

**An Archaeological Survey of the McSween Tract ,
Bexar County, Texas**

by

Harry J. Shafer and Thomas R. Hester

**Submitted to Frost Geosciences
Helotes, Texas**

**Report No. 39
Abasolo Archaeological Consultants
San Antonio, Texas
2006**

Abstract

Abasolo Archaeological Consultants conducted a Phase I archeological survey of the 36 acre McSween Tract for Frost Geosciences at the request of the City of San Antonio. The assessment consisted of a 100% surface inspection. A few trace of prehistoric activity in the form of widely scattered fire-cracked rock and an occasional chipped stone flake were observed, but no formal hearth features or sites were encountered. A recently abandoned 20th century ranch complex consisted of a two-story home, a detached garage apartment, and two barns. None of the structures are of historic significance. No further archaeological work is recommended.

Introduction

Abasolo Archaeological Consultants conducted a Phase I archeological survey of the 36 acre McSween Tract for Frost Geosciences at the request of the City of San Antonio. The assessment was carried out in accordance with the "Archeological Survey Standards for Texas" to determine the potential of any cultural resources for nomination to National Register of Historic Places. The assessment consisted of a 100% surface inspection.

The McSween Tract is located in Leon Valley. The property is bordered on the east by Bandera Road and is transected by Leon Creek. Most of the property is on a limestone ledge with remnants of a T2 and a section of T1 terrace bordering Leon Creek on the south. The property north of the creek is modern floodplain as evidenced by the extensive debris deposited from the 2002 floods. Extensive gravel operations have been carried out both on adjacent properties to the north and south.

The ranch is located in an oak-juniper parkland with dense prickly pear stands partly divided by Leon Creek. There is a two-story house, a garage and two barns situated on a bluff overlooking the narrow first terrace of the creek and the creek bottom. The area behind the bluff is relatively flat rocky pasture with much exposed limestone. Soils in the pasture behind the bluff and along the terrace are Lewisville silty clay (1 to 3% slope); those along the rocky bluff edge are of the Tarrant-Bracket Series (Taylor et al., 1991).

Archaeological Background

Local Chronology

The broad outline of the archaeology of northern Bexar County can be discerned. Major time periods and site types are briefly noted here. These temporal and cultural categories largely follow Hester (2004).

The **Paleoindian** period, 9,200-6,800 B.C., has distinctive chipped stone spear points used in hunting mammoth and other late Ice Age mammals early in the period. Other spear types appear with a shift to bison, deer and other game after the Ice Age ended around 8000 B.C. Known site types in northern Bexar County are *campsites* with flint-chipping debris from stone-tool making and repair. The Pavo Real site, of Clovis age (9,200 B.C.) was excavated near FM1604 and Leon Creek. A later site, dating around 7,500 B.C., was investigated on the grounds of St. Mary's Hall on Salado Creek. Most recently, the Chandler site on Culebra Creek has been partially excavated, yielding artifacts between 7,500-6,800 B.C.

Sites of the following **Archaic** period are common in northern Bexar County. These peoples were hunters and gatherers as in the earlier Paleoindian period, but lived in an

environment very similar to those of modern times. Projectile points used to tip spears (often erroneously called “arrowheads”) change in shape through time, from 6,800 B.C. to 500 A.D. Archaeologists use these forms to recognize more specific time frames within the Archaic (e.g., Early, Middle and Late Archaic). In northern Bexar County, the most distinctive Archaic site is the *burned rock midden*. These large accumulations of fire-cracked limestone result from the use of earth-oven cooking starting around 3,000 B.C. (Black et al. 1997). Such features were part of *larger campsites*, with large amounts of flint debris from tool-making; sometimes, animal bone (dietary remains) and charcoal that can be used for radiocarbon dating. Other Archaic site types include *lithic procurement* areas (where flint cobbles eroded out of the Edwards limestone and were processed), *lithic scatters* (lightly-used areas probably representing short-term hunting and gathering activities), and rarely, *sinkhole burials* (Archaic peoples often disposed of their dead by placing them in sinkholes and caverns).

By 700 A.D., there began to be some changes in the long hunter-gatherer lifeway. The **Late Prehistoric** is first seen with the introduction of the bow and arrow. The stone arrow points are very small (mistakenly called “bird points”), but could be used in hunting game of any size. By 1300 A.D., the economy emphasized buffalo-hunting. Most sites of this era include *campsites*, often in areas previously used by Archaic peoples, *lithic scatters* of this age; and the *lithic procurement areas* of earlier times continued to be used.

During the Historic period, the best known archaeological remains are *ranch and farm houses of cut stone*, dating from the 1840s through the 1880s. Stacked- stone fences also occur. Such sites, including those without surviving structures, are recognized from 19th century pottery fragments, artifacts of glass and metal, etc. Later Historic houses and farmsteads, through the early 1900s, are also found.

