

TEST EXCAVATIONS IN THE RIVER OF NO RETURN WILDERNESS:
PRELIMINARY REPORT ON WATERFALL VILLAGE AND BIG CREEK CAVE

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Test Excavations in the River of No Return Wilderness:
Preliminary Report on Waterfall Village and Big Creek Cave

Introduction

On September 1-9, 1981, a team of eight Forest Service and volunteer archeologists conducted limited test excavations at two prehistoric sites along the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, Idaho. One was a small dry cave, PY-147 (10VY67), at the mouth of Big Creek, Payette National Forest; the other was an open "pithouse village", SL-267, on Waterfall Creek, Salmon National Forest. The two sites are about 1/4 mile apart (Fig. 1). These were the first excavations ever carried out within the River of No Return Wilderness (previously Idaho Primitive Area). They supplement an extensive Forest Service sponsored inventory program in this area started in 1978 by Ruthann Knudson and others.

Work at the cave site was directed by Jerry Wylie and Tom Scott, and the village excavation was directed by Joe Gallagher. Field personnel included Tom Green, Virginia Harris, Jan Peterson, Jan Smith, and Amy Gilreath. Six people and all equipment/supplies were loaded on two planes and flown directly from Boise to the Flying B Ranch on the Middle Fork by a charter air service. From there the excavation equipment and camping gear was packed by 10 horses 15 miles downstream to Waterfall Creek. Personnel were flown from the Flying B to Soldier Bar, where they backpacked 6 miles down Big Creek to camp. On the return, the entire process was reversed. Two additional crew members were flown into Soldier Bar mid way through the week.

The following presents a very brief description of the work conducted and some of the preliminary results. At present we have not analysed any of the artifacts or received the C14 or pollen results.

Objectives

- 1) Provide information for use in developing the wilderness management plan.
- 2) Describe and map all surface information.
- 3) Determine the sites' research potential: depth, data categories present, preservation, chronology, cultural sequence.
- 4) Generate testable hypotheses for future research.
- 5) Explore the logistical problems of conducting fieldwork in this kind of remote wilderness setting.

Site Descriptions and Testing Methods

Big Creek cave is situated on a north-facing canyon face about 20 meters above the confluence of Big Creek and the Middle Fork Salmon River. The cave itself is 6 meters wide by 12 meters deep, with a maximum height of 2 meters.

Although there was only one small looter's pit in the cave floor when we arrived, apparently much of the northeast side of the cave had been disturbed in the past. After making a contour map, we excavated a series of four 1 x 1 meter test pits in arbitrary 10 cm. levels. The end result was a 1 x 4 meter trench a little more than a meter deep at its deepest point. All materials were screened through a 1/4" mesh. In addition to pollen samples, a total of 9 charcoal specimens were collected for C14 dating.

The Waterfall Village site is a series of more than a dozen shallow depressions and lithic debris along a small ponderosa-covered stream terrace. Waterfall Creek at this point is approximately 320 feet above the Middle Fork Salmon River. Similar sites are said to extend up the creek for at least 6 miles, but time prevented us from visiting these.

We excavated most of one quadrant of a suspected pithouse depression using six 1 x 1 meter test pits. Excavation was by 10 cm. arbitrary levels and all materials were screened through 1/4" mesh. An adjacent horse corral area previously disturbed by hunters was also shovel scraped to expose any features present. A measured site map was prepared using the Reddi Mapper system used so successfully during the 1978 Middle Fork campground survey. One C14 sample was obtained from the house feature.

Results

The cave yielded approximately 50 diagnostic projectile points, four scrapers, a drill, and two knife blades, one with the remains of hafting mastic on the base. Also present were large quantities of freshwater mussel shell and large ungulate bones (elk/deer?) at all levels and 10 large fish vertebra, probably salmon or steelhead. Of special interest were finds of plain brown/grey pottery and shell/bone beads, including two specimens of what may be Olivella shell beads from the Pacific coast. Typologically, the assemblage appears to be more Great Basin than Plateau. The deposits were dry throughout and surprisingly free from rodent burrowing. Extensive ash and charcoal lenses were common throughout the upper levels.

Work at the village site exposed a dual component house feature. The upper levels contained desert side-notched/small triangular Late Prehistoric projectile points while the house fill itself contained Middle to Late Archaic materials. Preservation was good and faunal remains were abundant. No ceramics were found. Diagnostic tools included 13 projectile points, three scrapers, and three drills. Lithic sources represented in the sample were very diverse, with a possible tendency to emphasize obsidian/ignimbrite in the upper occupation and cherts/quartzites in the lower units. The structure itself was over one meter deep and approximately 7-8 meters in diameter. However, the outer perimeter of the house was poorly defined and, because of a lack of time, the actual occupation floor was not reached.

