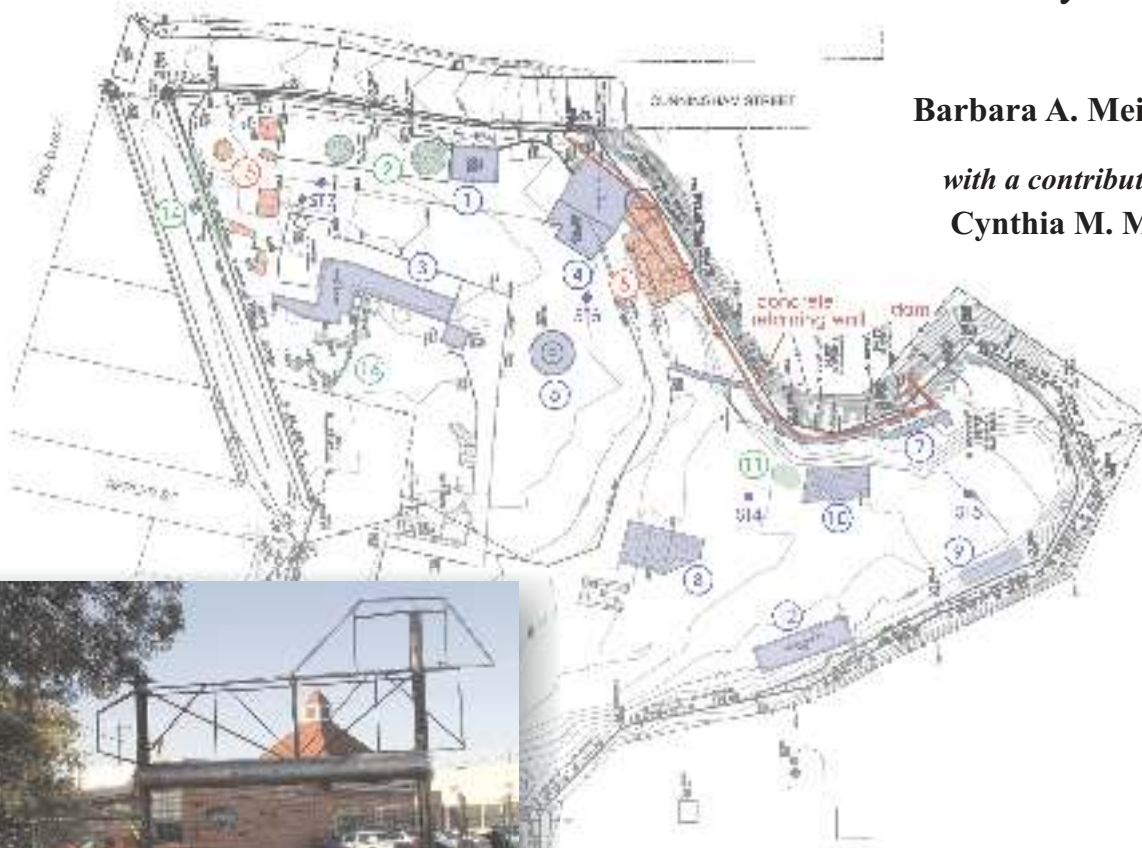


# Archaeological Survey and Historic Background Research Conducted for the Alamo Community College District at the Former Site of Playland Park, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas

by  
Barbara A. Meissner

with a contribution by  
Cynthia M. Muñoz



Texas Antiquities Committee Permit No. 5076



Prepared by:  
Center for Archaeological Research  
The University of Texas at San Antonio  
Archaeological Report No. 400

Prepared for:  
Facility Programming and Consulting  
Alamo Community College District

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**Principal Investigator**

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2009



## **Abstract:**

In November and December 2008, the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) of the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) conducted a 100 percent pedestrian survey (excluding known areas of contaminated soils) of the Area of Potential Effect (APE) of a project funded by the Alamo Community College District (ACCD), to build a centralized administration facility just northeast of downtown San Antonio, Texas. The survey was conducted under the requirements of the City of San Antonio Unified Development Code, Chapter 35, and the Texas Antiquities Code. The property was bounded on the east by a segment of the Acequia Madre de Valero, part of the Spanish Colonial irrigation system that continued in use until the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, the property was known to have been the location of Playland Park, a well-known amusement park that operated from 1943 to 1980. The archaeological services described in this report were performed under Texas Antiquities Permit No. 5076, with Barbara A. Meissner serving as Project Archaeologist and Cynthia M. Munoz as Principal Investigator.

A search of historic records was conducted to learn the ownership history of the APE. In addition, a total of seven shovel tests were excavated and photographs of 17 extant structures remaining from Playland were taken. The CAR crew also photographed the condition of the remains of the Acequia Madre de Valero on the eastern edge of the APE.

Examination of the ditch on the eastern edge of the property indicates that it follows the old course of the Acequia Madre de Valero, but all traces of the original acequia have been obliterated by erosion in the northern part of the APE. The uncovered portion of the ditch is now much deeper and much wider than the original acequia, and active erosion is still ongoing. The condition of the acequia in the southern part of the APE, which was filled at some time after 1916, has not been determined. While there are still many remnants of the historic use of the property as the Playland amusement park, all such structures are in poor condition.

Two chert flakes were recovered in the shovel tests, but both were in mixed context. No evidence of intact prehistoric cultural debris was encountered. No new sites were documented during the pedestrian survey. Due to the condition and construction style of the remaining Playland structures, CAR, in accordance with the Texas Historic Commission (THC) does not recommend designation of the amusement park as a historic site. Because the Acequia Madre de Valero runs along eastern edge of the APE, the CAR, in accordance with the THC, recommends that the

ACCD preserve this feature. The Alamo Community College District concurred with the CAR and the THC recommendation and will work with the City of San Antonio Historic Design Review Board to preserve and restore the acequia. Therefore, the CAR recommends that the construction of the proposed ACCD facility proceed as proposed, with preservation of the acequia.

All materials recovered during the investigation and all project related documents are curated at the CAR.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Project History

Facility Programming and Consulting of San Antonio, Texas, contracted with the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) of the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) to provide archaeological services required by state and city law before construction of a headquarters building just northeast of downtown San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas (Figure 1-1). The Area of Potential Effect (APE) included approximately 12.5 acres of land. The archaeological work was required because the project was funded by a political subdivision of the State of Texas, placing it under the jurisdiction of the Antiquities Code of Texas administered by the Texas Historical Commission (THC). Because the project required several City permits, it also falls under the oversight of the San Antonio Historic Preservation Division (COAHPD) as per Chapter 35 of its Unified Development Code. The archaeological services described in this report, performed under Texas Historical Commission Survey Permit No. 5076, were intended to obtain cultural resources clearance from the Archaeological and Architecture Divisions of the THC.

The principle goal of the 100-percent pedestrian survey was to determine the possible presence of undocumented historic resources and/or prehistoric cultural deposits that might be impacted by the construction of the ACCD headquarters within the project APE. In addition to the pedestrian survey, the CAR conducted archival research related to Playland Park, formerly located within the APE, and the Acequia Madre de Valero (also called the Alamo Acequia or the Alamo Ditch) that forms part of the boundary of the APE.

The CAR contracted with ACCD to perform all state-required archaeological services associated with the project, specifically:

1. application for a Texas Historical Commission Survey Permit;
2. archival research documenting the land-use and ownership history of the tract and the acequia;
3. a 100% pedestrian survey of the 12.5-acre tract using shovel testing;
4. determination of site boundaries for any newly documented archaeological sites;
5. completion of artifact analysis and preparation of a draft technical report;
6. preparation of artifacts and associated project records for curation at CAR;
7. submission of draft report for ACCD, COAHPD, and THC review;
8. revisions of draft report to incorporate review comments;
9. curation of artifacts;



Figure 1-1. The location of project area on the San Antonio East 7.5 minute series USGS quadrangle map.

10. printing of final technical report and submission of copies to the Sponsor, COSAHPD, and THC;
11. printing of 50 copies of a Public Brochure summarizing the results of the work; and
12. all coordination between ACCD, the COSAHPD, and the THC.

The field work for this project was completed on November 11, 2008. A total of seven shovel tests were dug, resulting in the collection of 90 artifacts. In addition, many photographs of the remaining structures were taken to document the condition of the APE prior to construction.

## The Project Area

The project area is located in an urban setting immediately northeast of downtown San Antonio, Texas. The 12.5 acre APE is bounded by Cunningham Street to the north, E. Josephine Street to the south, Alamo Street to the west and Fort Sam Houston to the East (Figure 1-2). The acreage



Figure 1-2. Aerial view of the project area, showing nearby streets, the remains of Playland, and the remaining section of the Arroyo Madre, today used as a drainage ditch.

is bordered by commercial development to the north and west and residential development to the south.

The topography of the San Antonio area is the result of the Miocene uplift that produced the Edwards Plateau and Balcones Escarpment. The project area consists of Quaternary Alluvium and Fluvial terrace deposits composed mainly of silts and clays overlying ancient alluvium (Barnes 1983). Soils on the APE consist of 19 percent Houston Black gravelly clay and 81 percent Lewisville silty clay. Lewisville soils are distinguished by their deep, dark grayish-brown to brown calcareous silty clays and are generally found on 1-3 percent slopes on riparian terraces. Houston Black soils are found on level to moderately sloping uplands, 3-5 percent slopes, and are formed mostly of calcareous clays and marls of Cretaceous age (Taylor et al. 1991). The project area ranges in elevation from 670 to 685 ft amsl. The San Antonio River, located 620 m (0.39

miles) west of the western edge of the APE, is the closest natural source of water. The river's source, the "Blue Hole" spring, lies about 2.5 k (1.6 miles) north of the project area.

