

# Archeologists uncover Aboriginal life

HOUSES WITH OVENS, PORCHES FOUND

By ROSS ANDREWS

Archeologists are finding that Aboriginal life was sometimes quite comfortably engineered when white settlement began.

Aborigines built themselves stone and mud houses in western Victoria, for instance. Some of their buildings had ovens, narrow doorways, porches and roof apertures to let out smoke from internal fireplaces.

Scientists of the Victoria Archaeological Survey have studied circular houses built by Aborigines near Lake Condah, Mount Eccles, Mount Napier and south of Lake Purrumbete. They apparently had low stone walls, were three to five metres in diameter and had bark roofs.

The circular houses had internal fireplaces and were said to have been built in places where timber was scarce. The survey team reported a resident of the district Mr John Kinghorn, who recalled his grandfather describing decaying bark and sapling roofs of similar stone houses on his family property.

"There seems little doubt, then, that this type of house was being built and occupied during the contact period [1800 to 1834]", members of the survey team reported in the latest issue of the magazine *Search*.

There is still some mystery

about whether Aboriginal stone houses were an original development or were inspired by the arrival of Europeans.

The archeologists found it difficult to study the subject because large areas of the Western District and the Geelong plains were cleared of basalt boulders by farmers.

"The remains of them are rare enough to elevate them to the status of oddities", they said.

But there was more to Aboriginal engineering skills than putting up stone houses. At Lake

Condah the archeologists studied an elaborate system of basalt dykes and weirs extending over about three kilometres.

Individual channels were longer than 150 metres and stone walls in the system may once have been higher than 1.3 metres.

Observers last century had seen canal systems covering more than seven hectares with some canals 500 metres long with banks up to 0.6 metres high. In other areas there were large wooden weirs up to 70 metres wide and 1.5 metres high.

On top of Mount Rouse there were stone arrangements more than two metres tall, suggesting time and energy had been spent in building them in a co-operative effort.

The team estimated it took 1,000 man-days (based on a 10-hour working day) to build the extensive Toolondo Canals in the northern end of the survey region.

The survey team found another mystery in the purpose of large mounds (with an average surface of 150 square metres) that Aborigines built mainly in clusters along major drainage systems.

"At the present time, no function for the mounds can be suggested", the team said. In Arnhem Land scientists have said mounds were used as refuges in times of flood, but in Western Victoria the mounds were often in areas not threatened by rising waters.

The team estimated it would have been possible to fit six Aboriginal houses on top of a mound.

It could have taken about 150 man-days to build a mound. The tools used by Aborigines were digging sticks and trays, on to which earth was painstakingly heaped and dragged away. It was also possible that wooden shovels with fire-hardened edges were used