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An Archaeological Study of the McPherson Road Extension Project Laredo, Texas

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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
STUDY OF THE

McPherson Road Extension Project

LAREDO, TEXAS

Daniel E. Fox and H.G. Uecker

Center for Archaeological Research
The University of Texas at San Antonio
Archaeological Survey Report, No. 45

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UTSA - Center for
Archaeological Research

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I. INTRODUCTION

In October 1977, the Commissioners Court of Webb County and the Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio, entered into a contract for an archaeological assessment of the McPherson Road Extension Project, Laredo, Texas. The object of this survey was to locate, record and evaluate archaeological or historical resources that might be present within the proposed right-of-way.

As a result of the survey, three archaeological sites (41 WB 64, 41 WB 65 and 41 WB 66) were located within the right-of-way, and it was determined that these sites would be affected by road construction. Sites 41 WB 64 and 41 WB 65 were recommended for limited testing to evaluate their potential. Site 41 WB 66 was considered to be of little archaeological significance.

In November, archaeological testing was conducted at the two recommended sites. The results of these tests indicated that very few subsurface cultural resources would be affected by the road extension project.

The results of the archaeological investigations, a summary of artifacts collected, and recommendations are presented here. All field notes, photographs and maps are on file at the Center for Archaeological Research. The collected artifacts are stored at the Center's Archaeology Laboratory, The University of Texas at San Antonio.

The field survey and testing were carried out under the supervision of Dr. Thomas R. Hester, Director of the Center, and Mr. Jack D. Eaton, Assistant Director. The field crew consisted of Daniel E. Fox and Herbert G. Uecker, Center archaeologists.

II. THE PROJECT AREA

The proposed McPherson Road extension is located in the northwest part of Laredo, Texas. The right-of-way, 120 feet wide, will run northward 4,000 feet along the western boundary of the old Laredo Air Force Base, and then extend approximately 9,000 feet north-northeast toward its intersection with Del Mar Boulevard (Fig. 1).

The project area is situated in a zone of gently rolling topography, the surface of which has been altered considerably by human activity, particularly farming and ranching. The western margin of the old Laredo Air Force Base has been altered by earth-moving activities related to the construction and maintenance of the base. In recent years, this southern third of the project area has become part of a growing suburban residential neighborhood.

The northern two-thirds of the right-of-way crosses old fields and root-plowed areas which now are used as pasturage for cattle and horses. Vegetation consists mainly of mesquite and huisache, prickly pear, short grasses and areas of brush. Supporting this growth is a fine, tan, sandy, clay loam which is exposed in many areas. Siliceous gravels outcrop along elevated slopes.

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The project area is drained by a series of ephemeral streams which are part of the headwaters of Zacate Creek. The courses of these shallow stream channels have been affected, and in some cases their directions have been altered, by such earth-moving activities as stock tank construction, channelization and cultivation.

III. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Only in recent years has there been sustained archaeological research in southern Texas, and to this day most research has been in the form of descriptive reporting of cultural resources. Most of the archaeological work that has been done in Webb County has been performed by amateur archaeologists (e.g., Saunders 1976) and artifact collectors. In 1973, a professional archaeological survey along a section of Zacate Creek recorded three prehistoric sites, one of which was affiliated chronologically with the Archaic period (Hall 1973), dating somewhere between 6000 B.C. and A.D. 1200 (Nunley and Hester 1975:7). Prior to the present study, a total of some 63 archaeological sites in Webb County had been recorded.

IV. THE SURVEY

The survey was confined primarily to the proposed 120-foot-wide, 2.6-mile-long, McPherson Road extension right-of-way as defined by lines of surveyors' stakes laid out by Foster Engineering Company of Laredo, Texas. The entire right-of-way area was walked out by the two-man field team. Areas of typical soils and vegetation were photographed. All observed prehistoric and historic cultural evidence was recorded on field maps, in notes and on survey forms, and samples of archaeological materials were collected and recorded as to their provenience.

Results of the Survey

Three prehistoric archaeological sites (41 WB 64, 41 WB 65, and 41 WB 66) were located, recorded and surface collected by the survey team. Each will be directly affected by earth-moving activities along the proposed right-of-way.

Site 41 WB 64

Location: A mesquite flat situated between two shallow ephemeral streams intersected by the proposed right-of-way between 4,400 feet and 6,000 feet north of Calton Road, East (the southern end of the project area).

Elevation: 453 feet above mean sea level (MSL).

