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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY
FOR PROPOSED LANDFILL EXPANSION (PHASE I),
CITY OF DEL RIO, VAL VERDE COUNTY, TEXAS**

Ronald W. Burkett

**Center for Archaeological Research
The University of Texas at San Antonio®
Archaeological Survey Report, No. 193**

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ABSTRACT

A cultural resource pedestrian survey was conducted within a 105-acre tract acquired by the City of Del Rio, Val Verde County, for a landfill expansion project September 25 and 26, 1989. The results of this surface reconnaissance resulted in the recording of one prehistoric site (41 VV 1251).

Early Archaic points were found to be eroding at a depth of 60 cm in an erosional cut, and temporally undiagnostic bifaces and biface fragments were exposed on and just under the surface. In addition, a proximal fragment of a Paleo-Indian *Clovis* point was surface collected outside the study area at a greater elevation but on the same ridgeline. The limited collection appears to indicate a probable Paleo-Indian and Early Archaic occupation of the project area.

Mapping and subsurface testing are recommended to define the components present at 41 VV 1251, and to determine eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places or for designation as a State Archeological Landmark. Geomorphological studies are also recommended to ascertain the soil formation in this vicinity.

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INTRODUCTION

A pedestrian survey of a 105-acre tract acquired by the City of Del Rio for the expansion of their landfill facility was conducted September 25 and 26, 1989, by an archaeologist from the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR), The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). The survey was conducted under the provisions of a contract between Raba-Kistner Consultants, Inc. (for the City of Del Rio) and the CAR-UTSA.

The purpose of the survey was to identify any cultural resources that would be disturbed by the earth-moving activities associated with landfill development. Texas Antiquities Committee Permit No. 869 was issued for this survey.

The investigation was carried out by Ronald W. Burkett of the Center staff, under the general direction of Jack D. Eaton, CAR acting director. All field notes and drawings pertaining to this project are on file at the CAR-UTSA.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Virtually everything written about the prehistoric occupation of southeastern Val Verde County and its environs is inferred. There is no record of extensive investigations having been carried out in this area. That so little attention has been devoted to this area is particularly noteworthy because it is pivotal in understanding the transition between cultural adaptations as they are perceived within three major cultural regions in Texas. Current publications present overviews of these perceptions as they pertain to Central Texas (Wier 1976; Prewitt 1981), South Texas (Hester 1980), the Lower Pecos (Turpin 1984), and northeastern Mexico (Epstein, Hester, and Graves 1980).

Additionally, two major physiographic regions meet in this area. They are the Edwards Plateau, just north of Del Rio, and the Rio Grande Plain to the southeast. Three major biotic provinces abut in the Del Rio area (Blair 1950). They are the Balconian to the northeast, the Chihuahuan to the west and south, and the Tamaulipan to the southeast.

Though there is some disagreement on the specifics within these cultural regions (Johnson 1986) and at the risk of generalizing, cultural evolution throughout most of Texas can be presented within the following periodic framework: the Paleo Indian period, beginning with the emergence of the *Clovis* point tradition at 9200 B.C. and continuing until 6000 B.C.; the Early Archaic period, 6000 B.C. to 2500 B.C.; the Middle Archaic

period, 2500 B.C. to 1000 B.C.; the Late Archaic period, 1000 B.C. to 300 B.C.; the Transitional Archaic, 300 B.C. to A.D. 700; the Late Prehistoric, A.D. 700 to A.D. 1500. Though these broad periods primarily define changes in subsistence patterns, further definition has been applied when sufficient cultural data has become available. The chronological markers for these changes, in Texas, are primarily projectile points as they evolved in type and form through time or as new varieties were introduced.

The earliest generally accepted indicator of the presence of man in the western hemisphere is the fluted *Clovis* point. These points have been found over most of the state, and 205 have been recorded in Texas (Meltzer 1987). Until this survey, only one of these points had been found in Val Verde County, 23 miles north of Comstock on the Devil's River (Greer 1968), and none have been found in the adjacent counties.

An intensive survey was conducted within a portion of the San Felipe Creek watershed just north of Del Rio in 1973 (Prewitt and Dibble 1974). Fourteen sites were recorded, and artifacts ranging from late in the Paleo-Indian period to the Late Prehistoric were noted. Most of these sites were either deflated or had been disturbed during past land-clearing operations. No excavations were carried out beyond minor subsurface probing, and no definitive conclusions were reached.

