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Archaeological Testing of 41RN129, Runnels County, Texas

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**ARCHAEOLOGICAL TESTING OF 41RN129
RUNNELS COUNTY, TEXAS**

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ABSTRACT

Site 41RN129 is a prehistoric site on the east or left terrace above the Colorado River, cut by CR 129, in southeastern Runnels County, District 7. Phase II archaeological testing was undertaken at 41RN129 by the author in order to determine eligibility for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places (in accordance with 36 CFR, Part 800) and State Landmark status. Testing was also conducted in order to determine cultural context, and horizontal and vertical boundaries of the site within the right-of-way. The site contains a prehistoric cultural zone of unknown origin, that is partially exposed on the surface and buried under up to 40 cm of sandy soil. No diagnostic material was recovered during testing. Two possible burned rock features were identified during testing operations. An adjacent strip of right-of-way, up to 100 ft, will be acquired in the site area. Results of testing indicate that further investigations will not add significantly to the overall regional prehistoric database, and that site 41RN129 does not meet the criteria for designation as a State Archaeological Landmark nor should be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

INTRODUCTION

This report describes archaeological testing conducted at site 41RN129 in February of 1992. The prehistoric site is located on a high terrace on the east side of the Colorado River, on both sides of CR 129, 18 miles southeast of Ballinger in southeast Runnels County (Fig. 1). The site was recorded in 1980 as part of the preliminary Stacey Reservoir Survey Study by Espey Huston & Associates who recorded several prehistoric and historic sites along the banks and terraces of the Colorado River in anticipation of inundation by the Stacey (Ivie) Reservoir.

Survey of the project area was undertaken by TxDOT archaeologists in March of 1991. The location of 41RN129 in relation to the realignment of CR 129 was noted and testing of the site was recommended. Significance testing was initiated prior to a TxDOT road construction project which will construct a new bridge over the Colorado River. The new bridge will replace the current National Register listed structure on CR 129 over the Colorado River which will be left in place. A new alignment, approximately 227 ft. in length, will begin to enter the site area at the east end of the new bridge and will connect the bridge with existing CR 129. A minimum of 100 feet of new right-of-way will be required at prehistoric site 41RN129.

Archaeological testing, totaling 144 man hours, was conducted in February of 1992 by the author, with the assistance of 2 workers from the District 7, San Angelo Residency. Testing at site 41RN129 was conducted to determine the nature of the deposits and cultural contexts, to determine the site's eligibility as a candidate for the National Register of Historic Places, and to assess the sites eligibility for designation as a State Landmark. In addition, the results of testing may allow a comparison to be made between 41RN129 and other prehistoric sites surveyed and tested for the Stacey Reservoir Project. The new lake, now named the O. H. Ivie Reservoir is located on the Colorado River 17 miles south of 41RN129.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

Landforms within Runnels County fall into the Mesquite Plains District of the Kansan Biotic Province as described by Blair (1950). This dry, subhumid region is characterized by level to rolling plains receiving slightly more moisture and having better drainage than the High Plains located to the north and west. The region is also an area of transition from eastern forest species to western grassland species (Blair 1950:110).

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Vegetation in the site vicinity includes mesquite and acacia trees, prickly pear cactus, and buffalo and bluestem grasses.

The Atlas of Texas (1979) lists the project vicinity land surface formation as smooth plains with more than 80% of the area gently sloping with a local relief between 100 and 300 ft. Elevation of the site area is between 1550 and 1560 above sea level. Mean annual precipitation falls between 20 and 24 inches. The population of Runnels County averaged approximately 10.5 persons per square mile in 1990.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The most recently published archaeological studies of the west Central Texas region in the vicinity of 41RN129 include a report on 41TG91 in Tom Green County by Creel (1990), and Price and McGraw's (1991) report on testing within the right-of-way of FM 1929 in Coleman and Concho Counties.

A Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation data recovery project at 41TG91 (Creel 1990), located on the terraces near and above the South Concho River just south of San Angelo, uncovered information dating from the Late Archaic Period through the later part of the Late Prehistoric Period in the west Central Texas region. Site 41TG91 is approximately 38 miles southwest of 41RN129. Bison bones, possibly butchered on site, were discovered in the Late Archaic (1000-300 BC) stratigraphic zone. Artifacts from two distinctive Late Prehistoric Phases, the Blow Out Mountain (AD 900-1300) and the Toyah (AD 1200-1600) were found above the Late Archaic material.

