

Notes on the Archeology of Medina Co.

By Dr. Thomas Hester

This brief article is aptly titled as “notes” since so little is presently known about the archeology of Medina County. When compared to adjacent counties along the southern edge of the Edwards Plateau, Bexar to the east and Uvalde to the west, very little scientific research has been done in the county . And like these two counties, Medina County has a very diverse environment ---the “hill country” or Edwards Plateau to the north, and the coastal plains of south Texas to the south.

The arrival of the first peoples in the region, most likely ancestors of modern-day American Indians, was around 11,500 years ago. This was during the late part of the Ice Age, and these early peoples hunted mammoth, a large now –extinct species of buffalo, and other mammals that became extinct around 10,000 years ago.

Although there are no well documented sites of the Paleoindians, the term used by archeologists to refer to these first occupations, sites in adjacent areas have yielded distinctive spear points such as Clovis (11,500 year ago) and Folsom (10,800 years ago).

Later Paleoindian cultures, using points like Plainview (10,200 years ago) appeared just as the Ice Age came to an end. For example, a Plainview point was found some years ago eroding from a steep riverbank downstream from the present day Medina Dam.

With the onset of the essentially modern climate and vegetation around 8,000 years ago, ancient American Indian population increased and spread into all areas of Medina County. At the Jonas Terrace site (41ME 29; 41=Texas; Me= Medina County ; 29=29th documented site recorded in the county) just off Hwy 16 , archeologists with the Texas Department of Transportation excavated a large campsite that had been repeatedly used for more than 45 centuries . Located along the San Geronimo Creek, the site had numerous cooking hearths, projectile points , and a variety of debris resulting from it’s repeated occupations over time . This site, and many like it in Medina County, dates to the Archaic Indians were hunters and gathers, carefully scheduling their activities and frequent movements of their camps, based on the availability of certain game or wild plants in particular regions. Their projectile point (often called “arrowheads”) tipped spears that were thrown with atlatl (spearthrower). Shapes or the points changed through time, and these shifts in “types” aid the archaeologist in dating a culture to a

certain time within the Archaic (see Ellen S. Turner and Thomas R. Hester, 1999, *A Field Guide to Stone Artifacts of Texas Indians*. Gulf Houston). In the northern part of Medina County, campsites are often marked by dome-shaped accumulations of fire cracked rock and ash, known as burned rock middens. These result, for the most part, from the repeated earth oven cooking over several generations. Many of these sites are dug unscientifically, either as a hobby (“collecting arrowheads”) or increasingly, for commercial purposes.

Interestingly, another well-documented archaeological deposit in the “hill country” of Medina County comes from a small cave. This is Scorpion Cave, in bluffs on the west side of the Medina River just below Medina Dam.

Excavated in 1971 by George Judson and others, it was published in 1978, and the report details heavy occupation of the cave beginning in the Middle Archaic (around 4,000 years ago) and continuing off and on until perhaps as late as A.D. 1600. The later occupations, starting around A.D. 500-700, reflect the introduction of the bow and arrow (the arrow tipped with tiny points often called “birdpoints” but which could be used in all kinds of hunting).

Several styles of arrow points were found in Scorpion Cave, along with bone tools and painted pebbles

In the southern part of Medina County, in the northern part of the south Texas “brush country,” a number of sites have been recorded, most notably in recent years by David Calame, Sr. of Moore. One site that has been excavated is 41ME34 (Batot-Hooker site), west of Hondo. Excavations that I directed in 1987 found two distinct areas of occupation. One was along a small creek, with about 4 feet of deposits containing a sequence of Archaic artifacts going back to around 5,800 years ago.

Nearby, another area of the site had just below the surface, several cooking-hearths associated with a Late Prehistoric occupation that dates to around A.D. 1600. These were peoples of the Toyah culture (we don’t know if they had tribal names in ancient times), who made distinctive arrow points (pine-tree shaped specimens called Perdiz), flint butchering knives, specialized scrapers, and vessels of plain pottery.

These people hunted a wide range of animals, but were especially adapted across southern and central Texas, to the hunting of buffalo. In and around the cooking areas at the 41ME34, we found broken buffalo bone, discarded hide scrapers and knives, and a few fragments of pottery. This important part of the site has recently been described in detail in a Master’s thesis written at the University of Houston.

Of course, Medina County is well known for Lipan Apache and Comanche raiders in the early and mid 19th century. But, their campsites are almost impossible to find, as they were always on the move. Several iron arrow points have been published by C. K. Chandler from southern Medina County. Also at this time, the first major European American settlements appeared at D'Hanis, Castroville, and other locales. The early buildings of this period are of great interest not only to historians and architects, but also to historic archaeologists who study the development of Texas cultures. Other major excavation has been done at Landmark Inn in Castroville by Texas Parks and Wildlife.

In closing, it can be said that the archaeology of Medina County is essentially untapped. Little is known, less than 120 sites have been recorded (though it is clear that there are thousands of them), and urban expansion, normal farming and ranching activities, housing developments, and, especially, undocumented relic-collecting takes a toll on sites every day. Fortunately, organizations like the Southern Texas Archaeological Association (headquartered in San Antonio) have carried out field schools, scientifically investigating and publishing (in their journal, *La Tierra*) a number of prehistoric sites in the Medina River Valley. If you are interested in sharing information on the Medina County area, contact the STAA at P.O. Box 791032, San Antonio, Texas, 78279; or your local Texas Historical Commission Steward, David Calame, Sr. , P.O. Box 448 Devine, Texas 78016 ; or the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, PRC 5, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712-1100. At UT's laboratory, site locations will be kept confidential upon request and are not subject to the Open Records Act. Contrary to wide spread rumors, archaeologists respect private property rights and confidentiality – and we do not “seize” or “confiscate” collections or the land on which sites are located!

Thomas R. Hester, PhD. Director, Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, and Professor of Anthropology The University of Texas at Austin.