
A NEW WORLD

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THE FIRST AMERICANS



Christopher Columbus. A contemporary portrait by Sebastiano del Piombo.

At daybreak on the morning of Friday, August 3 1492, an Italian adventurer named Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain to find a new way from Europe to Asia. His aim was to open up a shorter trade route between the two continents. In Asia, he intended to load his three small ships with silks, spices and gold, and sail back to Europe a rich man.

Columbus first sailed south to the Canary Islands. Then he turned west across the unknown waters of the mid-Atlantic Ocean. Ten weeks after leaving Spain, on the morning of October 12, he stepped ashore on the beach of a low sandy island. He named the island San Salvador—Holy Savior. Columbus believed that he had landed in the Indies, a group of

islands close to the mainland of India. For this reason he called the friendly, brown-skinned people who greeted him “los Indios”—Indians.

In fact, Columbus was not near India. It was not the edge of Asia that he had reached, but islands off the shores of a new continent. Europeans would soon name the new continent America, but for many years they went on calling its inhabitants Indians. Only recently have these first Americans been described more accurately as “native Americans” or Amerindians.

There were many different groups of Amerindians. Those north of Mexico, in what is now the United States and Canada, were scattered across the grasslands and forests in separate groups called “tribes.” These tribes followed very different ways of life. Some were hunters, some were farmers. Some were peaceful, others warlike. They spoke over three hundred separate languages, some of which were as different from one another as English is from Chinese.

Europeans called America “the New World.” But it was not new to the Amerindians. Their ancestors had already been living there for maybe 50,000 years when Columbus stepped on to the beach in San Salvador.

We say “maybe” because nobody is completely sure. Scientists believe that the distant ancestors of the Amerindians came to America from Asia. This happened, they say, during the earth’s last ice age, long before people began to make written records.

At that time a bridge of ice joined Asia to America across what is now the Bering Strait. Hunters from Siberia crossed this bridge into Alaska. From Alaska the hunters moved south and east across America, following herds of caribou and buffalo as the animals went from one feeding ground to the next. Maybe 12,000 years ago, descendants of these first Americans were crossing the isthmus of Panama into

South America. About 5,000 years later their camp fires were burning on the frozen southern tip of the continent, now called Tierra del Fuego—the Land of Fire.

For many centuries early Amerindians lived as wandering hunters and gatherers of food. Then a more settled way of life began. People living in highland areas of what is now Mexico found a wild grass with tiny seeds that were good to eat. These people became America's first farmers. They cultivated the wild grass with great care to make its seeds larger. Eventually it became Indian corn, or maize. Other cultivated plant foods were developed. By 5000 BC Amerindians in Mexico were growing and eating beans, squash and peppers.

The Pueblo people of present day Arizona and New Mexico were the best organized of the Amerindian farming peoples. They lived in groups of villages, or in towns which were built for safety on the sides and tops of cliffs. They shared terraced buildings made of adobe (mud and straw) bricks, dried in the sun. Some of these buildings contained as many as 800 rooms, crowded together on top of one another. The Pueblo

made clothing and blankets from cotton which grew wild in the surrounding deserts. On their feet they wore boot-shaped leather moccasins to protect their legs against the sharp rocks and cactus plants of the desert. For food they grew crops of maize and beans. Irrigation made them successful as farmers. Long before Europeans came to America the Pueblo were building networks of canals across the deserts to bring water to their fields. In one desert valley modern archaeologists have traced canals and ditches which enabled the Pueblo to irrigate 250,000 acres of farmland.

A people called the Apache were the neighbors of the Pueblo. The Apache never became settled farmers. They wandered the deserts and mountains in small bands, hunting deer and gathering wild plants, nuts and roots. They also obtained food by raiding their Pueblo neighbors and stealing it. The Apache were fierce and warlike, and they were much feared by the Pueblo.

The Buffalo Hunt by Charles M. Russell. Amerindians hunting buffalo.



The Iroquois were a group of tribes—a “nation”—who lived far away from the Pueblo and the Apache in the thick woods of northeastern North America. Like the Pueblo, the Iroquois were skilled farmers. In fields cleared from the forest they worked together growing beans, squash and twelve different varieties of maize. They were also hunters and fishermen. They used birch bark canoes to carry them swiftly along the rivers and lakes of their forest homeland. The Iroquois lived in permanent villages, in long wooden huts with barrel-shaped roofs. These huts were made from a framework of saplings covered by sheets of elm bark. Each was home to as many as twenty families. Each family had its own apartment on either side of a central hall.

