

**An Archaeological Survey of the
Silver Oaks Development Unit 5
Bexar County, Texas**

by

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Abstract

Abasolo Archaeological Consultants (AAC) conducted an archeological survey of the 20.04 acres of Silver Oaks Subdivision Unit 5 for Frost Geosciences and the City of San Antonio. The locality is along and north of Culebra Creek in northwest Bexar County. The survey discovered one large prehistoric site covering approximately 50 acres, most of which was formerly in cultivation. The majority of Unit 5 is encompassed within the site boundaries. At the time of the survey, development construction had begun by cutting streets and placing the fill over the surface across the northern half of the unit. Field investigations included a 100% surface inspection of the surface not covered with fill, inspection of numerous street cuts, and the excavation of two backhoe trenches. The prehistoric cultural material was found not to exceed 70 cm in depth, and to be mostly mixed shallowly-buried Middle and Late Archaic components. Given these factors, no further archaeological investigations are recommended for the Silver Oaks archaeological site. A small burned rock midden was observed on an adjacent property not affected by this development.

Introduction

The Silver Oaks development is located along the north side of Culebra Creek approximately one-half kilometer west of FM1560 (Fig. 1). At the time of the archaeological survey the Silver Oaks Subdivision Unit 5 property had been cleared, streets cut, and the fill from the streets were deposited over the surface in the northern half of the property. Flakes and burned rock were thinly scattered over the entire unit, including the fill area, but became more dense (3-4 artifacts per square meter) as one approached the creek from the north along the southern end of the property where the original plow surface was exposed. In addition to the streets, two drainage ditches also were also cut, one along the western border of the development and the other at the southeast corner of Unit 5 (Fig. 2). The profiles provided by the street cuts extended to various depths of from 50 centimeters to 1 meter. The western drainage ditch was over two meters deep, and together, these exposures provided ample opportunities to view the site's stratigraphy. Four cultural features were recorded during the survey, three burned rock hearths, and a burned rock midden (slightly truncated by the western drainage ditch) that extends onto the adjacent property.

The soils in the field are Lewisville silty clay with Trinity Frio soils occurring at the extreme southeastern part of the site beyond Unit 5 (Taylor et al. 1991). Patrick soils occur at the northern end of Unit 5 (Fig. 3). For the most part, however, the major portion of the site consists of Lewisville silty clay soils underlain by a thick bedrock caliche gravel deposit.

Archaeological Background

A useful overview of the archaeology of northern Bexar County can be found in Nickels, et al. (2001). Shafer and Hester (2005a, 2005b) also summarize local archaeology in their reports on Wildhorse Vista downstream on Culebra Creek, and Remuda Ranch, just upstream.

More than 1400 archaeological sites have been recorded in Bexar County, including many in northwest San Antonio. These span 13,000 years of human occupation of the region, from the late Ice Age into the Historic era. The archaeological record has been divided into four major time periods: Paleoindian, Archaic, Late Prehistoric and Historic.

The earliest sites are **Paleoindian**, beginning around 13,000 years ago. This begins in the late Pleistocene (Ice Age) with the Clovis and Folsom cultures hunting animals that are now largely extinct (mammoth, ground sloth, camel, native horse, large buffalo, etc.). They used distinctive fluted spear tips (Turner and Hester 1993) that can be used to date sites of this era. By 10,000 years ago, the Ice Age had ended, and the climates and landscapes approached those of modern times. During this "Late Paleoindian" time frame, regional cultures switched to a sequence of non-fluted, lanceolate spear points.

By 8500 years ago, the Edwards Plateau area had seen a considerable expansion of population, with increasing dependence on plant-food gathering and processing. This period is known as the **Archaic** and encompasses a broad range of hunter-gatherer cultural patterns that lasted until about 1500 years ago. In the regional chronologies (Turner and Hester 1993), the Archaic is divided into Early, Middle and Late sub-periods. Abundant evidence of Archaic peoples is found in northern Bexar County, as exemplified by the recent excavations at the Culebra Creek site (41BX126; Nickels et al. 2000). For example, the research at 41BX126 demonstrated that, during the Middle Archaic, regional Native American groups began the intensive processing of plants such as sotol, utilizing an earth oven technology that led to the accumulation of the so-called “burned rock middens” (see also Black et al. 1997).

