

How did American Indians get to the New World?

What theories relate to the appearance of American Indians?

Recorded history began in Oklahoma in 1540 when Coronado crossed the plains with his conquistadors. The Spanish, it seems, were the first recorded Europeans in Oklahoma. For centuries before that, though, people moved back and forth across this area and many lived here. Some may have had European origins.

There are different theories about the origin of the American Indian. The Indians had their own beliefs in 1540 and earlier. Most tribes had oral histories or legends with stories of *migration*. Quite a few claimed that early members of the tribe came from “the land of the setting sun,” or somewhere west of California. Others claimed to be from the north, south or east.

How did ancient people reach the Americas? The theory most experts accept is that *migration* probably occurred during the Pleistocene Age, or Ice Age. At that time, huge glaciers formed an immense ice cap. It covered much of the northern half of the Northern Hemisphere. Scientists and historians disagree on how long ago this happened. They do agree that it lowered the ocean’s water level. Between Russia (Siberia) and Alaska is a body of water, the Bering Strait. The ancient ice cap exposed a bridge of land there. People of northeast Asia could have walked across the bridge, called Beringia, into North America.

Maybe those early travelers and their descendants continued southward, all the way to the lower tip of South America. If they did, it must have taken many centuries.

Moving between countries and climates is called a *migration*. *Archaeologists* can trace migrations and piece together the lifestyles of ancient people. The cultural and physical differences of North American peoples hint that they may have arrived through various entry points. Even the people who crossed the land bridge may have started from different places. Physical characteristics show that early Americans may have been related to the Mongols or to Chinese tribes. Some may have actually been Indians — from India.

Thor Heyerdahl, a Norwegian ethnologist, went through a lot of trouble to prove the theory of Egyptian origin. In 1970, he built a boat

from *papyrus* reed (once used to make paper) and named it *RA II*. Heyerdahl sailed it from Africa to North America, trying to copy the conditions sailors lived with then. Numerous scientists say his journey did not prove his theory. Others say it may be that ancient Egyptians could have made similar trips.

This evidence suggests that the first Americans should not be put together in one group named “Indian.” Scholars of Native American history now divide the tribes according to language, cultural, and physical differences. They rarely call any group “Indian.” In conversation, however, Oklahomans tend to use both “Indian” and specific tribal names.

What stories do artifacts tell? Experts also use ancient objects to develop theories about the first people in the Americas. For instance, they found sculpted pieces in Mexico in 1961 and identified them as Roman. They dug up Japanese pottery, five thousand years old, in Ecuador. They also found *artifacts* of Phoenician origin in other places. All these items have been scientifically dated. They seem to have been in the Americas for hundreds, even thousands, of years before Columbus arrived.

These findings point to two possibilities:

1. The ancestors of the American Indian tribes came from many places.
2. Ancient Americans carried on trade with ancient people from around the world.

Maybe both possibilities are true. This would explain the differences among tribes. This would also explain the similarities to ancient cultures in distant parts of the world. For example, some Inca pyramids bear a striking resemblance to pyramids in Cambodia. Experts believe certain maps are copies of ancient Egyptian maps, but they show parts



of Antarctica and South America with amazing accuracy. Both ancient Chinese and Irish stories seem to be about the Americas and the American Indians. For now, scientists are divided on how to interpret all this evidence.

What was Oklahoma like in prehistoric times? The land now called Oklahoma measures roughly 69,000 square miles. The Cross Timbers divides it into two areas. This natural barrier of very dense scrub timber and thickets slowed down travelers as recently as a hundred years ago. The belt of thick vegetation ran from the central part of the state toward the southwest. Even now, east of that line, the land is largely wooded. Western Oklahoma is largely flat prairie. According to studies by experts, the original lifestyles east and west of the Cross Timbers were as different as the geography.



Artifact found in Spiro Mound near Spiro in southeastern Oklahoma, probably worn around the neck with a leather strap. Shell Gorget, Spiro, Mississippian period 9025.451 Gilcrease Museum Collection

The oldest archeological find in the state is the Domebo mammoth kill site near Stecker in Caddo County. It marks the easternmost place where Clovis points have been found in North America. Clovis people were hunters who lived about twelve thousand years ago. According to Arrell M. Gibson, author of *The American Indian* (published in 1980 by D.C. Heath and Co.), Clovis man “lived in scattered, temporary camps and built no shelters.” Gibson wrote that the climate of the country at that time was “generally temperate,” so there was not much need for shelter. Clovis man’s main source of food was probably the mammoth, a huge, hairy creature an elephant, which once roamed the Great Plains. Other food sources were camels, small horses, ground sloths, large bison generally referred to as the “huge early bison,” and very small antelope.

