AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE 85 ACRE
BAY CITY HIGH SCHOOL SITE
IN NORTH-CENTRAL MATAGORDA COUNTY, TEXAS

Texas Antiquities Permit Number 2189

by

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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE 85 ACRE BAY CITY HIGH SCHOOL SITE
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BVRA Project Number 99-08

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ABSTRACT

Brazos Valley Research Associates (BVRA) conducted a 100% pedestrian survey of an 85 acre tract of land, the site of the proposed Bay City Independent School District High School in north-central Matagorda County, Texas on May 23-24, 1999. This project was conducted under Texas Antiquities Committee permit number 2189. The project area was investigated by shovel probing and testing. No prehistoric or historic sites were identified, and it is recommended that construction be allowed to proceed as planned. Copies of the final report are on file at the Division of Archeology, Texas Historical Commission; Texas Archeological Research Laboratory; and BVRA in Bryan, Texas.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BVRA is appreciative of the assistance provided by Dr. Ned Walton (Project Manager) of Walton & Associates, Inc., the Engineering firm working with the Bay City Independent School District on this project. Special thanks to Dennis A. Mueck, District Conservationist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service for providing current soil data. At the state level, Jean Hughes, Assistant Curator of Records at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL) in Austin, Texas checked the TARL files for previously recorded sites in the project area. Mark H. Denton of the Texas Historical Commission, Archeology Division, was the reviewer for this project. The figures were prepared by Lili Lyddon of Lyddon Illustrations of Wellborn, Texas.
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INTRODUCTION

The Bay City Independent School District proposes to construct a high school on an 85 acre tract of land in north-central Matagorda County, Texas (Figure 1). The project area is bounded on the north by State Highway 35 and on the remaining three sides by private land (Figure 2). The project area is depicted on the Bay City topographic quadrangle, dated 1952 and photorevised in 1972 (Figure 3). Proposed construction consists of the main school buildings and secondary buildings, parking lots, roads, and athletic fields.

Matagorda County contains significant archaeological sites, both prehistoric and historic, and the area has been the subject of several major archaeological investigations. As part of its comprehensive environmental impact statement (EIS), Walton and Associates, Inc. requested BVRA to conduct an archaeological survey which was performed under Texas Antiquities permit 2189 and BVRA project number 99-08. The Principal Investigator was William E. Moore.

The following general discussion of Matagorda County was taken from the 1984-1985 Texas Almanac (Kingston and Harris 1983) and a biological assessment of the nearby Matagorda County Birding Nature Center (Brannon 1999). Matagorda County is situated in Southeast Texas and consists of 1157 square miles. Elevation in the county varies between sea level and 70 feet above sea level. Overall, the topography is characterized as flat broken by bays. The county is drained by the Colorado River, which bisects the county, and numerous creeks. Annual rainfall averages 47.29 inches. The January minimum temperature is 48 degrees, and the July maximum temperature is 90 degrees. These climatic conditions create a growing season of 296 days.

There is no current soils book for Matagorda County. According to the local Natural Resources Conservation Service office (NRCS) in Bay City, the soils in the county are currently being reassessed. Current data, however, shows the project area to be located entirely within Dacosta sandy clay loam soils (DaA), 0 to 1 percent slopes.
Figure 1. General Location of Project Area
Figure 2. Project Area Map
Figure 3. Project Area on Topographic Map
ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

According to a recently published planning document for the Central and Southern Planning Region of Texas (Mercado-Allinger et al. 1996:Figure 1.1.4), Matagorda County is situated within the Southern Coastal Corridor archaeological study region. In 1985, according to a statistical overview prepared by the Texas Historical Commission (Biesaart et al. 1985:159), Matagorda County contained 26 recorded sites. The site files at TARL revealed 116 recorded sites at the time of this survey. In 1985, no sites in the county had been excavated, 2 had been tested by hand, and all 26 had been surface collected. Fourteen recorded prehistoric sites in the county are Late Prehistoric, and five sites are listed as Archaic (Biesaart 1985:165). It is beyond the scope of this report to discuss in detail the archaeological background of Matagorda County, especially when numerous contract reports are available. The interested reader is referred to the statistical overview (Biesaart et al. 1985), the planning document published by the Texas Historical Commission (Mercado-Allinger et al. 1996), and an article entitled A Model for Cultural Succession for the Coastal Bend Area of Texas (Corbin 1974) for more detailed information regarding the archaeology of Matagorda County.