In addition to burned rock midden deposits found in campsites along what are modern streams, the Archaic is also characterized by numerous time-diagnostic dart point types (Turner and Hester 1993), hafted to spears that were thrown with the *atlatl* (spearthrower). Abundant evidence of flint-working is found, along with chipped stone tools of various sorts and ground-stone grinding slabs used in plant processing.

The **Late Prehistoric** begins around A.D. 700 with the introduction of the bow and arrow into central Texas. Tiny arrow points of flint were used to tip the arrows, and these are easily distinguished from the Archaic spear points of earlier times. By A.D. 1300, the area was occupied by peoples of the Toyah Horizon. These were probably local Native American groups who adopted the “tool kit” of buffalo hunting – Perdiz arrow points, beveled knives, end scrapers and bone-tempered pottery. These native peoples were first encountered by 17th century Spanish expeditions, and many of them later went into the Spanish missions in San Antonio. This marks the early part of the **Historic** era, during Spanish Colonial times. Though the sites that represent such “Contact Period” sites are hard to find, the occasional gun flint, triangular flint arrow point, or metal arrow point will indicate a spot where a Historic group briefly camped. In some sites, fragments of bone-tempered pottery indicate continuity from Late Prehistoric technologies. However, during the 18th century, Lipan Apaches began to move into the area, adding to the disruption of indigenous cultures begun by the Spanish. By 1750, the Comanches arrived from the southern Plains. The Native American peoples of central Texas began to disappear.

Thus, it was the Apaches and the Comanches who became “the Indians” in the region, raiding Spanish and later Anglo-European ranches and settlements until the 1870s. In the San Antonio area, there is a rich record of early European occupation – ranches, farms, and substantial stone houses. One of these Historic homes, built in the 1840s of cut limestone, was recorded as 41BX711 on Remuda Ranch upstream from Silver Oaks.

The Culebra Creek valley has a well documented prehistoric record extending back to at least 10,000 years. The State of Texas Archeological Site Atlas shows that three archaeological sites, 41BX708, 711, and 712 are located upstream on the south side of the creek approximately 1.5 kilometers west of FM 1560. Site 41BX708 has recently been partially excavated (by the Southern Texas Archaeological Association), and

contains an archaeological record extending from early Historic Period times to about 10,000 years ago during Late Paleoindian times. Prehistoric sites 41BX1422, 1423, and 1424 are located downstream between FM 1560 and Loop 1604.

Across from Silver Oaks, on the opposite side of Culebra Creek, two archaeological sites were recorded in 1986 by C. K. Chandler (Texas Archeological Site Atlas). Both sites are characterized by burned rock middens. At site 41BX709, no artifacts were associated (based on surface examination) of the burned rock midden. However, at nearby site 41BX710, Chandler reported two burned rock middens that were largely buried. Local artifact collectors had dug indiscriminately into these deposits. Chandler was shown arrow points (of the Edwards type), corner tang bifaces (of Late Archaic age; Turner and Hester 1993), as well as chipped stone bifaces, flakes, and deer bone.

Finally, as we have noted earlier, the excavations at site 41BX 126, located east of the project area where Loop 1604 crosses Culebra Creek, revealed that it was extensively occupied from about 2,000 to 5,000 years ago.

Archaeological Investigations

Silver Oaks Archaeological Site

The Silver Oaks archaeological site covers an estimated 50 acres, including all of Unit 5. It extends on to the adjacent property to the west, and southeast of Unit 5 in the adjacent Unit 6 bordering Culebra Creek (Fig. 3). The surface of the site has a slight slope to the south. The site had been considerably disturbed by construction prior to our investigation. Also, the field that contains the site had been under cultivation for many years. As previously noted, the streets had been cut and the fill from this activity was deposited over the northern half of the unit, obscuring the original surface. Artifacts in the form of burned limestone rock and chert flakes were found in the fill dirt. Burned rock, flakes, and chipped stone artifacts were observed over much of the undisturbed surface of the site. Cultural material became more concentrated as one approached Culebra Creek from the north, but the density never exceeded an average of 3 artifacts per square meter in Unit 5. This density was exceeded, however, along the western edge of the drainage ditch which had cut through a small burned rock midden, most of which extended onto the adjacent property. Four cultural features, three hearths (Figs. 5 and 6) and a burned rock midden (Fig. 7), were recorded at the site along with several diagnostic projectile points and bifaces. The cultural features are described below and the projectile points and bifaces are illustrated in Figures 8 and 9.