PROJECT VICINITY MAP

- a - Soldier Bar airstrip
- b - Site area/base camp
- c - Flying B Ranch

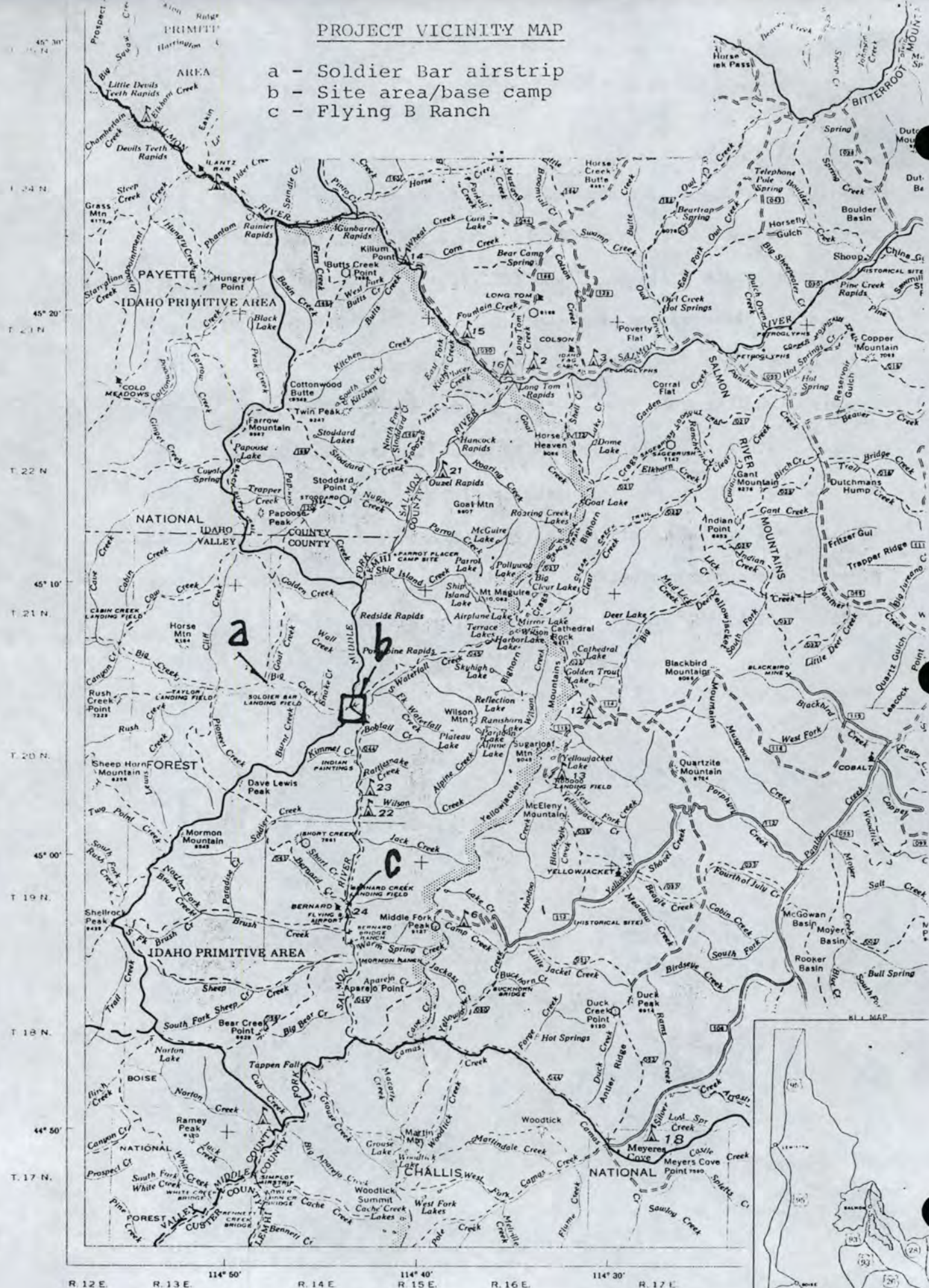


Fig. 1. Project location.



Fig. 2. Middle Fork Salmon River near the project area.



Fig. 3. Confluence of Big Creek and Middle Fork Salmon River. Big Creek cave in center of photograph.



Fig. 4. Mouth of Big Creek Cave.



Fig. 5. Interior of Big Creek Cave; view towards mouth.

Fig. 6. Big Creek Cave, PY-147, site maps/profiles.

