

THE BIG CIRCLE MOUNDS

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THE BIG CIRCLE MOUNDS

By Ross Allen

In the early part of 1946, while on a trip in the Everglades, we had an interesting conversation around the camp fire among the members of our snake hunting party. During this discussion George Espenlaub and Lawrence Bright of Clewiston mentioned a place called Tony's Mound. The site was very familiar to Espenlaub, who had camped there, and Bright, who had never camped there, had flown over it many times. The descriptions of the two men did not completely agree, which aroused my curiosity to the degree that I decided to fly over the area with Lawrence Bright. When we did fly over the site, I was amazed to see the peculiar formation shown in the aerial photographs accompanying this article.

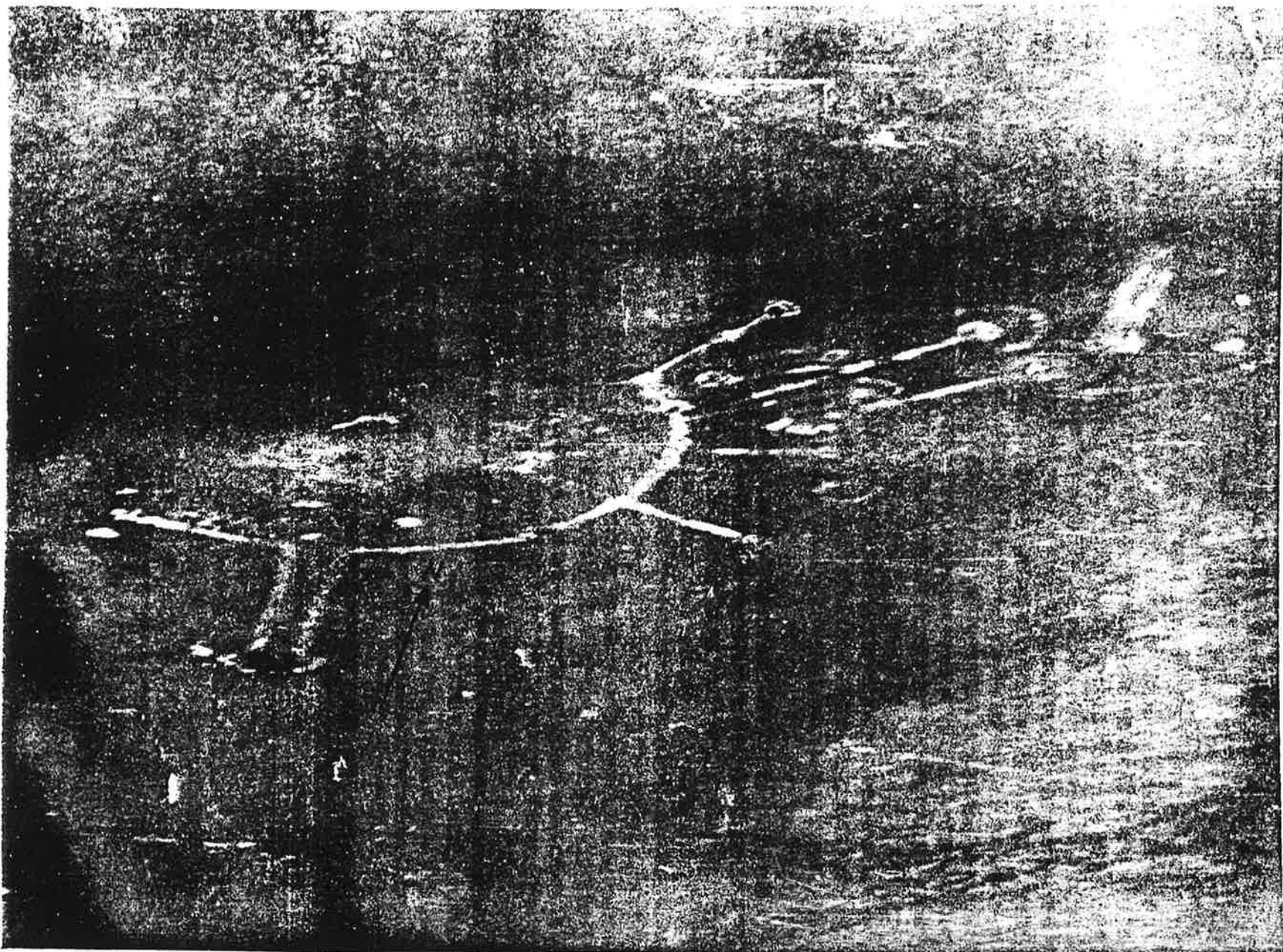
Although I am not an archaeologist, I was interested in looking over this formation of mounds, and planned an expedition with some friends, who, like myself, needed a vacation.

