
The Corbett Ranch Collection

at Texas A&M University

BY CASEY WAYNE RIGGS '09

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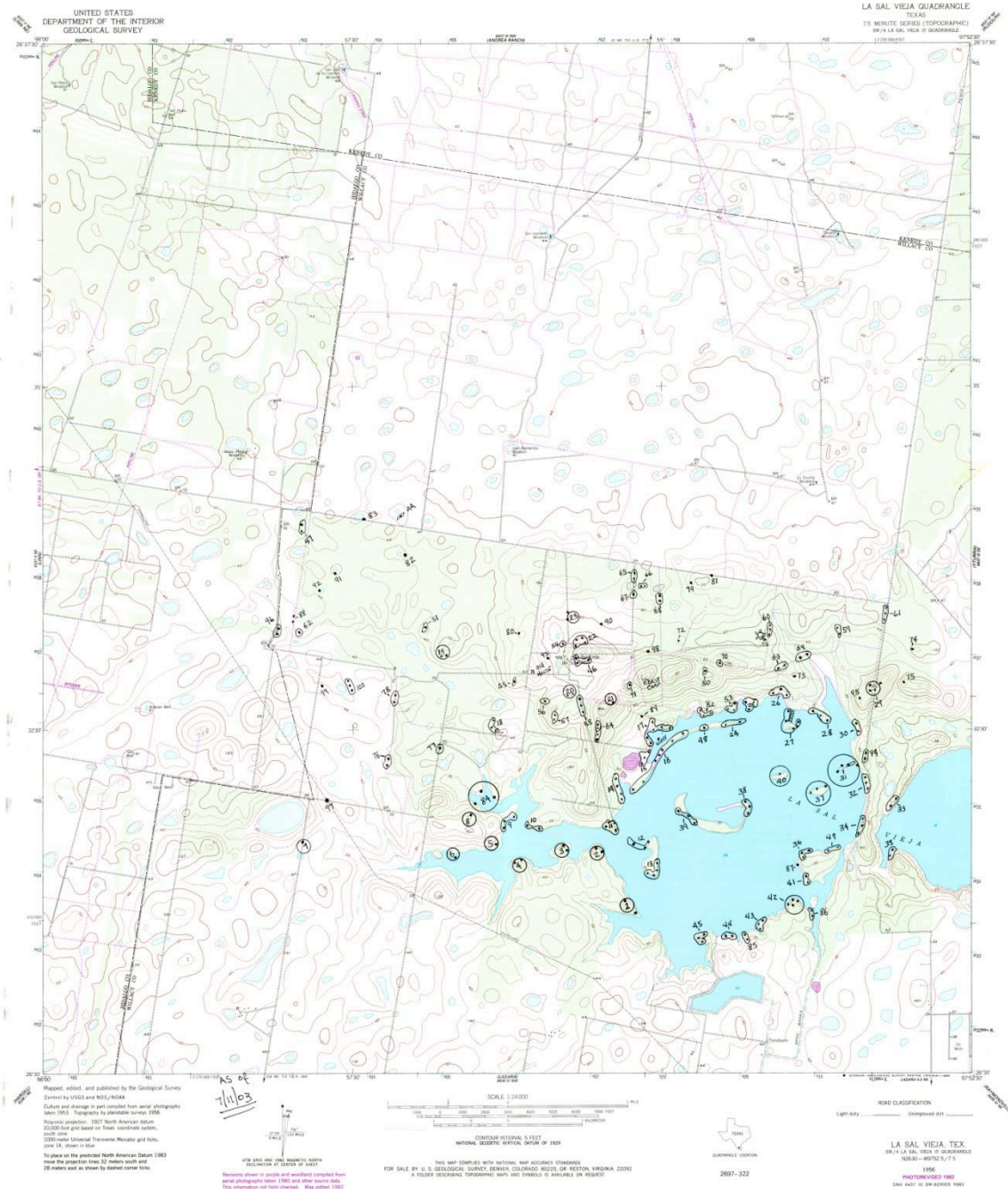
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Michael Corbett spent hours and hours in the 1950s looking for artifacts and rocks on his family ranch while his father, Dr. Charles M. Corbett, Jr. '48, ran the ranch. This childhood hobby continued on into adulthood. As a result, for almost 50 years, Michael Corbett collected archaeological and geological material from his family ranch, and other local ranches, in south Texas. Upon Mr. Corbett's death in 2008, his family began to search for a permanent home for this collection and, in 2010, donated it to the Department of Anthropology at Texas A&M University in College Station. This generous donation has made a well-documented collection of cultural material available to archaeologists.