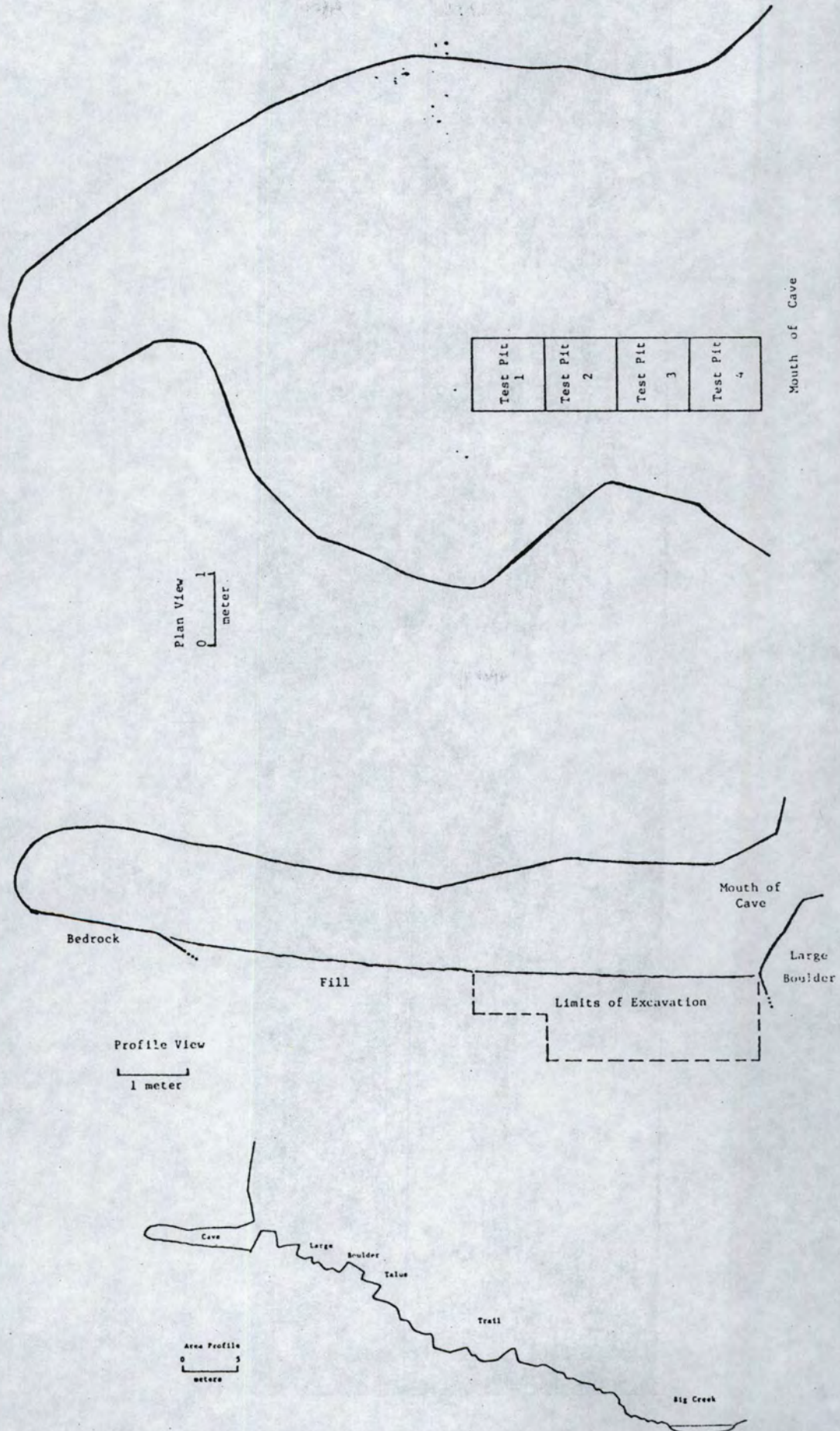




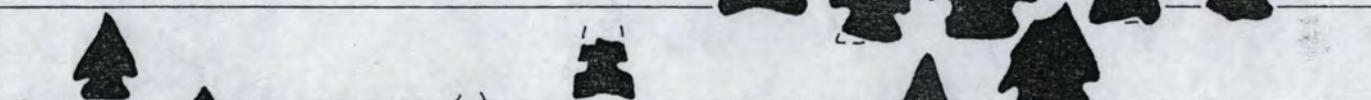
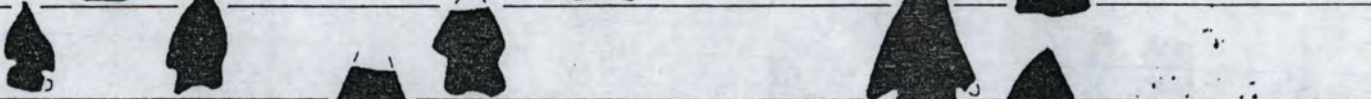
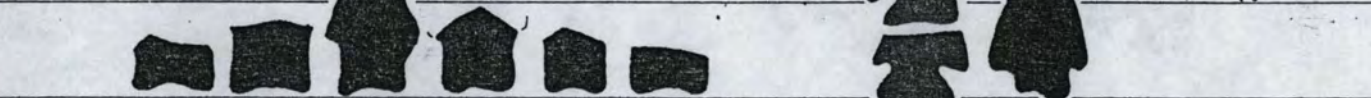
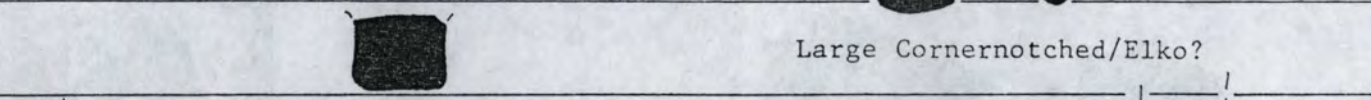
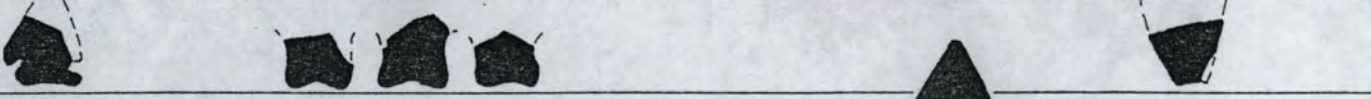
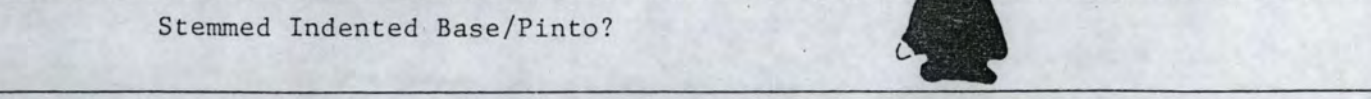
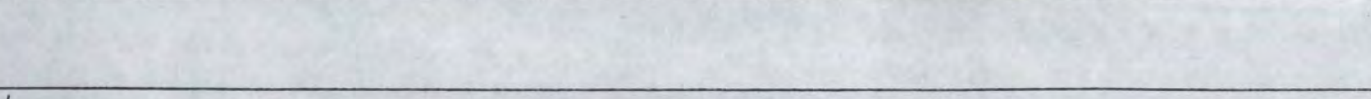
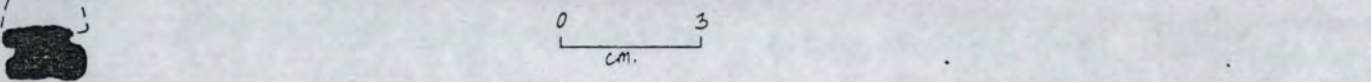