The Domebo site had several bones of a mammoth, evidently killed by prehistoric hunters. Scientists found three spear points there. Two of them were Clovis points. Radiocarbon dating showed they were

nearly twelve thousand years old. Experts using other methods disagree on their age. At any rate, the find verifies Clovis man's existence in the Oklahoma area at one time.

For several reasons, including better human hunting skills, the mammoth and other animals became extinct in this part of the world. Clovis people also disappeared. Humans became more advanced. They made different tools, and moved on. The most important tool made by Clovis people was the *atlatl*, a spear thrower. It was a stick-like weapon about two feet long. It was weighted and held a spear securely. Its greater *velocity* and whip action allowed the hunter to hit an animal as far away as three hundred feet with a great deal of force. Folsom people, the next known people of Oklahoma, also used the *atlatl*.

Evidence shows that Folsom people were here ten thousand years ago. They lived cooperatively. They hunted in groups and worked together for the common good. Their main source of food was the huge early bison. One hunting method was forcing a herd over a cliff. This made for a large, easy harvest, but wasted much of it. It was more common to separate a single bison from the herd. Then hunters surrounded the animal and killed it with spears.

What was life like for Indians? Scholars know that there were still no towns in the western part of the state eight hundred years ago. However, groups of farming Indians built their homes close together. These were large enough in number to be called farming villages. The farmers worked together and gave each other protection from raiders. They hunted rabbits with small nets. They also hunted larger game, such as the buffalo.

Western Indians planted three main crops — squash, corn, and beans. In fact, those crops have appeared in archeological studies so often together that scientists named them the American Vegetable Triad. The types of corn, squash and beans varied from place to place. But basically these three crops were the staples of tribes all across the Americas.

Western Oklahoma Indians were fine craftsmen. They made excellent stone knives and points, and traded tools to tribes from farther west. Such traders brought pottery from New Mexico, *obsidian* (volcanic



***The American Vegetable Triad—
corn, beans, and
squash***

glass) from Montana, chalcedony from Colorado, and even a few sea-shells that may have come all the way from California. The most important trade item in the region was salt. People depended on the Great Salt Plains for trade and for survival.

Life in western Oklahoma was more difficult than life in eastern Oklahoma. West of the Cross Timbers, little rain fell. Most moisture came all at once in the spring, causing floods. The people grew plants carefully and tried to shelter them against the high winds.

Eastern Oklahoma, on the other hand, enjoyed heavy rainfall and lush greenery. The people had more leisure. Eight hundred years ago, they built their towns close to rivers, lived in permanent homes, and were mostly farmers and small-game hunters. They grew a different kind of corn from that grown in the west, but their main crops were still squash, beans and corn.

Who made the Spiro Mound? One of the nation's most important archeological locations is near Spiro in LeFlore County. It is an enormous man-made mound of cedar logs and tons of soil. It was a ceremonial center and burial ground. When discovered in the

1930s, the mound showed details of a highly advanced culture. No written material was found, but the artwork and other *artifacts* helped social scientists to understand the Spiro ways.

The Spiro people were probably ancestors of the Caddo tribes. They lived in eastern Oklahoma from about A.D. 500 to about A.D. 1300. Their culture developed enough that much of their work was specialized. Probably most people were farmers and hunters, but some were weavers. They spun fibers and wove cloth from wild cotton, nettles, feathers, and wild hemp. (Wild hemp was used in making rope for many years.) Others were builders and architects. Still others used artistic talents, such as pottery-making. Part of the artwork found in the Spiro location resembles art designs of the Mayan culture.

The Spiro economy was highly advanced for its time. It included successful merchants and traders. Some of them traveled to trade with people in other places. Distant traders also traveled to eastern Oklahoma. They lived as far away as the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes.



A stone effigy pipe from the Spiro Mound Site, known as the Lucifer pipe

Oklahoma Archeological Society on display at the National Museum of the American Indian

Spiro traders likely traveled similar distances on their business trips.