Michael Corbett with daughter Katie Corbett Wheaton (center) and wife Kathie Corbett (right) [Photo courtesy of Corbett family]

It is common for families in Texas to keep artifacts and geological specimens collected from their lands; what makes the Corbett ranch Collection different from many others is that Michael Corbett maintained a master map and catalog, making it possible to tie a large majority of the artifacts back to the sites from which they were found. As only one of four private collections



Corbett's map showing location of his finds; numbers correspond to numbers on his artifacts.

from south Texas that has been made available to the Texas archaeological community, the Corbett Ranch Collection has the capability to help shed light into a region that has had very little archaeological research. Analysis of the collection will provide greater information about the life ways of both prehistoric and historic cultures that resided in the area.

Curation and Cataloging of the Corbett Ranch Collection at TAMU

Curation is important for the long term preservation of artifacts in the collection, especially the more perishable material such as bone and shell. Cataloging is important so that archaeologists will know exactly what artifacts are available for research. Beginning in March 2010, Casey Wayne Riggs '09 was asked to supervise the curation and cataloging of the Corbett Ranch Collection. Riggs was the obvious choice for this task: he is a TAMU archaeology student who grew up collecting archaeological material on his family ranches in west Texas, he has professional archaeology experience working in Texas, and he is in the early stages of planning his PhD focused on the Archaic Period in Texas.

Step 1: Initial Sorting

With great thanks to Mr. Corbett's record keeping, initial curation and cataloging was easily streamlined. With the aid of four undergraduate volunteers, all material from the Corbett Ranch Collection was transferred to archival quality bags and then assigned permanent TAMU catalog numbers based on the site from which they were collected. Material that Mr. Corbett collected from the King Ranch and from South Padre Island was similarly curated. Artifacts not labeled were assumed to come from the Corbett Ranch, but due to the uncertainty of this assumption, were placed in "No Provenience" bags.

Step 2: Final Sorting

After the initial sorting was completed, further cataloging was deemed necessary so as to more easily track the numerous artifacts of exceptional quality. Formal tools – such as shell beads or projectile points -- were assigned individual lot numbers and bagged separately within their larger site bags. Bulk materials -- such as rock samples or lithic debitage – were assigned a single lot number. Inside each bag with a separate lot number was placed a tag which includes the following information: catalog number, artifact type, material, and number of specimens. Mr. Corbett's note taking figured prominently in this step as well. His tags – which include detailed descriptions of artifact location, date of find, and some climatic conditions – were transcribed onto acid free paper and included with each associated artifact.

Step 3: Master Database

Throughout the sorting process a handwritten artifact log was maintained by volunteers. This information was then transferred to both a digitized spreadsheet, and the Department of Anthropology's Master Cataloging database, for long term curation and research.

Importance of the Corbett Ranch Collection at TAMU

Only four private collections from south Texas have been provided to the scientific community for further study. Because of limited archaeological research in south Texas, the record keeping of Mr. Corbett will help provide many insights into the little known past of the region. At the same time, the extent of the collection also demonstrates that further research is required to better understand this region that is considered to be the least studied area in Texas.

From the initial sorting and cataloging of the Corbett Ranch Collection, four general trends have been noted that further our archaeological understanding of the region's prehistory.

First, the collection shows that the Brownsville Complex extended north to the edge of the La Sal Vieja. This cultural complex existed from A.D. 1100-1700 and mainly occupied the area around the Rio Grande Delta. The Brownsville Complex people were hunter-gatherers who made massive quantities of shell jewelry, used Cameron arrow points for hunting, and buried their deceased in tightly flexed positions with many grave goods.

Second, the large amount of Brownsville Complex material in the collection demonstrates the likelihood of more deeply buried components on the Corbett Ranch that may be of interest for future archaeological research.

Third, the vast majority of projectile points in the Corbett Ranch Collection share a triangular outline. Compared to other regions of Texas, the South Texas Plains lack large outcrops of stone material suitable for tool manufacturing. The triangular shape of points is viewed by archaeologists as a cultural adaptation to a resource poor areas as points of this shape are less likely to break on impact and are easier to resharpen. Like other points found in the South Texas Plains region, the resharpening seen on the projectile points in this collection occurs in the form of beveling on one or both lateral edges. In addition to being stronger and easier to resharpen, maintaining the triangular shape allowed for subsequent generations to reuse points discarded or lost by previous groups, an excellent example of prehistoric resource recycling. Though the points were made smaller as time progressed, the maintaining of an overriding style hints at a continued cultural presence in the region that remained intact from Paleo-Indian times to the Historic Period.

Fourth, and finally, although the earliest cultures in south Texas were extremely resourceful in utilizing what little stone resources were present, it is likely that stone tool material was brought into the region from elsewhere. Also, due to the scarcity of lithic material for tools, general purpose artifacts that could be used for a variety of activities were relatively common throughout south Texas.

In prehistoric times the riparian areas within the region were heavily forested with a variety of trees which are no longer present today. It has been postulated that wooden artifacts were an important aspect of these people's material culture; because of this it is likely that many of the general purpose stone tools that are commonly recovered in south Texas were probably used to make wooden items.