## **Previous Archaeological Investigations**

The Texas Archeological Sites Atlas lists five archaeological sites within one mile of the project area, but no previous work was recorded within the project area:

41BX13. This site, located 0.47 miles west of the project area, is listed on the Texas Archaeological Sites Atlas database as an Archaic Period buried camp or village. Materials recovered consisted of archaic and neo-historic artifacts. The site was recorded by the Witte Museum in 1966 (THC 2008). This site encompasses the entirety of the Brackenridge Park and golf course (Katz and Fox 1979). No other information is available.

41BX264. Katz and Fox recorded this prehistoric lithic scatter as part of an archaeological and historical assessment of Brackenridge Park in 1976. The site (the Polo Field Site) is roughly 10,000 square feet and is on the edge of the Polo Field and in the adjacent horse corral. It consists of an extensive scatter of chipped stone flakes and tools associated with burned limestone. One diagnostic, a Castroville type dart point, was recovered, suggesting a Late Archaic occupation. No shovel tests or other subsurface excavations occurred. Monitoring was recommended for any future subsurface excavation (Katz and Fox 1979).

The site was surveyed by SWCA Inc., Environmental Consultants in 2001 in advance of the proposed Westin Texas Open rehabilitation of the Brackenridge Driving Range (Miller and Barile 2002). Eight backhoe trenches were excavated within the Driving Range revealing low to moderate quantities of subsurface cultural materials within 41BX264. One diagnostic tool, a Langtry projectile point, was recovered at roughly 35-40 cm below surface, supporting a Middle to Late Archaic age for the site. Due to heavy disturbances incurred over the past 100 years, the site was determined to have poor contextual integrity and is not considered potentially eligible for the NRHP (Miller and Barile 2002). 41BX264 is located 0.91 miles north of the ACCD project area.

41BX293. This site, 0.51 miles northwest of the project area, is listed on the Texas Archaeological Sites Atlas database as a sparse lithic scatter. Artifacts recovered consisted of two points, a Pedernales and a Frio, and one unifacial scraper. The site was recorded by Thomas Hester in 1975. This site is located on the west bank of the San Antonio River, south of

Brackenridge Park, under and around a house on Magnolia Drive (THC 2008). No other information is available.

41BX321. In 1976 Katz and Fox recorded this site as a lithic scatter located approximately 30 cm below the surface in the wall of a drainage ditch. No temporally diagnostic artifacts were noted. No subsurface testing occurred (Katz and Fox 1979). The site covers approximately 7500 square feet. Testing was recommended only if subsurface impact was imminent (THC 2008). The site is located 0.54 miles north of the project area.

41BX322. This site, roughly 8750 square feet, is described as a sparse lithic scatter consisting of flakes and burned rock (THC 2008). Katz and Fox recorded the site in 1976 and concluded that the site was possibly a temporary campsite or a specialized activity area. No subsurface excavations occurred and further limited testing of the area was recommended prior to any future modifications to Avenue B, Mulberry or Wilderness Roads, or to the Avenue B drainage ditch (Katz and Fox 1979). The site was tested by Fox and Frkuska in 1977 due to the impending Catalpa-Pershing Drainage project in Brackenridge Park. A one meter square test unit was excavated. Because artifact recovery was sparse and no diagnostic materials were recovered, it was determined that no further work was necessary (Fox and Frkuska 1978). 41BX322 is located 0.78 miles north of the current project area.

## **Methods**

### **In the Field**

Minimum Survey Standards put forth by the Texas Historical Commission for a pedestrian survey require, minimally, a shovel test every two acres. The CAR excavated seven shovel tests within the project area in settings with a potential for buried cultural materials. All shovel tests were 30 cm in diameter and excavated in 10-cm levels to 60 cm if possible. One Shovel Test (#1) could only be excavated to 45 cm below the ground surface (cmbs) due to the presence of large rocks.

Excavated soils were screened through 0.64 cm (0.25 in) mesh or troweled through carefully if clay content was high. The CAR recorded the location of all excavated shovel tests with GPS units and plotted their locations on aerial photos. A shovel test form was completed for each shovel test and included observations of soil texture and color, inclusions, artifact counts and depth, excavation depth of the shovel test, and other surveyor notes. All field forms were completed in pencil.

## **Laboratory Methods**

All cultural material collected during the survey was prepared in accordance with federal regulation 36 CFR part 79 and in accordance with current guidelines of the Center for Archaeological Research, which will provide permanent curation. Artifacts were processed in the CAR laboratory, where they were washed, air-dried, and stored in archival-quality bags. Artifacts were sorted into appropriate analytical categories. Acid-free labels were placed in all artifact bags. Each label displays provenience information and a corresponding lot number laser printed or written in pencil. Artifacts were separated by class and stored in acid-free boxes identified with standard labels. Catalog and analytic data were entered into a Microsoft Access® database. All artifacts are permanently curated at CAR. Field notes, forms, and hard copies of photographs were placed in labeled archival folders. Documents and forms were printed on acid-free paper and any soiled forms were placed in archival-quality page protectors. A copy of the final report in Adobe Acrobat® file format and all digital material pertaining to the project, including photographs, will be burned onto a CD and permanently curated with the field notes and other documents at the Center for Archaeological Research.



## Chapter 2: Historic Background

### The Acequia Madre de Valero (Alamo Acequia)

The original motives of the Spanish in establishing a settlement in the San Antonio River Valley were largely two-fold: 1) establish a secure way station for expeditions to the beleaguered missions of East Texas, and 2) move the rapidly failing Mission San Francisco de Solano from the Rio Grande to an area where the local Native Americans seemed friendly and the water was abundant. The Franciscan monks, in particular, were enticed to the location because of the water spilling from literally hundreds of springs along the edge of the Edwards Escarpment. These coalesced into two major water sources less than two miles apart, the San Antonio River and San Pedro Creek (Tous 1930:5).

The Spanish word *acequia* was derived from the Arabic *al-saqiya* meaning irrigation ditch, and entered the Spanish language during the years in which the Moors, Islamic Arabic-speaking peoples from North Africa, controlled most of Spain (Cook 1993). The Spanish obsession with water was founded in the need for irrigation for successful farming in the semi-arid lands of their home country (Cox 2004:7). The men who established Mission San Antonio de Valero and Presidio San Antonio de Béjar in 1718 recognized the sporadic nature of rainfall in south Texas and knew that if these settlements were to thrive, they must have water for irrigation. The original mission and presidio were located near the headwaters of San Pedro Creek, but this proved not to be the best location (Habig 1974:43). The presidio was moved to the San Antonio River. The mission was later moved east of the San Antonio River, probably sometime late in 1719, and to its final location, across the river from the presidio, in 1720 (Habig 1990:159). At some time early in 1719, the first acequia, later known as the San Pedro Acequia, was begun. This ran from just below San Pedro Springs to the San Antonio River. Another acequia, later called the Upper Labor Acequia, took water from the San Antonio River not far from its headwaters and ran to the west of the river, providing water to fields north of the mission (see Figure 2-1).

When the mission was moved to the east side of the river, a new acequia was needed to bring water to fields on that side of the river and to the new mission itself. This acequia, usually called the *Acequia Madre de Valero* or the Alamo Acequia or, less romantically, the Alamo Ditch, began just downstream from the entrance to the Upper Labor Acequia on the other side of the river, in what is now Breckinridge Park, and flowed south, today roughly paralleled by Alamo Street, finally returning to the river near the modern South Alamo Street bridge. Numerous