Backhoe Trenches

Two backhoe trenches were excavated in the southern end of the unit near Culebra Creek where the cultural material seemed most dense. These trenches were to accomplish two goals, to examine the geological deposits at the southern end of the site, and to assess the depth and density of cultural material. The results of this testing are described below.

Backhoe Trench 1 (Fig. 4)

This trench was located at the southwest part of Unit 5 near Culebra Creek. It was oriented east-west and was approximately 3 meters long and 1.3 meters deep. The north profile was recorded. Three separate soil zones were observed in the profile, an upper zone of dark brown Lewisville silty clay, a transition zone of lighter reddish brown silty clay underlain by a bed of nearly white dense caliche and gravel. Cultural material was observed in the upper mantle, possibly associated with the plow zone. No intact material was observed below 50 cm.

Backhoe Trench 2 (Fig. 5)

Trench 2 was located east of Trench 1 and was oriented north-south perpendicular to the creek. It too was approximately 3 meters long and 1.2 meters deep. The west wall was profiled. The upper most soil mantle was a dark brown silty clay underlain by a reddish brown clay. The underlying deposit was a limy caliche/gravel deposit, and the contact between the reddish brown clay and the limy caliche/gravel represents a clear disconformity. The soil profile fits the description of Lewisville soils. Cultural material was sparse in the trench and backdirt. A small amount of burned limestone was noted in brown silty clay during excavation. No concentrated or isolated cultural deposits were observed.

Summary of the Stratigraphy

The stratigraphy of the site was very consistent with that described by Taylor et al. (1991) for the Lewisville soil series. The stratigraphic units were essentially based on soil development and not by concentrations of cultural material. Since the site had been in cultivation for many years, the plow zone was readily apparent in the road cut (Fig. 6). This zone consisted of a dark brown silty clay; at depths varying from 30 to 40 cm below the surface, the dark brown silty clay grades into a lighter reddish brown clay. In the area of Backhoe Trench #2, this reddish brown clay reached a depth of about 80 cm (Fig. 5). In the vicinity of Hearth #2, a light brown calcareous soil capped the underlying caliche/gravel bedrock (Fig. 5).

Cultural Features

Four cultural features were recorded during the course of site inspection. Three are burned rock hearth features and one is a burned rock midden. These features are briefly described below. The location of the features and burned rock midden within Unit 5 is shown in Figure 2.

Hearth 1 (Fig. 7)

Hearth stones from this feature were exposed in machinery scrape. The feature consists of a cluster of fire cracked rock 1 meter by 1.2 meters in diameter. No artifacts found in association.

Hearth 2 (Fig. 8):

This hearth was exposed in road cut in southwest portion of property. It measures about 70 cm across and is 30-40 cm below plow surface. The feature is formed by a cluster of fire-cracked limestone in what may have been a shallow pit, although soil development has obscured any pit outline. Cultural material was noted beneath the hearth in the yellow-brown caliche-laden soil to a depth of 70 cm. Limestone bedrock was encountered at 80 cm.

Hearth 3

This hearth consisted of a cluster of fire-cracked limestone fragments displaced by scraping. It was located 20 meters north of Hearth #2. The size of the original cluster is unknown.

Burned rock midden (Fig. 9)

A small burned rock midden was recorded at the far southwest corner of the property, slightly cut into by the drainage ditch bordering the development on the west side and near Culebra Creek. The heart of the midden appears to be at the corner of a cultivated field (now in corn) on the adjacent property to the west (Fig. 9). The midden size could not be determined from the vantage point of the drainage ditch. No diagnostic artifacts were found among the burned rocks, but Nolan and Pedernales points were in close proximity.

Diagnostic Artifacts

A small sample of diagnostic artifacts was recovered during the surface inspection. These are briefly listed below and their temporal significance discussed. Projectile point typology is based on Turner and Hester (1993). Nine identifiable dart points were recovered, including the following types: Frio (2), Castroville (2), Pedernales (3), Langtry (1), and Nolan (1). Diagnostic points recovered from the survey are illustrated in Figure 10, and Figure 2 shows the map location for selected projectile point finds.

