



Prehistoric Atchafalaya

There's no sign on the road alerting you to its presence, and driving through the sparsely inhabited area on the outskirts of Catahoula, which is covered with sugar cane like much of the rest of the parish, the rural landscape calls no particular attention to itself. You'd never suspect that remnants of a prehistoric society lie buried just below the surface.

The archaeological site, officially designated 16SM39, is located between Bayou Mercier and Catahoula Lake on a naturally-occurring mound. Squint, and you can see how the sugar cane field banks up toward the small coulée that cuts diagonally across the property. The low mound—you can think of it as a natural levee—was first identified as an area of archaeological significance in the early twentieth century when

local inhabitants reported it as a consistent source of pottery shards and arrowheads. My father's grandmother, who lived not far from the site, as the story goes, would turn up shards of pottery near a large live oak that once grew on the mound, eventually collecting enough shards to fill a quart-size mason jar. Both the live oak and the jar have since disappeared, but based on preliminary sampling of the site, it's likely that hundreds more shards of pottery remain buried underground.

The only formal investigation of the site took place in 1986. At the time, SLEMCO had plans to install power lines along Bayou Mercier Road, but they needed to ensure that placement of the poles would not jeopardize anything of significance, so they hired Dr. Jon Gibson, director of the Center for Archaeological Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now known as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) to investigate, and on June 5th and June 13th of that year, he



visited the site, which he nicknamed The Theriot Site, after my father and my uncle, landowners of the property.

Into the naturally-occurring mound he made three subsurface probes with a tube sampler. Two of the samples, taken from the north side of Bayou Mercier Road, showed the presence of modern landfill. (This part of the archaeological site, prior to being a sugar cane field, served as a dump in the early twentieth century. In fact, we still call it “the old trash pile.”) The third sample, taken from the south side of Bayou Mercier Road, was studded with prehistoric pottery fragments.

In the sample he pulled from the earth, he observed a distinct dark gray layer from nine to sixteen inches below the surface, which he identified as a midden zone. (A midden is the archaeological term for a domestic dump, a place where people disposed of their everyday household waste. Middens are considered archaeological troves due to their high density of artifacts.) This midden may have once contained fish bones and other food waste, but only fragments of pottery have been unearthed so far. So in other words, the “old trash pile” was built on the site of a prehistoric trash pile.

Ninety-five shards were identified in the tube sample, eighty-three of which were plain, and twelve of which were decorated. Based on the type of decoration—a pattern known as Pontchartrain Check Stamped—Dr. Gibson was able to estimate their age. This type of decoration was produced by using a wooden paddle bearing check impressions to stamp a check design across the exterior surface of the bowl, beaker or jar before it was fired. Imagine a paddle in the design of a waffle iron which, when pressed against the malleable clay, stamped a waffle grid pattern onto the surface. Ten of the twelve decorated shards were Pontchartrain Check Stamped; the other two shards were incised. (The surface decorations were created by carving lines into the clay rather than by stamping.)



Pontchartrain Check Stamped pottery is so closely associated with Coles Creek culture—the prevailing culture of the Lower Mississippi Valley, including the Atchafalaya Basin, from 700 to 1200 AD—that the pattern is a kind of visual signature for this cultural period. Based on previous investigations of other Coles Creek sites in Louisiana, Dr. Gibson was able to further narrow down the date of the pottery shards at the Theriot Site to a fifty-year window—850 to 900 AD.

Dozens of Coles Creek sites have been discovered throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley, and archaeologists have been able to recreate a faint picture of what their world was like. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Coles Creek architecture were the flat-topped mounds they created. Imagine a pyramid with the top half cut off. Typically, two, three or four of these mounds—twenty feet high, on average—were built along naturally-occurring levees and arranged around a central plaza kept clean

of debris. The mounds likely functioned as stages for ceremonial rituals, at least at first. Over time, residences may have been built on the mounds for certain high-status members.

Coles Creek culture flourished in Louisiana during the Late Woodland Period, when the Atchafalaya was more densely inhabited than it has ever been before or since. The bow-and-arrow had only recently appeared on the scene, and the atlatl—a primitive type of spear-thrower—was quickly giving way to the new technology. And the loosely affiliated “we’re all in this together” bands of hunter-gatherers were transitioning into a more stratified society in which lineage and social roles conferred status. Some archaeologists have even taken the mounds to be an apt symbol of this transition.

We don’t know the name of the people who called Catahoula home twelve hundred years ago—we know them only by what they left behind—but when I’m paddling through the forks of Catahoula Lake, I like



knowing that they once paddled there too, and surely the wild muscadine draping the live oaks every August tasted just as sweet.

No exotic grave goods are likely to be discovered at the Theriot Site, even if it were excavated. Coles Creek culture was not known for imported luxuries or accumulated wealth. Rather, a simple ornament—a white-tailed deer jaw, for example—might be found placed at the foot of the deceased. Walking through the woods around the site yesterday morning, an oddly smooth object half-buried under a pile of leaves caught my eye. A white-tailed deer jaw. How different it must have been back then, and also how much the same.