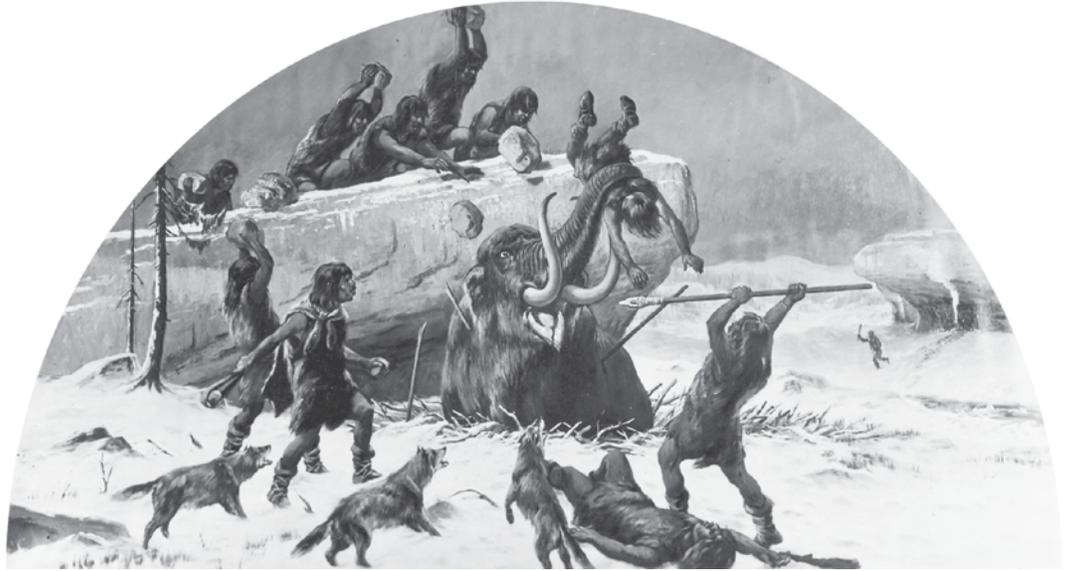


## CHAPTER 1

# Earliest Oklahomans

*Artist's conception of Middle Paleolithic people killing a mammoth.*



**THEORETICAL ORIGINS OF AMERICAN INDIANS.** Recorded history began in Oklahoma in 1540 when Coronado crossed the plains with his conquistadors. Some believe the Spanish were the first Europeans in Oklahoma. For centuries before that, however, people moved back and forth across this area and many lived here. Some may have had European origins.

There are many theories today concerning the origin of the American Indian. The Indians had their own beliefs, even in 1540 and earlier. Most tribes had legends or traditional histories. These were passed orally from generation to generation and contained stories of *migration*. Many legends claimed that early members of the tribe came from “the land of the setting sun,” or somewhere to the west of California. Others claimed to have come from the north. Some even say they came from the south or the east.



*Stone-edge axe from the Mound Builder era.*

**ICE AGE MIGRATIONS.** The theory most commonly accepted among experts concerns the Pleistocene Age, or Ice Age. Scientists and historians differ widely on how many years ago huge glaciers formed an immense ice cap which covered most of the northern half of the Northern Hemisphere. However, they agree that this ice cap caused a lowering of the ocean's water level. It exposed a land bridge between present-day



POSSIBLE MIGRATION ROUTES FROM BERINGIA

Russia (Siberia) and Alaska. Inhabitants of northeast Asia walked across the bridge, called Beringia, into North America. From entry, it is easy to conclude that those early travelers migrated southward, populating the land all the way from the Arctic Circle to the southern tip of South America. While the conclusion is easy, however, the actual accomplishment took many centuries and was probably one of mankind's most difficult *migrations*.

*Archeologists* are able to trace *migration* routes of various groups and to reconstruct the lifestyles of ancient people. The cultural and physical differences of Indian tribes indicate not only that early settlers may have arrived in North America through many entry points but also that the people who crossed the land bridge may have come from several different places. Physical characteristics indicate that early Americans may have been descendants of the Mongols or of various Chinese tribes. Some may have actually been Indians — from India.

This varied evidence strongly suggests that American Indians should not be grouped together in one class called “Indian.” Rather, they should be divided into groups according to their differences and similarities. In fact, scholars of Indian history have divided them into classifications according to language, cultural, and physical differences. They rarely refer to any group merely as “Indian.”