In addition to the projectile points, numerous bifaces were observed that represented all stages of biface manufacture (Fig.11). Most revealed manufacturing problems or mistakes resulting in their breakage or rejection. While the density of lithic debris was not great, that present confirmed the following flintknapping activities: quarrying Uvalde gravels, primary reduction of bifaces, thinning and finishing bifaces, including projectile points, production of other biface tools such as chopping tools and a biface celt (Fig.

11H), and the production and use of uniface tools, including ulu-like knife blades made on sequent flakes (Turner and Hester 1993; Shafer 2005).

The diagnostic projectile points date from Middle and Late Archaic times, from roughly 4500 to 1500 years ago (Collins 2004:113).

Summary and Assessment

The Silver Oaks archaeological site extends over an area of about 50 acres. The surface is marked by lightly scatters of burned rock, chipped stone flakes, and artifacts. Prior to cultivation and other disturbances, it is possible that the site consisted of a series of burned rock hearth features and light artifact scatter. Profiles provided by street excavations and backhoe testing revealed the deposits to be sparse, and no deeper than 70 cm below the surface.

Four cultural features were recorded during the investigations, three burned rock hearth features and a small burned rock midden. The burned rock midden barely extended onto the property along the west drainage ditch and lies mostly on the adjacent property to the west.

A small collection of artifacts were examined for information regarding both time intervals of occupation and site function. The point styles range in time from ca. 4500-1500 years ago indicating that the site was intermittently occupied over at least a 3,000 year period of time. Hearth features suggest that the occupation consisted of short campsite events. Burned rock concentrations may have reflected the preparation of foods using earth ovens, but if so, the evidence for the ovens has been destroyed. The burned rock midden to the west doubtless had that function of an earth oven. In addition, the chipped stone artifacts and residue indicate that thin biface tools such as projectile points were manufactured on the site from locally available Uvalde gravels, and that weapons were refurbished after use (an example of the latter is seen in Figure 10,D, an extensively re-sharpened Pedernales point). The combined archaeological evidence indicates that the Silver Oaks archaeological site was a short duration campsite

The scattered cultural deposits do not appear to have stratigraphic integrity, and it is unlikely that they are sufficiently dense to yield diagnostic artifacts or cultural features in datable contexts. Therefore, it is our recommendation that no further archaeological work is necessary at this site.