Fig. 7. Big Creek Cave trench profile of test pits 2, 3, and 4.

Fig. 8. Selected artifacts from Big Creek Cave, PY-147.

ARTIFACT TYPES LEVELS	Pottery Sherds	Fish Vertebra	Beads	PROJECTILE POINTS			
Surface	2				Small notched	Desert Sidenotched	Triangular
0-10 cm.	6				Large Cornernotched/Elko?		
10-20 cm.	3		1		Large Cornernotched/Elko?		
20-30 cm.			2		Large Cornernotched/Elko?		
30-40 cm.			2		Large Cornernotched/Elko?		
40-50 cm.					Large Cornernotched/Elko?		
50-60 cm.		1	1		Stemmed Indented Base/Pinto?		
60-70 cm.		3	2		Large Cornernotched/Elko?		
70-80 cm.					Stemmed Indented Base/Pinto?		
80-90 cm.		2			Stemmed Indented Base/Pinto?		
90-100 cm.					Stemmed Indented Base/Pinto?		
100-110 cm.		4.			0 3 cm.		

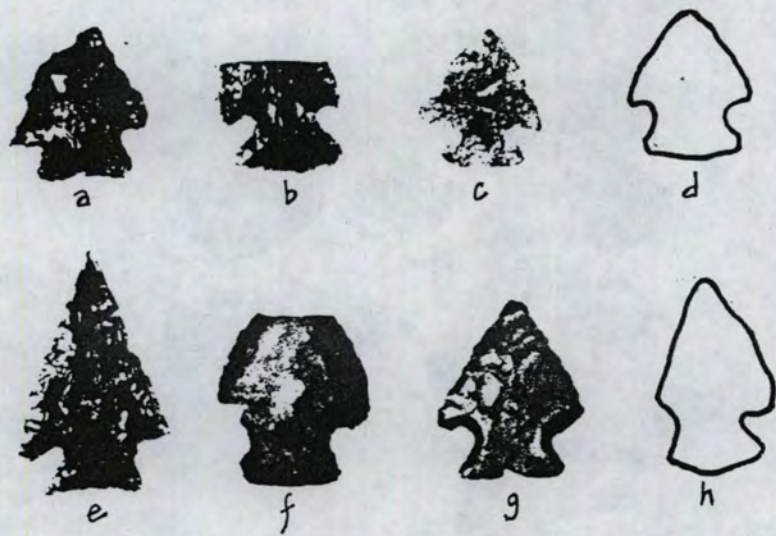


Fig. 9. Large corner-notched points from Big Creek Cave. Length of specimen e 3.8 cm.