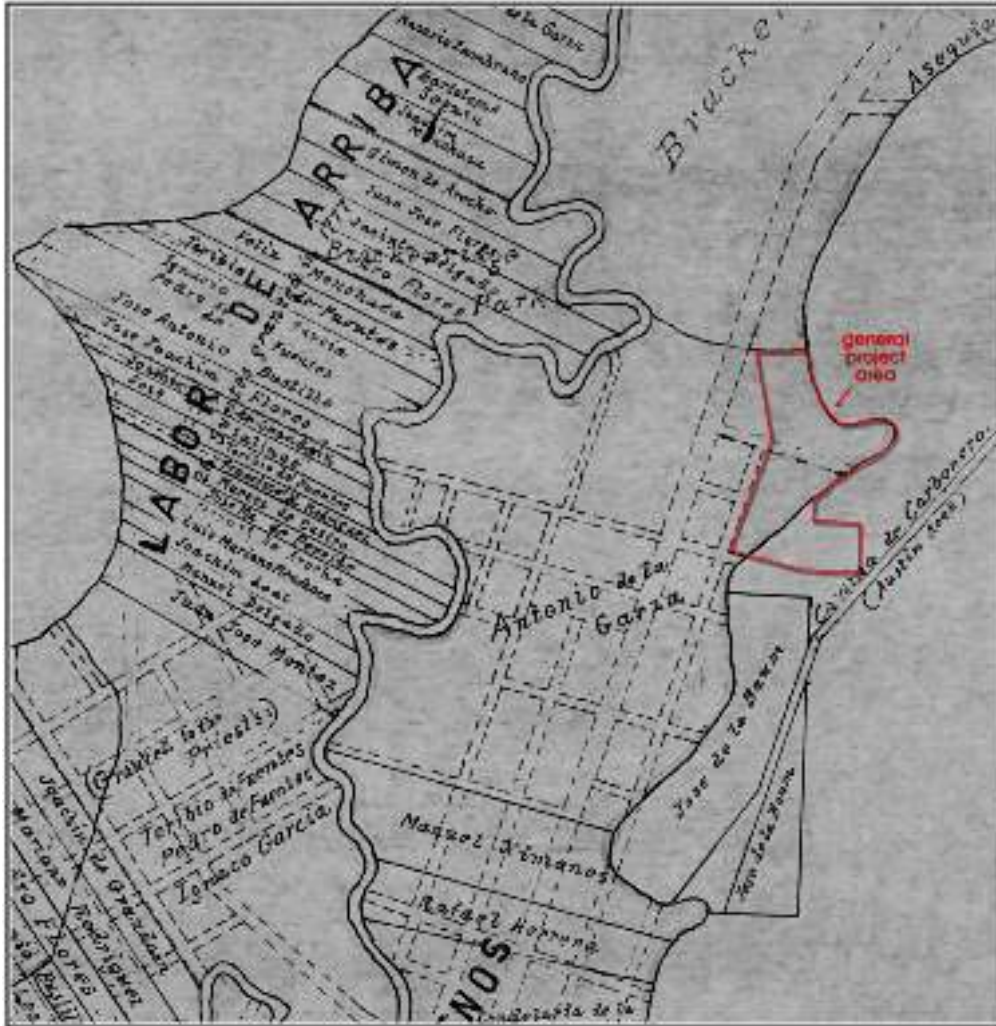


Figure 2-1. Map, ca. 1912 but based on a much older map, of the original land grants to the northern portion of the city, showing the Labor Arriba west of the San Antonio River, and the Labor de los Adameños east of the river, just south of the project area. Note the desagua at the northern edge of the project area.

branches fanned out from the Acequia Madre de Valero, including one that ran to Mission San Antonio (see map in Cox 2004:7).

The course of each acequia was dictated by the landscape. The water needed to remain near the ground surface so that it could be distributed to the fields without pumping. Therefore, each acequia began behind a partial dam that raised the level of the water source enough to spill into the man-made channel (Cox 2004:3). From that point, the acequia followed the landscape, always roughly the same depth and width, with the natural slope of the land providing the gradual change in elevation required to keep the water moving. This method of construction, using only simple measuring and surveying tools, required a willingness to literally “go with the flow”, that is, the acequia meandered where it needed to go as dictated by the landscape, and everything else had to

accommodate to that need. Occasional “*desaguas*”, ditches that returned excess water flow to the river, helped control water flow in the acequias. Water was distributed to the fields by opening gates for a certain amount of time on a schedule.

When Anglo engineers tried to expand the system in the late nineteenth century, irrigation was only part of the purpose (Cox 2000:13-14). The main function of the acequia known as the Alazán Acequia was to channel flood waters from the Olmos Basin to the west, outside of the inhabited part of the city. The construction methods used were very different from those used by the Spanish, cutting through landscape features that stood in their way, and making the acequia go where they wanted it to go. That acequia was a failure (Cox 2000:15). Ignoring the landscape resulted in water often pooling in the ditch, becoming a stagnant home for mosquito larvae. It was filled in twenty years after it was opened (Cox 2000:15).

The Spanish-built acequia system in San Antonio eventually contained more than 50 miles of ditches and major branches (Cox 2004:1). The early acequias were still fully operational more than a hundred and fifty years later. One of the acequias, the San Juan Acequia, is still in use as it was originally intended, as a way to irrigate farm fields near the San Juan Mission, and includes a working aqueduct that carries water over a creek near Mission Espada (Cox 2000:32-33).

The acequias in the more urban areas of San Antonio had been used primarily to provide drinking water to the inhabitants. When they were made obsolete by modern piped water systems, they were abandoned and later filled, and in some cases knowledge of the original course of the acequias was lost.

Wayne Cox, who spent much of his career as an archaeologist and historian studying the acequia system of San Antonio, noted:

These wandering waterways made the missions possible, predetermined the city’s seemingly random first thoroughfares, dictated its settlement and growth patterns and affected the lifestyle of the community well into the twentieth century...(Cox 2004:2).

Within the APE, the Acequia Madre de Valero makes a sharp meander to the east in order to skirt higher ground in the northern part of the property. Old survey maps, such as that shown in Figure 2-2, indicate the course of the acequia along the eastern boundary of the APE. By 1934, survey maps such as the one shown in Figure 2-3, indicate that the portion of the Acequia Madre de Valero north of Cunningham had been filled in. Knowledge of the original course was lost, as the surveyor has mistaken an old drainage ditch or *desagua* (visible in Figures 2-1 and 2-2) for the

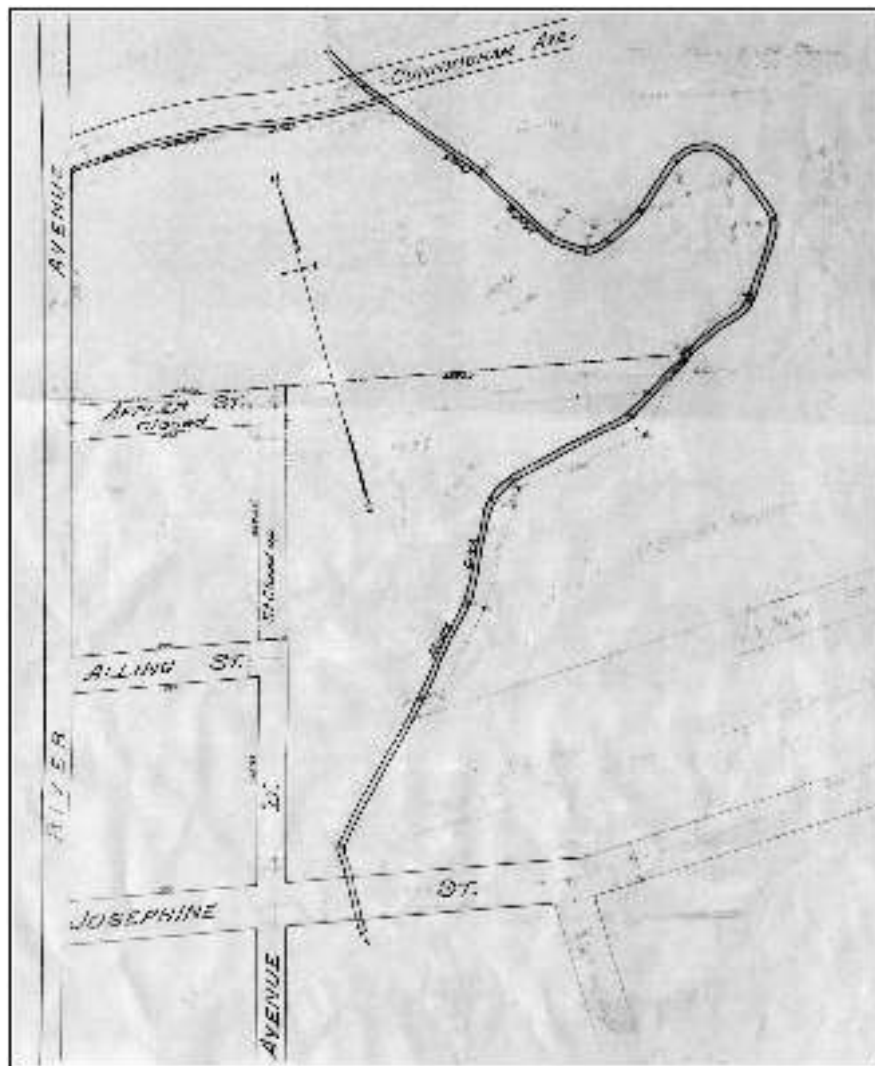


Figure 2-2. Surveyor's map of the project area in 1916, showing the rerouting of the northern end of North Anna Street.

Acequia Madre de Valero. At some time, probably before the property was purchased by Mr. Johnson (see below) the southern section of the acequia within the APE was also filled.

### **A History of Property Ownership in the APE**

The property that today includes the APE was originally granted to José Antonio de la Garza by the Mexican government in 1824 (see Figure 2-1), and is part of the two leagues of land awarded to him at that time (Bexar County Deed Records (BCDR), Book 2, Page 596; Orozco 2008). In 1818, de la Garza was given the unique privilege of minting a copper coin, known as a “*jola*”, with a face value of  $\frac{1}{2}$  *real*. This coin had the initials JAG and the date 1818 on the obverse and a single stamped star on the reverse (Orozco 2008).