Price and McGraw (1991) conducted significance testing of several prehistoric sites on terraces near the Colorado River in Concho and Coleman Counties. The study was initiated in conjunction with an environmental assessment for the FM 1929 highway expansion project. The prehistoric sites sampled, 41CC46, 48, 49, 50, 51, and 52, and 41CN218, are located approximately 20 miles southeast of 41RN129, just south of the new Stacey (Ivie) Reservoir. No discrete stratigraphic levels, nor any diagnostic tools were recovered in testing operations at the above sites. Lithic debitage was the primary artifact category uncovered during testing. Most of the stone tools found were simple, utilized flakes and a few biface fragments. A single Limestone hearth was the only feature located. None of the sites sampled for the project were recommended for further archaeological work.

Most of the previous archaeological work in the vicinity of 41RN129 has centered on projects associated with the construction of the Stacey (Ivie) Reservoir, located approximately 17 miles downstream on the Colorado River from 41RN129. The initial survey for the reservoir, accomplished by Espey, Huston and Associates in the early 1980's, located 431 sites. Less than 7% of the sites located contained Late Prehistoric components, 15% had Late Archaic levels, 14% included Middle Archaic components 4% had Early Archaic, and less than 2% of the sites located contained evidence of Paleoindian components. Several recorded sites contained prehistoric components of unknown age. The prehistoric sites generally consist of burned rock concentrations, chert flake scatters, mussel shell accumulations, or a combination of such.

Additional work by Prewitt and Associates, Inc. between 1986 and 1988 located several more prehistoric sites in the Stacey Reservoir area and tested a number of them (Bryan and Collins 1988, Bailey et al. 1989). The sites range in age from Paleoindian to Historic time periods. Archaeological testing since 1988 has been undertaken by Mariah Associates, Inc. who have accomplished significance testing at 40 prehistoric sites and gone into data recovery at eight sites. Report preparation is currently underway for the above testing.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Site 41RN129 is located on CR 129 on the east terrace of the Colorado River in southeast Runnels County about 17 miles upriver from the Stacey (Ivie) Reservoir. Adjacent lands are used primarily for raising cattle. Precious metal mining is ongoing on private land across CR 129 south of the project area. A fenceline delineates the old right-of-way and was used as an east and south boundary during testing (Fig. 2).

Although archaeological testing was limited to within the right-of-way, the actual boundaries of 41RN129 extend to the north, east and south of the project area. The site is exposed on the surface as a large, but sparse lithic scatter. A small group of burned rock, the probable remains of a campfire, was also found on the surface of the site within the right-of-way and designated Feature 1.

Site 41RN129 extends to an estimated area stretching approximately 700 meters north and south along the river bank and is about 300 meters in width. Less than 3% of the site within the right-of-way was sampled. Prehistoric sites that are similar in size and content were recorded by the Stacey Reservoir Project south of 41RN129 on terraces above the Colorado River.

