

Chapter

1

The First People (50000 B.C.E.–1500s C.E.)

In This Chapter

- ◆ Where the first Americans came from
- ◆ The Mayas, Incas, and Aztecs
- ◆ The Anasazi, Mound Builders, and Pueblos
- ◆ Leif Eriksson, first European in America

Look at a map that shows the north Pacific Ocean. You'll find the Bering Sea, an arm of the Pacific bounded on the east by Alaska, on the south by the Aleutian Islands, and on the west by Siberia and the Kamchatka Peninsula. Near the north end of the Bering Sea is the Bering Strait, which, lying between Alaska and Siberia, connects the Bering Sea with the Chukchi Sea of the Arctic Ocean. At its narrowest, the strait is only 55 miles across, the shortest distance between the continents of North America and Asia. Fifty-five miles in icy cold water is a long swim, but not much of an ocean voyage. Historians believe that once upon a time, there wasn't even that 55 miles of water between the continents.

People of the Land Bridge

Several times during what paleontologists call the Quaternary Period—that’s their name for the last two million years—a “land bridge” emerged in the Bering and Chukchi Seas as the sea level dropped due to the expansion of the ice cap surrounding the North Pole. The theory is that anywhere from 10,000 to 45,000 years ago, human beings used the Bering land bridge to enter the New World, migrating from what is now northeast Asia to northwestern North America. Beringia, as the land bridge is sometimes called, disappeared when the major continental ice sheets and other glaciers melted, causing the sea level to rise again.



Vital Statistics

Eleven million is the current consensus. However, estimates of the prehistoric population of the area encompassed by the United States range wildly—from 8.4 million to 112 million. By comparison, in 1990, 1,959,234 Indians, including Eskimos and Aleuts, lived in the United States.



What’s the Word?

Native American is the term used by most historians and anthropologists to describe the aboriginal peoples of the Western Hemisphere. In this book, I also use the more familiar term “Indian.” That designation was coined by Christopher Columbus, who, on October 12, 1492, thought that he had landed in Asia—“the Indies”—and therefore called the people he encountered Indians. The name stuck.

45,000 Years of American History (Abridged Version)

The trek across Beringia was no evening stroll. In fact, it must have consumed thousands of years. By 9000 B.C.E., it’s likely that the former Asians reached Patagonia, at the southern tip of South America. In between, in the area that is the present-day United States, the population of what we now call *Native Americans* may have reached 11 million or more.

These Native Americans, thinly distributed over a vast area in bands of a hundred or even fewer individuals, lived for thousands of years on the ragged edge of subsistence. They didn’t develop great cities, but, as nomads, wandered, hunted, and foraged together. Then, perhaps 9,000 years ago, some bands began to domesticate plants in order to supplement foraged and hunted food. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Europeans first made contact with Native Americans, they were cultivating maize, beans, and squash, as well as manioc, potatoes, and grains.

Agriculture fostered a more stable lifestyle than hunting and gathering, and the horticultural groups organized themselves into tribes.

The Anasazi

In the Southwest, archaeologists have identified a people they call the Anasazi (from a Navajo word meaning “the ancient ones”). The Anasazi appeared as early as 5500 B.C.E. and are also called “the Basket Makers,” because of the many skillfully woven baskets that have been discovered in sites associated with their culture. During the period of 700 to 1100 C.E., the Anasazi began building what Spanish invaders would later call *pueblos* (Spanish for “town” or “village” and also “people”). These were fantastic groupings of stone and adobe “apartment buildings,” cliff dwellings seemingly hewn out of lofty ledges, the most spectacular of which survive at Mesa Verde in southwest Colorado.

The Mound Builders

In the meantime, to the east, in a vast area stretching from the Appalachian Mountains to the eastern edge of the prairies, and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, other Native Americans were building cultural monuments of a different kind. From about 1000 B.C.E. to after 1500 C.E., many different Indian societies constructed earthworks that modern archaeologists classify as burial mounds, platform or temple mounds (which served as the foundations for important public and private buildings), and circular and geometric ceremonial earthworks. The largest and most elaborate of the mounds were built in southern Ohio by people of the Hopewell culture (named after mounds found near the Ohio hamlet of Hopewell).

South of the Border

Pueblos, mounds, some baskets, a few pots—these are the chief material remains of Native American culture before Europeans set foot in what is today the United States. But to the south, in present-day Mexico and Central and South America, Native American civilization took a very different turn.

The Maya

The Maya lived in southern Mexico and in Belize, Guatemala, and adjacent Honduras. By 5000 B.C.E., the Maya were settled along the Caribbean and Pacific coasts. Within the next 3,000 years, they began to move inland, turning from fishing to agriculture.

By about 1200 B.C.E., another native people, the Olmec of the Gulf Coast, dominated trade in Central America and began greatly influencing Mayan culture, which



Vital Statistics

Tikal, in northeastern Guatemala, was the largest Mayan city of the Classic era, covering 40 square miles. Its population probably numbered 75,000.

reached its height by 900 C.E., when it seems to have collapsed, probably due to famine, disease, and chronic warfare among Mayan city-states. A landscape adorned with spectacular stepped-pyramid temples and other structures endured, and various fragmentary Mayan groups continued to prosper in varying degrees—until the sixteenth century, when the Spanish conquistadors invaded.

