Digging for answers

Romantic interest in archaeology becomes reality at field school

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The pickup truck bumps along a gravel road, turning onto a dirt road, a swirl of dust following in its wake. Its occupants sit in the back on ice chests and boxes of equipment. As they bounce between the cultivated fields, the sun glides above the horizon, a shimmering orange-red.

Farmers and archaeologists alike tumble out before daybreak to get their work done before the intense heat of the Louisiana day. The group with Ann Ramenofsky’s LSU summer field school is riding over to its archaeological site in the middle of a soybean field that stretches as far as they could see. It’s in Catahoula Parish, 26 miles from Jonesville (formerly Troyville) on Louisiana Delta Plantation. Locals still call the site Josh Paulk’s camp, after the man who once lived there.

Lake is nearby. The Mississippi River’s muddy waters used to flow through the area. In an earlier age, the Arkansas River claimed dominance. “It makes more sense for them to have lived near a lake than by a river,” Ramenofsky said, explaining why early cultures would have chosen to live at the site. It would be characteristic of an Indian culture to have lived near a source of fresh water and fish, and they would usually have preferred a tranquil body of water near their homes.

Are these Indians ancestors of current Indian residents of the area? “It’s hard to track whether there are any descendants of these people,” she said. “During the recent historic past, the Tunica have used the area, but the site predates Tunica entry into Louisiana,” she said.

There’s ample evidence that many Indians lived in the Delta area, apparently for quite some time. “There are places around here which are literally paved with shards,” Ramenofsky said. But these places are not available to the public; they are all on privately owned land.

“When we surface-collect, we literally pick up everything — hot dog wrappers, cigarette packs — as well as projectile points and shards,” said her assistant, Ann Whitmer, a research associate at LSU. She’s working on her dissertation from the University of Washington in Seattle. “When farmers are plowing and disk ing, a certain amount of artifacts gets churned up,” she added. Things found on the surface — while interesting — are difficult to date out of context.

Carbon deposits are needed to date artifacts accurately.

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The other project assistant is Kathy Joiner, a graduate student in physical geography at LSU, whose specialty is soils and sediments.

“We have 10 to 12 people working here on a regular basis,” said Whitmer, “most of whom are students.” Ranks swell on weekends when volunteers are free to pursue their inclinations to dig. “We take off on Tuesdays and Wednesdays to accommodate volunteers, go back to Baton Rouge, restock our groceries and run errands.”

A typical day at the site begins with uncovering each 2-by-2-meter (2.4-by-2.4 yards) pit, hoisting up a tarpaulin to provide meager shade from the determined sun as it rises higher and higher above the workers.

Hats, sunscreen, shorts and old (or new) sneakers are the order of the day. Water jugs stand ready for brief moments of refreshment. Ampie lunches wait in ice chests in the shade of a large parachute for the mid-day break.

The heat intensifies. Sunscreen is slathered liberally.

Standing or squatting in the sun all day watching and working with these avid archaeologists takes a certain amount of endurance, one quickly discovers. These people are not only dedicated to their work but also tough.

They are excavating dwelling sites, not burials. Sensationalism is not their goal. They want to learn all they can about the people who lived centuries ago in an area north of Marksville. Handling objects made and used by people so long ago brings them close, makes them seem like human beings.

Ramenofsky is chauffeured by Whitmer to the site in a dust-coated white station wagon. Someone had fingerprinted “Ambulance” in the dust on the back of the car after Ramenofsky.
Clockwise from top left, arrowheads dating from 3000 BC to 1400 AD, Ramenofsky shows levels of occupation in excavation pit. Carey Coxe uses a surveyor's level to determine distance and elevation, Miguel Espinoza holds metric stadia rod. When we get a heavy rain, the pits fill up like swimming pools.

The project director, fell and was believed to have broken her leg. It turned out to be a bad sprain and torn ligaments, so her leg is in a cast - first a short cast, a week later - one up to her knee. She spends the days immediately following the injury with the offending foot propped up on a bucket, tablet in hand, recording data.

Each pit (of local pottery or fire being excavated at one level) is manned by two students who use trowels to scrape carefully across the surface and remove the dirt to large buckets. A whisk broom is used to clean loose dirt from any interesting "feature." A feature might be an object or unexpected marks in soil. Each feature is recorded and a surveyor's instrument used to site its exact position. "Once you pick it up you can't put it back, so it's better to record everything and then get rid of things we don't need - like gravel," Whitmer said.

The buckets of artifact-laden soil are labeled as to pit location, and the contents are dumped onto a water-screening table. This is the most enjoyable task of the day - a chance to work in close proximity to cool water. The top screen has a large mesh; the lower screen mesh is smaller so that artifacts that fall through the top screen are caught in the lower one. The worker uses a hose with a spray nozzle to wash through all the soil.

Artifacts in each pit are separated from soil by the water, dried and later sorted and studied. These are the lucky people who periodically hold up lovely pieces of wet, gleaming orange chert, obviously worked by hand centuries ago, perhaps the discarded pieces of arrowheads - and fragments of decorated pots, the lines and their patterns quickly identifiable as Troyville, Coles Creek or Plaquemine to the practiced eye.