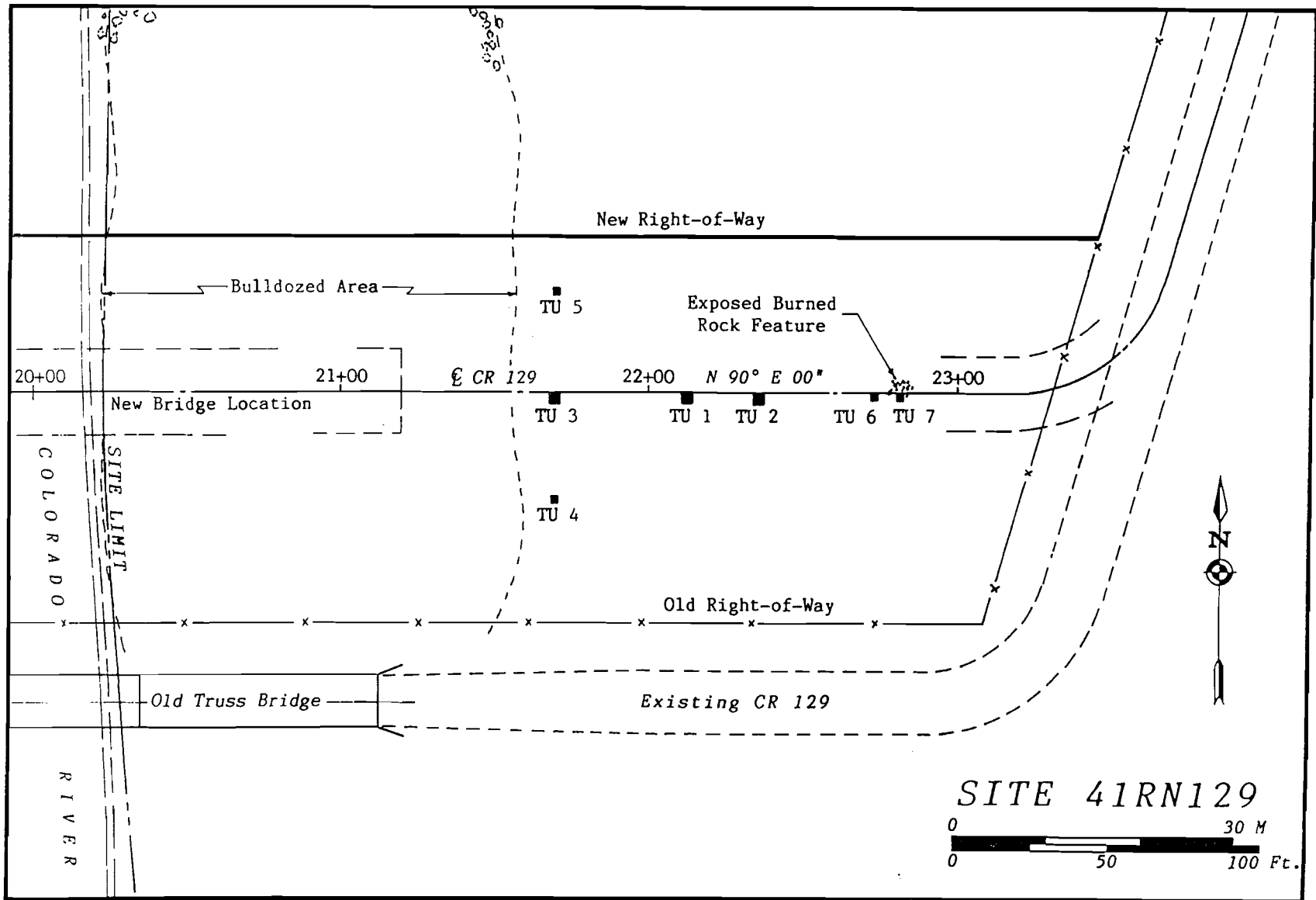


FIGURE 2. Site Map for 41RN129.

SOILS

The Colorado River cuts through Permian, Talpa Formation deposits in the project vicinity (Bureau of Economic Geology 1976). The general soil profile for the 41RN129 area may be characterized as consisting of deep, fine sandy loam overlying a gravel caliche (marl) conglomerate. Fine clayey loam forms the first soil zone (Talpa-Kavet Complex) from the surface to between 20 and 25 cm and diminishes in thickness toward the east end of that portion of the site tested. Zone 2 (Winter's fine sandy loam) consists of darker, reddish-brown, sandier soil and extends to approximately 40 to 45 cm below the surface. Zone 3 is a gravel caliche (marl) conglomerate that begins between 50 and 55 cm below the surface. The cultural material was found in zones 1 and 2. Zone 3 is culturally sterile. Gravel was sparsely distributed throughout the zones and increased in frequency descending towards zone 3. Zone 3 is exposed in a patch of ground adjacent to the river in the project area where machinery has stripped away the topsoil (see site map).

The Talpa-Kavet soil complex dominates in the western portion of the site near the Colorado River. Talpa-Kavet is composed of shallow, clayey and silty loams overlying alternating layers of hard Limestone and yellowish marl. Winter's fine sandy loam accounts for the eastern portion of the site within the project area and consists of eroded reddish brown fine sandy loams. The Spur-Colorado-Miles associated outcrop is the primary soil category in the site area. The soil has been subject to some erosion possibly causing a deflation of some of the cultural material found on the surface. Soil profiles of Test Unit 3 and 5 are provided in Figure 3.

