

Hasinai people left behind remarkable proof of their culture at Caddo Mounds State Historic Site—not to mention their friendly nature

BY E.R. BILLS



CADDO MOUNDS STATE HISTORIC SITE preserves what remains of a complex community of the Hasinai culture, which belonged to the Caddo Indians. Most prominent at the site are three mounds—a burial mound more than two stories high and two temple mounds. The Hasinai men were generally responsible for hunting, and the women specialized in agriculture, foraging and clothes-making.

THE NEAR-MYTHICAL EXPANSE OF TEXAS is difficult for many folks to get their heads around, including Texans, and most perceptions are based on our state and our state of mind since the Spanish laid claim to it in 1519. It's mind-boggling to think that there could be more to Texas, but there is, and one of the best places to experience this revelation is at the Caddo Mounds State Historic Site.

Located about 25 miles west of Nacogdoches, the 397-acre site is the only preserve of Caddo Indian mounds in the state, and it features evidence of occupation for more than 12,000 years. A Southern Caddo Indian culture known as the Hasinai flourished in the area from about A.D. 800 to about 1300.

Unlike their hunter-gatherer precedents, the Hasinai arrived with highly developed horticultural methods and a fixed, complex culture. Their success and productivity fostered remarkable communities with extensive trade networks (stretching from the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes), advanced social and political

hierarchies, and large ceremonial centers. The three mounds preserved at Caddo Mounds, which is in Cherokee County Electric Cooperative Association's service area, are remnants of one such center.

The Burial Mound is more than two stories high and contains the remains of about 90 Hasinai political and spiritual elite. The High Temple Mound comprises the remnants of a large, formally L-shaped pyramidal base upon which temples were built for ceremonial purposes. After each ceremonial cycle, the existing constructions were burned, and new ones were built on the ashes of the previous. The Lower Temple Mound was also a pyramidal base structure for ceremonial functions, but it was used only toward the end of Hasinai occupation and never achieved the heights of the Burial or High Temple mounds.

In addition to the three preserved mounds, the historic complex also includes the remains of a "borrow pit." The borrow pits were human-made depressions created during the construction of the mounds. Year after year and

one ceremonial cycle after another, the Caddos transported millions of baskets of soil from the remaining borrow pit and others to create and maintain their burial and temple mounds.

The Caddos lived interspersed among the mounds in large beehive-shaped dwellings that could reach 40 to 50 feet in height and 60 feet in diameter. Dwelling size and location were based on social rank, and each structure housed two to four families. In terms of sustenance and security, Caddo men were generally responsible for hunting (deer, bison, bears, small birds, mammals and fish) and tribal defense while Caddo women specialized in agriculture (corn, pumpkins, beans, watermelons, squash, sunflowers and tobacco), foraging (nuts, wild fruit, edible roots) and clothes-making.

Before six European, Mexican and U.S. flags flew over Texas, the Caddos thrived for almost 500 years, virtually peerless, masters of agriculture, production, exchange, diplomacy and early architecture in the region. They adorned their apparel with elegant ornaments and their bodies with vibrant paint and tattoo art. They created fascinating ceremonial blades and effigies and crafted some of the finest aboriginal ceramics on American soil.

By the time the Spanish met them in the late 1600s, however, the impressive Caddo culture had moved on, leaving only remnants of Hasinai presence in scattered farms and villages. They no longer built ceremonial centers or mounds, but one word from their language proved to be their most recognized and long-lasting contribution to the state of Texas. They called the first Spanish explorers they encountered "tayshas," meaning allies and friends. The Spanish later pronounced the word "tejas" and referred to the area as the Kingdom of Tejas.

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Getting There: Caddo Mounds State Historic Site, administered by the Texas Historical Commission, is 6 miles southwest of Alto (and U.S. Highway 69) on Texas 21.