

Brazos Valley Museum of Natural History offers viewers glance at colonial life

BY GRAY WHITTEN
The Battalion

The Brazos Valley Museum of Natural History is giving visitors a view of the lives of 17th-century colonists through the exhibition of a recently recovered French wrecked ship, *La Belle*.

The exhibit features items both ornate and mundane, but all the pieces work together to paint vivid pictures of the people's lives.

The ship, part of a convoy lead by French explorer Rene Robert Cavelier and manned by Sieur de La Salle, sank in Matagorda Bay, Texas, after the expedition overshoot the intended target at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

The French had planned to establish a colony to maintain control of the recently acquired Louisiana region and serve as a warm-water port for the area fur trade.

After navigational problems lead the group to Texas, La Salle attempted to return to the Mississippi with some of his crew, but was murdered in a revolt.

Had the convoy landed safely in the right spot, the colony at Fort St. Louis might have survived, tipping the balance of power in the Texas area from Mexican to French control, museum curator Tom Lynch said.

"The exhibit is particularly pertinent around here, because La Salle was probably murdered around Navasota," Lynch said.

Because the colonization mission was unsuccessful, the mostly-intact ship was found with many of its original fittings and contents intact.

The artifacts recovered were described by project director

Jim Bruseth in Texas Highways magazine as "a virtual colony kit." The layer of muddy sand that surrounded the craft prevented the invasion of microorganisms, which could have damaged the ship.

The children of some settlers were adopted by area Indians after their parents died in the crash, Lynch said. While some anthropologists will tell of the "kidnapped" French children, the Indians were simply acting as they thought they should and saving the lives of the orphaned children.

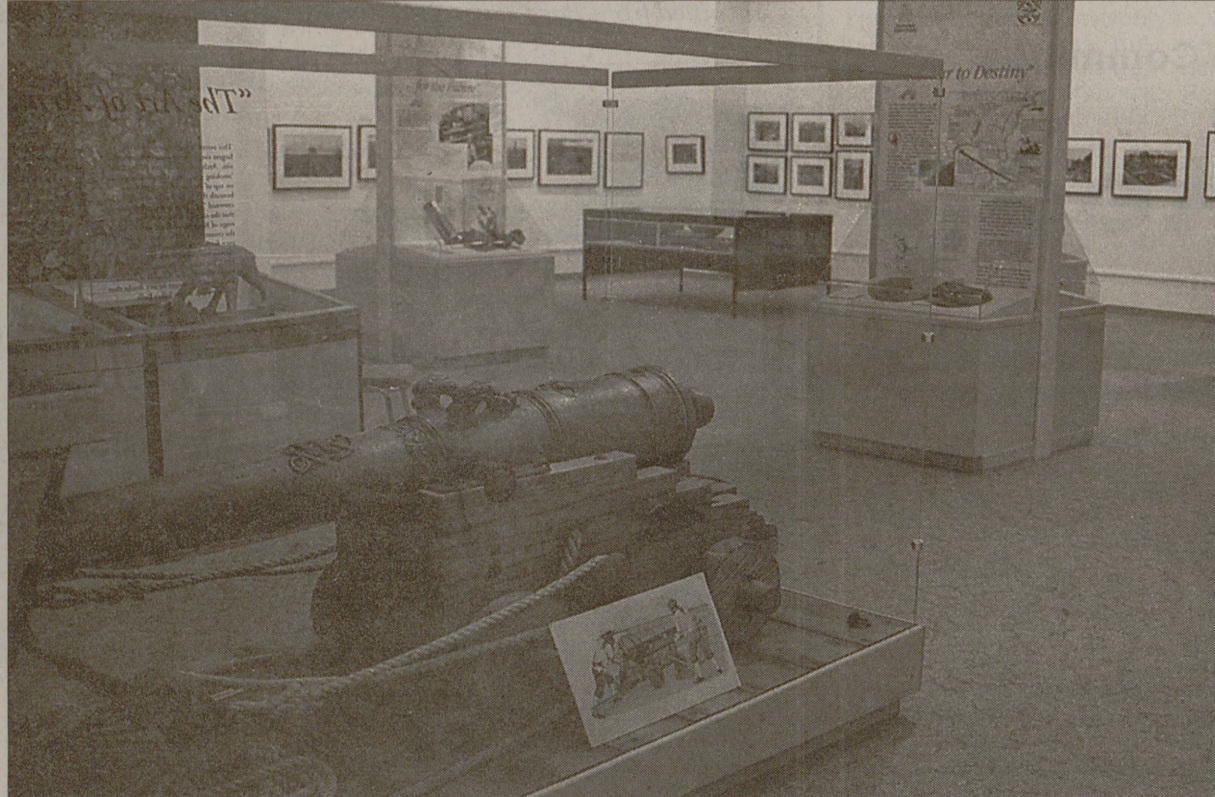
"It was sort of a fairy tale story," Lynch said. "One of those stories where everything went wrong that could. One ship was captured in the West Indies, and one ran aground. La Salle lost his own ship that Louis XIV gave him."

The exhibit features several cannons, including one very special gun. The solid brass cannon,

marked with the name of the Count of Vermandois, Admiral of France from 1669 to 1683, is considered the prize of the find, and would have been considered the absolute cutting edge of weaponry at the time of the wreck.

"The cost of making it would be equivalent to 400 men working full-time for a year," Lynch said, "probably about the same as a fighter jet today."

SEE LA BELLE ON PAGE 4.



STEPHANIE CORLEY/THE BATTALION
The *La Belle* exhibit features three canons, ceramic vessels, dishes, clothing, weapons and a cast model of an unidentified man who was found on the ship. The exhibit will remain open through Jan. 4, 1999.



ROBERT HYNCEK/THE BATTALION

New A&M group focuses on technical aspects of theater

BY KYLE WHITACRE
The Battalion

The exposure most Texas A&M students have to local theater is the one or two plays put on by the University's theater program each year.

Now theater arts students are offering Aggies a new chance to be involved in theater.

Six weeks ago, eight students from the theater arts program reinstated the A&M charter of the United States Institute for Theater Technology.

This student chapter was originally formed in the '70s but closed shortly after. Now it has been reinstated as interest in theater and the arts has returned to A&M.

USITT is the association of design, production and technology professionals in the performing arts and entertainment industry.

Its mission is to actively promote the advancement of the knowledge and skills of its members, Leah Graves, president of A&M's chapter of USITT and a sophomore theater arts major, said.

USITT's A&M Chapter performs

this role through education, service and training.

"We all are disappointed regularly of how much theater is neglected at A&M," she said. "We wanted to create an opportunity for all the people who are interested to get what they want to know."

Active participants in theater arts are now heading the organization.

The current agenda for the club, besides recruiting new members, is to complete a series of projects for the next year, including making T-shirts for each production of the theater program, hosting opening-night galas for every show, conducting a Theater Arts Career Seminar and publishing a weekly information letter via e-mail showcasing local acts, productions and a help-wanted section, Graves said.

As of now, only a few people are handling all of these projects.

"We basically picked officers by the ones most willing to make things happen," Graves said. "It really came down to who had the most time."

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