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FIGURES

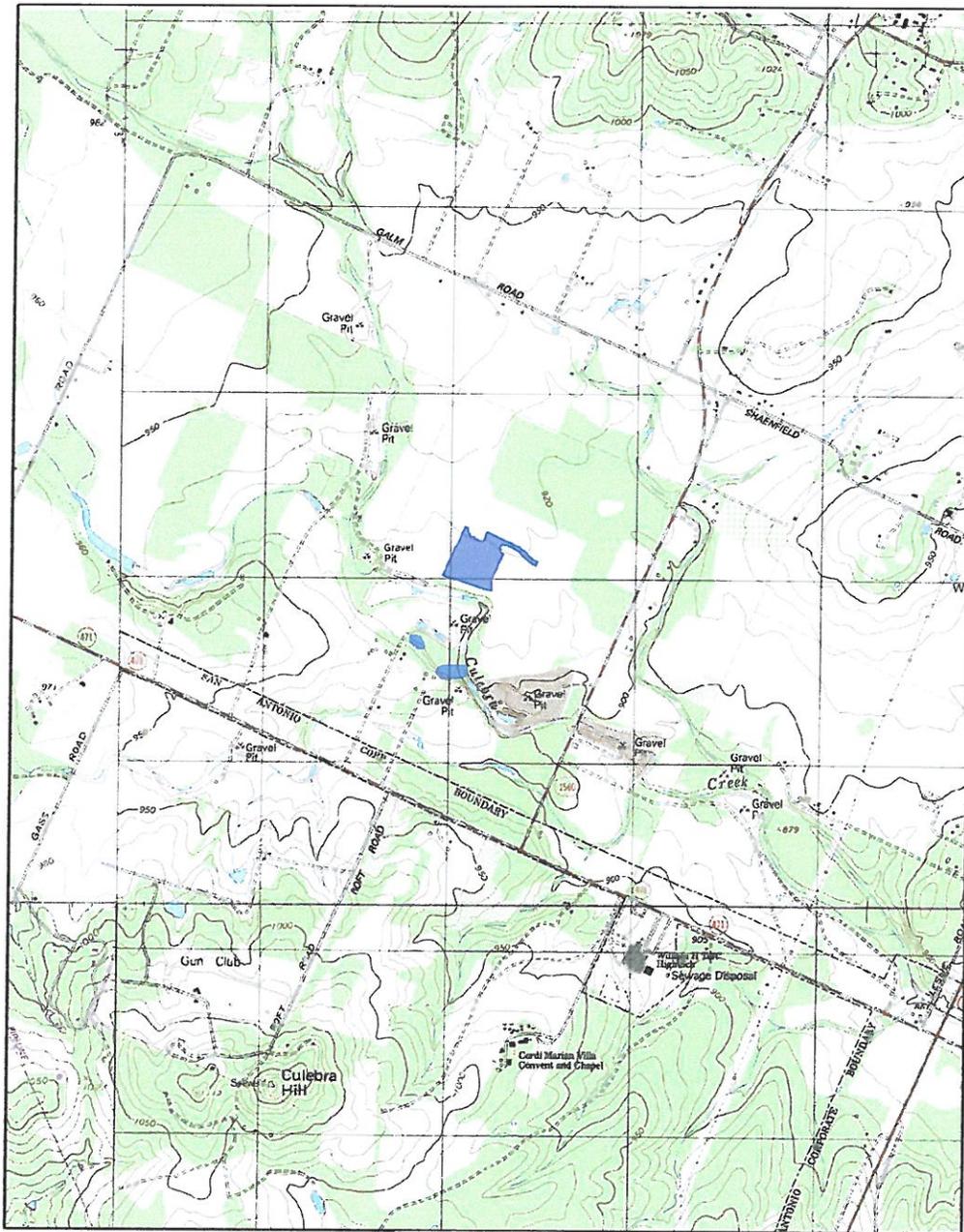


Figure 1. Topographic map of Silver Oaks Unit 5 and site environs. Map provided by Frost GeoSciences, Boerne, Texas.



Figure 2. Map showing Silver Oaks Unit 5 plan, selected features and finds. BRM denotes the location of the burned rock midden; H1, H2, and H3 are hearth locations. Letters code point type finds: P=Pedernales, N=Nolan, CP=Castroville preform, and F=Frio points. Map provided by Frost GeoSciences, Boerne, Texas.