PROCEDURES

The Testing of 41RN129 was initiated in February of 1992. The recently staked centerline for the new CR 129 alignment was used as a baseline for the compilation of a site map and for the formation of a testing grid. Four 1x1-m and three .5x.5-m test units were excavated in 10-cm increments to sterile soil levels. All matrix was screened through 1/4-in. hardware cloth. Testing concentrated on the segment of the site that occurs within the right-of-way. The actual excavation was carried out with trowels, flat and spade shovels, with the use of trowels to clean floor levels and examine possible features.

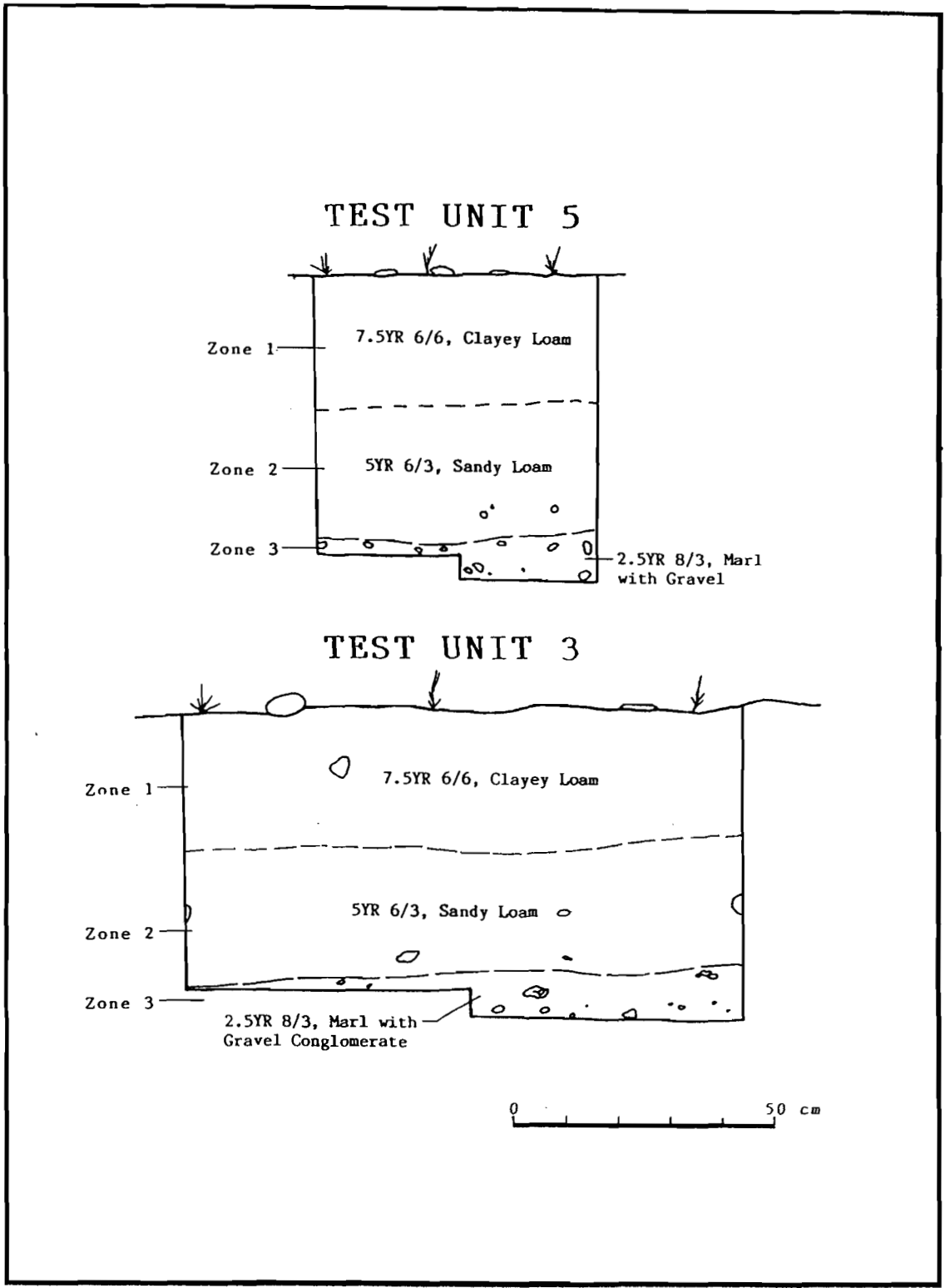


FIGURE 3. Soil Profiles of Test Unit 5 and Test Unit 3.