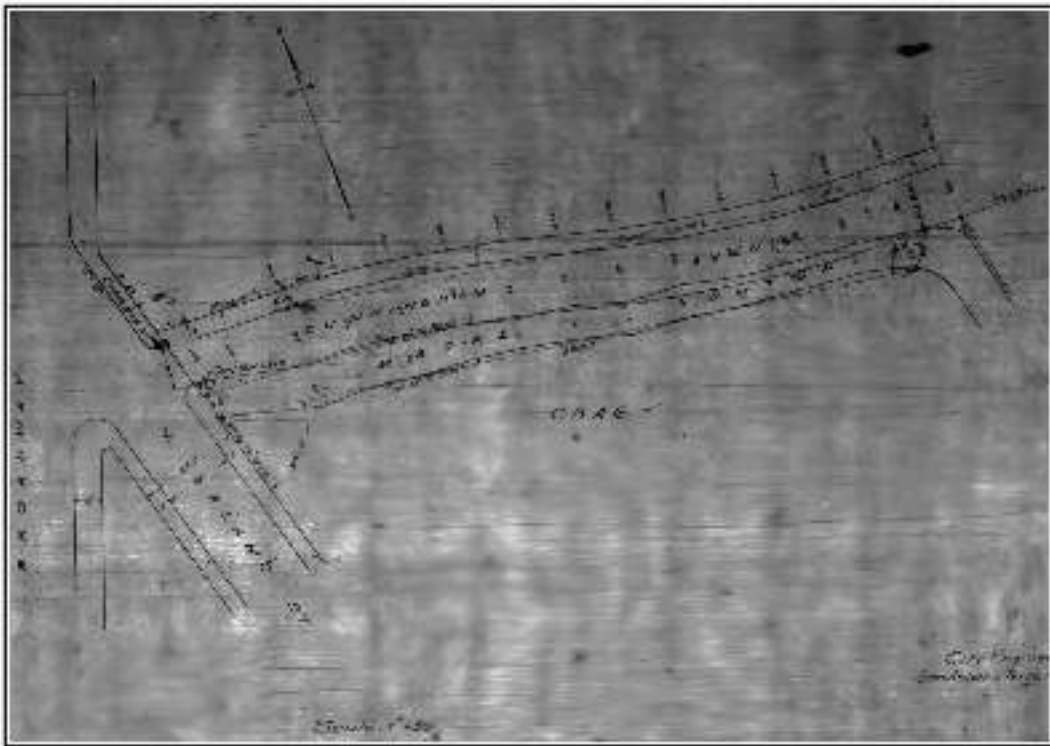


Figure 2-3. Surveyor's map of Cunningham Street in 1954. Note that the portion of the Acequia Madre de Valero that crossed Cunningham in the past has been filled, so that this surveyor mistook the old design that ran south of Cunningham as part of the acequia (compare with Figure 2-2).

The APE was part of the property conveyed to de la Garza's son Leonardo by his mother in 1866, after the death of his older brother José (BCDR book U2, pp. 22-23). In 1877, Garza deeded the right to lay pipes from the San Antonio River across the APE to the United States of America, thus allowing the newly created Fort Sam Houston (on land adjacent to the east of the APE, donated by the City of San Antonio in December of 1876) access to water (BCDR 6:587).

At some point before 1898, the southern portion of the APE, the portion that lies south of Appler Street, was separated from the northern part, probably in order to mortgage the property. Search of deed records has not located details of this transaction.

The northern part of the APE, north of Appler Street, was sold by Leonardo Garza and his wife Carolina to Friedrich Groos and Hulda Groos in 1903 (BCDR 256:28). The Groos family was part of the massive migration of Germans into Texas that began in 1848 (York 2008). The family included Carl (Karl), his wife Hulda, and his brothers Friedrich and Gustave. Together, the brothers created a freight company, which took Confederate cotton to Mexico to avoid the U.S. Navy blockade of Southern ports. The business was successful and after the war the family moved to San Antonio, began buying land, and started a private bank, which, in 1912, became the Groos National Bank (York 2008). A search on the name Groos in the Bexar County Deed

Records online database (Bexar County Clerk 2008) returns hundreds of transactions, many of them in the names of either Friedrich or Gustave and their sister-in-law Hulda.

The northern part of the APE was sold to Paul Poppe in 1905 (BCDR 256:19). He built greenhouses and several other buildings to support his garden and landscape business. Figure 2-4 shows a portion of the 1912 Sanborn Insurance Map showing the APE. Mr. Poppe's greenhouses are shown, as well as a number of outbuildings. Mr. Poppe's business was apparently successful because he was able to pay off a deed of trust and several builders and mechanics liens on the property by 1930, when he received clear title (BCDR 153:521-522). Twelve years later Poppe and his wife Martha sold the property to S. L. Carrico (BCDR 1947:41). Carrico, in turn, sold the property to James E. Johnson in 1945, when Johnson exercised his option to buy the property after leasing it, beginning in 1942 (BCDR 2091:581; Gaida 2007:31). It was on this northern portion of the APE that the majority of the Playland rides and other entertainments were located in the first years of the park. The at least one of Mr. Poppe's greenhouses was still standing when Johnson leased the property and was converted into the "Midway" (see Structure 3, below) of Playland Park (Gaida 2007:31).

The southern portion of the APE was sold by the Bexar County Sheriff under a court order from the 45<sup>th</sup> District Court of Bexar County, in January 1899 (BCDR 177, pp. 565-568). The list of owners of the property at the time of the court ruling, on October 5, 1898, included Leonardo Garza, and the San Antonio National Bank, as well as 10 other names. The property was sold by Sheriff's Deed to Friedrich Groos and his sister-in-law, Hulda Groos (BCDR 177, pp. 565-568). Transfer of this property by the Groos' to anyone else has not been found in the available records. However, a warranty deed, dated March 17, 1945, exists, in which six heirs of Leonardo Garza sold the property to M. Riley Wyatt, who in turn sold the property to James E. Johnson on September 25, 1946. No records explaining how the property was returned to the Garza family have been found at this time. The western part of this section of the APE was used primarily as a parking lot for Playland Park, while the eastern part contained several rides and the shooting gallery (see below).

Once both portions of the APE had been paid for, Johnson transferred ownership to the Playland Park Properties Corporation (BCDR 2305:116-118).

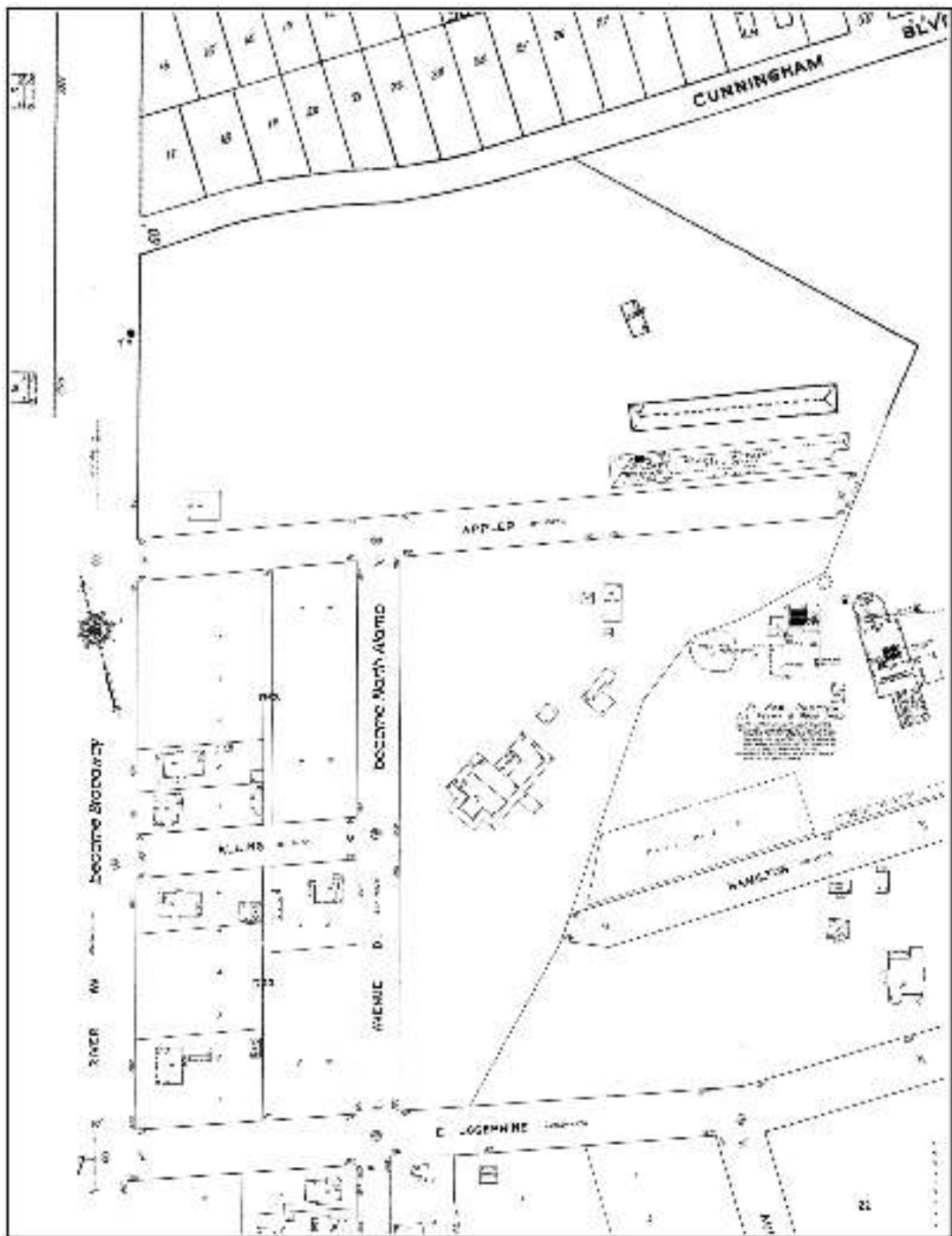


Figure 2-4. Portion of a 1912 Sanborn Insurance map, showing the APE. Note the greenhouses, and outbuildings constructed by Paul Poppe. Also note that Avenue D (became North Alamo Street) did not extend to the intersection of Cunningham and Broadway at this time (compare with Figure 2-2).

