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NORTH CENTRAL ILLINOIS

Students investigate 1600s DePue massacre

By Allison Ryan
NewsTribune Reporter

DEPUE — South and east of DePue, near the remaining vertebrae of a former railroad bridge, an ordinary cornfield shows no sign of the massacre that may once have taken place on its soil, long before the nearby town was founded.

Clay Skinner, a teacher at Illinois Math and Science Academy, Aurora, and a handful of his students hope to change that.

"You notice how scandalously little early history there is in Illinois. If this was Jamestown, there'd be a plaque or something ... This was a fairly earth-shaking event," Skinner said Sunday as he arrived at the site with his four students, Luis Carbajal, Sanat Bhole, Nina Gnedin and Thomas Vandiver.

The group is researching a series of three battles between the Iroquois and Illinois Indians that began on Sept. 12, 1680, and had rippling consequences for the tribes, the colonies developing to the east and the empire-building European powers, according to Skinner. The students hope their work will become part of history curricula in classrooms across the state, including perhaps the University of Illinois.

Working primarily with historical documents, including explorer Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle's translated diaries, they are trying to pinpoint the locations of the three battles that started with a trade conflict.

Iroquois, originally from the area now known as New York state, traveled far inland to find beaver furs, bringing them into competition with the native residents of the



DePue Mayor Don Bosnich (from left) shows a map of the area to Illinois Math and Science Academy teacher Clay Skinner and three of his students, Nina Gnedin, Luis Carbajal and Sanat Bhole as they stand near a cornfield southeast of DePue. The field, now owned by Bosnich's family, may have been the site of an Illinois Indian massacre in 1680.

Illinois area.

The first battle occurred on the Vermilion River near Oglesby, according to the students. Men of the Illinois tribe stayed to defend a city which housed 2,000-3,000 people, Vandiver said.

"The Iroquois were better supplied, they actually had muskets," Bhole said. Eventually, the Illinois warriors fled and the Iroquois destroyed their city, then paddled downriver to where the Illinois had hidden their women, children and elderly.

After slaughtering every-

one they found at the hideaway, the Iroquois continued downriver to Calhoun County, where the remaining Illinois warriors had fled, to fight the third battle, according to the IMSA students. Afterward, the Illinois were unable to organize any meaningful resistance.

More than just a skirmish between two tribes, the battles were an extension of European policy at the time. Great Britain supported their trading partners, the Iroquois, while Sieur de La Salle tried to bolster France's hold by

supporting the Illinois and their allies.

"The biggest implication is that the Illinois tribes had so much potential to really fight back, but because (they lost) this initial battle between them, it was really earth-shattering, not only... because the rest of the Illinois tribes saw that their attempts have been shattered, but for La Salle also because his whole life's work has kind of gone down the drain," Vandiver said.

The battles "put the French and British on a colli-

important conflict, Carbajal said.

"Reading all the accounts, the primary sources and these people's journals, you kind of come and expect to see exactly what they saw," he said. Sediment has filled in the gap that separated "Massacre Island" from the riverbank and Skinner said there wouldn't be much evidence remaining because the camp had lasted only 10 days. But he also said he had read reports that farmers were unearthing bones in their fields in the area for a long time.

Viewing the site, the students looked for reasons the Illinois would have chosen such an easy-to-reach spot.

"If you look along the banks and looking at this spot here... you can see how low the bank is. It really would be easy (to attack)," Vandiver said.

"The Iroquois weren't really good with canoes, so if the river had been really deep or there had been a giant channel, they wouldn't have made it," Gnedin added.

While they've seen a lot of contradictions among the accounts they've read, the best explanation they can accept is the Illinois' confidence that they could win the battle.

They hope their work will encourage more people to understand their local history.

"When you learn American history, you learn very, very little about Illinois, if anything at all," Gnedin said.

"Citizens of Illinois should know what their state was," Bhole added.

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course," that precipitated the French and Indian wars, which went on to play a role in the Revolutionary War, Skinner said. His students drew comparisons between the colonial situation and modern situations of unequal power, such as the tendency for French Jesuits and oil-rich countries such as Nigeria to restrict access to luxuries to other residents for the purposes of conversion and political control, respectively.

It was a little disappointing to see a cornfield on the supposed site of such an