In about five minutes water screen workers look like canvases for spatter painting with mud. Add a little honest sweat, and everyone becomes a nice, even shade of clay. These folks helpfully hose down comrades from time to time. Nobody objects.

There is something worse than heat to archaeologists: floods. "When we get a heavy rain, the pits fill up like swimming pools," Ramenofsky said. "The clay at the bottom of the site holds the water, so we have to pump it out." At the end of the eight-week field school, all of the pits will be refilled with soil to prevent accidents and to protect the site from vandalism.

Red-haired Becky Asente, a graduate student in anthropology, prepares to face the day by donning a huge coolie hat over braided hair and works at water screening before moving to one of the pits.

Potsherds, projectile points, bird, fish and mammal bones and charcoal are turned up in the pits and at the water
"Glunk is fired clay, probably used in cooking areas. But there's also glunk from natural fires... We have to figure out which is natural and which is manmade.

Plant materials tend to be difficult to find in the soil of the pits. The team soaks globs of soil in buckets of water and baking soda (100 lbs. was used this summer) then dumps the chocolate-mousse-looking mess into a barrel through which water is shot at high pressure. Heavy items go to the bottom, the soil washes out, and light things are caught in the nylon organdy tray on top. They call this a flotation device.

This summer's work marks the first time archaeologists at a Louisiana site have used water screening and flotation, Ramenofsky said. As a result, they are finding small objects like seeds and beads which can be seen only when the clay has been separated from them.

Operating the flotation device is Marie Standifer, a graduate student in anthropology whose interest in plants of early era has led her to study the archaeology of plants. Any plant materials collected will be studied by research specialist Gail Fritz at her lab of anthropology, University of Michigan.

Especially exciting to the archaeologists are features called post molds — indications of Indian dwellings. Black spots in the brown soil form patterns. After the posts fall apart, staining the dirt with charcoal, the hole is filled with dirt from above. That's a charcoal deposit. "If the post molds are large, they were probably supports for the daub and wattle huts the Indians lived in. If they are small, they were probably drying racks for fish, clothes, hanging pots, meat or whatever," she explained.

The Indians would have put up the posts first, then would have woven grasses and patted clay over the whole structure. Fires burned the clay. "You can see the imprint of the grasses on the clay," Whitmer said.

Whenever new post molds are found, everyone stops what he's doing and goes to see the new features.

Miguel Espinoza's pit reveals the first line of post molds. Espinoza, a student from Costa Rica who has worked on archaeological sites in his country and who plans to be an archaeologist, wears a sweat band around his forehead, designer sunglasses and no shirt.
"I've learned much working with Ann," he said, "especially the different techniques used here," he said. He and his partner, Becky Aseante, are digging at level 5. Each level is 10 centimeters deep (four inches).

"Now, Miguel," said Ramenofsky, "why don't you scrape the soil from the front side of that post mold so we can see it more clearly?"

"Yes, my lady," the student quipped.

From the hilarity and comments following his reply, it is apparent that his Old World response professes a certain amount of deference (besides being tongue-in-cheek) on the part of the director.

A field or two away from the excavation site lies the Cowpens Slough burial ground, dated to 5,000 years ago. The burials were exposed when a drainage canal was cut through the farm and were studied by Ramenofsky in 1984. The burials do not appear to be related to the era of the village site being excavated, Ramenofsky said.

The excavation pits show three levels of occupation: modern farming has plowed the level known as Plaquemine, near the historic border (1,500 A.D.); Cole's Creek preceded Plaquemines (800-1,200 A.D.); Troyville (300-800 A.D.) is the earliest on the site — essentially two villages, one on top of another.

Pits are started without any notion of what they might reveal, consequently some turn out to be disappointments. Some are sleepers, revealing their pieces of prehistoric puzzle just as everyone has given up hope of finding anything.

Ricky Mitchell is at the lowest level (90 centimeters or 36 inches), practically featureless — except for a large carbon deposit in a pit in one corner. Charcoal from this pit will be dated and provide the earliest date of use by an native population, Ramenofsky said. Mysteries keep an archaeologist's life scintillating.

Mitchell is an undergraduate in anthropology. His skills from working as a carpenter for seven years have come in handy on this project. He built the plywood dining trestle tables and makes repairs quickly when needed.

Younger undergraduate students in anthropology working at excavating pits are Dana Coury and Carey Coxe. Ben Bryant, a beginning graduate student in anthropology, said he has a drama background. Janet Shoemaker has an M.A. in anthropology. Her graduate work focused on native language use of Ebarb, near Toledo Bend.

Beverly Wilson, a graduate student in art education, said she always wanted to work at an archaeological site, so this summer's excavation is the fulfillment of a dream.

In fact — judging by the team's good-natured acceptance of relentless heat, long hours of hard work in the field and in the lab and the noticeable absence of petty disagreements — working at this site on the project director.

You can see the imprint of the grasses on the clay.