Nearby Archaeological Sites

The Leon Creek drainage was first surveyed for archaeological resources by Paul McGuff and William Fawcett in the late 1960s and early 1970; these sites are recorded at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL) at The University of Texas at Austin (Texas Archeological Site Atlas, Texas Historical Commission). Later work along Leon Creek was done at the Pavo Real site, noted above, once located south of FM1604 and dating to Paleoindian times. The Center for Archaeological Research (CAR), The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), has carried out a variety of studies in the Leon Creek drainage since the 1970s, most notable being the work of Tennis (e.g., 1995) at sites on Leon Creek not far from the UTSA campus.

Almost all of the focus on Leon Creek has been upstream from the McSween Tract. However, there are several sites recorded by McGuff and Fawcett just across Bandera Road, not far from the survey area. These include sites 41BX54,55,58,59,60,61,62, 73 and 74. Most are lithic scatters or minor campsites with little research potential; only 41BX60 had a diagnostic artifact, a Late Archaic Montell dart point (Turner and Hester 1993).. One is a rockshelter (41BX62), with some flakes and other materials in 1970

(probably long since destroyed by collectors). 41BX73 is represented by collections housed at the Witte Museum. A probable female juvenile burial was excavated in the 1960s, accompanied by several shell ornaments in necklace form. McGuff and Fawcett link it to the Late Prehistoric era. One site downstream on Leon Creek was recorded by J. A. Jaquier during a 201 Survey for the CAR in 1977. It was an occupation site, marked by scattered lithic debris.

Survey Findings

The 100% pedestrian survey of the McSween Tract yielded only widely scattered traces of prehistoric utilization. No concentrated deposits of cultural material were observed although fire-cracked rock was noted scattered throughout the pasture south of the bluff line. No concentrations of burned rock that would signify hearth locations or burned rock middens were observed. It should be noted, however, that the entire pasture had been mechanically cleared at least once in the past to remove juniper and other unwanted brush. This scraping could have displaced hearths, but would not have obscured burned rock middens.

A few scattered burned rocks were also noted on the terrace below (north of) the house. The terrace is an abandoned field and contains alluvial soils capping a dense Pleistocene gravel deposit. No buried burned rock was noted eroding into the creek along the bank, although there is some potential for buried deposits to occur on these terraces in the Leon Valley. The Pavo Real site (41BX52) is a classic example (Collins et al. 2003).

The floodplain across Leon Creek yielded no traces of prehistoric human activity, but was laden with debris from past floods, the latest major flood was in 2002.

Five abandoned structures associated with a 20th century ranch complex remained standing albeit abandoned at the time of the survey. The main structure is a two story house ranch house constructed probably in the second quarter of the 20th century (Fig. 4). Associated with this structure is a detached garage with an apartment, and two barns, the larger of which is shown in Figure 5.

Artifacts observed during the survey other than burned rock included an occasional chipped stone flake and a Potranco biface (Fig.6). Potranco bifaces were expediently made tools made of any chert resource available and used to exploit certain kinds of plants (possibly bulbous plants) that naturally occur in the Balcones Canyonlands. The distribution of Potranco bifaces is an interesting phenomenon. They frequently occur as discarded artifacts in the landscape away from campsites.

Summary

A 100% pedestrian survey of the McSween Tract yielded scant traces of prehistoric human activity. As with a number of sites recorded in the Leon Creek drainage in this area, the pasture behind the bluff and northeast of the ranch house may have been marked by light occupation, with lithic scatters and hearths. If this was used in ancient times, any

evidence was essentially removed by rootplowing and bulldozing to remove unwanted vegetation and promote the growth of grass. This mechanical activity would have displaced limestone hearths to the extent that only scattered burned rocks remained. It is clear that none of the observed cultural material has contextual integrity.

A recently abandoned 20th century home, garage apartment, and two barns remain standing on the property. It is our assessment that none of these structures are of historical significance. No further archaeological work is recommended for the McSween Tract.

References Cited

- Black, S. L., L. W. Ellis, D. G. Creel, and G. T. Goode
1997 *Hot Rock Cooking on the Greater Edwards Plateau: Four Burned Rock Midden Sites in West Central Texas*. Two volumes. Studies in Archeology 22, Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, The University of Texas at Austin, and Archeology Studies Program, Report 2, Environmental Affairs Department, Texas Department of Transportation. Austin.
- Collins, M. B., D. B. Hudler, and S.L. Black
2003 *Pavo Real (41BX52): A Paleoindian and Archaic Camp and Workshop on the Balcones Escarpment, South-Central Texas*. Studies in Archeology 41. Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, The University of Texas at Austin.
- Hester, T. R.
2004 The Prehistory of South Texas. In *The Prehistory of Texas*, ed. by T. K. Perttula, pp. 127-154. Texas A&M University Press, College Station.
- Taylor, F. B., R. B. Hailey, and D. L. Richmond
1991 *Soil Survey of Bexar County*. Series 1962, No. 12. Reissued June 1991. United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, Washington, D.C.
- Tennis, C. L.
1995 *Archaic Land Use of Upper Leon Creek Terraces: Archaeological Testing In Northern Bexar County, Texas*. Archaeological Survey Report 234. Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio.
- Turner, E. S. and T. R. Hester
1993 *Guide to Stone Artifacts of Texas Indians*. 2nd ed. Gulf Publishing, Houston.