Test Units 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7, were placed adjacent to the centerline of the roadway and were dug to a depth of between 50 and 55 cm. Test Units 4 and 5 were located five meters south and north respectively of the project centerline. Two possible burned rock features were plotted and photographed.

FEATURE DESCRIPTIONS

Two possible features were located during testing operations. Both are scattered burned limestone rock concentrations. One such concentration of burned rock, Feature 1, was located on the surface above Test Unit 7 (Fig. 4). The feature is a collection of heat fragmented rock that does not appear recent because of the absence of any burned wood or charcoal. The other burned rock concentration, Feature 2, was uncovered in Test Unit 6, 5-10 cm under the surface. No charcoal or other artifacts were associated with Feature 2. Adjacent areas of soil did not appear burned.

MATERIAL RECOVERED

Lithic debitage in the form of small, reduction flakes, was the primary artifact category recovered from 41RN129, comprising 471 of the total 556 artifacts found. The flakes are of local chert in various stages of patination. None of the chert appears to be heavily patinated. Approximately 17% of the total number of flakes are categorized as flake chips under 1 cm in diameter. A small number of flakes (less than 3%) recovered may have been produced by soft hammer knapping techniques. Approximately 19% of the total flakes exhibit discoloration associated with burning or heat treating. Of the total number of flakes recovered, 3.5% are primary lithic reduction flakes, 31.5% are secondary flakes, and 65% are tertiary flakes.

In the tool category, 11 biface fragments, 1 unifacially flaked perforator, a biface preform, 1 blade fragment, and exhausted cores or core fragments, were located in the top three levels (0-30 cm) of Test Units 1 through 7 (Fig. 5). Altered flakes, most possibly used as tools, numbered 62, and accounted for 11.6% of the chert flakes recovered. Chert flakes listed under the altered category include those flakes purposefully