## **James E. Johnson and Playland Park**

In 2007, Ed Gaida, who had worked at Playland Park during its last decade in operation and continued as caretaker for several decades afterwards, published a review of the history of Playland Park (Gaida 2007). The majority of this section is derived from this excellent book.

James E. Johnson, known throughout his life as Jimmy, was born in Arlington, Nebraska on November 13, 1901 (Gaida 2007:9). His family moved to Omaha while he was still a young child. He worked at various jobs during his childhood, including tending furnaces and other chores forbidden to neighboring Orthodox Jews on the Sabbath (Gaida 2007:9). Beginning at age 20, he was a traveling chewing gum salesman, until he joined the sales staff of Western Electric Piano Co. in Chicago (Gaida 2007:10). This company was lost during the Depression, but beginning in 1934, Johnson started a new company selling pinball machines (Gaida 2007:14) and later illegal table-top gambling machines. This business had ups and downs, being forced into bankruptcy at one point, but emerged from this strong enough to continue until 1942, when the factory was converted to building precision parts for bomb sights (Gaida 2007:15-21). The business continued to make money for the Johnson family and his partners until it was sold in 1980 (Gaida 2007:122).

In 1941, Johnson opened a penny arcade in San Antonio he called “Playland”, on North St. Mary’s street across the street from the Empire Theater (Gaida 2007:21). With a partner he had a temporary amusement park in the part of Breckinridge Park now known as the Polo Grounds, but eventually the City of San Antonio remembered that the gift of the park property from George Breckinridge included a clause that stipulated that no for-profit organizations could use the park (Gaida 2007:29). Forced to move, Johnson broke with his partner and in 1942, he leased the property at the corner of North Alamo and Broadway and began development of Playland Park. The same year, he moved his family, including his adopted twins Jack and Jill, to San Antonio (Gaida 2007:21).

Playland Park opened its gates for the first time on May 14, 1943. Johnson took advantage of the free advertisement inherent in such rides as the carousel, whose animals were stylized swans rather than horses, and the Ferris wheel. Both these rides were deliberately placed near the front of the park, where they were readily visible from nearby streets (Gaida 2007:34). The attempt to run something as “frivolous” as an amusement park during the war years had its difficulties. Spare parts for the machinery were difficult or impossible to acquire (Gaida 2007:27). Even stuffed toys to use as prizes at the various games were not available. Soft plaster “kewpie” dolls

were used until the end of the war (Gaida 2007:36). The first season was a financial success and the institution of Playland was firmly established as part of the San Antonio landscape.

As the war was coming to a close, Johnson was beginning to plan for a large wooden roller coaster that could not be built until war-time material restrictions were eased. Since the roller coaster would be a permanent fixture on the property, Johnson decided to exercise his option to buy the property in 1945 (BCDR 2091:581; Gaida 2007:31). Once the vendors' note on this deed was paid off, construction of the "Rocket" roller coaster began. It was placed in a roughly east-west orientation, extending from near the parking lot onto the land within the meander of the old Acequia Madre de Valero on the eastern side of the property (Gaida 2007:37, 46).

On August 15, 1947, the "Rocket" was opened for business. Designed by Herbert P. Schmeck, the "Rocket" was considered one of the best wooden roller coasters in the country. In the 33 years of its tenure at Playland it carried more than 3 million people (Gaida 2007:62). After Playland was closed in 1980, an amusement park in Pennsylvania bought the "Rocket", took it apart, shipped it in pieces, reassembled it and renamed it the "Phoenix". In spite of its age, the "Phoenix" is still considered one of the top ten wooden roller coasters in the U. S. (Wikipedia 2008).

Gaida (2007:22-23) describes Jimmy Johnson as a man who had definite ideas about how to do things, had a temper, and was subject to mood swings. Nevertheless, he was fundamentally a kind boss, genuinely concerned for the welfare of his employees, giving them reasonable wages and was often quite generous, always giving gifts for weddings and new babies. He both inspired loyalty and rewarded loyalty. Though he was ever the businessman, he understood the importance of safety. Every winter, each of the rides was disassembled, inspected, and repaired. At least two employees walked the tracks of the "Rocket" every single day before the ride was opened (Gaida 2007:120). In the 37 years of its operation, no major accidents happened at Playland (Gaida 2007:119), even though some of the equipment was many decades old before it was purchased for use at Playland (Gaida 2007:29, 31).

Johnson understood the value of good relations with the surrounding community. Every year he held a special day for children from the city's orphanages. Children were given tickets announcing that they were guests of James E. Johnson, allowing free rides, a free comic book, and one free ice cream, soda, and popcorn each (Gaida 2007:32). Free passes were made available to airmen in basic training at Lackland Air Force Base (Gaida 2007:121).

One aspect of Johnson's social behavior can be seen in his attitude toward African Americans. In



the 1940s and until 1954 it was against the law in Texas and in San Antonio to allow black Americans into public businesses that did not have separate accommodations for them. Since providing such a separate facility for African Americans would not be feasible in an amusement park setting, Johnson obeyed the law and black San Antonians were not allowed in the park. But one day a year he closed the park to white patrons and opened it for African Americans. It was always a special day, with many raffles that included such prizes as major appliances (Gaida 2007:40) Of course, he made a great deal of money on this special day each year, but it can be inferred that it was not purely a business decision by the choice of the date on which it was always celebrated. It was June 19, a day celebrated as “Juneteenth” by African Americans in Texas as the day on which slavery came to an official end in the state (Acosta 2008).

Jimmy Johnson had a distinct method of doing business. His early years during the depression had taught him to make as many friends in positions of authority as possible, read contracts carefully, never assume a partnership would last, and always be ready for political trouble. As a result, Playland continued to operate as a successful business until the mid-70s, when changing times and Johnson’s refusal to make significant changes in the park resulted in gradually increasing losses. Johnson was satisfied because his business in Chicago made so much money he needed a tax shelter. He could maintain the park the way he wanted it, as it always had been, and still profit from its lack of profits (Gaida 2007:122). When the business in Chicago was sold in 1980, there was no longer an impetus to maintain Playland. At midnight on Labor Day in 1980, the park was closed. Although there were several offers to buy the park, Johnson refused. Playland was his, and he did not want anyone else to have it (Gaida 2007:124).

After the closing of Playland, most of the rides were sold (Gaida 2007:124-125). The buildings were allowed to deteriorate. Playland now exists almost entirely in the memories of those who went there as children (Figure 2-5).



*Figure 2-5. The remains of the main gate of Ploverland, viewed from inside the park, with only the support structures for the main sign still extant.*



# Chapter 3: Results of Survey

## Field Survey Results

On November 11, 2008, a field crew from the CAR conducted a 100 percent pedestrian survey of the APE, excluding areas where soil contamination was known to be severe. The contaminated areas were delineated for the CAR personnel by a representative of the ACCD. These areas included the ground beneath the roller coaster, known to be contaminated with mercury, cadmium, and lead (preservatives used to protect the wooden structure of the coaster), and the area that had once been beneath the Ferris wheel, which was contaminated with hydraulic fluid.

Seven shovel tests were placed in areas that were not paved (Figure 3-1). All sediments in the shovel tests appeared to be either fill or highly disturbed (Table 3-1). Artifacts were sparse and in mixed contexts and the majority were from the twentieth century or later.

Table 3-1. Shovel Tests Excavated in the APE, Showing Soil Characteristics

ST#	Level (Depth cmbs)	Soil	Notes	Summary
1	1 (0-10)	Soft dark brown silty clay w/ 35% gravels	Limestone and chert gravels, 1 to 8 cm	All levels appear to be fill
	2 (10-20)	Compacted dark brown silty clay w/ 35% gravels	Gravel size getting larger, modern artifacts present	
	3 (20-30)	Compacted dark brown silty clay w/ 45% gravels	Modern artifacts present	
	4 (30-40)	Same Same as above	Modern artifacts present	
	5 (40-45)	Compact very dark brown silty clay to 45 cmbs	Terminated at 45 cmbs due to large rocks blocking continued digging. All levels appear to be fill	
2	1 (0-10)	Compact ash-brown silty sand with 40-60% gravels and large chert cobbles.	Appears to be fill	All levels appear to be fill
	2 (10-20)	Same as above	Appears to be fill. Modern artifacts present	
	3 (20-30)	Same as above		
	4 (30-40)	Same as above		
	5 (40-50)	Same as above		
	6 (50-60)	Same as above		
3	1 (0-10)	Soft dark gray-brown sandy silt becoming more compact.	Mixture of asphalt and concrete chunks, other modern artifacts present	Levels 1 to 3 are fill, 4 to 6 may be disturbed original sediments
	2 (10-20)	Compact dark gray-brown sandy silt	Modern artifacts present	
	3 (20-30)	Compact dark gray-brown sandy silt with increasing gravel to 70 percent.	Modern artifacts present	
	4 (30-40)	Compact blackish brown sandy silt	Modern artifacts present	
	5 (40-50)	Same as above	Modern artifacts present	
	6 (50-60)	Same as above	Modern artifacts and faunal bone present.	