An archaeological survey was conducted within the right-of-way for a proposed water main between San Felipe Springs and Laughlin Air Force Base, roughly 1.5 km north of the present survey area and parallel to U.S. Highway 90 (Labadie 1986). One site was recorded near the intersection of U.S. Highway 90 and Calaveras Creek. The site contained a light scatter of lithic debitage, and shovel testing produced no subsurface cultural resources.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA

The surveyed area is approximately 1.5 km southeast of Del Rio, Val Verde County, Texas, and immediately south of the existing landfill site. That portion of the acquired tract encompassing 41 VV 1251 is an approximately 30-acre area of high ground overlooking an unnamed tributary of the Calaveras Creek drainage system. This area itself is the northeastern extent of a plateaulike feature overlooking Calaveras Creek and the city of Del Rio (see Fig. 1).

Vegetation includes a few scattered clumps of short and medium grasses; however, the year of the

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survey was an unusually dry year, and the thinness of ground cover may be abnormal. Most of the vegetation present today consists of scattered to heavy stands of mesquite, whitebrush, agarita, yucca, cacti, and purple sage. This is usually an indicator of overgrazing.

Physiographically, the site is comprised of Acuna series soils which range in depth from 40 inches to greater than 60 inches over the C horizon. Depth to limestone or gravel ranges from 6 to 20 feet. Slope ranges from 0 to 3% (Soil Conservation Service 1981).

FIELD METHODOLOGY

Preliminary reconnaissance was performed utilizing standard topographic and geologic maps. An analysis of the terrain suggested that if an occupational site existed, it would be located on the high ground overlooking the tributary drainage feeding into Calaveras Creek. It was determined that the first step would be to locate the perimeter of the subject tract on the ground; second, to select physical reference points that would ensure a near 100% visual inspection of the ground surface; third, to pay particular attention to the high ground mentioned previously; fourth, to perform shovel tests as required. These procedures have produced the information contained in this report.

DISCUSSION OF SITE 41 VV 1251

A multicomponent, prehistoric occupation site was given the designation 41 VV 1251 (the first two digits designate the state [Texas is 41], the two characters designate the county within the state [Val Verde County], and the final digits refer to the chronologic sequence of officially recorded sites on file at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory at The University of Texas at Austin. A light scatter of lithic debitage and some lithic tools were found over a 30-acre area, and the site probably extends beyond the subject tract boundaries to the northwest and southwest. The site is located approximately 1.5 km southeast of Del Rio and 1.5 km south of U.S. Highway 90. UTM Grid Coordinates at the center of the site are 319960 E and 3248690 N (Del Rio SE Quad), at an elevation of 1050 feet above mean sea level.

Site 41 VV 1251 (Fig. 1) is included in a northwestern oriented, 30-acre leg of a 105-acre tract acquired for the expansion of the current landfill facility. It is situated at the northeastern limit of a plateau rim dominating the Calaveras

Creek basin. The terrain slopes gently from the southwest toward the northeast and culminates in four "fingers" that overlook a steep drop into an arroyo formed by an unnamed tributary feeding into Calaveras Creek. The arroyo has been impacted by earth removal and backfilling from the landfill operation to the northeast. This northeastern boundary is delineated by an old fence and/or property line which has served to curtail encroachment by landfill operations. The site appears to be generally undisturbed.

A description of the four land fingers overlooking the arroyo from northwest to southeast follows: the northwesternmost (UTM 31956 E/324900 N) was predominantly limestone cobbles on an eroded surface, a scatter of burned and fire-cracked rocks, and some possible hearth features. No lithic debitage was observed. The second finger (UTM 31974 E/324896 N) had some limestone cobbles but was predominantly silty clay with a few burned rocks, several pieces of lithic debitage, one heavily patinated chert blade fragment (Fig. 2,a), subsequently pressure flaked on three edges indicating reuse. The third finger (UTM 31983 E/324888 N) had a few limestone cobbles, increased number of chert flakes, one uniface scraper (Fig. 2,b), and one bifacially worked fragment (Fig. 2,c). The fourth finger (UTM 31996 E/324875 N) had some burned rock fragments, lithic debitage, four retouched flakes, one bifacially worked tool (Fig. 2,d), and two biface fragments (Fig. 2,e,f).