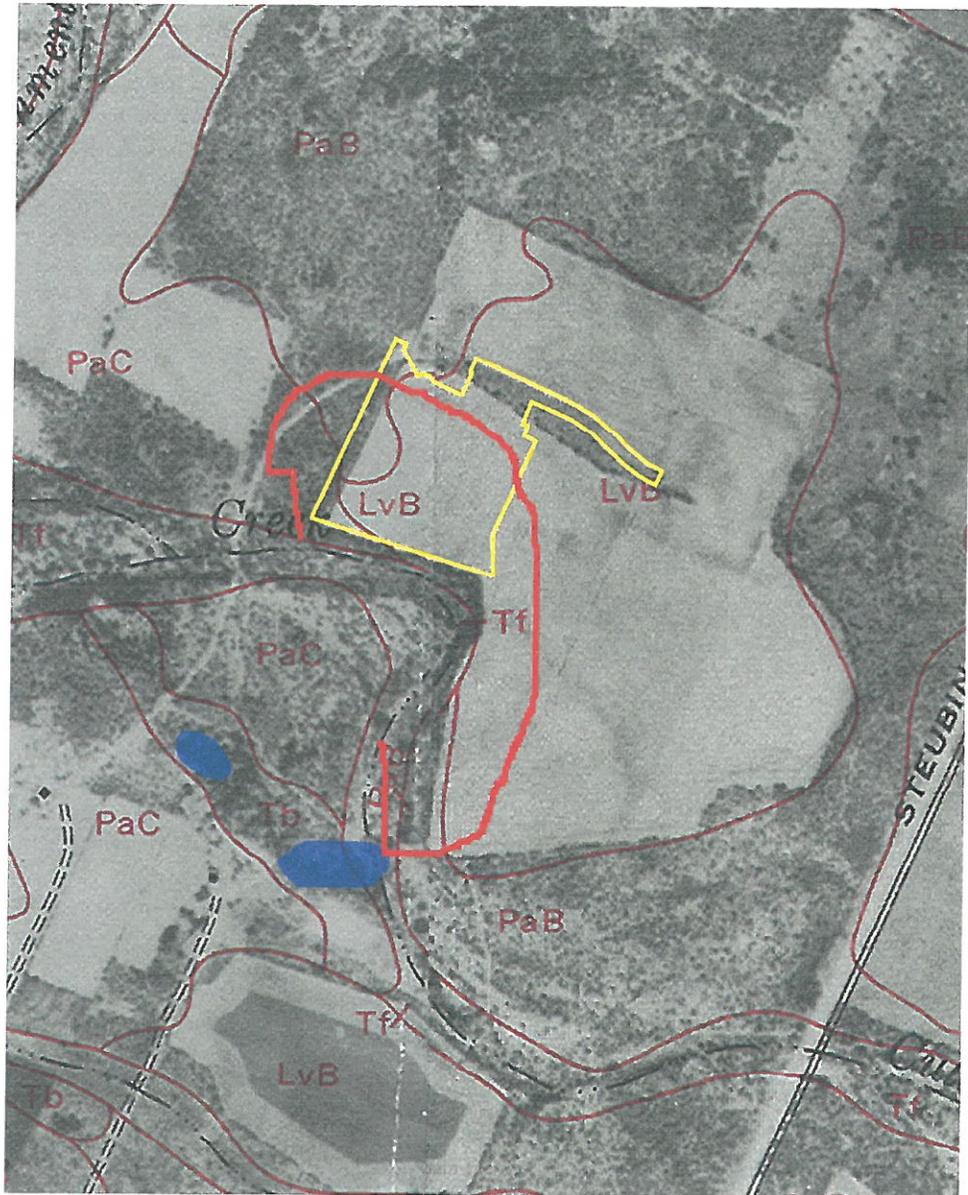


Figure 3. Soils map showing site location (outlined in red) and soil types (provided by Frost GeoSciences, Boerne, Texas).



Figure 4. Backhoe trench #1 profile showing shallowness of soils. Scale increments are 10 cm.



Figure 5. Backhoe trench #2 profile illustrating the bedrock limestone and caliche disconformity. Scale increments are 10 cm.



Figure 6. Street cut profile at Feature 2 showing clear distinction of plow zone. Scale in one meter.



Figure 7. View of Hearth # 1, a burned rock concentration. Scale increments are 10 cm.



Figure 8. Feature two exposed in street cut. Scale increments are in 10 cm intervals.



Figure 9. Small burned rock midden in the edge of the drainage ditch cut viewed from the north and extending (west) into adjacent property and corn field.