There is also a variety of historic artifacts in the Corbett Ranch Collection. Although most of these items are either discarded trash or items that were potentially lost, they can still inform about the everyday life of indigenous cultures and European settlers in south Texas during the Historic Era. From the Guerrero arrow points to the coins and bullets, it is clear that many different cultural groups were present in and around the Corbett Ranch historically. One major attraction for these various groups may have been the salt resources in La Sal Vieja, however, further research and analyses would be required to substantiate this possibility.

Future of the Corbett Ranch Collection at TAMU

With continued efforts, many different forms of research can be conducted on the large assemblage of artifacts present in the Corbett Ranch Collection. The most obvious and immediate study should be focused on the material used to produce numerous stone tools in the collection. A researcher could determine the material used for the numerous projectile points, woodworking tools, knives, scrapers, and blades and then trace these materials to their original source through physical characteristics and geochemical studies. Such a project, combined with a more detailed typological study, would inform the archaeological community and public on the trade relations and nomadic living patterns of the earliest residents of south Texas.

Although an analysis of stone tool material alone would provide an amazing amount of information, other studies could also provide a more in-depth understanding of how different past groups living in the Corbett Ranch area spent their days. For example, a use-wear analysis of the various stone tools could inform archaeologists not only about what types of foods were eaten, but also on the extent of woodworking or shell jewelry production

by local inhabitants. A detailed study of shell jewelry and associated stone tools could provide information on the artists who were making the shell beads and pendants, as well as who these artists were trading with to receive the shell. Another interesting study would be a provenience study of all of the historic artifacts. Although how these historic materials were used is often fairly well known, where they were made is not as clear. Understanding where these items originally came from would allow historic archaeologists to recreate trade routes and understand the economics of early settlers in the region. Although a few studies are suggested here, it should be realized that this is not an exhaustive list and that the Corbett Ranch Collection provides potential material for any number of projects that can be designed by researchers interested in Texas's past.

Exhibit of the Corbett Ranch Collection at TAMU

Many of the more exceptional artifacts from the Corbett Ranch Collection are now on permanent display in the Anthropology Building on the College Station campus of Texas A&M University. The text of the exhibit includes a copy of the master site map, pictures, and a general history of how the collection was developed through Mr. Corbett's and the Corbett family's actions. Although a variety of historic and prehistoric artifacts can be viewed, the exhibit highlights the most phenomenal aspect of the Corbett Ranch Collection: the projectile points. Photographs of all exhibited material are presented on the next pages with a brief description of each item.



Historic Period Pot Sherds: both utilitarian and service wares are present in the collection



Historic Period Spent Rifle Bullet Casing



Historic Period Fence Post Fragments: as these samples show, fence posts were commonly constructed of cedar (*Juniperus* sp.)



Historic Period Rifle Bullets



Historic Period Glass Shards: the glass color, along with bottle bases and mouths, help archaeologists to date glass artifacts to the decade of their production



Historic Period Pestle: most likely of Mexican origin, this tejolote would have been used in conjunction with a molcajete



Historic Period Metal Bell: because this bell is not broken, it may have been accidentally lost



Historic Period Artifacts clockwise from upper left: toy marble, shell button, rivet button (probably from a work jacket or pant fly), Mexican centavo



Stone Drill: this chert tool was probably used to drill holes during shell jewelry manufacture (Archaic Period to Late Prehistoric Period)



Stone Knives: these knives, all made of chert, were probably prehistoric “Swiss army knives” and could have been used for a variety of tasks (Late Paleo-Indian to Late Prehistoric Period)



End and Side Scraper: although used primarily for plant processing, this tool could also have been used for hide working or other tasks (Archaic to Late Prehistoric Period)



Prehistoric Pebble Tool



Prehistoric Clear Fork Biface (Paleo-Indian to Middle Archaic)



Prehistoric Clear Fork Uniface (Paleo-Indian to Middle Archaic)



Prehistoric Notched Pebble/Waco Sinker: this artifact was most likely attached to a net as a sinker, but may also have been used as a bolo weight



Shell Beads and Bead Blanks (probably Middle Archaic to Late Prehistoric Period)



Incised Freshwater Mussel Shell Pendant (probably Late Prehistoric, but possibly Middle or Late Archaic Period)



Freshwater Mussel Shell Pendant (Late Prehistoric Period)



Bone Awl: used for weaving plant materials and for hide working (Archaic Period and Late Prehistoric Period)



Rasp Fragments: used as a music instrument (Late Prehistoric or possibly Late Archaic Period)



Scottsbluff Point: this specimen is of special interest because most points of this type are found in east Texas and Louisiana and is thin in comparison to others(Late Paleo-Indian, ca. 7120 BC - 6650 BC).