There is a stock tank located at UTM 31989 E/324870 N. Periodic overflow from this tank has caused the gentle erosion of a 2-m-wide, 60-cm-deep trough that runs approximately 50 m to flow into a natural depression caused by a seep. At least two hearth features are exposed at the bottom of this channel. In direct association with one of these hearths were two heavily patinated Early Corner Notched dart points (Fig. 2,g,h). This point type is attributed to the Early Archaic, 6000 B.C. to 4000 B.C. (Turner and Hester 1985). At the edge of the trough and at a depth of 6 cm, a lightly patinated dart point (Fig. 2,i) was found to be eroding. Though this point is unidentified, it conforms with types attributed to the Middle or Late Archaic chronological periods. On the surface in this general area, five unifacially flaked scrapers, four thick biface tools, and three thin biface fragments (Fig. 2,j-l) were noted. The soil is silty clay and appears to be colluvial.

In the area to the west and to the south of the stock tank and extending to the boundary of the study area are several possible hearth features and

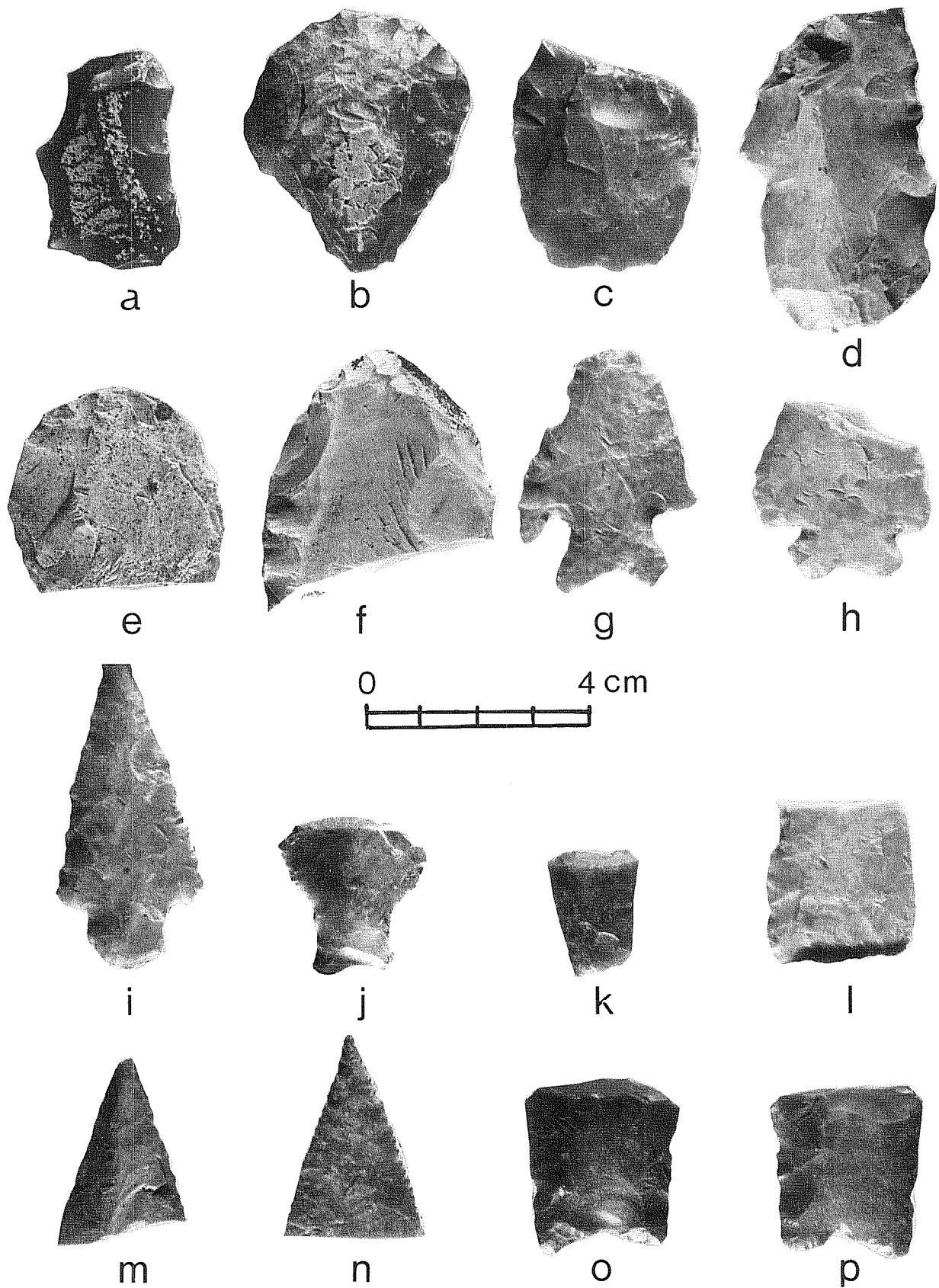


Figure 2. *Artifacts from Site 41 VV 1251 and Adjacent Area.* a, blade fragment; b, uniface scraper; c-f, biface fragment; g, h, Early Corner Notched points; i, stemmed point; j-l, thin biface fragments; m, n, thin biface distal fragments; o, *Clovis* point proximal portion with fluting (obverse); p, same portion (reverse).

light concentrations of lithic debitage. Two thin biface fragments (Fig. 2,m,n) were collected.

Outside the study area, approximately 500 m to the southwest and on higher ground, the proximal portion of a fluted *Clovis* point (Fig. 2,o,p) was surface collected. The surface of this high ground is predominantly fragmented limestone and appears to be completely deflated. There were two thick biface fragments and a number of utilized flakes exposed in the proximity of the *Clovis* point, but there was no indication of direct association.

Lithic debitage was not found to be densely concentrated at site 41 VV 1251, but, the greatest activity seems to have occurred just east and southeast of the stock tank. It should be noted that every chert flake examined appeared to show some sign of utilization, and many showed signs of being retouched.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Site 41 VV 1251 has been shown to include at least one undisturbed, stratified occupation level containing two Early Corner Notched dart points that can be dated to the first half of the Early Archaic period (6000 B.C. to 4000 B.C.). Surface evidence indicates another later occupation, probably Late Archaic, on the site. Considering the plateau feature as a whole and the recovery of one *Clovis* point fragment (datable to 9200 B.C.), it would be reasonable to expect to find evidence of an earlier Paleo-Indian occupation within the study area.