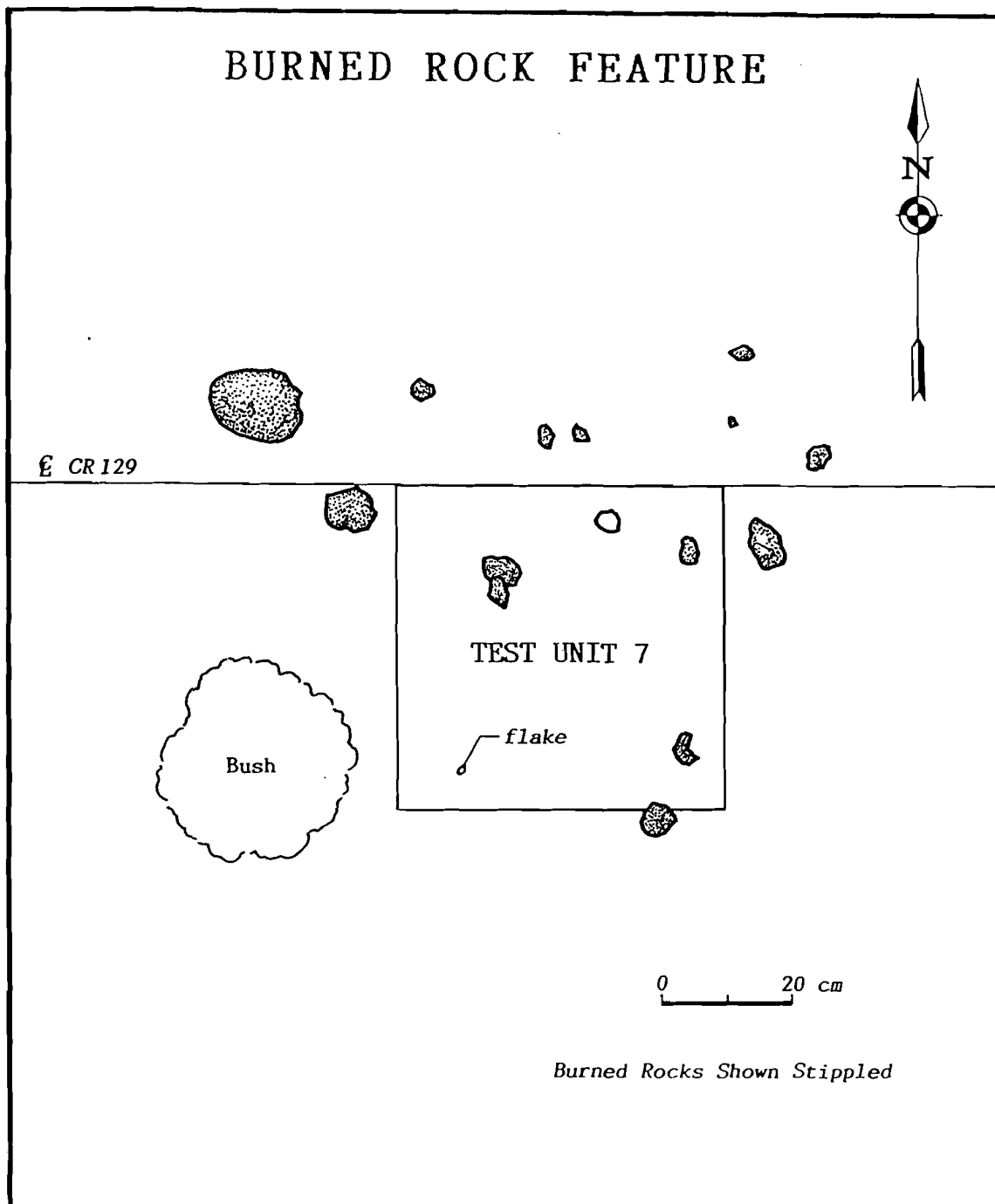


FIGURE 4. Burned Rock Feature on Surface of Test Unit 7.

edge-modified for a specific use and those flakes exhibiting possible evidence of use wear. Similar type material has been noted in Archaic sites recorded on the banks of the Colorado River downstream from 41RN129 (Bailey et al. 1989, Bryan and Collins 1988, and Price and McGraw 1991). No projectile points or other diagnostic tools were recovered during testing. Tool types recovered from 41RN129 are represented in Figure 5.

A few isolated burned rocks, 66 pieces of shattered chert (half of which is burned), and 230 freshwater Mollusca shell fragments were also recovered during testing. Pieces of mussel shell were scattered throughout the site but were not found in concentrations constituting feature status. Complete mussel valves recovered range in size from 2.1 cm to 9.6 cm. No historic artifacts were found in the testing operations. Artifact levels are charted in Figures 6-9. All artifacts will be curated at the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory, Austin, Texas.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Seven test units were excavated at 41RN129 in order to determine the nature of the prehistoric cultural deposits at the site and to decide if further data recovery operations would be necessary. Testing concluded that the portions of 41RN129 sampled consist of a broad lithic scatter buried in 30-40 cm of soil with some burned rock and chert flakes exposed on the surface. Mussel shells are also associated, but not in substantial quantities. Two small concentrations of burned rock were located and labeled Feature 1 and Feature 2. Both features were devoid of additional sources of information such as charcoal, burned soil, and associated artifacts and trash.

Cultural features and diagnostic artifacts are lacking in the area tested. The site has also been slightly eroded causing a deflation of some of the surface material. The available limited evidence suggests that the site probably functioned as an occupation area used for camping in prehistoric times. No evidence of prehistoric subsistence patterns such as grinding stones, animal bones, or other such midden material, were uncovered as a result of testing. Mussel shells, often very fragmented, abound at the site and are probably indicative of mussels being used as a readily available food source in prehistoric times.