We met at George Espenlaub's headquarters in Clewiston, and prepared for a ten day trip. Espenlaub and Ned Moren each had an Everglades buggy, and these were to be our transportation. George J. Leahy of Chicago, Bob Morrow of Miami, George Marnhout of Philadelphia, and the writer made up our party, which later turned out to be the most congenial group I have ever camped with.

While we were preparing for the trip George Marnhout flew over the Indian mounds with Lawrence Bright, and made motion pictures and photographs, some of which are used with this article. (Figs. 5-6) The mounds are located approximately south-southeast of Clewiston. On leaving the Clewiston airport the direction is at 165 degrees for about 15 miles in a straight line.

In order to reach the mounds by land, we traveled all day long through mud and water in the 'Glades buggys, and made camp in a beautiful little hammock. The following day we drove to the mounds, which were only about ten minutes away.

These Indian mounds are located on a grassy prairie, which was very dry at the time of our visit. They are at the edge of the sawgrass, about three miles northeast of the cypress swamps. The area covered by the mound group is so extensive that it cannot be seen in its entirety from the ground, but as we measured and walked over the area we became more fascinated by this strange group. The half circle, which may be seen in the illustrations, and which led us to apply the name 'Big Circle Mounds', has a diameter of 580 feet and is 1665 ft. around. The roadway-like embankment which forms it is about 10 to 15 feet in width. The mounds that are set off from the main circle are connected to it by raised pathways about six feet in width; the



mounds themselves are of various sizes. Beyond these mounds there are crescent-like raised earthwork which does not connect with any other feature.

We counted the different mounds of the group at various times, and decided that there were between 19 and 22 distinct mounds, with the possibility that there had formerly been a few more. Small areas which may or may not have been mounds complicated the counting.

Tony's Mound, one of the largest, is easily recognized in the photographs because of the trees growing on it. This vegetation includes sugarberry, banyan, mulberry, papaya, saw palmetto and small plants. Tony's Mound measures 110 by 83 feet. A canal-like depression 600 feet long, flanked by spoil banks or raised pathways 30 feet in width, extends from the north side of the mound. The depression itself is 38 feet wide, and breaks through the half circle as shown in the sketch plan of the site. At this point it should be noted that the sketch plan (Fig. 7) was made before the aerial photographs were developed, and is not strictly accurate. It does however serve to orient one in studying the photographs.

