming and the gathering of wild food became less important. Corn, beans, and squash were introduced to Louisiana from Mexico and were the major foods cultivated by Indian farmers. The steady and reliable food source provided by cultivated crops allowed the Indians to build larger and more stable villages and freed them from the bondage which had tied them to the natural food supply for so long.

But one might well ask how do we know about these early men?

The answer is complex and always only partial. Early man left evidence of the sort of life he lived. He left pottery sherds, stone and bone tools and weapons, animal and human bones, seeds, post molds where house posts were once fixed in the ground, imprints of basketry and the like.

Usually these remains are found in what were once home or village sites. When an Indian site is found, sometimes this is just the Indians' garbage dump, archeologists set about excavating it. The material they find tells them much about the Indians' way of life and the time at which the particular group lived.

And then, of course, there are historical records of European explorers who had contact with the Indians living here during the 1700's and educated guesses based on what is known about other people who lived under conditions similar to those the Indians lived under, not only in America but around the world.

The first thing one learns from the available evidence is that to lump all of the Indians who lived in Louisiana is to suggest a homogeneity that did not exist. There was actually no one single group of Louisiana Indians, rather there were many, many different families, bands, groups, and tribes that lived throughout our state over the thousands of years before the Europeans came. They spoke many different languages, hunted and fished, gathered wild foods, farmed, traded, and fought, and were actually only one part of the rich tapestry that was the life of the American Indian.

Unfortunately, the most important and distinctive elements in human life are not as durable as the stone and bone remains. The beliefs, fears, languages, social customs, and the crafts and skills have almost all disappeared, to be reconstructed only partially and by the most painstaking work.

From the information that is available, scholars try to reconstruct what the lives of the different Indian groups must have been like. They try to derive their language, technology, religion, political and social organization, and their relationship to other groups around the state and nation.
Fieldwork can involve some tricky technical problems, including the need for a metal cell and water pumps to keep an excavation from flooding. These scenes are all from an excavation at Bayou Jasmine in Saint John the Baptist Parish. Remains date from 1,500 B.C. to 1,400 A.D.
Anthropologists have grouped the different Indian peoples that lived in the state over the many thousands of years into several rough periods or cultural stages. The different groupings show a gradual movement through the years toward greater complexity, just as European culture became more complex from 10,000 B.C. to 1,700 A.D. The Indians, for example, learned new ways of providing the food they needed, their villages became larger and more permanent, and their religious, social, and political organizations became more complex.

The names of the different cultural stages, usually named for the site in which evidence of a particular culture was first found, and the dates are: the Historic (1,700 A.D. to present), Caddoan, Mississippian, Plaquemine (1,300 A.D. to 1,700 A.D.), Coles Creek (950 A.D. to 1,300 A.D.), Troyville 600 A.D. to 950 A.D.), Is- saquena (300 A.D. to 600 A.D.), Marksville (100 B.C. to 300 A.D.), Tchefuncte (600 B.C. to 100 B.C.), Poverty Point (1,500 B.C. to 600 B.C.), Archaic (6,000 B.C. to 1,500 B.C.), and Lithic (back to 10,000 B.C. or older).

Before our European ancestors "discovered" Louisiana, over 500 generations of prehistoric Indians had lived and died in Louisiana. We have no written record of their existence and their stories can only be told by excavating and analyzing the state's many prehistoric sites. It's impossible to give examples of all the numerous different cultural stages in one brief article but a description of three prehistoric sites will give some idea of how the Indians' story has been reconstructed.

One of the most intriguing prehistoric sites ever discovered in Louisiana, or in North America, is the Poverty Point site in northeast Louisiana. Located along Bayou Macon, the site has given its name to a culture which extended between modern day Louisiana and Georgia from 1,500 B.C. to 600 B.C.

Today, all that remains of what was once a vibrant and thriving community are two immense man-made earthen mounds, two smaller mounds, and six concentric ridges. The community itself is estimated to have numbered perhaps as many as 5,000 people with 10,000 people living in the immediate area. These figures are based on the amount of labor that would have been needed to construct the mounds and the population which could have been supported by the available food supply.

The large mounds are felt to be in the shape of birds and to have symbolized a complex religious system which centered on the worship of a bird-like supernatural being which the mounds symbolized. Similar beliefs were recorded by European explorers who encountered Indians along the Mississippi many years later.

There is evidence that the community could have lived solely by gathering available natural foods and hunting and fishing. There might have been no organized farming.

These incised Whooping Crane bones were found on the chest of a person buried perhaps a thousand years ago in Cameron Parish. What were they meant to be? Whistles? Religious objects? Good luck charms? No one will ever know. They're simply one more tantalizing hint of a way of life that is lost forever.