No diagnostic artifacts were found during testing or are reported from the surface of 41RN129, thus making temporal placement difficult. Further sampling of different portions of this large, scattered site outside the right-of-way may reveal additional

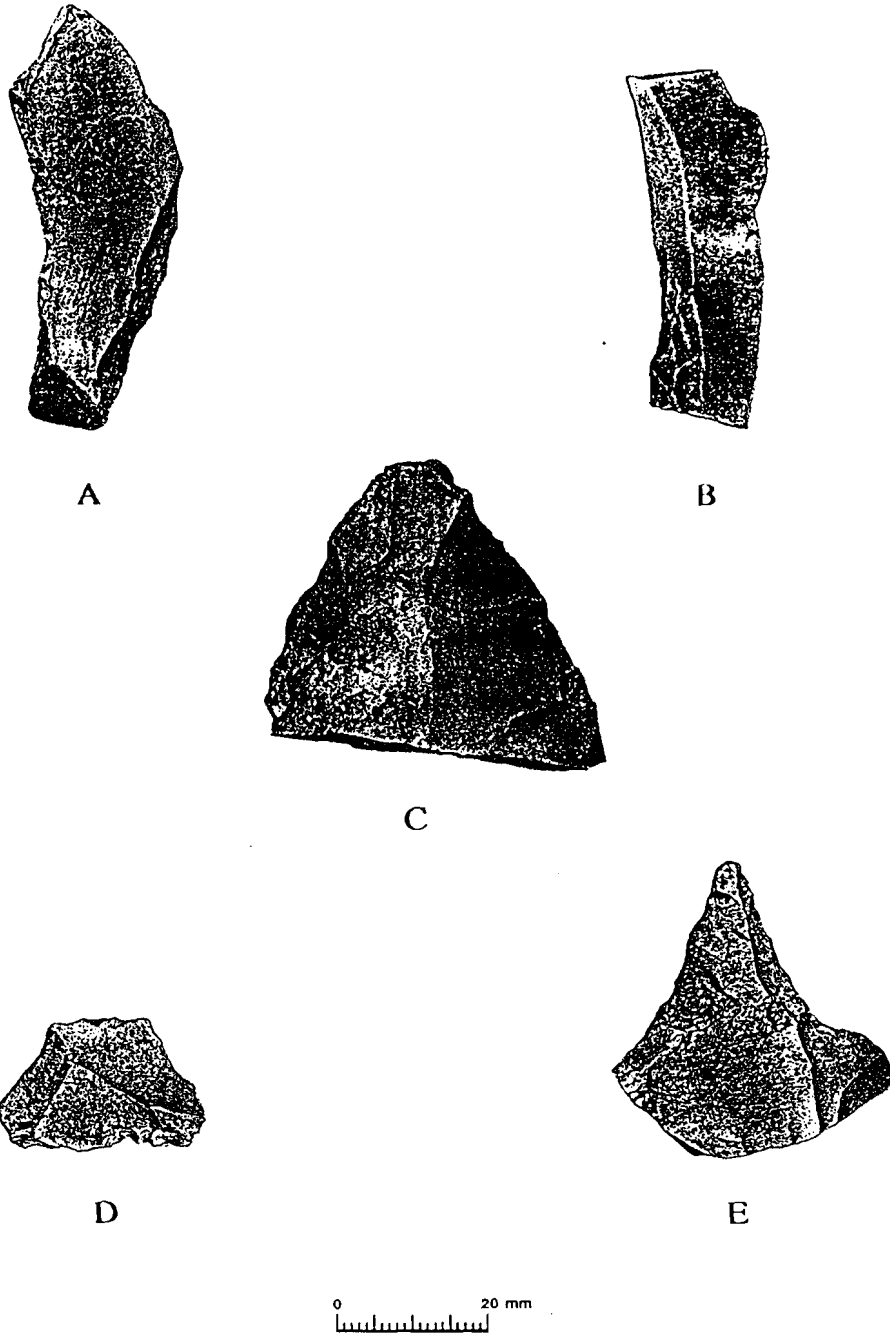


FIGURE 5. Tools from 41RN129: A, Altered Flake; B, Blade Fragment; C, Biface Fragment; D, Altered Flake; E, Perforater.