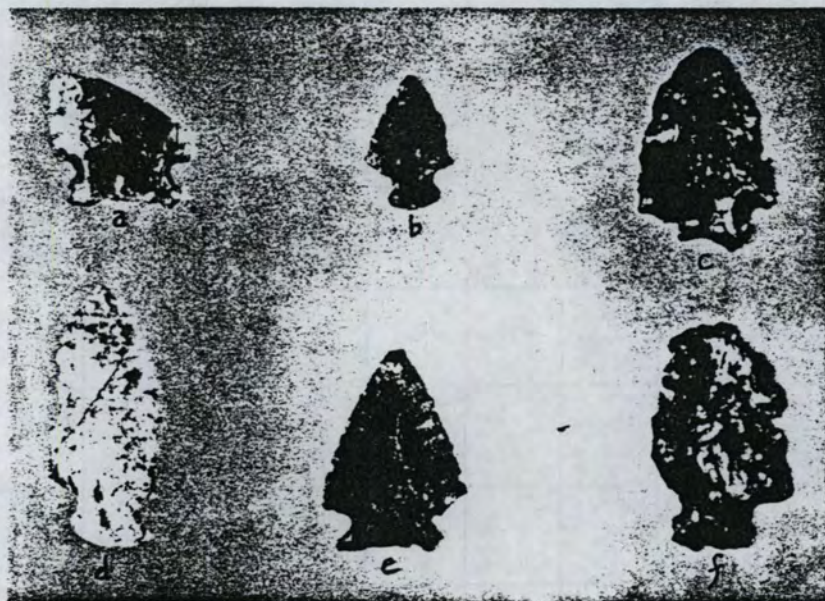


Fig. 10. Large corner-notched points from Big Creek Cave. Length of d 3.9 cm.

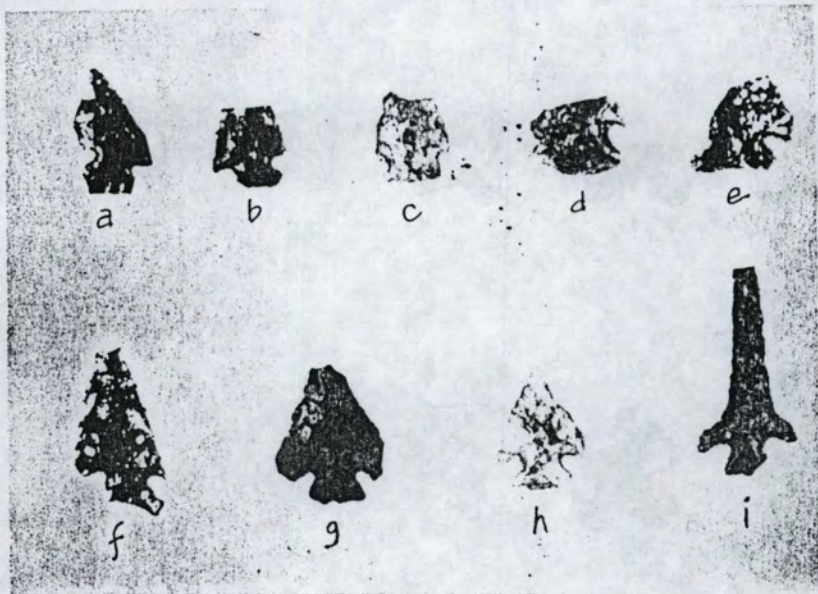


Fig. 11. Small corner-notched points from Big Creek Cave. Length of specimen f 2.7 cm.



Fig. 12. Miscellaneous small points from Big Creek Cave. Length of specimen k 3.1 cm.

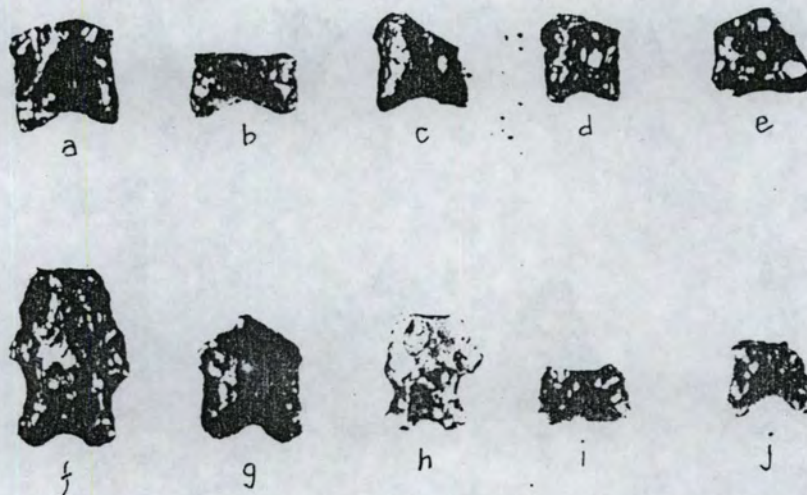


Fig. 13. Stemmed Indented Base points from Big Creek Cave. Length of specimen f 2.7 cm.