Table 3-1. Continued...

ST#	Level (Depth cmbs)	Soil	Notes	Summary
4	1 (0-10)	Soft gray/brown silty clay mottled with yellowish caliche	Fill	Most of this ST was in a pipe trench. Sediments below trench may be original sediments but appear highly disturbed
	2 (10-20)	Caliche		
	3 (20-30)			
	4 (30-40)	Caliche to 43 cmbs. PVC pipe on east side of ST, then very dark brown silty clay	Caliche fill in pipe trench, then possibly original sediments with modern artifacts	
	5 (40-50)		Possibly original sediments, but appears disturbed	
6 (50-60)	Soft very dark brown silty clay with scatter of limestone gravel.			
5	1 (0-10)	Soft gray-brown silty clay with 5% gravel	Modern artifacts present	Appears to be fill throughout
	2 (10-20)	Becoming more compact gray-brown silty clay with increasing gravel to 35%.		
	3 (20-30)	Compact gray-brown silty clay with 35% gravel	Modern artifacts present	
	4 (30-40)	Compact gray-brown silty clay with 45% gravel		
	5 (40-50)		One large chert flake with modern artifacts	
	6 (50-60)			
6	1 (0-10)	Compact black-brown silty clay	Modern artifacts and faunal bone present	Disturbed but possibly original sediments throughout
	2 (10-20)		Modern artifacts present	
	3 (20-30)			
	4 (30-40)		One small chert flake at top of level	
	5 (40-50)			
	6 (50-60)			
7	1 (0-10)	Compact gray-brown silty clay w/15% gravels	Modern artifacts present	Levels 1 to 4 appear to be fill, 5 to 6 may be disturbed original sediments
	2 (10-20)			
	3 (20-30)			
	4 (30-40)	Compact gray-brown silty clay w/20% gravels		
	5 (40-50)	Compact gray-brown silty clay		
	6 (50-60)			

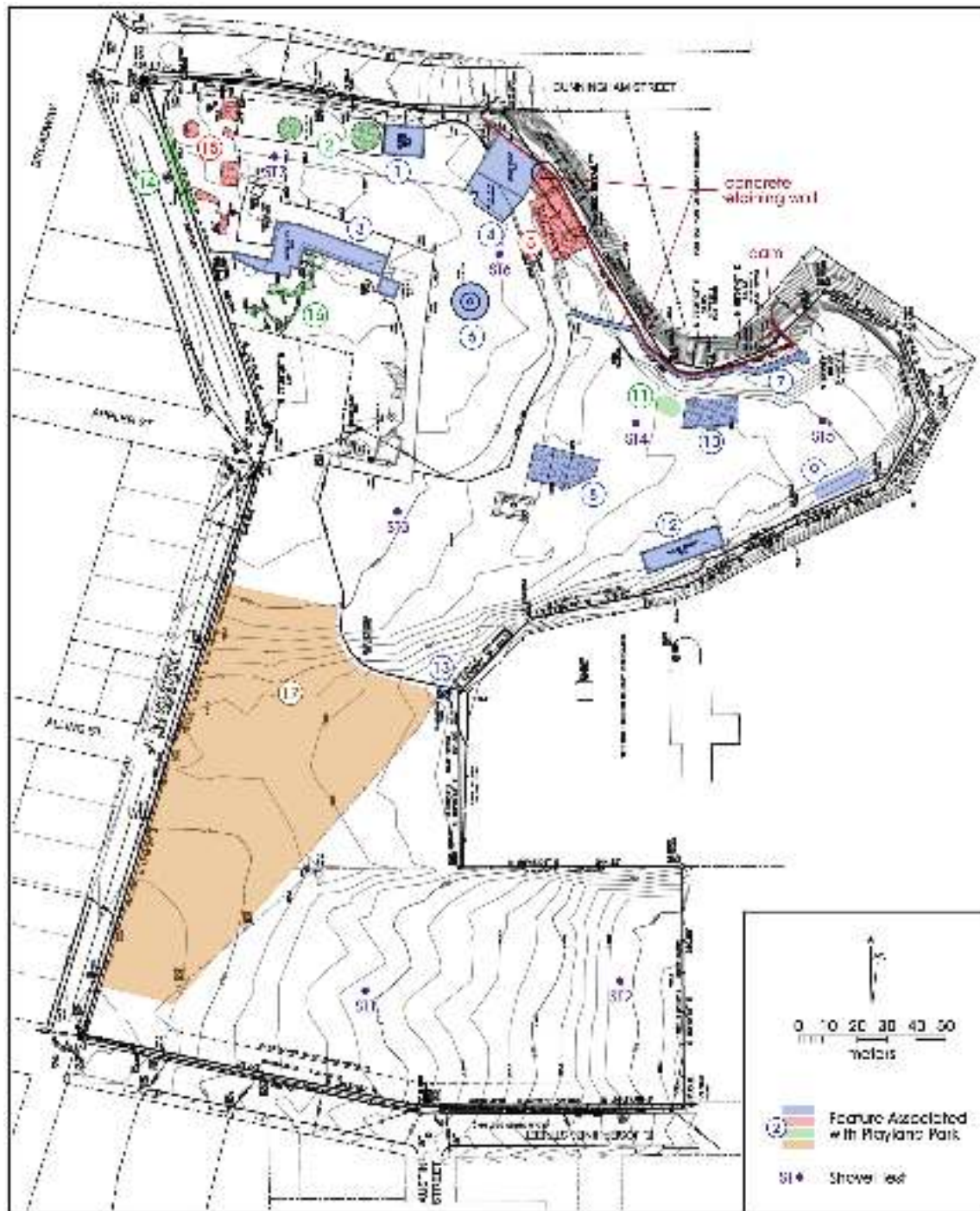


Figure 3-1. The APE, showing numbered features associated with Playland Park, including remaining buildings, the old paved parking lot, concrete slabs and sidewalks. The location of the 7 shower tests and structures associated with the remnant of the Acequia Madre de Volcanes are also shown.



## The Remnants of the Acequia Madre de Valero, November 2008

Although there is still a ditch in the same location as the historic Acequia Madre de Valero, erosion, which is active and ongoing (Figure 3-2), has destroyed the original acequia itself, and had probably done so before Jimmy Johnson bought the property. The existing parts of the ditch are as much as 4.9 m (16 ft) deep on the northern end of the APE, near Cunningham Street and as much as 10 m wide. While the original dimensions of the acequia at this location are unknown, it would not have been that deep or wide. A roughly 29 m section of the Acequia Madre de Valero, excavated by Mardith Schuetz in 1966 at Hemisfair Plaza, was found to be in remarkably good condition. That section of the acequia, about 3 km southwest of the APE, was consistently 1.6 m deep and 1.9 m wide (Schuetz 1970:5). The acequia is unlikely to have varied a great deal from these measurements throughout its course, as to do so would have made allocation of water in an equitable manner impossible.

We know that Johnson built a retaining wall on his side of the ditch, following the old acequia channel, intended primarily to prevent floodwaters from spilling over into Playland (Gaida 2007:45). That wall remains (see Figure 3-1 and Figures 3-3a and b), as does a dam Johnson built across the ditch in 1946 (Gaida 2007:45; Figure 3-3c).



Figure 3-2. The remnants of the Acequia Madre de Valero, showing the active erosion taking place in the ditch as of November 2008.