Early Triangular Points: this point type marks the true beginning of the Triangular Point Continuum found in south Texas (Early Archaic, ca. 3700 BC – 3600 BC)



Kinney Point (Middle Archaic, ca. 2500 BC – 500 BC)



Abasolo Points (Early to Middle Archaic, ca. 8000 BC – 500 BC)



Tortugas Points (Late Middle Archaic, ca. 850 BC – 600 BC)



Ensor Point (Transitional Archaic, ca. 200 BC – AD 600)



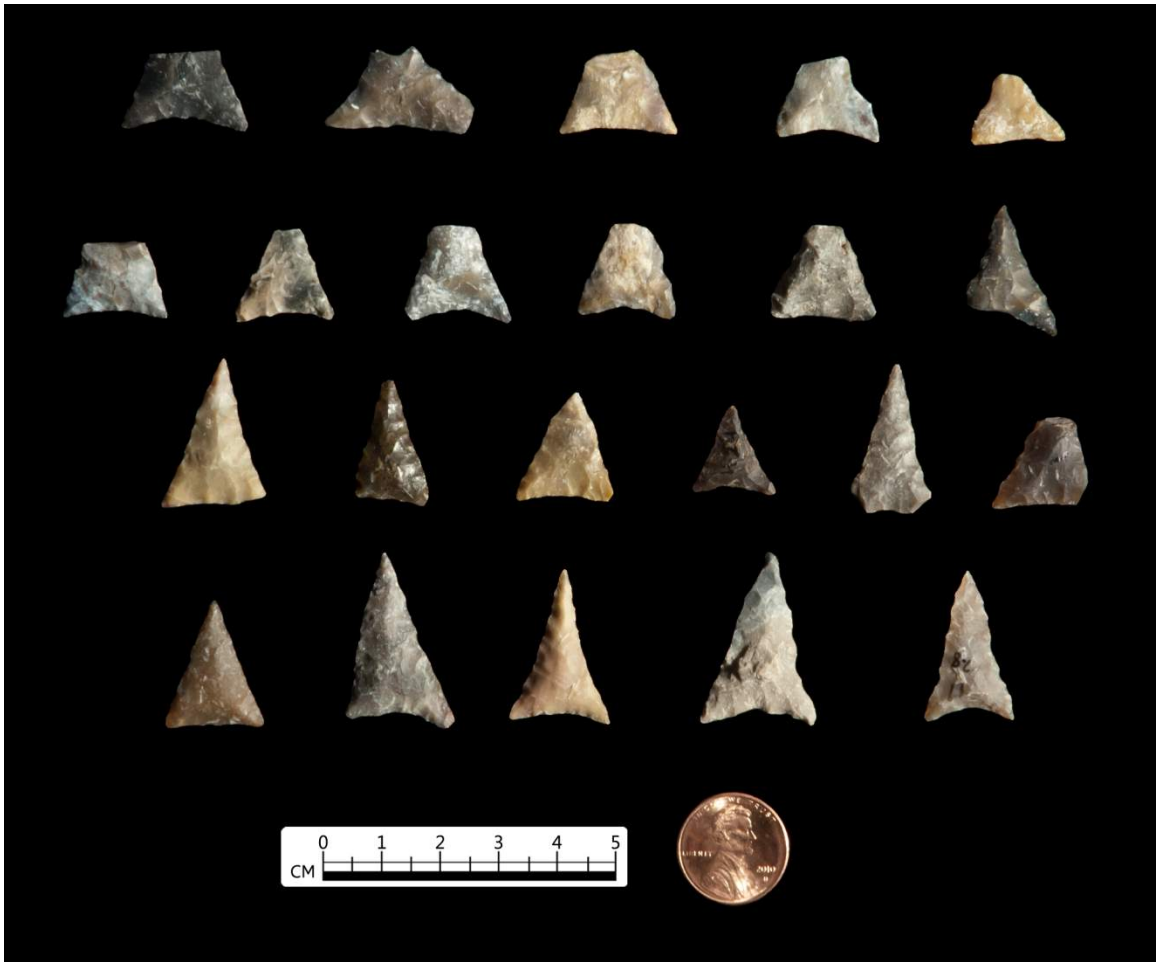
Cáтан Points (Late Archaic to Late Prehistoric, ca. 500 BC - AD 500)



Matamoros Points (Late Archaic to Late Prehistoric, ca. 500 BC – AD 500)



Fresno Points: these arrow heads mark the most likely beginning of regular bow and arrow use in south Texas (Late Prehistoric, AD 800 – 1500)



Starr Points (Late Prehistoric, AD 800 – 1500)



Guerrero Points: these points are associated with the “Mission Indians” (Historic Period, ca. AD 1500 - 1700)



Cameron Points (Late Prehistoric to Historic, AD 800 – 1700)