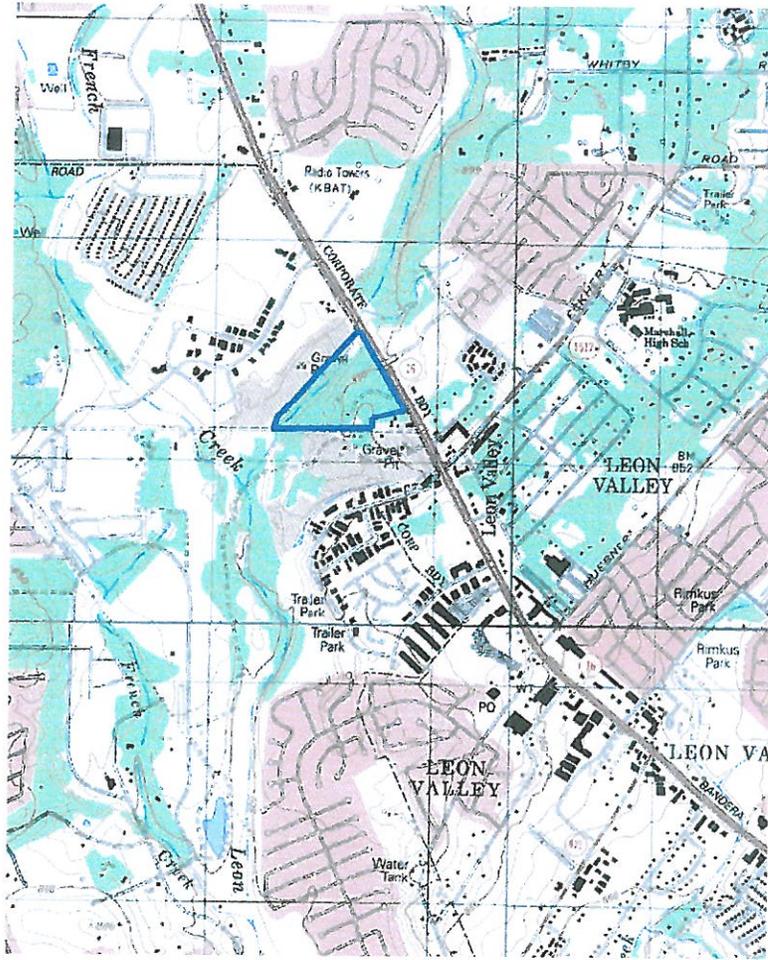


Figure 2. Topographic map of the McSween Tract. Image provided by Frost GeoSciences.



Figure 3. View of the upland pasture at the McSween Tract.

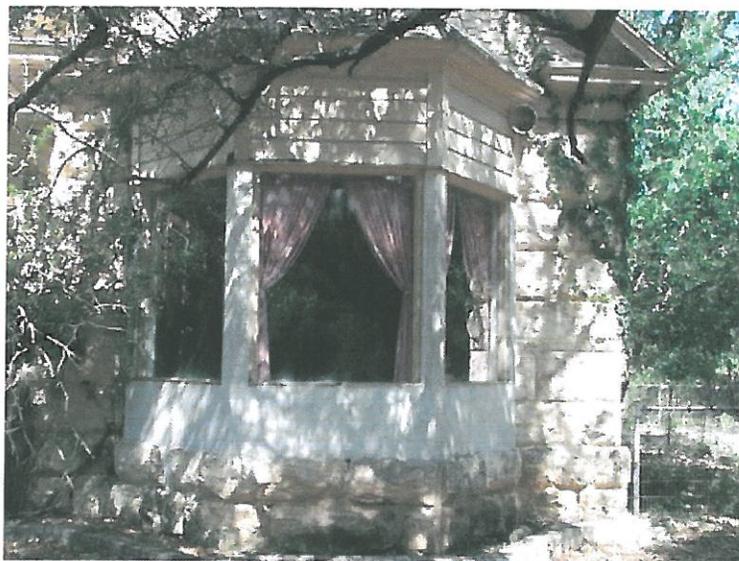


Figure 4. Views of the ranch house at the McSween Tract.



Figure 5. Two views of the large barn at the McSween Tract. Top view looking southwest; bottom view looking south-southeast.



Figure .6 Potranco biface found in the McSween pasture near the southeast corner of the property.