

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONNAISSANCE OF THE PROPOSED
EAGLE PASS MUNICIPAL AIRPORT SITE,
MAVERICK COUNTY, TEXAS

Kenneth M. Brown

Center for Archaeological Research
The University of Texas at San Antonio
Archaeological Survey Report, No. 87

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INTRODUCTION

During October 1979, an archaeologist from the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR), The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) conducted an archaeological survey of approximately 250 acres of land proposed for development of a new municipal airport near Eagle Pass, Texas. The purpose of the survey was to make an archaeological assessment of the area as part of an environmental impact study. The field project was carried out under contract between CAR and Bernard Johnson Incorporated, Mr. Leslie A. Heinen, project Manager. The field work was done by Kenneth M. Brown, Center Archaeologist, under the supervision of Dr. Thomas R. Hester, Director, and Jack D. Eaton, Associate Director.

DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

The survey area, consisting of ca. 250+ acres, is located atop a broad, flat mesa at about 850 to 900 feet in elevation. The area is drained to the south by Rosita Creek and another small nameless drainage, and to the northwest by Seco Creek. The Rio Grande lies about five km to the west. To the northwest, the mesa is bounded by a steep and prominent escarpment where the land drops about 30 m to the Seco Creek drainage. Nearly all of the archaeological remains occurred along the rim of this escarpment, where good visibility of the relatively flat Seco Creek drainage is available.

All of the drainages in the survey area are dry washes. Except for recently created stock tanks, there are no sources of water in the survey area during dry weather. All water used at the Manges Ranch is hauled from the canal at Eagle Pass. Aside from these stock tanks, the principal human alterations to the landscape are a network of ranch roads, a maze of caliche pits and spoil piles at the northwest end of the proposed runway, the ranch headquarters and out-buildings, and several pipeline trenches. The area serves as rangeland for horses and cattle but appears to be grazed well below carrying capacity; grazing seems not to have affected ground visibility.

The substrate in the survey area is the Escondido Formation (Barnes 1976), consisting principally of clays, caliche and limonitic limestone. Small, patchy lag deposits of Uvalde gravels are also common. There are a number of small outcrops of caliche on the mesa top; these form low mounds, extensively badger tunneled and frequently supporting persimmon saplings. The survey area, from northwest to southeast, includes soils of the Maverick (escarpment and foot-slope), Olmos, Elindio, Montell and Zapata associations. These are calcareous, saline clays, loams and silty clay loams (Anonymous 1977); soils tend to be deeper, better developed and siltier on the flats and in the low drainages crossing the area, frequently supporting a mesquite grassland with thickets of mesquite, wild oregano and other woody species choking the swales. Grass cover in these areas is in many places quite thick, thoroughly obscuring the ground. Soils tend to be shallow, rocky or gravelly where the slope is greater; grass in such areas is sparse and scattered, and woody species such as ceniza, sagebrush or guayacan tend to predominate. Ground visibility in these areas is good, although gravel deposits tend to make close examination of the surface necessary. Vegetation on the mesa top is very patchy in distribution, with species such as sagebrush, allthorn, ceniza, guayacan and mesquite showing distinct concentrations.

SURVEY METHODS

Prior to visiting the survey area, a search was made of the Maverick County site file at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, Balcones Research Center, Austin. No archaeological sites had been previously recorded in the survey area.

Beginning from identifiable landmarks shown on the Site 1 airport plan, a series of transects was walked, following a compass bearing determined by the orientation of the tract; for the runway and westernmost industrial tract, the bearing was N 50° W. In the case of the other industrial tract, it was N 05° W. In practice, it was impossible to maintain a very straight course through the brush, and in several cases it was necessary to repeat or to add to a transect that departed from the planned path. At the end of each transect, the actual path walked was plotted roughly on the map, usually by simply joining the two end points with a straight line.

It should be noted that since ground cover was so variable in density, the reliability of the reconnaissance is also variable. In particular, the low swales north of the stables and along the northeast side of the runway extension could not be well examined because of heavy brush and grass cover.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

No archaeological or historic sites were found in the proposed runway or industrial tracts. A couple of exhausted chert cores and a few flakes were found scattered over the last 400 meters at the northwest end of the runway, but these were isolated finds.

A very small concentration of perhaps half a dozen chert flakes was noted on the surface near the foot of the escarpment (at about 825 feet elevation), but this appears to be slightly south of the proposed access road (and about 450 m southeast of Highway 57), covering an area of only three or four meters in diameter. One or two additional flakes were found to the southeast near the base of an earth fill stock tank dam.

The only archaeological sites located as a result of the survey were three small scatters of lithic debris along the northern rim of the mesa at about 875 to 905 feet elevation. These have been designated Localities 1, 2 and 3. Only one of these (Locality 2) is within the proposed construction area.

