

# Independence Creek Rock Shelter Recordings (41TE687, 41TE688)

Tom Ashmore

Dec 2014, updated April 2025

## Abstract

Concho Valley, Iraan, and Midland Archeological Society members worked with the Texas Archeological Society Rock Art Task Force to identify and record rock shelters within the Independence Creek Nature Preserve in 2013. This report will cover two shelters recorded: Dry Creek #1 (41TE687) and Dry Creek #2 (41TE688).

## Introduction

The Independence Creek Nature Preserve is 22 miles south of Sheffield, Texas, 38 miles west of Ozona on Interstate 10. The preserve was started in 1991 by the Chandler family and the Nature Conservancy of Texas. In total, it covers 19,740 acres.

Independence Creek runs west to east through the nature preserve, emptying into the Pecos River five miles below the preserve headquarters and spring outlet. The appropriately named Dry Creek runs northeast into Independence Creek near the area of the preserve headquarters. In 2000 and 2001, the Nature Conservancy purchased the Oasis and Canon ranches to create a 19,740-acre preserve adjacent to the Chandler family's easement.

On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013, we recorded two rock shelters on Dry Creek. Teddy Stickney of the Texas Archeological Society Rock Art Task Force and Evans Turpin, Texas Historical Commission Steward and member of the Iraan Archeological Society, oversaw the recordings.



**Figure 1. Bison bone and midden locations** (courtesy Google Earth)

## Background

There is abundant evidence that a sizeable Indian encampment once existed within the shady trees along the north side of Dry Creek just before it runs into Independence Creek. In February 2009, Lisa Wrinkle, the Nature Conservancy's Lower Pecos program coordinator, noticed something shiny and white protruding from the eroded wall of the creek just below the ancient encampment area. She found bones, vertebrae, teeth, and a jawbone on closer inspection. Analysis by Sul Ross State University

confirmed the remains were bison. They considered the find interesting because bison bones had never been found in this eastern Pecos region - a desert area that includes Big Bend National Park. For two years, they kept the find quiet.

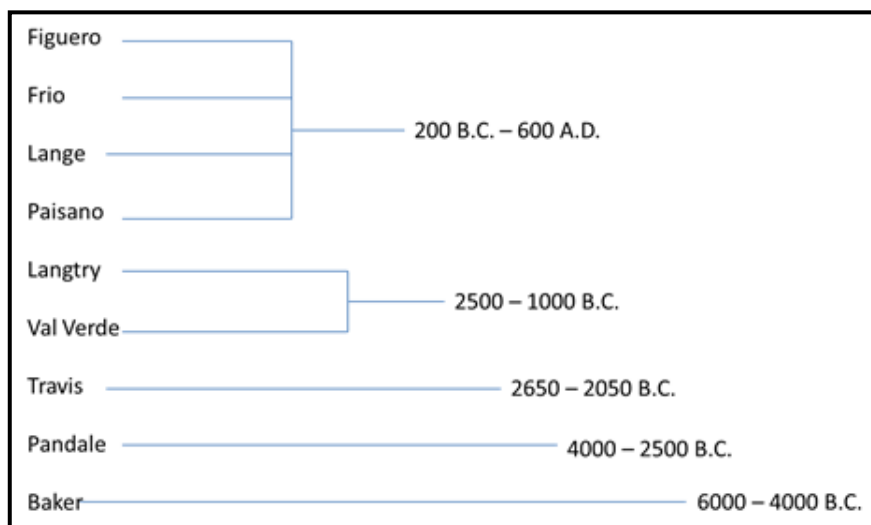
In 2011, a group of students, headed by Samuel Cason, Cultural Resources Management Coordinator, Sul Ross State University Center for Big Bend Studies, excavated a portion of this camp area and the creek embankment where bison bones protruded. About 300 identifiable bone fragments were recovered. Indications were that there were two individuals, one juvenile and one neonate. Burned rocks and chipped stone above and just below the bone outcrops and an apparent green fracture (a bone break that is often the result of human actions) on one specimen suggested the deaths were human-caused.

No radio carbon dating was conducted on the artifacts; however, Cason believes the upper deposits in the excavation are from the Late Prehistoric Period (A.D. 700 to A.D. 1600) and the lower deposits are likely from the Late Archaic Period (1500 B.C. to A.D. 700). The bison bones were in the lower deposits. This is consistent with the known period of bison returning to the Lower Pecos region. (Texas Beyond History) Subsequent testing of other portions of the terrace in 2011 confirmed the presence of deeply buried features and archaeological deposits that may represent Middle or even Early Archaic occupations.



Bison Bones and stone tools from the creek embankment excavation site (Center for Big Bend Studies, Sul Ross State University)

An extensive collection of stone points collected by previous nature preserve staff from the area around the creeks and springs within the preserve and identified by our archeological society members indicates a possible heavy period of occupation that coincides nicely with the dates believed to be for the lower deposits of the creek-side encampment.



**Figure 2. General date ranges of points previously found within the Independence Creek Preserve, A Field Guide to Stone Artifacts of Texas Indians (Turner, Ellen Sue, Hester, R. Thomas)**

According to information gathered by the University of Texas archeological research, “The onset of the Late Archaic (1500 B.C. to A.D. 1000) in the Lower Pecos Canyonlands is marked by the return of bison into the region. This seems to coincide with a wet period as indicated by increases in pine and grass pollen.” (Boyd, E. Carolyn)

### Discussion

Across from the ancient encampment area, on the south side of the creek and upstream approximately 600 yards, are two small shelters. They are natural erosions in the limestone wall along the creek. Neither of these shelters is large enough to have been habitable, but both were purposefully used.