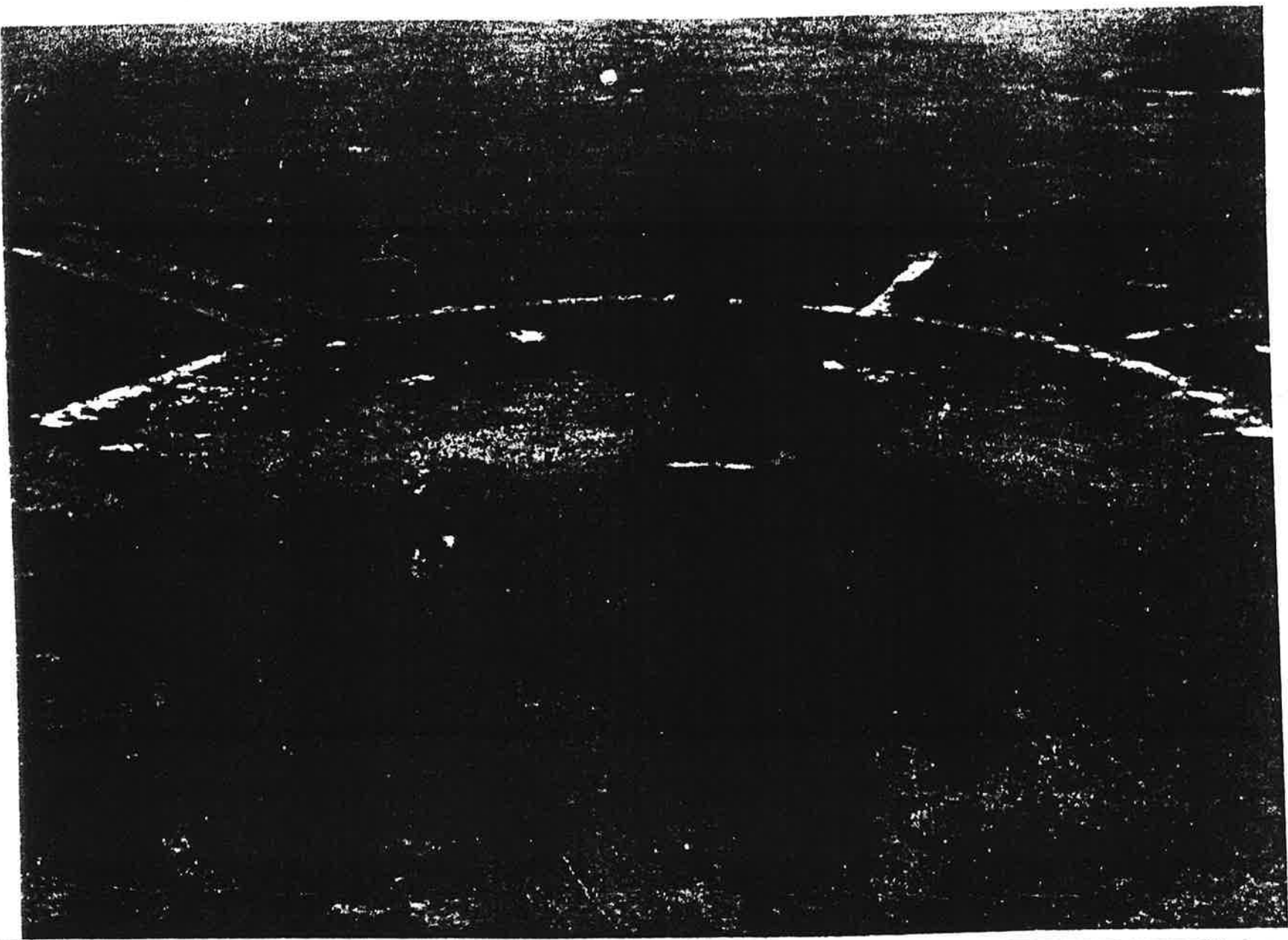
The largest mound is situated opposite Tony's Mound, and is barely visible in the photographs. It is 390 feet in length and 135 feet wide; there is a small canal leading to it. It was evident that cattle had used this mound as a bedding place, and consequently had caused more erosion here than on the other mounds. Because of this, accurate measurements of this mound were difficult to secure.

Approximately a quarter of a mile northwest of the mounds there is another large mound covered with trees and growth. We presumed that this was the burial mound.

The longer I studied the terrain, the more I realized how well located the site was. The deepest sawgrass area was on the northeast side of the group, but the grass also extended all along the east side of the area. I believe that this sawgrass area extends all the way to Miami. It was an area of deeper water and doubtless provided both fishing and water transportation. To the west of the mounds was grassy prairie, dotted with attractive hammocks, which provided good hunting and palm materials for construction. To the southwest was the Cypress Country, where wild turkey and deer abound.

It seemed to us that the shape of the mounds and the canals indicated that there had been deep water next to the homes of the Indians, and that the canals certainly provided a waterway to the most important mounds. Perhaps at the time when the site was occupied this area was largely covered with water much of the time, and perhaps the mounds were the only dry places available.

We later found out from Mr. John W. Griffin, State Archaeologist, that



these mounds were of the type made by the Calusa Indians in the 16th century, and that the crescent arrangement is present in other sites in the area. We did not do any digging in these mounds because I felt that they were too valuable for amateurs to disturb, and we have told many citizens of Hendry County that these mounds should be preserved, and perhaps set aside as state property.