The Aztecs

Most of what is today called Mexico fell under the domination of another great Native American civilization, the Aztecs, who subdued and subjugated the other peoples of Mexico by the fifteenth century, creating an empire second in size only to that of the Incas in Peru. Extending from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific and from the Valley of Mexico south into Guatemala, the Aztec empire was populated mostly by slaves, whose work was supremely manifest in the capital, Tenochtitlan, according to the conquistadors, a city as large as Cordoba or Seville. Most remarkably, the Aztec capital was situated entirely within Lake Texcoco, two miles from the mainland. Four great causeways led to the city, which provided water through a system of magnificently engineered aqueducts. The streets, lined with splendid temples, issued onto great public squares, which served as marketplaces. And there were priests. Legions of black-robed holy men, fresh from the blood sacrifice of slaves and prisoners, continually marched through Tenochtitlan's boulevards, for the Aztec capital was the home of God himself as incarnated in the emperor, Montezuma II.

The Incas

Maya civilization was magnificent, and the Aztecs ruled with brutal splendor, but the Incas of Peru controlled the largest native empire in the Americas. Toward the end of the fourteenth century, the Incas fanned out from their base in the Cuzco region of the southern Andes. For the next century and a half, their holdings increased until the Inca world was invaded by Conquistadors under the command of Francisco Pizarro in 1532. At the time of that clash, the Incas held sway over some 12 million people in what is now Peru and Ecuador, as well as parts of Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina.

Beyond the Aztec Horizon

If you could see a map of the Americas in the days before the European invasion, you would behold great Indian empires in South and Central America, but nothing more than a collection of thinly distributed tribal communities in North America, the vast region beyond the Aztec frontier. In the southwestern part of this region the Pueblo culture developed. Far to the northeast of the Pueblos, were the “Temple Mound” people.

The Pueblos and the Temple Mound people diversified into many tribes, which overspread the region now encompassed by the United States. Unlike the Maya, Aztec, and Inca, these North American cultures had no written language and left no historical records, so it is impossible to present a “history” of the North American Indians before their contact with Europeans. In fact, some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that most North American Indians lived apart from linear time, harmonizing their lives with the cycles of the seasons and the biological processes of propagation, birth, and death. Europeans, forever *doing* and *getting*, were obsessed with recording *events* and measuring time. The Native Americans were focused instead on *being*. Therefore, time itself was different for them.

Leif the Lucky

Momentously—and tragically—the *time* of the Old World would collide with the *time* of the New. For 400 years, from a clash between “Indians” and Christopher Columbus’s men in 1493 to the massacre of Native Americans by the U.S. Seventh Cavalry at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890, the history of America would be in large part the history of racial warfare between the white and the red.

The first European contact, some 500 years before Columbus sailed, ignited no great tragedy, however. It seems likely that Vikings reached the Faeroe Islands by 800 C.E., and that they landed in Greenland in 870 C.E. The very first Old World dweller to set eyes on the continent of North America was most likely a Norseman named Bjarni Herjulfsson in 986 C.E. But that sighting came as a result of a mistake in navigation. Herjulfsson had been blown off course, and he had no interest in actually exploring the land he sighted.

It was not until the next decade, about the year 1000 C.E., that the Norse captain Leif Eriksson led an expedition that touched a place called Helluland (probably Baffin Island) and Markland (most likely Labrador). Most historians believe that Leif—celebrated as “Leif the Lucky” in the great Icelandic sagas of the thirteenth century—and his men

spent a winter in crude Viking huts hastily erected on a spot abundant with berries and grapes and, for that reason, called Vinland, which was probably located at a place now called L'Anse aux Meadows on the northernmost tip of Newfoundland. After Leif the Lucky left Vinland, his brother Thorvald paid a visit to the tenuous settlement in about 1004. Next, in 1010, Thorfinn Karlsefni, another Icelandic explorer, attempted to establish a more permanent settlement at Vinland. According to two Icelandic sagas, Thorfinn, a trader as bold as he was wealthy, brought women as well as men with him. They carried on a lively trade, but they also fought fiercely with the Native Americans, whom the sagas call Skraelings—an Old Norse word signifying “dwarfs” or “wretches” or, perhaps, “savages.” The Skraelings attacked tenaciously and repeatedly.

American Life

The adventures of Leif Eriksson (ca. 970–1020) are known exclusively through semi-legendary, sometimes contradictory sagas. Leif the Lucky (as he was called) was the son of Eric Thorvaldsson, better known as Eric the Red, who established in Greenland the first enduring European settlement in the New World in about 985 C.E. Through his fearsome father (Eric was banished from Iceland after having murdered a man), Leif Eriksson was descended from a line of Viking chieftains. Leif explored the lands that had been first sighted by Bjarni Herjulfsson.

After three lethal winters, Thorfinn and the other would-be settlers abandoned Vinland forever. The Viking expeditions to North America led, then, to nothing—at least not right away. Christopher Columbus, half a millennium removed from the Vikings, heard of the Vinland tradition and was excited by stories about a New World across the “Ocean Sea.”

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Native Americans almost certainly immigrated to the Americas from Asia across an Ice Age “land bridge” where the Bering Strait is today.
- ◆ Pre-Columbian Native American cultures varied widely, with the most elaborately developed in South and Central America.
- ◆ The early Indians of North America may be thought of as the peoples of the northern Aztec frontier.
- ◆ The European discoverer of America was (most likely) Leif Eriksson in about 1000 C.E.