

Lost village of Caddo discovered

Old maps pinpoint site in east Texas

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AUSTIN, Texas — In the first-floor office of a nondescript state office building, Mark Parsons sorts the last remnants of a once-great civilization in brown cardboard box tops.

There are colorful pottery shards. Rusted pieces of a flintlock gun. Scores of emerald-green and blood-red beads. Each relic is meticulously catalogued with a serial number.

Parsons and fellow state archaeologists say the relics are the linchpin to reconstructing the late history of the Caddo, American Indians who occupied a region of Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma for a millennium until they were forced onto a reservation 160 years ago.

The artifacts were uncovered from an East Texas tree farm during a recent Texas Historical Commission excavation. The project confirmed that the site near Caddo Lake is Sha'chadinnih, the last autonomous Caddo village.

Jim Bruseth, director of the commission's archaeology division, said Sha'chadinnih ranks with the Alamo among the most important historical sites in Texas.

The remaining Caddoans, about 4,000 of whom live in southwestern Oklahoma, are less enthusiastic about the salvage of their ancestors' long-lost belongings.

But Stacy Halfmoon, the tribe's cultural affairs officer, agreed the discovery has value.

"There is much to be learned," Halfmoon said.



Associated Press file photo

Archaeologist Mark Parsons surveys potsherds and other remnants that were recovered from an area of east Texas that was the home of the Caddo people. They were Native Americans who occupied that region of Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma until they were forced onto a reservation 160 years ago.

The estimated 1,500 to 2,000 people who lived there possibly represented the survivors of the last Caddo tribes combining to protect and boost their population, Bruseth said.

The Caddo, who mistakenly believed their land was part of U.S. territory when in fact it was Mexico's, sold it to the United States in 1835. The last of them left in 1842, relocated first to a reservation near the Brazos River and to

other metal cookery at the site suggest that Caddo pottery already had lost importance. Bruseth said that recovered engraved pottery shards might help modern Caddo rediscover the lost art of their ancestors.

Also among 1,350 artifacts recovered were Caddo corn and a ritual smoking pipe.

The dig brought spiritual benefits for a few Caddoans who assisted, including Carter and a

"There is lost Caddo history because of those years when we were forced to flee for our lives. As long as we can do it in a way that is respectful."

Before their land was gradually taken by Europeans and traditional enemies the Osage, the Caddo farmed, hunted and traded around well-established villages throughout the region.

Parsons said the Caddo were a powerful people, revered by other American Indians as "the father of tribes" because of their influence and ability to mediate. They also were known for their artful pottery.

"The Caddo appear to have been, even in the earliest times, very good diplomats, able to establish good relations with tribes along their borders," said Cecile Carter, a historian and author of "Caddo Indians: Where We Come From."

Carter said the earliest recorded account referencing the tribe was from the Spanish about 500 years ago — nearly 200 years before the French explorer Robert Cavalier de LaSalle established a colony along the Texas coast.

"Before they crossed the Rio Grande, Indians told the Spanish that there is a nation to the north described as having a strong sociopolitical structure and that no one dared cross their borders without permission," Carter said.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Caddo became an important nation politically because of their position between the United States and the Spanish in what would later become Texas. The state, incidentally, is named for the Caddo word pronounced "taysha," or "friend."

"They were being courted right and left and made all these promises," Bruseth said. "Then just as soon as those issues got resolved and Texas became a republic, the Caddo were no longer important so they were sort of kicked out of their homeland."

Sha'chadinnih, a phonetic approximation of the Caddo name, was settled about 1800 after disease — probably the European import smallpox — decimated their population.

Oklahoma in the 1850s.

"The story of the Caddo people ... is one of terrible tragedy and terrible disconnect of their history," Bruseth said. "Today the Caddo are largely relegated to a footnote in our history books."

Lost for a century and a half, Sha'chadinnih was found in six weeks by two Louisiana men.

Jaques Bagur, an LSU historian, scoured period maps that noted the village.

Using Bagur's research, Shreveport avocational archaeologist Claude McCrocklin noted an 1841 map showed a distinct loop in James Bayou, near the bend where Caddo Lake sweeps northeast into Louisiana.

McCrocklin, 78, found the same loop on a modern map and headed there with a metal detector in early 1998.

It wasn't long before he found the village site, amid 70-foot pines on gently rolling terrain about 40 miles northeast of Marshall in Marion County. The land is owned by International Paper Co.

"It was great, the satisfaction," said McCrocklin, a former World War II prisoner of war and retired West Texas cattle buyer. "This had been looked for for many years."

The Cypress Valley Alliance, a Marion County nonprofit group dedicated to environmental and historical preservation, put McCrocklin in touch with state archaeologists and helped provide for an exploratory excavation by lining up free motel space and meals. The state provided no financial assistance, only staff time.

The dig, which covered about 75 square yards during six days in February, verified the find and allowed researchers to draw some basic conclusions about Sha'chadinnih.

Parsons said the village was a collection of hamlets or farmsteads with crops cultivated in between. He found evidence of their dealings with whites, including tiny brass thimbles probably made especially for trade to Indians. The Caddo sewed them on clothing.

The ear of a brass kettle and

young Caddo man who sang traditional songs at the site.

"You could look up through those tall pine trees, the tall timber on the hill, and feel a rather indescribable connection between the old ones, as we call our ancestors, and myself," Carter said.

Still, the Caddo have concerns. Halfmoon expressed frustration over a lack of authority at the site and said the tribe wants a lead role in deciding where to excavate next and who will take possession of the artifacts.

"I don't think we approach it with the same enthusiasm as does a scientist because of our beliefs ... and our respect for our ancestors," she said. "We're glad to have that information. We want to know. We would like the opportunity to express our opinion on the disposition of the site."

Neil McGinness, an International Paper forester and point man on the site, said the company is poised to enroll several hundred acres in and around the village site in its "unique areas" protection program.

He said the company has told tribal officials of its intention to involve them and the Cypress Valley Alliance in decisions.

"We're really trying to do something that would please everybody," McGinness said.

Under Texas law, any artifacts would belong to International Paper, McGinness said a few relics might be kept for local display, but most likely will be returned to the tribe.

Duke DeWare, a Jefferson attorney and president of the Cypress Valley Alliance, said the group would like to display some of the artifacts but is staking no claim.

Also in question is who will pay for further excavations of the village. The state, which has set aside \$250,000 for the ongoing excavation of LaSalle's sunken ships in south Texas, has budgeted no funds for continuing study of the Caddo site. The Legislature must make any such allocation.

Parsons said four or five months of work would yield a good idea of what's there.