The first archaeological examination was conducted in 1932 when Woolsey recorded the Battle Island site (41MG1). In 1941, G. E. Arnold of the University of Texas at Austin reported finding one large prehistoric campsite and three shell middens. In 1971, when Alton K. Briggs published Archeological Resources in the Texas Coastal Lowlands and Littoral, only four sites were known in the county, and one had been destroyed by Hurricane Carla.

One of the early (and most extensive at the time) studies in the county was a survey of the Matagorda Bay area that included an inspection of the lower reaches of the Colorado River (Fritz 1975). This study used a shallow draft boat for a preliminary investigation of the Colorado River as the Pleistocene terraces could only be easily examined from the present river channel. No sites along the Colorado River were seen from the boat; "the cut banks were devoid of visible archeological remains" (Fritz 1975:10). Also, spot checks on foot at various points along the Colorado and its West Branch yielded negative information, and local residents knew of no prehistoric sites along these streams. Therefore, no further work along this drainage was conducted. The nearest prehistoric sites to the project area were found along the shores of two natural lakes. In 1980, archaeologists from The University of Texas at San Antonio surveyed an area adjacent to the lower reaches of the Colorado. No sites were found along the river, and the prehistory of Matagorda County was classified as "poorly understood at present" (Gibson and Gibson 1980). The most recent archaeological investigation in the county was a recent survey of a 23 acre tract by BVRA in May 1999. This study examined an area along the current bank of the Colorado River and a creek and tributary within the project area. Although the area appeared to be a likely setting for prehistoric sites not one was found.
FIELD METHODS

This project was performed using the 100% pedestrian survey method supported by shovel testing and probing. The entire area was walked (6 transects) and examined by 39 shovel tests and probes (Figure 2). When possible, excavated matrix was screened using 1/4 inch hardware cloth. In most cases, however, the hard clay had to be broken apart by hand. Only ten shovel tests had enough sandy soil to allow for screening. Virtually the entire project area consisted of very hard clay at or near the existing ground surface. Due to cattle trails and extensive grazing, surface visibility is estimated to be at least 40% over the entire area; some areas were less visible than others.
RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The site records at TARL yielded no previously recorded archaeological sites in the project area. A review of the literature revealed that significant prehistoric and historic sites are present in Matagorda County. No archaeological sites in the county are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). There are, however, two sites in the county that are listed as a State Archeological Landmark (SAL). These are the Mad Island Marsh Preserve (41MG60) on the coast and the Caney Creek Historic Shipwreck (41MG32). Numerous pre-twentieth century shipwrecks are known in the county. This investigation examined 85 acres, and no archaeological sites were found. The only evidence of activity in the project area was a road for farm vehicles, cattle hoof prints, and other indications that the area had been used for grazing, and rusted pipes presumably used for irrigation purposes. Overall, given the distance from the project area to dependable water sources*, the 85 acres is considered a low probability area for prehistoric sites. It also appears that this area has always been used for some type of agricultural activity, probably cattle grazing, and not as an area for settlement.

Soils in the project area appear to be representative of a Blackland Site as described on the "Nontechnical Soils Description Report" published by the NRCS. According to the NRCS report, a Blackland Site consists of deep, dark, clay soils on nearly level coast prairies. Climax vegetation is a treeless, tall grass prairie. Plants found in this setting include little bluestem, eastern gamagrass, switchgrass, indiangrass, big bluestem, florida paspalum panicums, sedges, snakerooot, gayfeathers, mimosa, sensitivebrier, neptunia, bundleflower, gaura, and indianplantain.

* The Colorado River is more than 1000 meters to the west, and Cottonwood Creek is more than 1500 meters to the east.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the absence of archaeological sites in the project area, it is recommended that construction be allowed to proceed as planned. It is always possible that archaeological sites are missed during any archaeological survey. Should evidence of a prehistoric or historic site in the project area be discovered during construction, all work should cease immediately. The Archeology Division, Texas Historical Commission, should be notified so that this find can be evaluated before continuing with this project.
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