Treasure sought at Indian mounds

LUTCHER, La. (AP) - Sunday mornings find them deep in the woods of St. James Parish, sifting through one thin layer of dirt after another, searching carefully for one piece of buried treasure at a time.

It's not gold they're after, but something they consider just as valuable - prehistoric artifacts from an ancient Indian mound.

Members of the St. James Historical Society discovered the mound, and two others nearby, four years ago in a densely wooded area off Louisiana 3125 between Convent and Lutcher.

Since July, group members and friends have conducted a meticulous excavation of the site, believed to be from Plaquemine Indian Culture of about 800 years ago.

"My grandmother was a Choctaw Indian and I never learned much about her background," Johnnie Cagnolatti of St. James said.

"I'm hoping to find out more about my ancestors. It's fascinating to find out about their way of life, and it's even more amazing how they could do so much with nothing and survive."

Several pieces of pottery, a part of a rim of a bowl, bones and stone artifacts have been recovered.

The Indian tribes that left those items were members of the region's last prehistoric culture before the arrival of European settlers, said Brian Duhe, a LaPlace insurance agent and amateur archaeologist who is guiding the excavation.

The Indians lived in family groups and farmed most of their food, he said.

Duhe helps classify the artifacts. His wife, Lyn, keeps complete records of the excavation, the environment and what is found at each level.

On one recent morning, excitement ran high as two important finds were made. One was a piece of quartz, not natural to Louisiana, but believed to have come from Arkansas. The other was a spear point.

"The quartz indicates probably some kind of trade pattern between tribes," Mrs. Duhe said. "We've found a bone with hack marks obviously made by a human. Indians made spear points from bones."

About 9,000 Indian mounds have been documented in Louisiana, state archaeologist Kathleen Byrd said.

The St. James excavation project is being financed by St. James Bank. It is paying for supplies, photo processing, laboratory analysis and other expenses, historical society member Joe Samrow Sr. said.

Charlie Duhe of Gramercy said he participates mostly out of curiosity.

"To know something has been here all of your life is exciting," he said.

"It's hard to believe Indians lived in a swampy area. How did they put up with the mosquitos?"

Samrow said it's hard to estimate how long the excavation may take. It could be years before the project is finished.

But plans are under way for a museum in St. James Parish that will house not only the Indian artifacts but other historical items.

The old College Point Pharmacy built in 1934 in Convent will be relocated to Lutcher and used as a general museum and research center, Samrow said.