TEST UNIT 1	LEVEL			
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40 cm
Primary Flakes	2	0	0	0
Secondary Flakes	15	8	8	4
Tertiary Flakes	21	24	9	3
Altered Flakes	5	4	2	2
Biface Fragments	0	1	1	0
Chert Core Fragments	0	2	0	0
Chert Shatter	6	4	3	0
Mussel Shell Fragments	29	28	31	11

TEST UNIT 2	LEVEL			
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40 cm
Primary Flakes	2	1	0	1
Secondary Flakes	27	9	3	0
Tertiary Flakes	43	19	15	8
Altered Flakes	4	3	0	0
Biface Fragments	2	1	0	0
Unifacial Perforator	0	1	0	0
Chert Core Fragments	0	0	0	0
Chert Shatter	17	2	0	0
Mussel Shell Fragments	10	6	6	1

FIGURE 6. Recorded Material from Test Unit 1 and Test Unit 2.

TEST UNIT 3	LEVEL				
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50 cm
Primary Flakes	3	1	1	0	0
Secondary Flakes	28	5	5	0	0
Tertiary Flakes	55	13	10	1	0
Altered Flakes	12	6	2	1	0
Biface Fragments	1	0	4	0	0
Biface Preform (surface)	1	0	0	0	0
Chert Core Fragments	2	1	0	0	1
Chert Shatter	13	2	0	0	0
Mussel Shell Fragments	29	26	6	8	3

TEST UNIT 4	LEVEL			
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40 cm
Primary Flakes	1	2	0	0
Secondary Flakes	6	15	0	0
Tertiary Flakes	19	24	3	0
Altered Flakes	6	4	3	0
Biface Fragments	0	0	1	0
Blade Fragment	0	0	1	0
Chert Core Fragments	0	1	0	0
Chert Shatter	5	3	3	0
Mussel Shell Fragments	2	2	3	0

FIGURE 7. Recorded Material from Test Unit 3 and Test Unit 4.

TEST UNIT 5	LEVEL			
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40 cm
Primary Flakes	1	2	0	0
Secondary Flakes	2	2	3	0
Tertiary Flakes	4	2	2	0
Altered Flakes	2	1	2	0
Biface Fragments	0	0	0	0
Tested Cobble	1	1	0	0
Chert Core Fragments	0	0	0	0
Chert Shatter	4	1	1	0
Mussel Shell Fragments	8	15	7	0

TEST UNIT 6	LEVEL			
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40 cm
Primary Flakes	0	0	0	0
Secondary Flakes	4	2	1	0
Tertiary Flakes	11	10	1	0
Altered Flakes	0	1	1	0
Biface Fragments	0	0	0	0
Chert Core Fragments	0	0	0	0
Chert Shatter	0	1	0	0
Mussel Shell Fragments	2	1	2	0

FIGURE 8. Recorded Material from Test Unit 5 and Test Unit 6.

TEST UNIT 7	LEVEL			
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40 cm
Primary Flakes	0	0	0	0
Secondary Flakes	2	0	0	0
Tertiary Flakes	4	4	0	0
Altered Flakes	0	1	0	0
Biface Fragments	0	0	0	0
Chert Core Fragments	0	0	0	0
Chert Shatter	0	0	0	0
Mussel Shell Fragments	1	4	0	0

ARTIFACT TOTALS TEST UNITS 1-7	LEVEL					Total
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	
Primary Flakes	9	6	1	1	0	17
Secondary Flakes	84	41	20	4	0	149
Tertiary Flakes	157	96	40	12	0	305
Altered Flakes	29	20	10	3	0	62
Biface Fragments	3	2	6	0	0	11
Chert Core Fragments	2	4	0	0	1	7
Chert Shatter	45	13	7	0	0	65
Mussel Shell Fragments	81	80	57	20	3	241

FIGURE 9. Recorded Material from Test Unit 7 and Artifact Totals.

information regarding site function, subsistence and temporal placement. Site 41RN129 in this regard appears to bear some similarity to other nearby sites associated with the Colorado River that contain broad scatters of artifacts, but lack significant depth, diagnostics, and/or features. Sites tested within the right-of-way of FM 1929 (Price and McGraw 1991), discussed in the previous research section of this report, appear to fall within this category as do some of the prehistoric sites recorded by the Stacey Reservoir Project (Bryan and Collins 1988).

Only a small percentage of the 41RN129 is located in the project ROW and although the part of the site that exists within the project right-of-way contains artifacts, additional excavation within the right-of-way will not add to the data already recovered or to the prehistory of the region. The portion of 41RN129 within the right-of-way is not considered worthy of designation as a State Archaeological Landmark nor should be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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