The Humanitarian and Human Rights Crisis in South Texas Exemplified through the Tres Norias Cemetery

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INTRODUCTION

- In 2015, the Forensic Border Coalition (FBC) began the South Texas Cemetery Survey project to understand burial practices in South Texas counties and to locate unidentified, presumed migrant remains in need of identification efforts.

- Through community outreach, a local death investigator indicated that unidentified human remains found in Cameron County were buried in the Tres Norias Cemetery in neighboring Willacy County (Figure 1). DNA samples had either not been taken from the unidentified burials or had not been submitted for CODIS inclusion as required by state law (TCCP Ch 63).

- No maps existed of where burials were located, and the only record of these burials was the memory of the death investigator. GPS coordinates were recorded for presumed unidentified burials. Exhumation of the unidentified burials was necessary for humanitarian forensic action.

METHODS

- Geophysical survey, including ground penetrating radar (GPR) and gradiometry, was conducted prior to exhumations. GPR data was collected using the GSSI-400 with a 400mhz antenna and processed using GPR-SLICE v7.MT. Gradiometer data was collected using the Grad601 single-axis fluxgate gradiometer and processed using TerraSurveyor.

- A backhoe was used to remove topsoil and look for burial pit outlines. Because burial shafts were difficult to locate based on soil change, all areas of interest from previous surveys were explored.

- The site was mapped with a Trimble R7/R8 real-time kinematic (RTK) base and rover system and a Leica TS06 plus total data station, burials were also hand-mapped using traditional archeological methods. All GPS points were collected in UTM projected space and visualized using ArcGIS Pro v2.3.0.

RESULTS

- GPR and gradiometer work was somewhat inconclusive (Figure 2). Gradiometer data is highly sensitive to magnetic debris or trash located on the ground surface making interpretation difficult.

- 71 burial shafts containing 74 individuals were located and investigated (Figure 3).

- While an individual was located in almost every location the death investigator pointed out, the remains were not always migrants, some were paupers (Figure 4).

- Because migrants and paupers were buried side by side, criteria were established to distinguish between them based on excavation experiences in other cemeteries. Minimally invasive field intakes were conducted to assess migrant versus pauper status (Figure 5).

- Although burials were consistently organized (Figures 3 & 6), there are instances of multiple individuals stacked within a single burial shaft (Figure 4) and several individuals were buried face down. Furthermore, documentation contained within body bags were inconsistent and often no longer legible (Figure 7).

- Presumed migrants were typically buried within body bags with no care taken regarding body placement. Medical waste such as nitrile exam gloves were commonplace within body bags.

- Paupers were typically buried in clothing, often with other personal effects, within containers made of particle board with cloth coverings. Although medical waste was present, it consisted typically of treatment and intervention devices, including intubations and catheters.
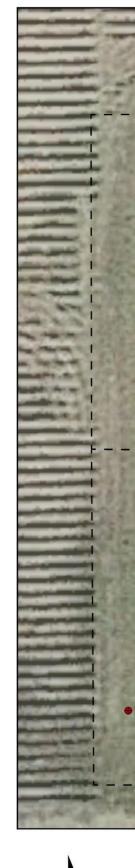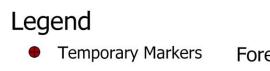
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

- A total of 38 presumed migrants were exhumed and taken to the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State (FACTS) for analysis and identification efforts.

- Two individuals have been identified with future identifications pending DNA profiling and comparisons with national and foreign government databases.

- Lack of burial documentation and reliance on memory results in unidentified human remains becoming lost and invisible, creating human rights violations and contributing to a humanitarian crisis.

SUMMARY

Texas laws pertaining to the treatment of the dead are routinely not followed in South Texas, resulting in a lack of identification efforts, human rights violations, and a humanitarian crisis.

Lack of burial documentation and reliance on memory results in unidentified human remains becoming lost and invisible.

Funding from the HHRRC allowed for humanitarian forensic action in the form of exhumation and continued, collaborative identification efforts.

Figure 1: Map of Texas showing location of Tres Norias Cemetery

Figure 2: GPR map

Figure 3: Tres Norias Cemetery Map

Legend
- Temporary Markers
- Survey Burial Location
- Quadrant Outline

Forensically Significant
- Yes
- No

Figure 4: Burial at top is a single pauper burial, burial on bottom contains multiple presumed migrants in a single grave.
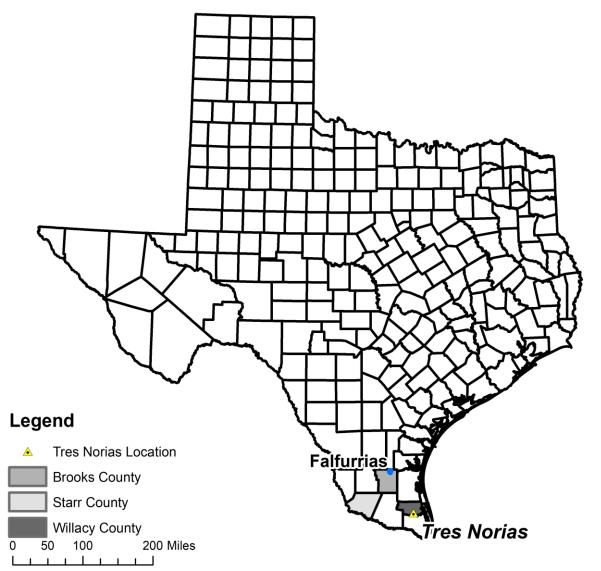

Figure 5: Field intake to assess migrant versus pauper status

Figure 6: View of burial shafts

Figure 7: Example of documentation with a burial that is illegible

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