



by Gordon C. Baldwin



The First Americans

America has been discovered at least three times. Everyone knows about the discovery on October 12, 1492, when Columbus arrived. And many people are aware that the Vikings had come to America by way of Greenland about five hundred years before

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that. Both the Vikings and Columbus found a dark-skinned people already there. Columbus, thinking he had sailed around the world to India, misnamed these people Indians.

But the Indians had not always been in America, either. It was about 25,000 years ago that they had discovered that land for the first time. No one can be sure, but probably it happened much like this:

On the rocky tip of Siberia a band of twenty or thirty cold and hungry people shivered under skin robes. For days they had been following the trail of a mammoth. If they could catch up to it and kill it, there would be food for all. The tracks of the mammoth stretched out eastward, finally vanishing in the icy, windswept landscape below them. Warily the little group of adventurers continued along the trail. Thus did the first American immigrants cross Bering Strait from Asia and find themselves in a new world.

Alaska and Siberia are separated by water now, but scientists believe they were joined by a land bridge thousands of years ago. Even if there were no connecting strip of land, the ice could be crossed during the winter. So the hunters following the mammoth probably walked to America. Of course, they had no idea that they were discovering a new continent. All they had in mind was a nice breakfast of mammoth meat. New World, Old World—what did it matter so long as mammoths and mastodons were there to be hunted? And both those mighty elephants of the past *were* there. So were giant beavers, camels, deer, caribou, elks, and antelope. Clumsy ground sloths, strange beasts larger than a cow, roamed about. To hunters seek-

ing food, this country must have seemed a natural paradise. Here was a land teeming with game, yet free of human enemies. They had no thought of returning to Asia.

But there were other hunters in this new land—not people, but animals. Wolves, great cave bears, and saber-toothed cats were quick to make a tasty meal of a careless person. It wasn't easy to stay alive 25,000 years ago. Few persons lived to be much more than forty or fifty.

The first people to come to the New World didn't bring much with them. Whatever they brought they had to carry, for they had no wheeled vehicles or domestic animals. Some of them probably carried chipped stone knives. Others brought wooden clubs and spears. They might also have had stone scrapers to help them prepare clothing from the skins of animals they killed. And perhaps their leader wore a bear-tooth necklace or a string of tiger claws.

Perhaps more important was the knowledge they brought with them. They knew how to make fire. They knew how to spin grass or bark fibers or hair into string by rolling it between the palm of the hand and the thigh. From this cord they made nets and traps to catch birds and small animals. And they probably knew how to build some type of warm shelter.

None of this—the simple tools, the knowledge—sounds like very much, and it wasn't. But it was enough. They hunted, they fished, they picked berries—and they stayed alive.

Other wandering groups of hunters followed that first little band. As the newcomers arrived, the firstcomers began drifting across

the continent. Always looking for food and shelter, they made their slow way south into this seemingly endless wilderness they had found.

No doubt some followed the coastline, keeping close to the sea and its fishing. At last, perhaps after centuries of slow southward progress, some adventuresome groups found themselves in Washington and Idaho.

Others went eastward up the Yukon and other river valleys into central Alaska. They crossed into the Mackenzie River valley in northern Canada. From there they could choose any of several easy routes to southern Canada and the great plains area of the United States. They kept moving, these hunt-

ers, following the game or pushed by the bands still coming over from Asia. Here and there groups dropped out as they found surroundings that suited them. Other groups pushed on, until finally they had poked their way into every corner of North and South America. Perhaps thousands of years after the start of their travels, a few daring Indians reached the extreme southern tip of South America. Ahead of them stretched another vast ocean. It was the end of the journey; they had no place else to go. But for thousands of years to come these continents were to belong to no one but them. The first discovery and exploration of the New World was complete.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **The New World was first discovered by**
 - A Europeans
 - B Vikings
 - C Indians

2. **The first people arrived in the New World about**
 - A 500 years ago
 - B 2500 years ago
 - C 25,000 years ago

3. **Today the place where the first people arrived is known as**
 - A Siberia
 - B Alaska
 - C Asia

4. **The writer suggests that the Indians entered the New World because they were**
 - A driven off course by a storm
 - B lured on by an animal's trail
 - C pursued by a group of enemies

5. **They probably crossed Bering Strait by**
 - A walking across a land bridge
 - B sailing on a crude raft
 - C swimming across a narrow river

6. **The Indians did not have**
 - A clothing
 - B weapons
 - C horses

7. **They did not know how to make a**
 - A wagon
 - B net
 - C fire

8. **To the Indians, the mammoth was a**
 - A beast of burden
 - B dangerous hunter
 - C source of food

9. **The Indians who followed the coast south did so mainly because**
 - A travel was easier there
 - B enemies were fewer there
 - C fish were plentiful there

10. **The article suggests that the last part of the New World to be settled by Indians was**
 - A central Canada
 - B the great plains
 - C South America