In the east, as in the west, salt was the most valuable trade item. The eastern Indians obtained it from salt “mining,” extracting it from spring water by evaporation. They placed the water in large flat pans made of pottery and set those over low fires. When the water was gone, salt was left in the pan.

Spiro Indians traded semi-precious stones, such as amethyst and garnet, as well as surplus field crops, fabrics, carvings, pottery and artwork. In exchange, they received copper from the north, pearls from the south, and raw materials and items unusual in Oklahoma.

Other groups of people in eastern Oklahoma lived like the Spiro people. They observed similar customs, made similar pottery, and built similar homes. Because they were great artists and their work resembles Aztec and Maya artwork, a number of scientists believe they were related to one of those tribes. But there were also eastern Oklahoma Indians who lived very differently, so they may have had different origins. There is no certain proof of any one theory.

The only records of any of the early dwellers are the *artifacts* and rubbish uncovered in “digs.” Archaeologists analyze them but may disagree on what a “find” tells us. These experts hope to find more *artifacts* and explain the origins and cultures of the first people here.

Who were Oklahoma’s first visitors? Even though Europeans came to the area more recently, historians and scientists are not sure about their origins, either. For a long time, experts thought Francisco Vasquez Coronado, a Spanish explorer who came in 1540, was the first Caucasian visitor.

When historians studied rune stones near Heavener in eastern Oklahoma, another theory emerged. *Runes* are the letters of the *Teutonic* alphabet, an ancient writing system from Northern Europe. The Norsemen, or Vikings, used them. If the rune stones are genuine, then in November, A.D. 1012, Vikings traveled along the Arkansas and Poteau rivers. They made their way through the Winding Stair and Sugar Loaf mountains and stopped to record the journey by carving *runes* in stone. If this is true, it means Vikings visited five hundred years earlier than the Spaniards.



**Engraved Shell
Gorget from Spiro
Mound
Oklahoma
Archeological Society**

On the other hand, some experts say they might have been carved in the early 1700s. It is possible that the Swedish leader of a group of Germans carved the *runes* then, while trying to colonize that area for the French.

Today, reputable scientists believe the rune stones are a clever hoax, and perhaps neither story about Heavener is true. Coronado and his army were probably the first Europeans to enter the area that is now Oklahoma.

Who was Cortés? Hernán Cortés de Monroy y Pizarro, First Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca, was a Spanish conquistador who led an *expedition* that caused the fall of the Aztec Empire. He and his soldiers brought large portions of mainland Mexico under the rule of the King of Castile in the early 16th century. Cortés helped begin the first phase of the Spanish colonization of the Americas.

In Latin America, Cortés had defeated the Aztec nation by capturing one man, Montezuma, their god-king. The god-king concept was

that one ruler ruled many clans and segments of the mighty nation. But in North America, separate tribes had their own chiefs and most tribes had several chiefs. The religions and governments of northern Indians were diverse, and each tribe was a separate nation. The Spaniards did not anticipate this difference. They assumed that all Indians were ruled by the same type of government as the Aztecs. Therefore, they failed to control the Indians to the north, even after defeating them in battle.

Who was Coronado? During this age of exploration, Spain was the most powerful nation in Europe, even in the world. In 1540, Spanish Emperor Charles V appointed Don Antonio de Mendoza, “the good *viceroys*,” to rule New

Spain. He sent the Spanish cavalry under the command of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado y Luján into the unknown north country to search for gold. The conquistadors were *invincible*. They considered all strangers their enemies.

Mendoza was confident that Coronado and his army would find and conquer the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola. Rumor was that common utensils there were made from gold and that jewel-studded houses were



Coronado
Painting, Deaf Smith
County Museum in
Hereford, Texas.

built several stories high.

If the Spaniards had been less powerful and more friendly, history might have had quite a different course. After crossing Oklahoma and turning west, the army did find the famous cities. From a distance the tall houses, well-fashioned pueblos, sparkled as though weighted down with precious jewels. The Spanish attacked and defeated the settlement, only to find that their “jewels” were nothing more than *gypsum* glistening in the sun. The conquerors found a little silver, fine clay pottery, and a few trinkets. They found no gold.