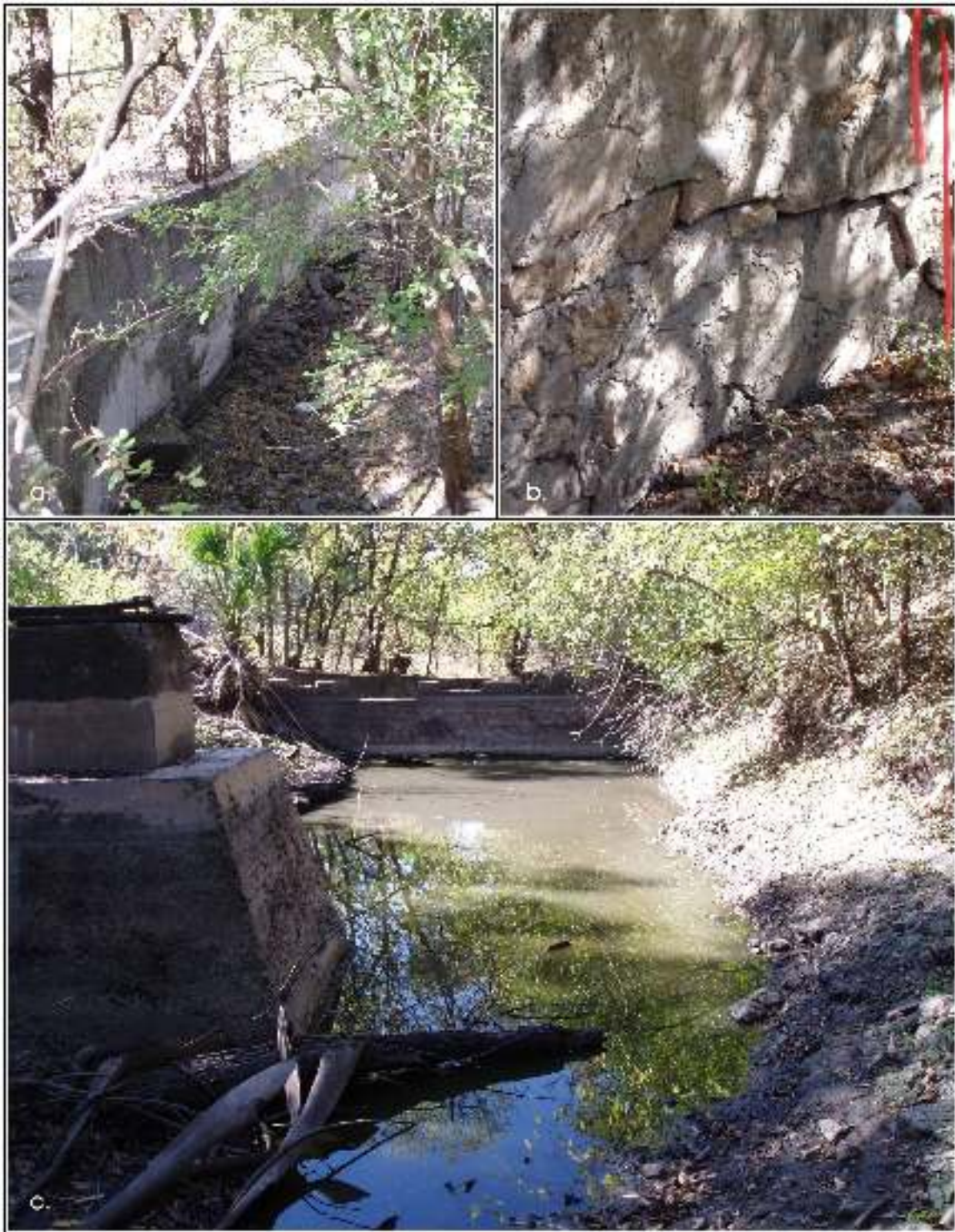


Figure 3-3. Modern structures associated with the remnants of the Acequia Madre de Valero. a) overall photo of the acequia with retaining wall (looking west), near the shallower (southern) end; b) a closer view of the retaining wall in a deeper part of the ditch; c) a view of the dam built across the ditch (looking northwest).



## The Remnants of Playland Park, November 2008

Photo documentation of the remaining structures of Playland included all extant structures, including buildings, concrete slabs, footers, etc. The following is a brief description of selected structures. The complete structure list is included in Table 3-2.

Table 3-2. Structures Recorded in the APE as of November 2008

Structure #	Type	Description
1	Building	Cement block building, open on one side (Figure 3-4)
2	Concrete slab	Concrete slabs with circular areas that once formed the base of two childrens' rides, including the boat ride and the car ride (see Gaida 2007).
3	Building	The "Midway", open-sided, constructed of concrete block on foundation of old greenhouse. Covered area in front. Subdivided into many small rooms for various "games"(Figures 3-5, 3-6). The putt-putt golf course was located behind the midway (Figure 3-9). The park offices were upstairs on the south side of the building (Figure 3-8)
4	Building	Cement block building, with wooden roof in poor condition, open on one side (Figure 3-10), similar to Structure 1.
5	Concrete slab	Remains of the slab foundation of a building.
6	Fountain	Large circular concrete fountain (Figure 3-11)
7	Sidewalk	Long sidewalk leading from main part of Playland to entrance to roller coaster (Figure 3-12).
8	Concrete slab	The slab foundation of a building.
9	Bottle cache	Cache of at least several hundred soda bottles (Figure 3-13), mentioned in Gaida (2007)
10	Concrete slab	Large concrete slab near the former location of the roller coaster
11	Debris pile	Concrete footers for the roller coaster, bulldozed into a pile
12	Building	Long, narrow concrete block building (Figure 3-14)
13	Tower	Remains of a 60 ft metal tower constructed to get better television reception.
14	Gate and turnstyle	Remains of the main gate of Playland, with support structure for the sign.
15	Concrete slab	Group of 6 small concrete slabs in the northwestern corner of the APE that served as foundations for the carousel, the Ferris Wheel, and several small ticket booths and other very small buildings.
16	Concrete slab	Remains of the concrete footers for the putt-putt golf course.
17	Parking lot	The remains of the parking lot for Playland Park

### Structure 1

Structure 1 is a building, open on one side, constructed of cement blocks with a wooden superstructure and asphalt shingled roof (see Figure 3-4a). It was used as accommodation for a fortune teller on one side and a photographer on the other (Figure 3-4b; see also Gaida 2007:141).

### Structure 3

Structure 3 is the remains of the building known as "The Midway" (Figures 3-1 and 3-5), originally constructed on the remains of one of Paul Poppe's greenhouses (Gaida 2007:31). The building was open-sided on the north side, with this area subdivided into several spaced where various "games" were offered. The wooden roof of Structure 3 extended beyond the building to provide cover on the north side (Figure 3-5b). Figure 3-6 shows views of the remains of three of the "games" areas.



Figure 3-4. Structure 1, showing degree of deterioration: a) view from east b) closer view of the remains of the former-teller's section.





Figure 3-5. View of "the Midway" showing open side with wooden roof above it: a) overview from the east side; b) view of condition of the overhang.

Two large murals decorated each end of Structure 3. On the west end was a flight of fancy featuring a number of “aliens”, an American “moon lander”-type vehicle and human visitors to the scene arriving in a space ship (Figure 3-7a). The mural on the east side of the building includes a number of Sesame Street ® characters on a trolley that has Playland Express lettered on it (Figure 3-7b).

The southern half of Structure 3 contained the administrative offices of the park (Figure 3-8) and the entrance to the Putt-Putt gold course (Figure 3-9; see also Gaida 2007:82). Note that the concrete footings for the golf course are listed as Structure16 in Table 3-2.

#### Structure 4

Structure 4 is another open-sided building with a roofed overhang (Figure 3-10a), similar to Structure 1, built of concrete block with a wooden roof, which is bad condition (Figure 3-10b), and another extension, probably intended to provide more shade.

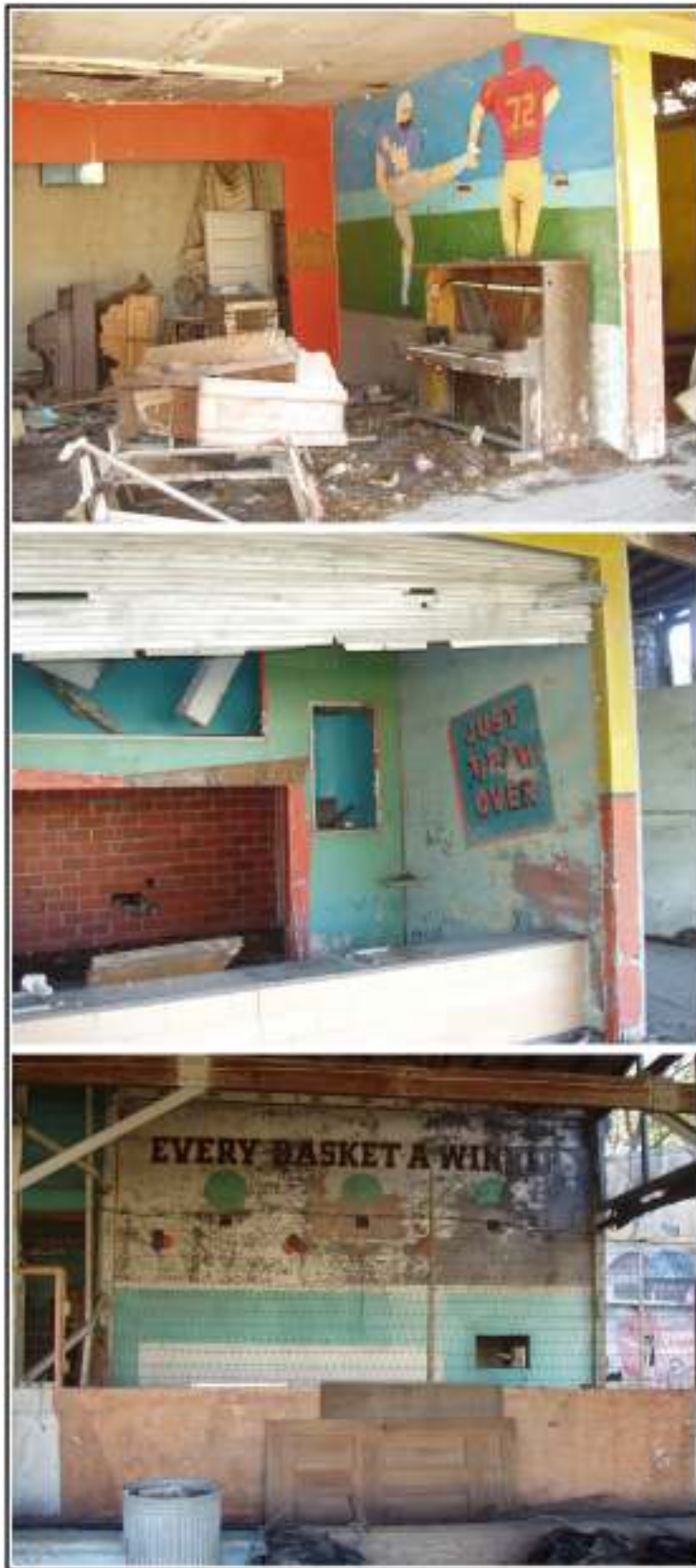


Figure 3-6. Three views of the remains of several of the individual “games” areas in the Midway.