Description: A variety of chipped stone and thermally altered stone scattered over an area of about 3 acres (8 hectares). This site appears to be shallow (less than 50 cm deep), ovoid in shape, and oriented NE-SW. The soils consist of fine, tan, sandy clay loams. The pattern of mesquite trees and other vegetation suggests that the site area was once a cultivated field.

Condition: Disturbed by cultivation (possibly including root-plowing) and erosion.

Surface Indications: Thermally altered fine-grained and coarse-grained gravels, cores, thin bifaces, trimmed flakes and chipping debris representing a wide variety of stone types. Sherds of 20th century Anglo-American-made and Mexican-made ceramics were observed on the surface of the northeast margin of the site.

Remarks: Although 41 WB 64 appears to be badly disturbed, it is possible that earth-moving activities along the proposed McPherson Road extension will encounter buried cultural evidence which is preserved; therefore, such activities in this section of the right-of-way should be monitored by an archaeologist.

Site 41 WB 65

Location: A relatively flat area situated between the gradual slope of a hill (to the northwest) and a shallow ephemeral stream channel (to the southeast). This occupation area is crossed by the proposed right-of-way between about 6,500 feet and 8,000 feet north of the southern end of the project area (Calton Road, East).

Elevation: 458-465 feet (MSL).

Description: A thin scatter of chipped stone and thermally altered stone exposed in a fine, tan, sandy clay loam. Most of the site is covered by dense grasses, weeds, mesquite, prickly pear and some brush. The southern portion of the site has been cleared and root-plowed recently. The entire site, roughly oval in shape and oriented north-south, includes an area of about 2.5 acres (6 hectares).

Condition: Badly disturbed by cultivation (including root-plowing) and erosion.

Surface Indications: Thermally altered fine-grained and coarse-grained gravels, cores, thinned bifaces, trimmed flakes and chipping debris.

Remarks: This site appears to be badly disturbed and relatively shallow. Similar to site 41 WB 64, it is possible that earth-moving activities along the proposed McPherson Road extension will encounter preserved deposits of cultural material. For this reason, construction work in this portion of the right-of-way should be monitored along with site 41 WB 64.

Site 41 WB 66

Location: The gentle slope of an upland area or hill which flanks the proposed right-of-way to the west. The right-of-way crosses the lower portion of this site between about 1,200 feet and 6,000 feet south of Del Mar Boulevard.

Elevation: 470-490 feet (MSL).

Description: A very thin scatter of chipped stone and thermally altered stone exposed in open areas of dark tan, sandy clay loam with gravels. Much of this hillside is covered by mesquite, grasses and weeds. The northern and upland areas are cultivated. A 20th century stone and brick house is located on the southern end of this site, west of the proposed right-of-way. The total area of the site could not be determined.

Condition: Badly disturbed by cultivation, root-plowing, gravel quarry operations and erosion.

Surface Indications: Thermally altered fine-grained and coarse-grained gravels, cores and chipping debris.

Remarks: This site has been badly disturbed and does not merit further investigation.

The Collections

A total of 115 lithic specimens were collected from the surfaces of the three prehistoric archaeological sites recorded during the survey. Of these artifacts, 31 (27.0%) are fragments of thermally altered fine-grained and coarse-grained gravels which may have been used as hearth stones. Another 62 specimens (53.9%) are flakes and chips (chipping debris) which are representative of various stages in the manufacture of tools from locally available gravels. The remaining 19.1% of the sample of lithic artifacts includes 10 cores (gravels or cobbles from which flakes have been removed), three unifacially trimmed flakes (often referred to as scrapers), eight thin bifaces and thin biface fragments (commonly referred to as dart points or tools), and a fragment of a ground quartzite pebble which may have been used as a tool. Selected examples of collected lithic artifacts are illustrated in Fig. 2.

The provenience of these specimens is presented in Table 1. More detailed definitions and discussion of similar archaeological materials recovered from other parts of southern Texas can be found in Fox *et al.* (1974) and Lynn, Fox and O'Malley (1977).

Summary and Recommendations

An archaeological survey of the McPherson Road Extension Project area found and recorded three prehistoric archaeological sites that would be affected by road construction. Although these sites cannot be dated precisely with the available evidence, samples of cultural material collected from the surface of the sites probably represent numerous periodic or seasonal occupations by hunter-gatherer peoples during the Archaic period.