Coronado defeated all the cities and claimed new territory for the emperor. He recorded what he saw in places no other white man had traveled. He found food and salt in Indian storehouses. He sent out scouting parties that explored the Little Colorado River and found the Grand Canyon. For a year, Coronado and his men moved back and forth across the plains and mesas, fighting and searching. They executed many of the people they conquered. They never found gold. In the spring of 1542, they returned to Mexico.

How did the Spaniards take over so easily? They had three distinct advantages: the horse, the gun, and the wagon. They were able to ride in, attack, and flee swiftly because of their horses. Their guns could kill at greater distances than the Indians’ arrows and stones. With their rolling boxes, the Spaniards were able to carry necessary *ammunition*, food and other items for life and defense wherever they went. These items gave the conquistadors the element of surprise against an otherwise able enemy and left the Indians at their mercy.

During his search for riches, Coronado traveled back across part of Oklahoma and western Kansas and found a Wichita-type village where tattooed farmers lived. Friar Juan de Padilla, a chaplain with the expedition, decided to return there when Coronado’s army returned to Mexico. Padilla wished to establish a mission for the tribe. He was accompanied by Andres de Campo, a Portuguese soldier. They ministered to the tattooed people during most of 1542 and then went through central Oklahoma to visit another tribe. En route, they were attacked by a hostile tribe, and Padilla died. DeCampo and a handful of Mexican-Indians escaped. These men spent several months in Oklahoma. They may have



Hernando De Soto
Engraving

stayed in the area for several years. There is no record of their eventual fate.

Who was De Soto? The Spanish emperor sent Hernando De Soto to conquer Florida and made him governor of both Florida and Cuba. De Soto was not sure there would be enough food for his army, so he brought *numerous* animals — pigs, goats, sheep, cattle, and chickens. These animals, besides horses, came to North America for the first time with the Spaniards.

De Soto's army expected to find wealth in Florida similar to the jewels and precious metals found in South America by Cortes. When they did not find riches, they pushed on into the interior of the country. They fought the Choctaws in the Mississippi Valley and continued westward. They crossed the Mississippi River in May 1541 and persisted onward.

De Soto's private secretary, Rodrigo Ranjel, kept the official record of their journey. When the army reached the Grand and Arkansas River valleys in eastern Oklahoma, he recorded intricate details of what they saw. He wrote about "wild cows" that the Indians killed and how the "cow skins" were used in *numerous* ways. He described the complicated *stockades* protecting Indian towns and villages. He told of elaborate temples for complex rituals. The friendly native people, he wrote, wore beautiful clothes and adornments of shell and pearl. These people guided them through the wilderness. But soon, the Spaniards began to express contempt for the Indians.

Finally, tired of being mistreated and robbed, the Indians became hostile toward De Soto and his men. The Spaniards, at last convinced that they would find no gold, turned back to the Mississippi River. De Soto died of an illness on May 15, 1542. Half his original force survived to return to Panuco, Mexico, by following the river south.

There is a bit of *controversy* over whether De Soto actually came within the borders of present-day Oklahoma. Ranjel's writings seem to indicate, however, that the *expedition* reached the Arkansas River and perhaps came even further into the eastern part of the state.

Who was Onate? Don Juan de Onate led the last major Spanish *expedition* into Oklahoma in 1601. Again it was a search for gold. Taking *artillery* carts and more than seven hundred horses and mules, Onate and his men followed the San Buenaventura (Canadian) River to the Antelope Hills. They marched northward into Kansas and on to the area of the tattooed people. Known as the Quivira, the tribe probably lived

near the location of what is Wichita, Kansas, today.

Upon their arrival, Onate's army was attacked vigorously by the Quivira, who had greeted Coronado quite peacefully sixty years earlier. The Quivira injured most of the Spaniards so badly that they were forced to retreat to their camp on the Rio Grande.

Onate was not interested in the Great Plains as a prize. Still, he recorded the beauty he saw, the huge herds of buffalo grazing there, and the remarkable fruits and grasses growing there.

What legacy did the Spanish leave? When they departed, the Spaniards left a legacy of distrust, hatred, and violence. Most important, however, they left horses. Nothing changed the life of the western tribes as much as those. Hunting became easier. The horses had made the Spanish more powerful in warfare, and now the tribes held that advantage over other tribes. Horses soon became the mark of wealth among native people. Two hundred years later, when white men again encountered the western Indians, their horses made them stronger enemies than Coronado had faced.