Figure 3-7. Murals on the Midway building: a) west side "Alien Landscape"; b) east side "Necanic Street."

### Structure 6

Structure 6 is the remains of a large concrete fountain (Figures 3-1 and 3-11; see also Gaida 2007:136). This fountain was located just east of the most active area of Playland, and would have provided a little bit of cooling for the crowds in the hot South Texas summers.

### Structure 7

Structure 7 is the sidewalk that once led to the entrance to the "Rocket" roller coaster (see Figure 3-1). It follows along the northern edge of the acequia ditch to a point near the eastern-most part of the APE. In the past, the roller coaster was located in the area shown on the left of Figure 3-12. No remains of the coaster are evident in this location today, and the soil beneath it is contaminated



a.



b.

Figure 3-8. Park offices located along the back of the Midway building:  
a) Exterior view of offices; b) condition of one of the offices on the second floor.





Figure 3-9. Remains of the Putt-Putt golf course: a) entrance building at the back of the "Midway"; b) remnants of the putt-putt golf area.



Figure 3-10. Structure 4: a) showing the open roofed side; b) interior of Structure 4, showing poor condition of roof.





Figure 3-11. *Remains of a large circular concrete fountain.*



Figure 3-12. *The eastern end of Structure 7, a sidewalk leading to the entrance to the roller coaster. Note the area to the left of the photograph, where the roller coaster once stood. Also note the remains of the old TV tower (Structure 13) at the center back of the photograph.*

(see above). The only remaining evidence of the coaster is a pile of concrete footers that were removed from the area and bulldozed into a pile (see Structure 11 in Figure 3-1; see also Table 3-2).

### **Structure 9**

Not actually a structure, this feature is a dump of glass soda bottles (Figure 3-1, Figure 3-13). Gaida (2007:23) tells the story of these bottles, using it as an example of the way that Jimmy Johnson was always looking for a business advantage. Shortly after the end of World War II, the owner of the Mathews Bottling Company mentioned to Johnson that he had thousands of six ounce pop bottles that he no longer wanted because the end of government restrictions on the use of sugar was allowing him to bottle sodas in larger bottles (Gaida 2007:23). Johnson allowed him to dump the bottles behind the roller coaster. Later he made use of the bottles he had gotten for free:

Bottles were suspended from the ceiling with a string. Park visitors could purchase 5 marbles for a dime and using a sling shot attempt to break bottles to win a prize. The game lasted until 1974, when for reasons of safety it was replaced by a football toss (Gaida 2007:23).



Figure 3-13. *The bottle dump mentioned by Gaida (2007:23).*



This was presumably the game section shown in Figure 3-6, with the football players mural. Though the slingshot game presumably used thousands of bottles in the decades it was in operation, at least several hundred are still in the original pile (Figure 3-13).

### **Structure 12**

Structure 12 is a building constructed of concrete blocks (Figure 3-1, Figure 3-14). It is not known what this long narrow building was used as.

### **Structure 13**

Structure 13 is the remains of the 60 ft. tower Johnson built for improved TV reception (Figure 3-1), which once had a misspelled sign “Palyland” on it (Gaida 2007:49).

### **Structure 14**

Structure 14 is the Main Gate of Playland. Figure 2-5 shows the remains of the gate and the support structure for the large sign at the entrance. The sign has been removed.



Figure 3-14. *Entrance to Structure 12.*

## Artifacts Recovered

Table 3-3 lists the artifacts collected during the field work at the APE. Note that all are of twentieth century origin or later, with the exception of two pieces of debitage. One large secondary chert flake was recovered from Level 5 (40-50 cmbs) in Shovel Test 6. It measures 56 mm long and 59.5 mm wide. Edge damage on this flake is post-depositional. The other flake is a small (17.5 mm x 19.5 mm) tertiary flake recovered from Level 5 (40-50 cm bgs) in Shovel Test 6. Wire nails, which took over the nail market ca. 1890 (Wells 1998:92), were found in the same levels as each of these prehistoric artifacts, indicating they were in disturbed or secondary context.

The two bottles collected as a sample from the bottle cache are made of natural (aqua) glass and have Applied Color Labels which declare they were intended to contain Spur cola, made by Canada Dry (Figure 3-15). The back of the bottle reads “SPUR/A Cola Beverage/Contents 6 fluid ozs./Manufactured and Bottled by/Barq’s Beverages, Inc./Corpus Christi, Texas”. Makers marks on the bottom of the bottles show that both were made at the Owens—Illinois bottle making plant in Streator, Illinois in 1947 (Lockhart 2004).

### Discussion

While two pieces of chert debitage were recovered, both were associated with wire

Table 3-3. Artifacts Recovered During Survey

Artifact Type	Ct.
<i>Faunal Bone</i>	
Mammalian	2
<i>Container Glass</i>	
Aqua, complete bottle w/ACL "Canada Dry Spur"	2
Dark Amber (brown)	6
Clear	13
Clear w/ACL and fragment of "Dr. Pepper" logo	1
<i>Construction Materials</i>	
Roofing Nails	2
Wire Nails	10
Tack	1
Nut and Bolt	1
1" metal washer	1
Window Glass	16
Unidentified translucent glass, very thin with small diameter (neon light tubing?)	2
Painted plaster	2
Unpainted plaster	1
Ceramic Tile	1
Ceramic sewer pipe fragment (exterior painted)	1
Brick fragment	3
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	
Very thin glass (lamp glass)	4
Fragment of a metal pick	1
Fragment of old tarp	2
Modern flower pot	8
Asphalt fragment	6
Unidentified metal fragment	2
<i>Lithics</i>	
Chert Flakes	2
<b>Total Artifacts</b>	<b>90</b>

nails, which are known to post-date 1890 (Wells 1998:92), indicating these artifacts were in highly disturbed context. The remainder of the artifacts recovered included only modern items (see Table 3-3).

In general, the entire APE appeared to have been either seriously disturbed or to have been covered with asphalt paving or fill. The entire southern end of the APE, from the point where the acequia has been filled in, appears to be under layers of fill. The removal of the concrete footings for the roller coaster by bulldozer has seriously impacted the landscape within the “loop” of the old acequia, on the eastern side of the APE. In at least two places, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the existing sediments are dangerously contaminated.

No new archaeological sites were encountered during this project. Remains of the historic use of the property as an amusement park are scattered across the APE, but are in poor condition.



Figure 3-15. Example of the bottles from the bottle dump mentioned by Gaida (2007:23). See Figure 3-13.

## **Chapter 4: Summary and Recommendations**

In November 2008, a field crew from the CAR conducted a 100 percent pedestrian survey of the APE for the ACCD (excluding known areas of contaminated soils), in order to clear the property for construction of a new administrative facility. A search of historic records was conducted to determine the ownership history of the APE.

A total of seven shovel tests were excavated and photographs of 17 extant structures remaining from the use of the property as an amusement park from 1943 to 1980 were taken. The CAR crew also photographed the condition of the remains of a section of the Acequia Madre de Valero, part of the system of ditches constructed by the Spanish in the early eighteenth century to provide irrigation and drinking water during the Spanish Colonial Period.

While two chert flakes were recovered in the shovel tests, both were in mixed context. No evidence of intact prehistoric cultural debris was encountered. While there are still many remnants of the historic use of the property as the Playland amusement park, all such structures are in poor condition.

Examination of the ditch on the eastern edge of the property indicates that it follows the old course of the Acequia Madre de Valero, but all traces of the original acequia have been obliterated by erosion in the northern part of the APE. The uncovered portion of the ditch is now much deeper and much wider than the original acequia, and active erosion is still ongoing. The condition of the acequia in the southern part of the APE, which was filled at some time after about 1916 has not been determined.

The pedestrian survey of the ACCD project area was completed in accordance with State Historic Preservation laws and the mandates of the Antiquities Code of Texas. The work adhered to the requirements of the City of San Antonio United Development Code, Chapter 35 and to the requirements of Section 106 of the NHPA. No new sites were documented during the pedestrian survey. The structures remaining from the Playland amusement park are in poor condition. They are constructed of concrete blocks with wooden overhangs shingled with asphalt. Due to the condition and construction style of the structures, the CAR, in accordance with the THC, does not recommend designation of Playland Park as a historic site. Because the Acequia Madre de Valero runs along part of the eastern boundary of the APE, the CAR, in accordance with the THC, recommends that the ACCD preserve this feature. The ACCD concurred with this recommendation to preserve the Acequia Madre de Valero and will work with the City of San Antonio Historic Design Review Board to preserve and restore the acequia remnant bordering

the property. The restored acequia will be used as a drainage feature for the campus and will become a key element in the overall site development emphasizing the historical significance of the property.

Therefore, the CAR recommends that the construction of the proposed ACCD facility proceed as proposed with preservation of the Acequia Madre de Valero.



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