Silver Springs, Florida
April, 1948

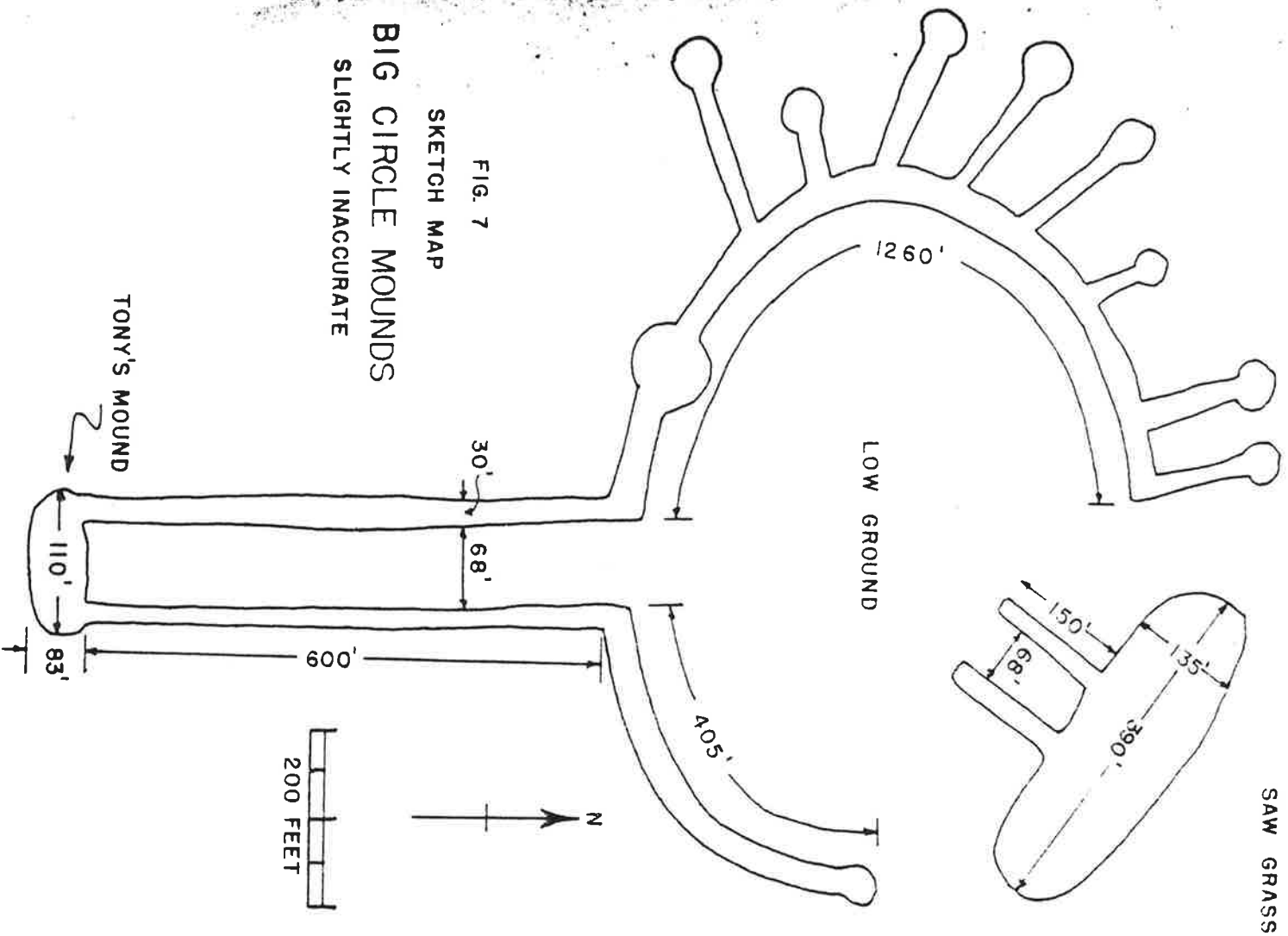


FIG. 7
SKETCH MAP
BIG CIRCLE MOUNDS
SLIGHTLY INACCURATE