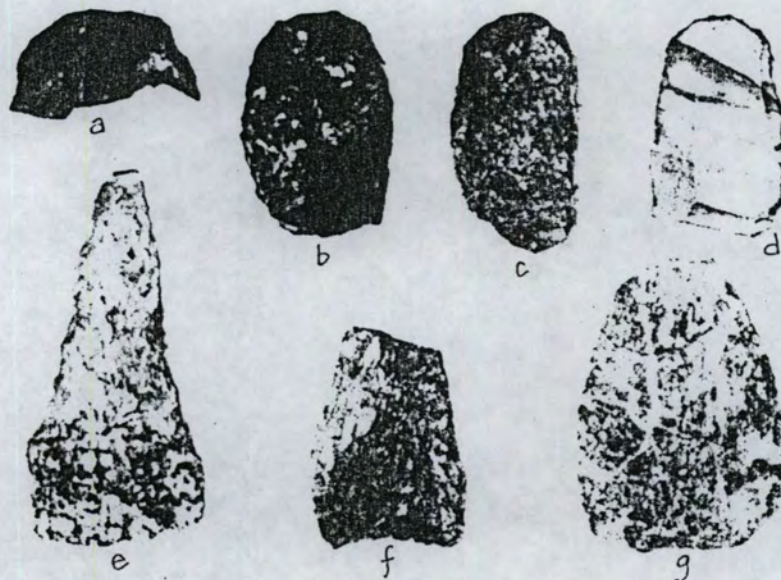


Fig. 14. Scrapers and knives from Big Creek Cave. Length of specimen e 5.7 cm. (note mastic).

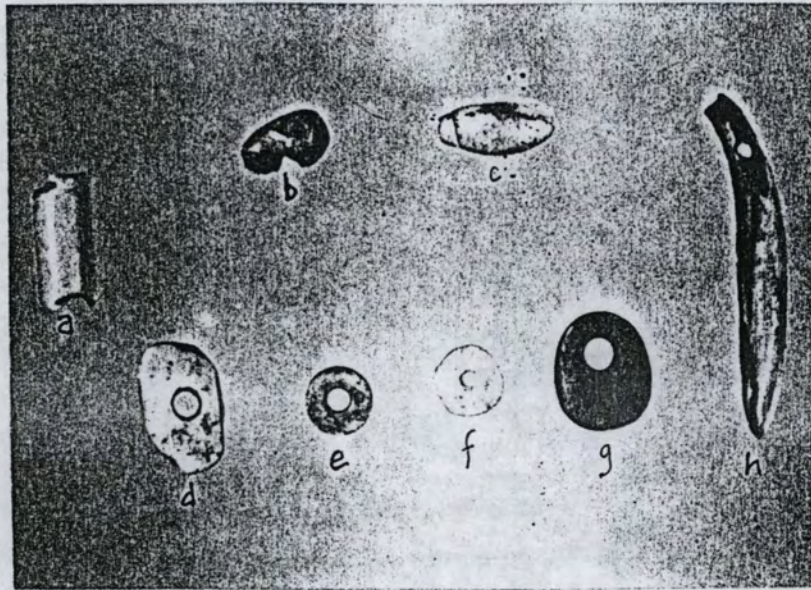


Fig. 15. Shell and bone beads/pendants from Big Creek Cave. Length of specimen g 1.3 cm.



Fig. 16. Blow-up of Olivella shell bead from Big Creek Cave. Actual length 1.3 cm.



Fig. 17. Waterfall Village site, SL-267.
View east up Waterfall Creek.

