

A RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY OF A 20 ACRE TRACT
IN SOUTH-CENTRAL HIDALGO COUNTY, TEXAS

By

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Project Number 95-06

Prepared for

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ABSTRACT

A reconnaissance survey of a twenty acre site on private land was conducted by Brazos Valley Research Associates (BVRA) on June 29, 1995 at the request of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma who wish to operate a gaming facility at this location. Although the entire tract was evaluated, only ten acres will be involved in the permit application. No previously recorded archaeological sites were found to be present within the project area and the field reconnaissance did not locate evidence of a prehistoric or historic site. The entire tract has been disturbed and is approximately five miles from the nearest water source, the Rio Grande River. Therefore, the project area is considered unlikely to contain significant, intact cultural resources. It is recommended that construction be allowed to proceed as planned with no additional archaeological investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am appreciative of the help I received during this project. Joe Guerra and his staff were very supportive. Mr. Guerra showed me the project area and provided the maps and a copy of the legal description of the area examined. Art Nave is thanked for serving as a representative of the United Keetowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma. He reviewed the report and offered suggestions. At the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL) in Austin, Texas Carolyn Spock, Head of Records, is acknowledged for checking the site records for previously recorded sites.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 29, 1995, Brazos Valley Research Associates (BVRA) was contracted by the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians (UKB) in Oklahoma to conduct a reconnaissance survey of a ten acre tract in south-central Hidalgo County that has been selected as the future site of a gaming facility. This tract is privately owned and will be donated to the UKB if the project is approved by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Secretary of the Interior. An adjacent ten acre tract (also privately owned) will serve as a parking area and is not included in the pending permit application. The reconnaissance evaluated both tracts. According to a legal description obtained at the Hidalgo County Recorder's Office in Edingburg, Texas, the project area is part of Lot 38, Block 3, in the C. E. Hammond Subdivision as recorded in Volume 18, page 439, Deed Records, Hidalgo County, Texas. The legal description of the ten acre tract appears as Appendix I of this report. Topographic coverage of the project area is provided by the 7.5' quadrangle, Hidalgo.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

Climate

Hidalgo County is located in South Texas in an area known as the Rio Grande valley on the north bank of the Rio Grande River. This area is hot and humid most of the year with an annual temperature of 74 degrees Fahrenheit. In winter, frosts are rare and continued periods of intense heat and drought have been noted during the summer months. The average rainfall is 61.65 cm with the majority occurring in early fall and late spring with thunderstorms most common in September and October.

Soils

The project area is composed entirely of soils that are described in the soils book for Hidalgo County (Jacobs 1981:48-49) as Reynosa silty clay loam. This is a deep, nearly level soil with slopes ranging from 0 to 1 percent. The surface layer is usually grayish-brown, silty clay loam about 15 inches thick. This is followed by a brownish-gray silty clay loam from 15 to 48 inches and by a pale brown silt loam extending from 48 to 65 inches. The soil is calcareous throughout. Reynosa silty clay loam is well drained and surface runoff is slow and permeability is moderate. The soils book states that a few areas of this soil have been altered by land leveling for irrigation and in these areas this soil has a thin surface layer because of cutting and in some areas a thick surface layer because of filling. In some areas the surface layer has been removed. This soil is used almost entirely as irrigated cropland.

Flora and Fauna

The reader is advised to consult Blair (1950) and Hall et al. (1987) for more detailed information regarding the flora and fauna of the region. The following information was taken from these sources.

The native vegetation is characterized as a thorny brush savannah with tall grasses and scattered motts of Live Oak or brush and prairies of Sacahuista, a tall, coarse grass. It has been suggested that grasslands were the primary vegetation during prehistoric and early historic times. Later, brush appeared along with cattle, horses, sheep, and goats.

There is substantial faunal diversity in the Rio Grande Delta. Animals known to inhabit the area include large game species such as deer, javelina, bobcat, cougar, and coyote. Small game species include raccoon, skunk, badger, opossum, jackrabbit, cottontail rabbit, and armadillo. A large number of migratory birds, snakes, lizards, turtles, and fish are also present.

CULTURAL CHRONOLOGY

The South Texas archaeological area that includes the Rio Grande delta is, according to Hester et al. (1969) one of the least understood regions in Texas. The earliest sites in South Texas dated to the Late Pleistocene, circa 9500 B.C. to 5500 B.C. These early inhabitants subsisted by hunting and gathering. They often followed what archaeologists refer to as "seasonal rounds." This is the practice of returning to favored areas during the year in order to exploit certain resources that occurred in these areas at different times.

Archaeological sites in far South Texas are most often associated with Archaic, Neo-Archaic, and Historic materials. Paleo-Indian occupations, although documented, are rare in the region. Lanceolate and stemmed projectile points diagnostic of the earliest sites have tentatively been associated with bones of Late Pleistocene animals at the Morhiss site northeast of Harlingen in Victoria County (Campbell 1976).