Locality 1 (41 MV 71)

This small scatter of lithic debris is the densest of the three. It is located between the 900 and 905 foot contour lines near the mesa rim (Fig. 1) on terrain gently sloping to the northeast. As a reference point, the core referred to below is about 25 m due south of the ranch road that follows the mesa rim and about 90 m west of the head of a small gully shown on the topographic map. The valley floor is somewhat rocky, supporting allthorn, acacia, guayacan, sagebrush and sparse short grasses. Ground visibility is good. The scatter appears

Figure 1. *Map of Western Area of the Survey.* Shown
are localities of limited cultural resources.

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somewhat oblong, oriented northwest-southeast, and is estimated as roughly 30 X 50 m across.

At the northwest end of the scatter, a small exhausted core of a distinctive yellow ocher-colored chert was noted on the surface; to the north and east of the core for an estimated distance of 2 m is a scatter of flakes and flake fragments of the same material. At least 10 of these were noted on the surface; in addition, one small chunk was found ca. 5 m to the east. Other items noted on the surface include an oval mano of unidentified stone (smoothed on one side only), a possible hammerstone, chert cores, a couple of preforms and a light scatter of flakes, primarily hard hammer percussion flakes. There were also scattered chunks of red limestone; since the Escondido limestone contains limonite, these may represent oxidized hearthstones from disturbed and scattered hearths. No clusters or *in situ* concentrations were observed. These possible hearthstones occurred chiefly in the northeastern part of the scatter.

Locality 2 (41 MV 72)

This is a smaller, less dense scatter of lithic debris on the crest of a spur that projects northward from the mesa rim, at about 875 feet in elevation (Fig. 1). It is directly in the path of the proposed airport access road as it climbs from the valley floor to the mesa. Good visibility of the valley is available at the north end of the scatter, which is estimated to be ca. 15 X 20 m across and which appears to lie mainly toward the east side of the spur. As in Locality 1, the scatter includes a small array of flakes from a single core (gray fine-grained quartzite); however, in this case the core was not found, perhaps having been removed from the site. These flakes seem to be distributed over a slightly larger area than in the Locality 1 example. Except for chert cores and one preform, no other artifacts were noted.

This site is very rocky, with a sparse growth of vegetation (ceniza, acacia, quayacan and sparse grass); ground visibility is good.

Locality 3 (41 MV 73)

This is a linear scatter of lithic debris exposed in an eastwest ranch road which intersects the proposed access road about 150 m south of Locality 2. The scatter extends eastward from the intersection for an estimated 120 m and is just outside the limits of one of the proposed industrial tracts. The terrain (ca. 885 feet elevation) is level, open and grassy with scattered low brush (guayacan, acacia, etc.); the soil is a fairly deep gray brown silty clay loam. None of the Seco Creek valley is visible from this area. Chipping debris is very sparse and is less abundant than at either of the other sites described. The area on both sides of the road was checked for debris, but none was found, possibly due to heavy grass cover or, speculatively, eolian silt deposition. The only artifact noted was a small end scraper ("gouge"). No historic artifacts except those apparently resulting from recent caliche mining and ranching were found. An old excavated depression, about three or four m in diameter and about 0.5 m deep, with rocky backdirt piled around the northwest, west and southwest sides, was found in one of the proposed industrial tracts, but there were no artifacts present.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

No archaeological or historic remains were found within the limits of the proposed construction areas with the exception of small lithic scatter, designated as Locality 2. Due to limited potential for additional information, this site does not appear to warrant further investigation.

The interior of the mesa top appears to be devoid of occupational debris for at least two km over the area surveyed, with the constraints on ground visibility previously mentioned. The only substantial evidence of occupation seems to consist of small lithic scatters along the northern rim of the mesa where visibility of the Seco Creek drainage may have been of locational value. Possibly the lack of surface water on the mesa may have limited occupation.

If the construction limits are changed, or if an alternate construction site should be chosen, further reconnaissance will be necessary. In the event that Localities 1 or 2 should be affected by such changes, it is recommended that: (1) limited subsurface testing, such as test pits or screened shovel tests, be considered at Locality 2 to determine its extent beyond the ranch road; (2) mapping of Locality 1, especially of the core and flake scatter, and some controlled surface collection should be carried out. Both of these projects would be quite limited in scope and duration.

REFERENCES CITED

Anonymous

- 1977 *Soil Survey of Maverick County, Texas*. United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service.

Barnes, V. E.

- 1976 *Geologic Atlas of Texas*. Crystal City-Eagle Pass Sheet. Bureau of Economic Geology, The University of Texas at Austin.