There is no proof of the primary deposition of the *Clovis* point; however, the physical context within which it was found on a high point overlooking a broad floodplain, is a normal context according to Mallouf (1981:134):

If Paleoindian incursions into the Lower Pecos and Big Bend were as sporadic as findings (Dibble and Lorrain 1968; Campbell 1970) indicate, then short term, open hunting camps located on strategic, well elevated landforms for observing the surrounding terrain, may prove characteristic. Long term encampments, on the other hand, may indeed be rare. . . .

The attributes that made 41 VV 1251 a desirable hunting campsite during the Early Archaic, and perhaps later periods, might well have been an attraction during the Paleo-Indian period. These attributes include a possible water source, now a seep, but which might have been a spring during

more mesic times. A look-out or sentinel on the high ground where the *Clovis* point was found would be easily visible from the camp; the arroyo, if it existed in earlier times, would provide an easy, quick, and covered approach to the valley floor below.

Over time, the colluvial deposition of soils have deflated the highest points on the plateau while overlaying the succeeding occupations on the lower terrace containing 41 VV 1251.

The variety of lithic tool types observed or collected on the surveyed site surface, indicate activities other than hunting. However, since these tools were on the surface, they are delegated to later periods of occupation. They may have been used in gathering and processing the more xeric vegetal resources associated with the Middle and Late Archaic periods.

Subsurface testing of this site is recommended because of the lack of definitive knowledge available on this pivotal microregion of Texas. It is within this microregion that questions of differentiation between interfacing cultural adaptations need to be addressed.

The 41 VV 1251 area contains what might be viewed as the single most desirable campsite on the northwestern quadrant of this plateau. The presence of at least part of a stratified Early Archaic deposit at this site has been noted.

The finding of the *Clovis* point fragment in the area implies a Paleo-Indian period presence. Because of the rarity of documented, open *Clovis* sites, any reasonable likelihood of identifying such a site should be investigated. A study of the geomorphology of the site area is necessary to understand the development of the soils.

Therefore, we recommend that 41 VV 1251 be mapped, a controlled surface collection within a grid system be carried out, and the site be adequately test excavated to determine eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places and to ascertain Texas Archeological Landmark status. We also recommend that a geomorphologist examine the soil formation.

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