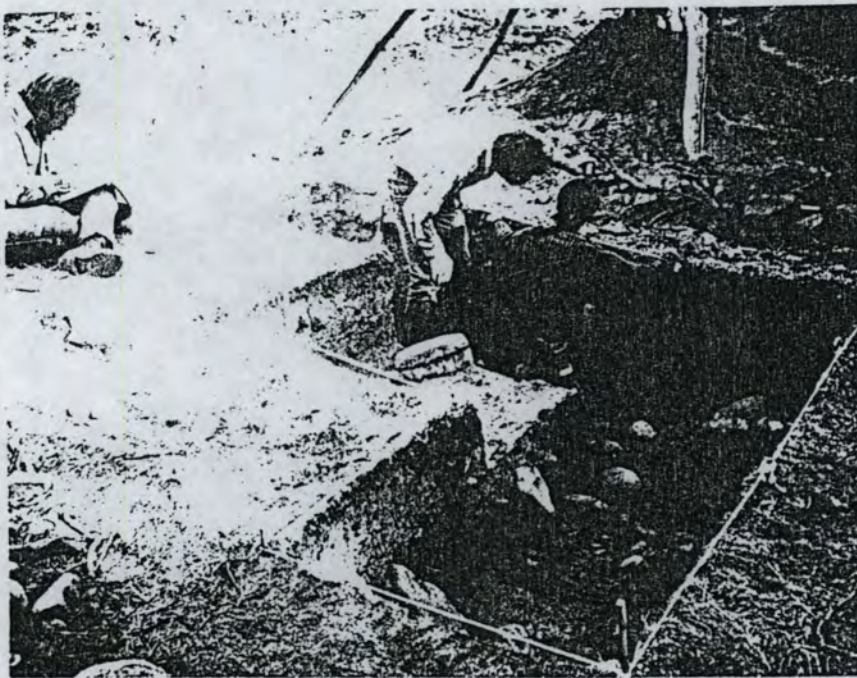
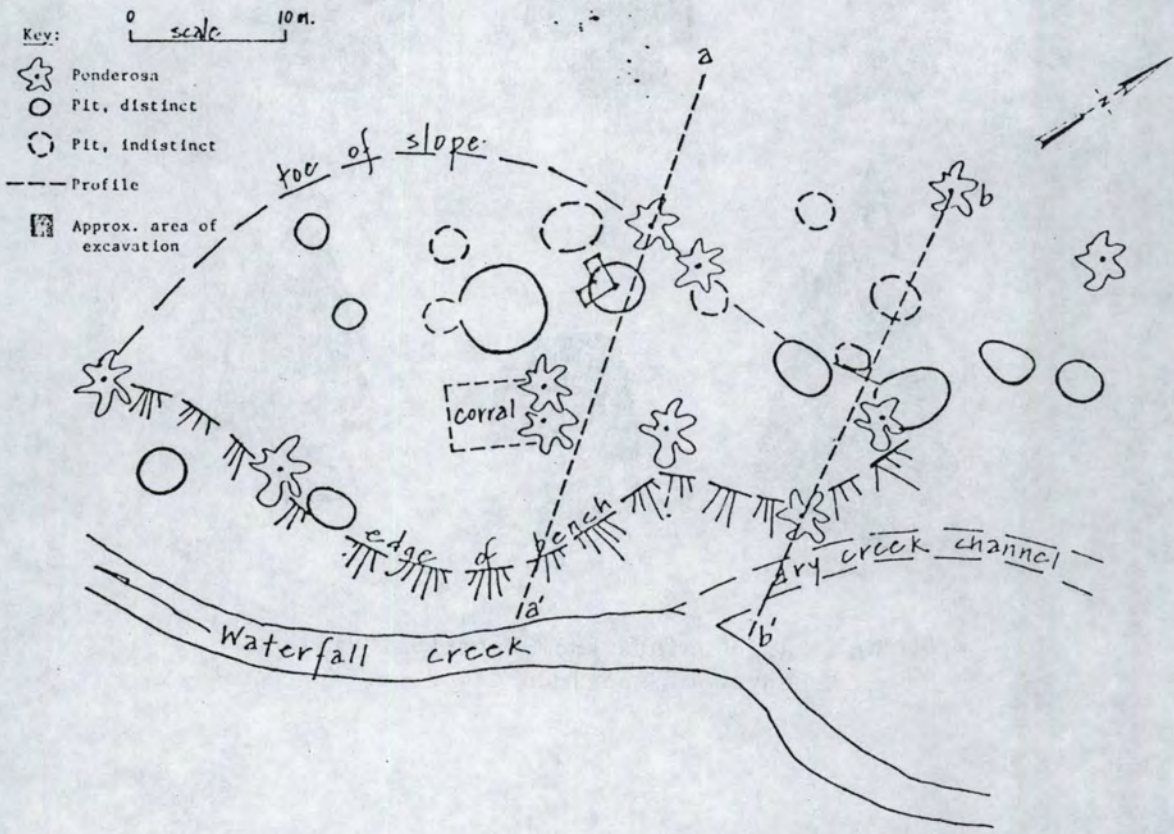


Fig. 18. Test excavations at Waterfall Village.



Waterfall Village Profiles

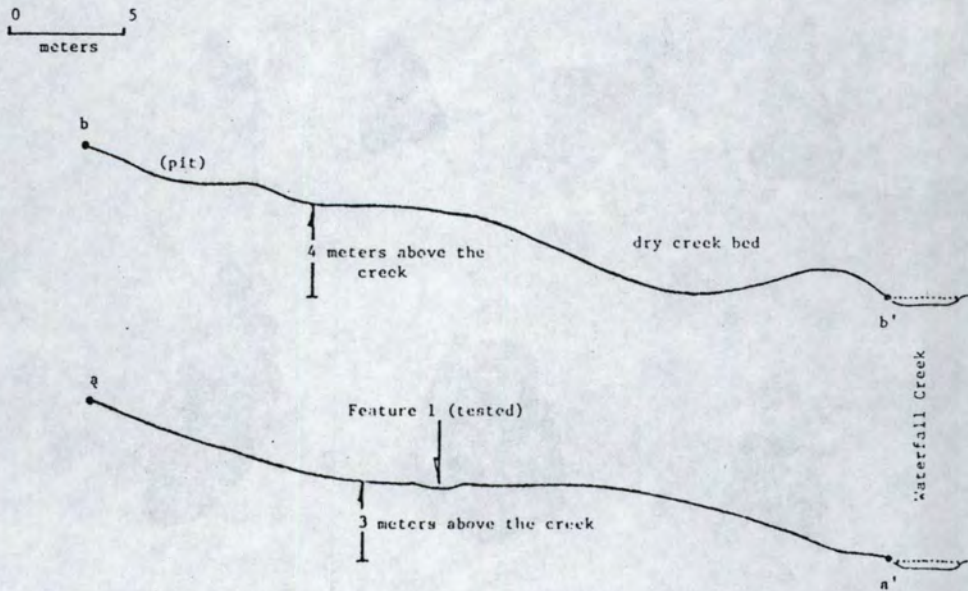


Fig. 19. Waterfall Village, SL-267, site map.