Who were La Salle and La Harpe? Just as the Spanish came to seek their fortunes in the new land, so did the French — but the French did not want to conquer. The French wanted to trade, especially for furs. René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, never saw Oklahoma, but in 1682, he claimed the area for France. He claimed not only the Mississippi River Valley but also the rivers which flowed to the Mississippi. He named the area Louisiana in honor of the French ruler, King Louis XIV.

The French sought peace and trade with the Indians, but their feelings toward the Spanish were not so friendly. Louis XIV wrote in his *memoirs* that La Salle hoped to gain control of trade in Louisiana by securing two advantageous ports. He particularly wanted one approximately sixty miles upriver from the Gulf on the banks of the Colbert (Mississippi) River. In addition, by enlisting large native forces, and four hundred or so French soldiers, the explorer planned to expel the Spaniards from the area. La Salle was certain that the Indians' hatred of the Spaniards would seal any necessary pact between the natives and the



**René-Robert
Cavelier,
Sieur de La Salle**
Engraving

French.

Actually, La Salle's plan might have worked if the French army had not met so many misfortunes. The men became lost in the wilderness, and a number died from disease. After they were further weakened by desertions and Indian attacks, the French soldiers turned against La Salle. They killed him in his sleep. The survivors returned to France and let go of their dreams of controlling the New World.

Less political fur traders carried on the trade with the Indians, however. In 1718, Bernard de la Harpe began trading along the Red and Arkansas Rivers. He *established* no permanent trading post, but his records added to the knowledge of historians concerned with that time period.

How were European and Indian cultures affected by contact with each other? European-Indian contact began to cause change right away on both sides. Each contributed items to the other's culture. Besides corn, beans, and squash, Indians introduced Europeans to pumpkins, avocados, pineapples, chewing gum, chocolate, and other edible products. The Europeans brought peas, pears, apricots and several other fruits the Indians had not tried. They also brought wheat and the animals previously mentioned.

From the Europeans, the Indians learned metal craft. Prior to the coming of the Europeans, the Indians' primary materials for tools and utensils were clay, wood, stone, and bone. The Europeans taught them metallurgy, the art of heating metal and hammering it into shapes. The Indians began to make a few farm implements and small household items. Some tribes made beautiful silver jewelry, an art form for which they are well-known today.

For years, Indians traded with Europeans for most of the metal items they needed and continued to perfect their own crafts. Like the whites, Indians wanted to own knives. However, the most powerful metal item they got from Europeans was the gun. Gun trading was a lively, prosperous, and often law-breaking business on the frontier.

Most Indian tribes had a system for supporting the elderly and the disabled. No such system existed anywhere in Europe in the form of a government agency. Sanitation and city planning were developed sciences among some Indian tribes. These abilities may explain the absence of certain diseases among the natives. Europe, by contrast, suffered epidemics of various kinds which modern scientists attribute to the lack of proper sanitation.

Do You Know?

The world's first installed parking meter was in Oklahoma City on July 16, 1935.

Perhaps the greatest surprise concerning Indian culture at the time of the Europeans' arrival was the lack of a wheel. In spite of advanced technology in some areas, American Indians had never developed the concept of the wheel. Therefore, their technical advancement may have been delayed because they did not have wheeled machines.

Very soon, explorers carried American art, food, and technology back to Europe while natives used new items and ideas from the Europeans. Both cultures began to intermingle.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the most commonly accepted theory of Indian origin in North America.
2. How did living conditions differ between eastern and western tribes during the early prehistoric era?
3. Describe the oldest archeological find in the area that would become Oklahoma.
4. Discuss the advanced state of civilization reached by the Spiro people as evidenced by *artifacts* found in the Spiro Mound.
5. What is the theory of Scandinavian expeditions into the area that is now eastern Oklahoma?
6. Describe the purpose and results of the Coronado expedition. How did the attitude of the conquistadors affect their expeditions?
7. What advantages did the conquistadors have over the Indians and how did they use their advantages?
8. How did the things left behind by the Spanish affect the lifestyles of the Indians?
9. How did the French hope to succeed in North America? How did they differ from the Spanish?
10. What contributions did the explorers and the Indians make to one another's lifestyles?