#### Dry Creek #1 (41TE687)

The first shelter is more like a small cave. It sits approximately two meters above the creek bed with a small ledge and overhang before going back into the limestone wall. The dimension of the entrance is eight meters wide and three meters high. It narrows dramatically as it goes back into a cave-like hole in the limestone. It is currently filled with sand from flooding, making it very difficult to go very far back at all. No excavation of the sand was undertaken, but we estimate it to be at least one meter deep and probably deeper farther in. The soot-blackened ceiling is evidence of the many campfires maintained at the entrance.





**Figure 3. Entrance to Dry Creek Shelter #1**

This shelter is unique, though, because of the rock art and markings at the entrance and the number of small grinding cupules.

At least 33 small grinding cupolas in the limestone floor and shelf areas are to the right of the entrance. Just above these on the face of the wall and ceiling section are several what appear to be tally marks. On the left wall of the entrance is a faded polychrome pictograph.



**Figure 4. Small cupules at the entrance**



**Figure 5. Possible tally marks on the ceiling and wall**





**Figure 6. Pictograph on left side of entrance**

The pictograph is very faded, and we could not make out any definitive portions of the scene while at the site. No interpretation was made for the official archeological recording. However, for this paper, using enhanced photos from the site, I will hazard a personal interpretation.



**Figure 7. Enhanced photo of pictograph with different selections artificially bordered**

## **Pictograph Interpretation**

My interpretation of the enhanced image is a man standing (on the far left) at the entrance to the cave. At the other end, on the right, may be another man, possibly sitting and representing a shaman. In four successive pictures, from left to right, are what can only be described as large blobs appearing to grow incrementally in size from the man at the entrance. Each one is multicolored with distinctive red blotches covering the rounded top portions. Coming out of the top of the last and largest blob is a streak of white paint, which connects with an object at the top of the pictograph. I believe the object may have been depicting a buffalo.

This interpretation, along with the numerous small cupolas and the tally marks, makes me believe this was a vision quest cave. The cupolas are similar to those found at White Shaman Shelter (41VV124), 72 miles southeast of this location. They may have been used to grind the mineral ingredients for the pictograph colors or medicinal/hallucinogenic herbs. Two possibilities for the tally marks could have been the number of members to take their vision quests or the number of seasons/years the tribe returned.

According to Carolyn Boyd's, of the Shumla Archeological School, "Certain geographic features, such as caves, mountains, and bodies of water, are frequently associated with the axis mundi (connection to the other world). During shamanic initiations, caves are particularly important and function as concrete symbols for passageways to another world or descent to the underworld... Caves are also of primary importance in North and South American shamanism as the location where aspirants have their dreams and meet their helping spirits."

Additionally, she writes, "When the shamans enter an altered state, it is believed they have experienced "death." This death allows the soul of the shaman to leave the body and journey into the world beyond. The shaman's tutelary animal plays an important role as a guide and source of power during the shamanic journey into the otherworld, enabling the shaman to forsake the human condition." (Boyd, E. Carolyn)

This shelter may have been used for the shaman to guide other members of his tribe on their own journeys into the axis mundi. It should be noted that none of the pictographs from Carolyn Boyd's Lower Pecos studies resemble this particular pictograph. If it was a vision quest cave, it was a different people and a much different time, this being Late Archaic, whereas the famous pictograph studies by Boyd and the Shumla School were Middle Archaic.



## **Dry Creek #2 (41TE688)**

Another 80 yards upstream is a second shelter used for a different purpose. This is a shelf sitting three meters above the creek bed. Its dimensions are 10 meters long and an average of 2.3 meters high, and an average of 2.5 meters deep. Within the limestone on the walls and ceilings are large chert nodules that have been knocked off. The embedded remains can still be seen throughout the limestone walls and ceiling.



**Figure 8. Dry Creek Shelter #2**



**Figure 9. Dry Creek Shelter #2 chert nodules**



**Figure 10. Dry Creek Shelter #2 chert nodules**



**Figure 11. Indentations from dulling of chert tools during knapping**

In the shelter is a large fallen limestone boulder used to dull chert edges as part of the knapping process. Dulling is a common technique in the pressure flaking process of making points and knives.





**Figure 12. Chert nodules**

The floor is covered with chert flakes. No worked tools were found on site. There is no evidence of soot blackening on the ceiling. This shelf was essentially a tool making workshop for the tribe.



**Figure 13. Indentations from dulling of chert tools**



**Figure 14. Chert pieces found around dulling rock**



**Dry Creek Shelter #2 (41TE688)**



**Figure 15. Shelter #2 recording**



**Figure 16. Shelter #2 recording**

## Conclusion

The proximity to the large ancient encampment across the creek from these shelters makes it highly likely that these shelters were used simultaneously with the encampment. The bison bones collected by Samuel Cason from the Center for Big Bend Studies point to the Late Archaic period. Dry Creek Shelter #1 is one of the few, and possibly the only vision-quest cave reported in the Lower Pecos area from the Late Archaic period. However, this encampment may have been occupied as far back as the Middle or Early Archaic periods. This covers most of the period reflected by the stone points found in the Independence Creek area.

## References Cited

Boyd, E. Carolyn

2008 Rock Art of the Lower Pecos, pages 49-50, Texas A&M University Press

Independence Creek—Logan's Terrace

<https://cbbs.sulross.edu/independence-creek/>

Texas Beyond History Web Team

2008 Lower Pecos Canyonlands, [texasbeyondhistory.net/pecos/archeology.htm](http://texasbeyondhistory.net/pecos/archeology.htm).(available online)

Turner, Ellen Sue, Hester, R. Thomas

1999 A Field Guide to Stone Artifacts of Texas Indians, pages 118, 112, 141, 165, 143, 192, 189, 168, 77, Gulf Publishing