From intensive surface inspection, all three recorded sites appear to have been badly disturbed by 20th century farming and ranching activities, and are not of National Register potential; however, it is possible that some preserved deposits of cultural material may be encountered by earth-moving activities along the proposed right-of-way at sites 41 WB 64 and 41 WB 65. It is recommended that limited testing be conducted at these two sites in order to better evaluate the subsurface contents and probable impact expected by earth-moving equipment.

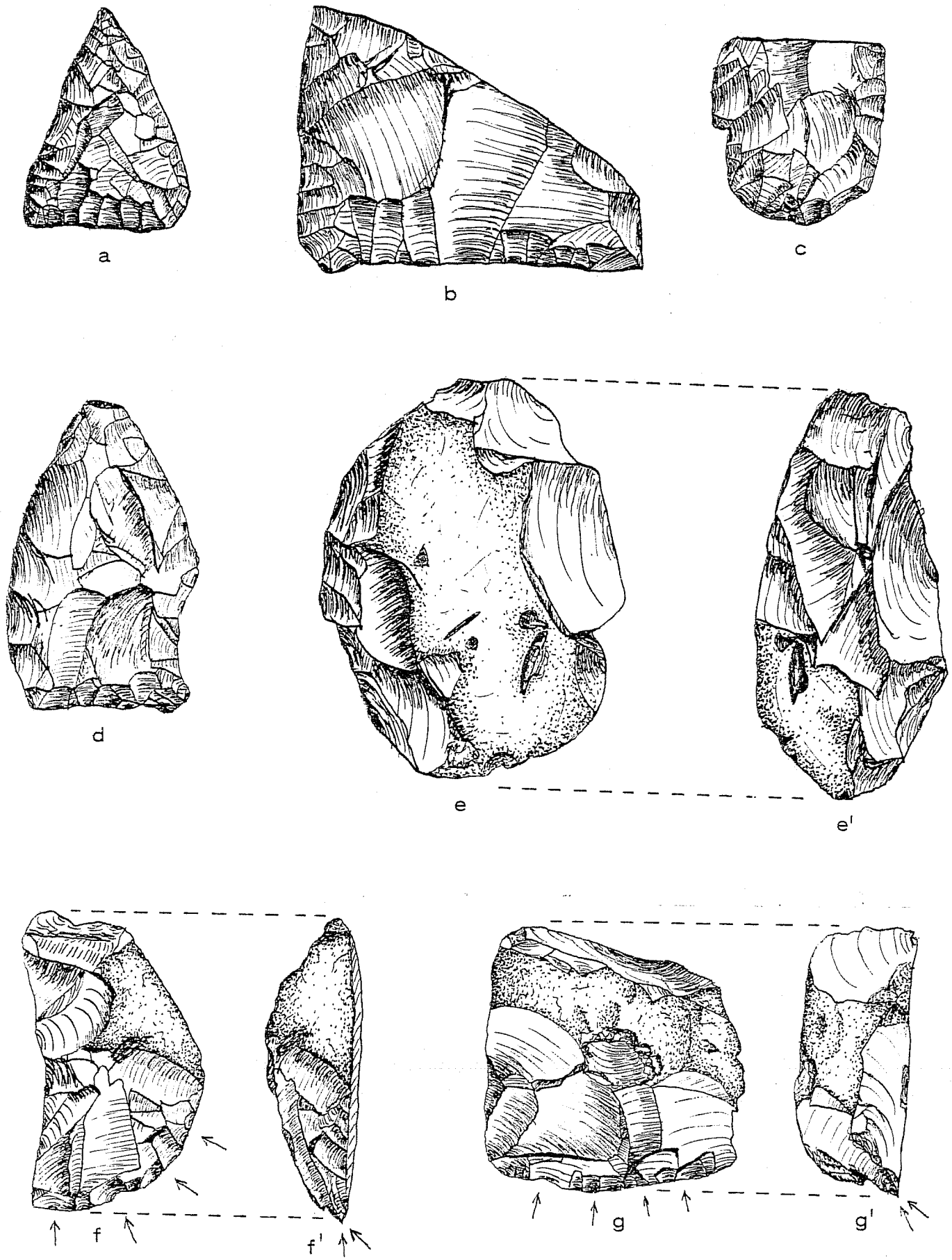


Figure 2. *Lithic Artifacts from the Surface.* a-d, thin bifaces, 41 WB 64; e,e' cores, 41 WB 64; f,f', g,g', trimmed flakes, 41 WB 64, 41 WB 65.