Once this young woman begins washing down the soil she and her colleagues have dug up, she's never sure what she'll find, from animal bones, to stone tools, to pottery sherds.
An archeologist returns to the lab to study excavated material. Below, an archeologist in Madison parish at the site of a human burial that took place about 500 A.D.

If there were no farming, the Poverty Point site would represent one of the most complex societies ever developed without some sort of agriculture. As it is, it is perhaps the earliest complex culture site in all of North America. It was abandoned for some reason and although there are several theories no one will ever know why.

A burial mound called the Crooks site near Catahoula Lake in La Salle Parish has been excavated and placed in the Marksville period. In addition to over 1,000 burials, excavators found numerous different pottery types, projectile points, drills, hammerstones, scrapers, stone beads, sandstone human effigies, bone fish hooks, clay pipes, remains of basketry, and copper ear spools and beads.

As at Poverty Point, artifacts found at the Crooks site give evidence of long distance trade. Conch shells were found in the mound which had come from the Gulf of Mexico; the copper may have come from the Lake Superior deposits; and galena and quartz crystals may have come from Arkansas. There was also pumice and volcanic tuff which could not have been found locally.

Excavations on Big Oak and Little Oak Islands in eastern New Orleans revealed that Big Oak Island had four distinct occupations or utilizations beginning from before 500 B.C. and lasting until almost 500 A.D.; Little Oak Island had a single occupation of the Tchefuncte type.

Both sites yielded bone and antler tools such as spear points, fishhooks, flakers, fleshers, and beads, as well as human burials. Some of the material was not available locally and could have come from as far away as Arkansas and the Appalachians.

The story of the first Louisianians is a rich and important part of the heritage which we all share. A heritage that continues today not only in the lives of the Indian descendants of those first men who came to our state but also in the lives of all Louisianians who care about preserving the land and its resources for those who will come after us. The rich resources of our state gave the Indians life, and as long as we preserve and care for those resources they will provide for us also.
Dear Mr. Angelle:

The other night my wife and I were looking up some recipes in the Conservationist. I've kept most of the issues dating back to the '60s and now I'm glad I did.

As we thumbed thru the various magazines, we remembered the good times we had and how much we miss good old Louisiana. I doubt if any other state in the Union can match what Louisiana has to offer, and the Conservationist does an outstanding job in presenting Louisiana to the general public.

Too often we take for granted the things we have at our fingertips. We had to move to Texas to realize this.

On behalf of a couple of transplanted Cajuns, please accept our check for $10.00 as our way of showing our appreciation for what you all are doing.

Sincerely,
A.J. Reixach, Jr.
Houston, Texas

Dear Mr. Reixach:

We deeply appreciate your complimentary letter regarding the Louisiana Conservationist and the work of the commission.

You may be assured that your check will be used wisely to further the preservation of wildlife resources in the State of Louisiana. Anytime you are ready to return, we are always glad to welcome a Cajun back home.

Sincerely,
J. Burton Angelle
Director

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Dear Eighth Grade Students of Buckeye High School:

Director J. Burton Angelle has asked me to again express appreciation from the Louisiana Wildlife & Fisheries Commission for your $200 contribution.

It is very gratifying to see young people exhibit an interest in the wildlife resources of our state, and you may be assured that your check will be used wisely in preserving these resources.

I hope you enjoyed your visit and anytime we can be of assistance to you just drop us a line.

Sincerely,
(Ms) Marian R. Pendley
Executive Assistant

Dear Director Angelle:

Thanks for the memories.
Thanks for the opportunity to have worked with so many wonderful people during the past 30 years. I would like to express my feelings by saying if I had to chose employment and live this part of my life over I would do the same. I have derived great satisfaction in this field of work, regardless of whether it was in the hot sun, cold wind, rain, rough seas or calm. I often look back and realize I enjoyed the rough times as well as the good — like getting up before dawn to watch the day break while working somewhere out in the coastal marsh or being called to duty by radio just when the fish were biting so good.

Needless to say, I made many friends on my various interesting assignments and details, with the petroleum industry as well as the fishing industry.

It was interesting traveling by car, boat, airplane, and helicopter down the entire southeast coastal area of Louisiana. I often think of the things I use to do, such as climbing to the top of an oil derrick to take photos of a pollution violation.

I am 55 years old now, but oil field pollution abatement has been the most part of my life thus far.

I would appreciate it if you would pass my message of “Thanks for the Memories” to all the employees of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission.

Jack Hood
Coastal Environmental Agent III
Oysters, Water Bottoms and Seafoods Division

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Executive Assistant Marian Pendley accepts a check for $200 from representatives of Buckeye High School, Kim Paulk and Dwayne Reed. The funds are to be used to further conservation in Louisiana. Faculty members of Buckeye at the presentation included Bob Stevens, Hilda Graff, Terry Smith, Sandra Smith, Douglas Martinez, and Lynn Sibley.

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