The Archaic period, circa 5000 B.C. to A.D. 1000, is characterized by a dependence on gathering of wild plants and the hunting of small game. Diagnostic artifacts include stemmed and triangular dart points, bifacial tools, milling stones, and bone and shell artifacts. In South Texas, the Early Archaic is represented by the Falcon Focus followed by the Mier Focus, a transitional period indicating a Late Archaic and Early Neo-American occupation.

The Neo-American period is the last prehistoric culture in the area, circa A.D. 1000 to European contact. It is characterized by flint and marine shell tools and ornaments including arrow points. The presence of arrow points in Neo-American sites represents a transition from the *atlatl* to the bow and arrow. In the Rio Grande Delta region this culture is evidenced by the Brownsville Focus. Interaction with nearby groups is indicated by the occasional recovery of diagnostic pottery sherds. Historic Indian sites contain tools and ornaments manufactured from glass. Historic Indian groups known to have inhabited the region include the Karankawa and Coahuiltecan. Newcomb (1961) provides the interested reader with more in-depth information regarding the various Indian groups living in South Texas during the Historic contact period.

PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS

The following listing of previous work in Hidalgo County and vicinity is given to provide an insight to the amount of work that has been conducted in this region of Texas. This list is not purported to be complete. Rather, it represents the major works and all additional efforts the authors were able to locate and stay within the scope of this project.

The first, and some of the most important, archaeological investigations in the area were conducted by A E. Anderson, a civil engineer from Brownsville, Texas. From 1908 to 1940 he made systematic collections from sites in Cameron County and northern Mexico. During this time he recorded approximately 196 prehistoric sites in Cameron County and about the same number in northern Tamaulipas, a state of Mexico. The Anderson file and collection at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL) in Austin, Texas contains data and artifacts from his work. In addition, Anderson (1932) published some of his findings in the *Bulletin of the Archeological and Paleontological Society* in 1932.

In the 1930s, E. B. Sayles (1935) conducted a preliminary survey of Texas. He used data collected by Anderson to describe what he referred to as the "Brownsville Phase of the Tamaulipecan." Sayles attempted to define a cultural and/or temporal separation for the southern Texas groups. Richard McNeish (1947, 1958), in later studies of the area revised Sayles' list of traits. Of particular interest to this project is the Brownsville complex defined by McNeish based on data from sites recorded by Anderson and McNeish.

In the late 1940s, a Brownsville complex burial site in Hidalgo County was investigated by Campbell and Frizzell (1949). The Ayala site proved to be important in terms of substantiating statements previously based on surface finds. In 1952, Frederick Ruecking, Jr. visited the Ayala site and attempted to collect additional data. Although his efforts were hampered by vandalism to the site, some of the data he obtained were incorporated into a later report on the site (Hester et al. 1969).

T. N. Campbell (1960) published a major article in the *Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society* entitled "Archeology of the Central and South Sections of the Texas Coast." This work provided a detailed discussion of archaeological work along the Texas coast prior to 1958.

In 1969, Hester et al. (1969) published a three-part article on prehistoric cemeteries in Cameron and Hidalgo counties. The sites discussed include Floyd Morris (41CF2) in Cameron County and Ayala (41HG1) in Hidalgo County.

Important information concerning burial patterns of the Brownsville complex was obtained by Hester and Rodgers (1971) when they investigated a single flexed burial north of the Arroyo Colorado on the terrace of an oxbow channel known as *Concepcion Resaca* about 0.8 kilometers upstream from the Ayala site.

In 1972, Douglas R. Brown conducted a survey in Hidalgo County to be impacted by construction of the Retamal Dam and United States Dike and the Modified Hackney Floodway as well as the closure of the Mission Floodway (Brown 1972). His survey documented the alteration of archaeological sites by extensive land modification activities and noted a general scarcity of prehistoric materials in the area investigated.

A major overview of the general area was authored by Thomas R. Hester (1973) and entitled *Hunters and Gatherers of the Rio Grande Plain and the Lower Coast of Texas*. This work presents a general discussion of aboriginal populations occupying the large area of Texas south of the Edwards Plateau and San Antonio River, often referred to as the "Rio Grande Plain." Hester's paper is a synthesis of previous work in the area. In a later work (Hester 1975), he discarded and revised some of his views in the 1973 version.

A paper presented by Hester (1975) entitled *A Chronological Overview of Prehistoric Southern and South-Central Texas* discussed the area of Texas from the Edwards Plateau on the northwest and the Guadalupe River on the northeast, southward to the Rio Grande. His study area covers 34 counties and is larger than the Rio Grande Plain discussed in his earlier paper (Hester 1973).

In 1977, a major study involving Hidalgo and Willacy counties was conducted by the Office of the State Archeologist (Mallouf et al. 1977). This agency sampled archaeological sites across all of Willacy and parts of Hidalgo counties in response to proposed construction of a floodwater channelization project by the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The final report contains very detailed discussions of previous work in the area and should be consulted in any serious research project involving South Texas.