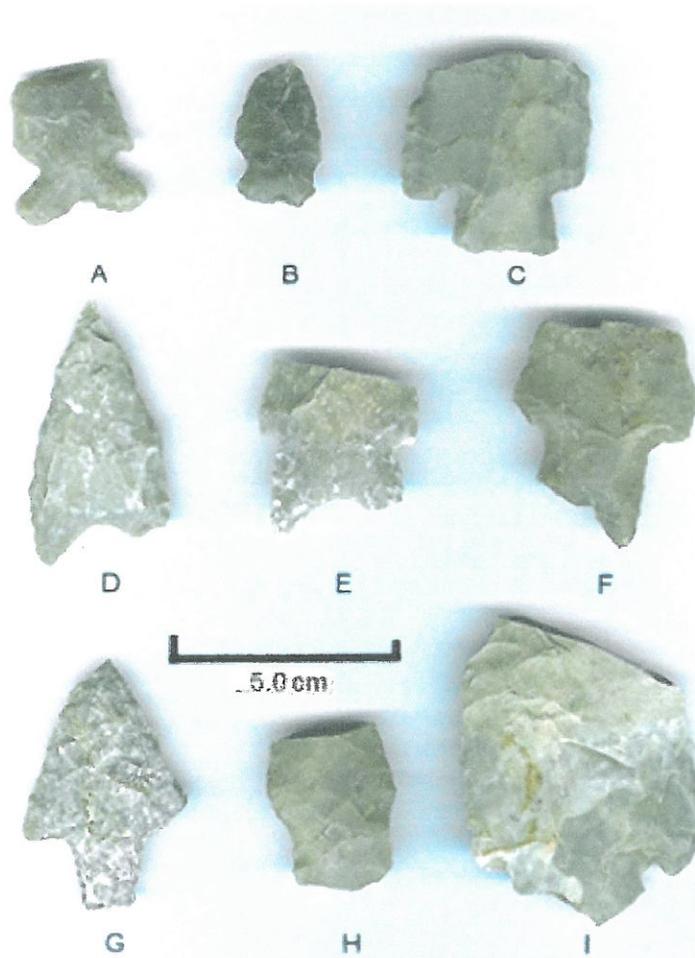


Figure 10. Diagnostic projectile points from the Silver Oaks site. A, B, Frio, C, Castroville, D-F, Pedernales, G, Langtry, H, Nolan, I, Castroville preform.

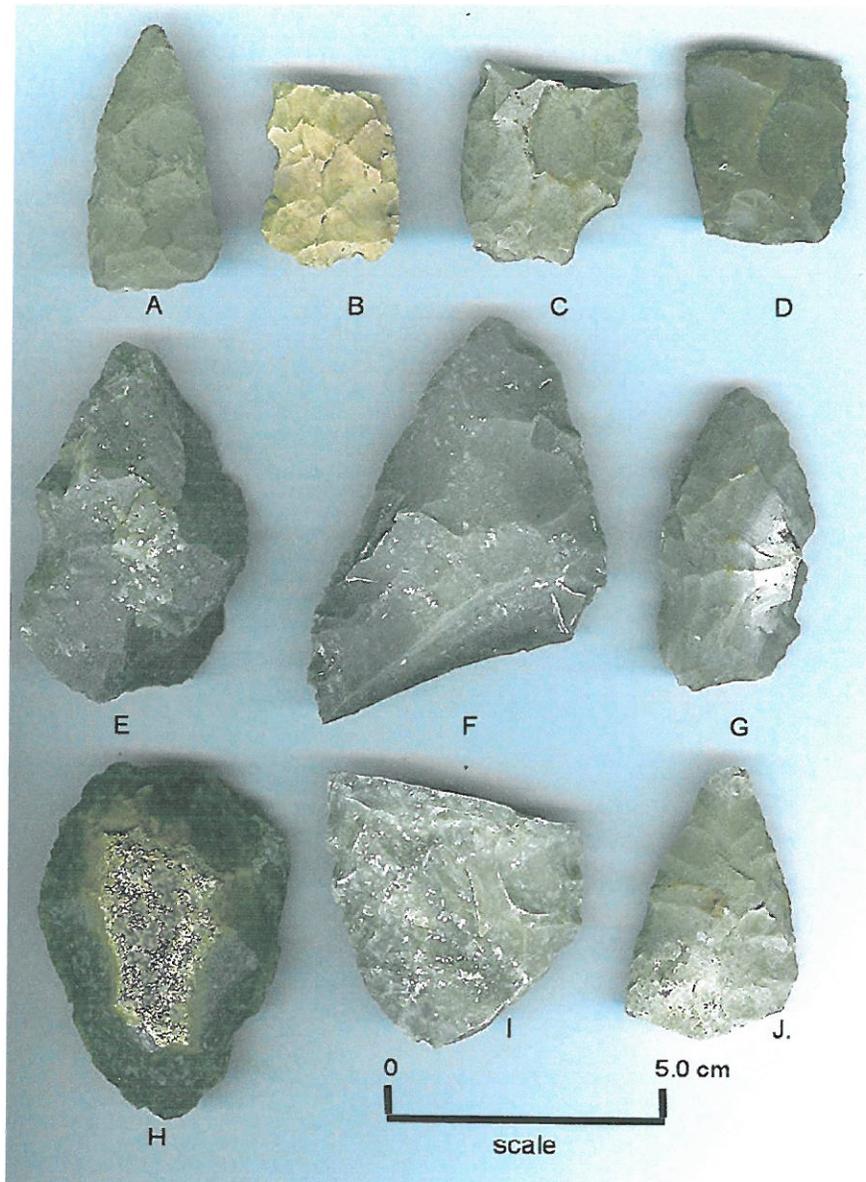


Figure 11. Biface artifacts. A-G, I, J, manufacturing failures; H, small biface celt or adze.