TABLE 1. PROVENIENCE OF SURFACE COLLECTED LITHICS

	41 WB 64	41 WB 65	41 WB 66	Total
Cores	5	3	2	10
Flakes:				
Primary	1			1
Secondary	9	5	3	17
Tertiary	12	3		15
Chips:				
Corticate	1		1	2
Partially Cort.	4	2	3	9
Decorticate	12	4	2	18
Unifacially trimmed flake	1	2		3
Thin bifaces	7	1		8
Ground stone	1			1
Thermally altered stone	21	7	3	31
TOTALS	74	27	14	115

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF SUBSURFACE ARTIFACTS

	*ST1	41 WB 64 ST2	ST3	ST4	41 WB 65 ST1	Total
Flakes:						
Secondary	1		1	**1		3
Tertiary		3	2			5
Chips:						
Partially Cort.				3	1	4
Decorticate	2		2			4
Thermally altered stone	5	4	13		1	23
Thermally altered clay		2				2
Charcoal		1	1			2
TOTALS	8	10	19	4	2	43

* ST = Shovel Test

** This specimen exhibits lipping.

V. THE TESTING

In accordance with the decision by the Center for Archaeological Research and the County Commissioners Court of Webb County to employ limited testing rather than monitoring, the field team excavated a series of five 50-cm² shovel test pits to various depths on two sites, 41 WB 64 and 41 WB 65 (Fig. 3). A barbed wire fence and the existing road right-of-way survey stakes were used as bases for horizontal control. The shovel tests were strategically located depending on topography, soil conditions, and surface indications of cultural materials. Vertical control was maintained by excavating in 15-cm arbitrary levels. All excavated deposits were screened through 1/8-inch mesh hardware cloth, and all shovel tests were backfilled.

Results of the Testing

Various kinds of evidence encountered in the test excavations indicate that the upper 40 to 50 cm of sites 41 WB 64 and 41 WB 65 have been disturbed by human activities (cultivation) and natural processes (erosion). These disturbed deposits consist of a fine-textured, tan-colored, sandy clay loam having a maximum depth of 50 cm. This upper soil zone, which yielded most of the cultural material found, is mottled and exhibits few depositional laminae or other stratification characteristics. It is underlain by a pinkish to orange, apparently less disturbed zone, containing greater densities of clay. This lower soil zone extends below the 60-cm depth reached by the shovel tests.

Lithic cultural material was thinly distributed throughout both soil zones, and no concentrations of cultural material were observed. Occasional small gravels were mixed with the cultural material.

The Collections

A total of 39 lithic artifacts was collected from the shovel tests (Table 2). Of these, 23 exhibit angular fracturing and other thermal alterations which suggest they are probably hearth stone fragments, and 16 fragments of chert and flint are classed as chipping debris which is representative of the final stages of lithic tool production. In addition, two fragments of burned clay loam (thermally altered clay), and two small bits of charcoal probably are evidence of 20th century land clearing operations.

Summary and Recommendations

In October and November of 1977, a field team of archaeologists from the Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio, conducted a survey and limited test excavations along the proposed McPherson Road Extension right-of-way in Laredo, Texas, for the Webb County Commissioners. A total of three prehistoric archaeological sites was located, recorded and surface collected, and two of these sites were test excavated. A total of 158 archaeological specimens was collected and analyzed, and data were assembled concerning the depth and condition of the sites. On the basis of these investigative efforts, the following conclusions and recommendations are offered.

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The three recorded sites, 41 WB 64, 41 WB 65 and 41 WB 66 probably can be attributed to Archaic period hunting and gathering peoples. Lithic artifacts from sites 41 WB 64 and 41 WB 65 probably represent the final stages of lithic tool production. This is indicated by the presence of dart points, bifacial tools, and attendant secondary and tertiary chipping debris. Chipped stone from site 41 WB 66 contains a higher relative frequency of primary and secondary chipping debris, indicating that this site probably was used as a quarry area.

It was obvious from surface inspection that site 41 WB 66 has been completely disturbed by various processes. Data recovered from shovel tests excavated at sites 41 WB 64 and 41 WB 65 indicate that, while small quantities of cultural material occur to depths of over 50 cm below the surface, deposits containing cultural material have been disturbed by 20th century human activities and erosion. Although there is a slight possibility that concentrations of cultural material or other prehistoric cultural features could be preserved in isolated, buried deposits, it does not seem likely that earth-moving activities along the proposed right-of-way will encounter such features. Therefore, no further archaeological work is recommended for sites 41 WB 64, 41 WB 65 and 41 WB 66.

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