The Iroquois were fierce warriors. They were as feared by their neighbors as the Apache of the western deserts were feared by theirs. Around their huts they built strong wooden stockades to protect their villages from enemies. Eager to win glory for their tribe and fame and honor for themselves, they often fought one another. From boyhood on, male Iroquois were taught to fear neither pain nor death. Bravery in battle was the surest way for a warrior to win respect and a high position in his tribe.

Many miles to the west, on the vast plains of grass that stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, there was another warrior nation. This group called themselves Dakota, which means “allies.” But they were better known by the name which other Amerindians gave to them—Sioux, which means “enemies.”

The Sioux grew no crops and built no houses. For food, for shelter and for clothing they depended upon the buffalo. Millions of these large, slow-moving animals wandered across the western grasslands in vast herds. When the buffalo moved, the Sioux moved. The buffalo never remained on one pasture for long, so everything the Sioux owned was designed to be carried easily. Within hours they could take down the tipis, the conical buffalo-skin tents that were their homes, pack their belongings in lightweight leather bags—“parfleches”—and move off after the buffalo. They even carried fire from one camp to the next. A hot ember would be sealed inside a buffalo horn filled with rotted wood. There it would smolder for days, ready to bring warmth from the old village to the new.

The Sioux Creation

In 1933 a Sioux Chief named Luther Standing Bear wrote down some of the ancient legends of his people. This one tells how the Sioux people began:

“Our legends tell us that it was hundreds and perhaps thousands of years ago that the first man sprang from the soil in the great plains. The story says that one morning long ago a lone man awoke, face to the sun, emerging from the soil. Only his head was visible, the rest of his body not yet being shaped. The man looked about, but saw no mountains, no rivers, no forests. There was nothing but soft and quaking mud, for the earth itself was still young. Up and up the man drew himself until he freed his body from the clinging soil. At last he stood upon the earth, but it was not solid, and his first few steps were slow and uncertain. But the sun shone and the man kept his face turned toward it. In time the rays of the sun hardened the face of the earth and strengthened the man and he ran and leaped about, a free and joyous creature. From this man sprang the Dakota nation and, so far as we know, our people have been born and have died upon this plain; and no people have shared it with us until the coming of the European. So this land of the great plains is claimed by the Dakotas as their very own.”

To many people the tepee is a symbol of the Amerindian way of life. This large cone-shaped tent was invented by the buffalo hunters of the western grasslands. It was built round a framework of about twelve slim, wooden poles approximately twenty feet long. The thin ends of the poles were tied together with strips of buffalo hide and the poles were raised and spread until their bottom ends formed a circle about fifteen feet in diameter. As many as forty buffalo hides were sewn together then spread over the frame, their ends fastened to the ground by pegs. A doorway covered with a flap of skin was left in the side and an opening at the top acted as a chimney. The outside of the tepee was decorated with painted designs that had religious or historical meanings.

Amerindian tepees.

The lifestyle of the people of North America's northwest coast was different again. They gathered nuts and berries from the forests, but their main food was fish, especially the salmon of the rivers and the ocean. Each spring hundreds of thousands of salmon swam in from the Pacific and fought their way up the

fast-flowing rivers to spawn. A few months' work during this season provided the people of the Pacific coast with enough food to last a whole year.

This abundance of food gave the tribes of the Pacific coast time for feasting, for carving and for building. Tribes like the Haida lived in large houses built of wooden planks with elaborately carved gables and doorposts. The most important carvings were on totem poles. These were specially decorated tree trunks which some tribes placed in front of their houses, but which the Haida made part of the house itself. The carvings on the totem pole were a record of the history of the family that lived in the house.

The Amerindian peoples of North America developed widely varied ways of life. All suited the natural environments in which the tribes lived, and they lasted for many centuries. But the arrival of Europeans with their guns, their diseases and their hunger for land would eventually destroy them all.

Potlatches

The "potlatch" was a popular ceremony amongst the wealthy Pacific coast tribes of North America. The word means "gift giving." A modern potlatch is a kind of party at which guests are given gifts, but the original potlatch ceremonies went much further. A chief or head of a family might give

away everything that he owned to show how wealthy he was and gain respect. To avoid disgrace, the person receiving the gifts had to give back even more. If he failed to do so his entire family was disgraced.

*A Haida potlatch.*