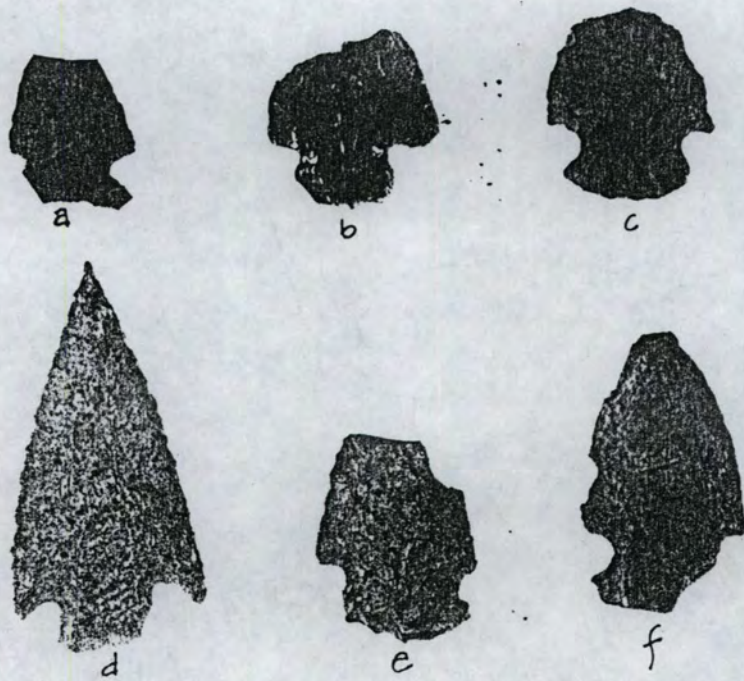


Fig. 20. Large points from Waterfall Village.
Length of specimen d 4.2 cm.

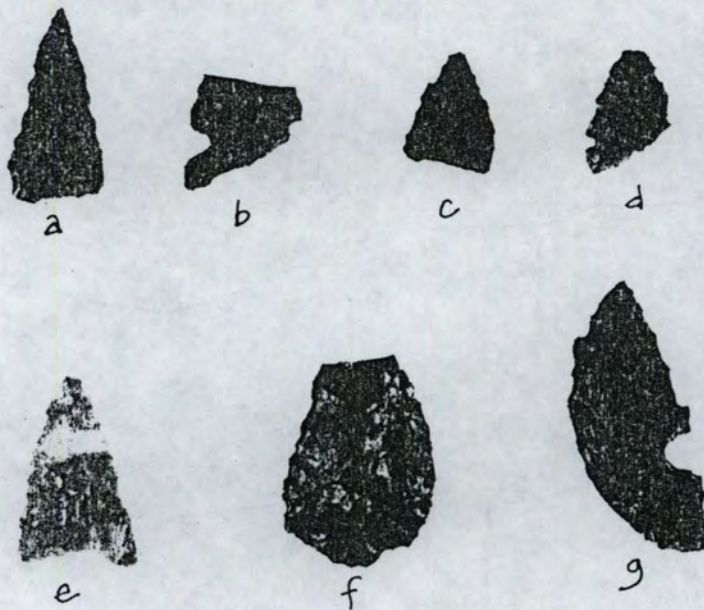


Fig. 21. Miscellaneous points from Waterfall
Village. Length of specimen g 3.0 cm.

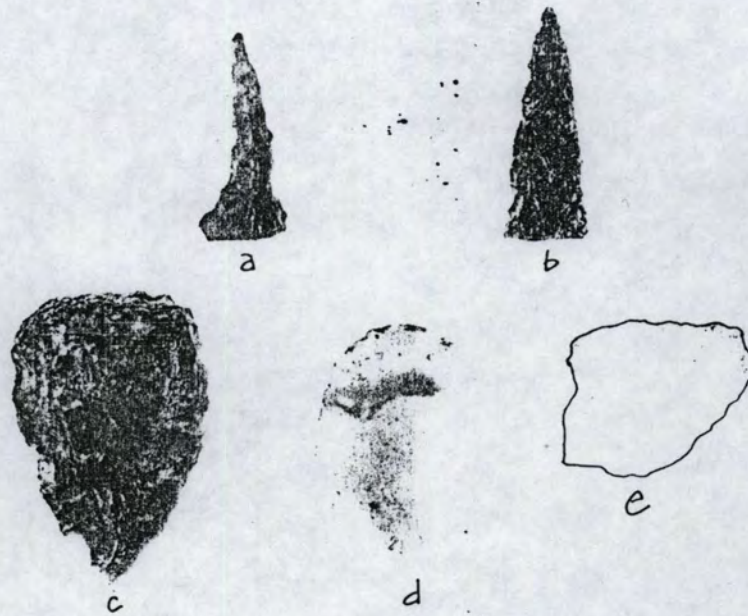


Fig. 22. Drills and scrapers from Waterfall Village.
Length of specimen c 3.5 cm.



Fig. 23. Obsidian drill/awl from Waterfall Village.
Actual length 10.9 cm.