A cultural resources survey was conducted in portions of Hidalgo and Willacy counties by Prewitt and Associates, Inc. in 1980 (Day et al. 1981). The purpose of this study was to locate, record, and assess the information yield potential of prehistoric and historic sites which may be affected by the construction of major drainage improvements within the two counties. Information regarding 63 archaeological sites was collected.

Espey, Huston & Associates, Inc. (EHA) conducted a cultural resources survey and records review of three proposed segments of transmission line right-of-way in Cameron and Hidalgo counties (Voellinger 1983). This is the closest previous study to the current project area. EHA archaeologists located two previously unrecorded sites (41CF122 and 41CF123) and revisited one known site (41HG7). These three sites are located in close proximity to the current project area. They are discussed elsewhere in this report.

In 1986, archaeological, geomorphological, and paleontological investigations were conducted in portions of Hidalgo and Willacy counties by Prewitt and Associates, Inc. (Hall et al. 1987). Forty-three sites and 21 isolated finds were recorded. The Sardinias Resaca site (41HG118) was intensively investigated through controlled surface collection, backhoe trenching, and test pit excavations.

Since 1986, a number of small area surveys have been successful in locating and recording sites in Hidalgo County. Reports for these studies were authored by Prewitt (1987), Quigg (1988), Crass (1989), Quigg et al. (1989), Bousman et al. (1990), Eling (1991), Good (1991), Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation (1991), Whitsett (1992), Whitsett and Jurgens (1992), and Bradle et al. (1995).

METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

Prior to the field investigation, archival research was conducted at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL) in Austin, Texas to check for previously recorded archaeological sites in the project area and vicinity. A literature search of relevant site reports, maps, and soils books was also performed.

The field reconnaissance consisted of a surface investigation of the exposed areas not in cultivation. This was supplemented by limited shovel probing. A recently excavated trench across much of the project area provided excellent visibility. This exposed area was examined for displaced cultural materials and measurements were taken to determine depth of clay along the trench.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The background check revealed that no previously recorded prehistoric or historic sites are present within the 20 acres examined during this reconnaissance survey. A limited surface inspection was negative in terms of observing cultural materials. According to the soils book for Hidalgo County, the project area is composed of Reynosa silty clay loam. Although this was not confirmed, the area does contain a clay loam overlying a subsoil that is very hard. This subsoil contains less loam than the top stratum. A trench through part of the project area revealed this subsoil at an average depth of 13 centimeters below the ground surface.

It is unlikely that a prehistoric site would be present in this area for two reasons. First the nearest water source is the Rio Grande River approximately five miles to the south and second, prehistoric sites are usually found on landforms containing sandy soils. The review of archaeological literature for the area showed a definite preference for proximity to water as a major factor in site selection by prehistoric groups in South Texas. Should a prehistoric site be present it would most likely be disturbed through cotton agriculture and other activities that its research potential would be severely diminished. Although some types of historic sites are not tied to water, any site in this area would likewise be disturbed with little research potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians of Oklahoma be allowed to proceed with their plans to construct a gaming hall on the 10 acres examined during this reconnaissance survey. An intensive survey is not considered necessary as this area is very disturbed and is not likely to contain significant cultural resources. Monitoring by an archaeologist during construction is also not necessary. Should, however, evidence of a prehistoric or historic site be uncovered during construction all work must cease until the situation can be evaluated by the proper regulatory agency.

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APPENDIX I
LEGAL DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT AREA

Property (including any improvements):

A 10.0 acre tract of land out of the North part of Lot 38, Block 3, C. E. Hammond's SUBDIVISION, Hidalgo County, Texas, as recorded in Volume 18, Page 439, Deed Records, Hidalgo County, Texas.

BEGINNING at an iron rod set on the East line of South 23rd Street (Spur #115) far Northwest corner of the following described tract of land; said point located South 81 Degrees, 20 Minutes, 15 Seconds East, 386.38 feet East and South 8 Degrees, 39 Minutes, 45 Seconds West 712.1 feet from the Northwest corner of Lot 36.

THENCE, parallel to the North line of Lot 38, South 81 Degrees, 20 Minutes, 15 Seconds East, 686.94 feet to an iron rod set, for the Northeast corner hereof;

THENCE, South 4 Degrees, 03 Minutes, 00 Seconds West, 681.7 feet to an iron rod set, for the Southeast corner hereof;

THENCE, parallel to the North line of Lot 36, North 81 Degrees, 20 Minutes, 15 Seconds West, 595.2 feet to an iron rod set, on the East line of South 23rd Street (Spur #115), for the Southwest corner hereof;

THENCE, with said highway right-of-way North 3 Degrees, 30 Minutes, 31 Seconds West, 695.11 feet to the POINT OF BEGINNING, Containing 10.0 acres of land, more or less;

SAVE AND EXCEPT, all oil, gas, and other minerals, which are hereby reserved unto the Grantors, their heirs and assigns.