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ARCHAEOLOGICAL TESTING OF SITE 41WH85

WHARTON COUNTY, TEXAS

Wayne C. Young

Archaeological site 41WH85 was located by the author during a routine archaeological survey of FM 442 in June of 1986. A small area about 100 ft. in diameter was located north of FM 442, west of the San Bernard River, and east of a private gravel driveway (Fig. 1), and contained a quantity of small oyster shell fragments and very scattered flint flakes. Surface visibility was quite limited by waist-high native prairie grasses. It was noted that all shell fragments were found along an eroded surface between the gravel driveway and the San Bernard River. Once right-of-way limits were defined and the property was purchased by the state, testing was undertaken to determine if there were any subsurface deposits at the site.

Testing of the site was conducted by the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation's Archaeology Section on November 24, 1986, under the auspices of the Procedures for the Protection of Historic and Cultural Properties (36 CFR, Part 800) and with the assistance of two SDHPT District 12 personnel and a backhoe. Three man-days were expended on the site.

Right-of-way stakes were in place when the testing program began, and they shed considerable light on the project boundary and its relationship to the site locale. In the site area, approximately 125 ft. of

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right-of-way width existed between the pavement edge and the north right-of-way boundary. Within this area, a distance of about 45 ft. from the pavement toward the north right-of-way had been previously impacted by highway construction and maintenance. Approximately 85 ft. of the site north-to-south extended into the SDHPT jurisdiction, while the east-west limits were about 100 ft. long between the gravel driveway and the edge of the river terrace.

Approximately 5 in. of rain had fallen on the site immediately prior to testing and had flattened most of the native vegetation. The area thought to be an eroded surface could then be seen as a small borrow pit from which most of the black clay topsoil within the right-of-way site area had been removed. A surface investigation under these conditions indicated that the observed shell was crushed oyster fragments and located immediately adjacent to the private driveway and FM 442.

A backhoe trench was excavated into the site along the edge of the borrow source. This 3-meter-long trench was 1 meter deep and failed to indicate any subsurface cultural materials. The profile contained 80 cm of black clay overlying a yellowish orange clay. The profile was void of shell fragments, flint flakes, features, or burned rock.

After a thorough surface examination and a view of the backhoe trench profile, it is the author's opinion that what was reported as an archaeological site is most likely shell brought in from the coast for road construction. Both the crushed nature of the shell and the

presence of oyster shell 50 miles inland from the coast suggest something other than an aboriginal occupation of the area. Also, most of the area thought to represent a site has been removed by borrow-pit activities and the intact portions within the right-of-way do not contain subsurface archaeological materials.

No additional research is proposed within the right-of-way. The existence of an archaeological site at this locale is seriously questioned, and the area does not appear to be worthy of a State Archaeological Landmark or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.