Thor Heyerdahl, a 20th *century* explorer, went to a great deal of trouble to prove the possibility of Egyptian origin. In 1970, Heyerdahl sailed the *RA II*, a vessel styled in the tradition of ancient Egypt and made of *papyrus* reed (once used for paper), from Africa to North America. The Norwegian ethnologist simulated as nearly as possible the conditions under which the Egyptians would have traveled. While some scientists say his findings were *inconclusive*, his journey may have proved that it was possible for sailors from ancient Egypt to have made similar trips thousands of years ago.

**THEORIES DEVELOPED FROM *ARTIFACTS*.** Sculpted pieces found in Mexico in 1961 have been identified as Roman. Japanese pottery, five thousand years old, was found in Ecuador, and *artifacts* of Phoenician and Pompeian origin were found in other places. All these items have been scientifically dated and are believed to have been lying in their discovery locations for hundreds, even thousands, of years before Columbus stumbled into this hemisphere looking for the Orient.

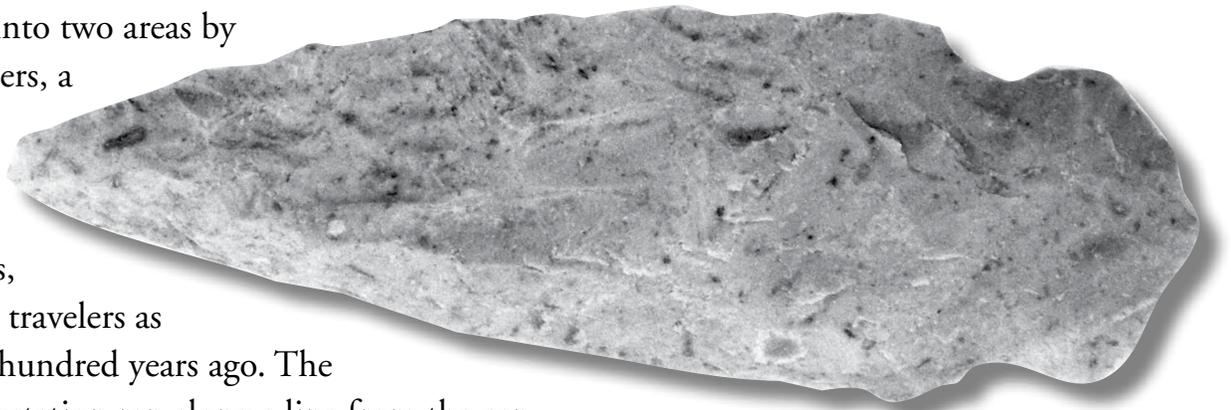
All this evidence points to two obvious possibilities:

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.

Perhaps both possibilities are true. This would account not only for the differences among tribal cultures but also for the similarities of some to ancient cultures in other parts of the world. Some Inca pyramids bear a striking resemblance to pyramids in Cambodia. Maps believed to be copies of ancient Egyptian maps depict parts of Antarctica and South America with amazing accuracy. Tales were told in ancient Chinese and Irish literature which appear to be talking of the Americas and the American Indians. The possibilities are endless, and scientists are sharply divided on what the probabilities might be.

**PREHISTORIC OKLAHOMA.** The land area now called Oklahoma measures some 69,000 square miles. It is divided geographically into two areas by the Cross Timbers, a natural barrier of very dense scrub timber and thickets, which impeded travelers as recently as one hundred years ago. The belt of thick vegetation ran along a line from the central part of the state toward the southwest. Much of the land east of that line is rough woodlands, while western Oklahoma is largely flat prairie land. According to archeological studies, lifestyles of the inhabitants east and west of the Cross Timbers were as different from each other as the land on either side was different.

The oldest archeological find in the state is the Domebo mammoth kill site located near Stecker in Caddo County. Not only is it the oldest in the state, but it marks the easternmost place where Clovis points have been found in North America. Clovis people were hunters believed to have lived about 12,000 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 asserted that the climate of the country at that time was “generally tem-



perate,” making the need for shelter minimal. Clovis man’s main source of food was probably the mammoth, a huge, hairy creature resembling 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.

*Archeologists* at the Domebo site unearthed several bones of a mammoth that had evidently been killed by prehistoric hunters. Three spear points were found, two of which were identified as Clovis points. Radio-carbon dating marked the age of these items as somewhere near 12,000 years, although some experts using other methods disagree. Regardless of dating methods, however, 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 many of its companions became extinct in this part of the world. Clovis people, as they are classified by modern scientists, also disappeared. People became more sophisticated; their lifestyles changed. They made different tools, and moved on. The most important contribution made by Clovis people was the *atlatl*, a spear thrower. The *atlatl* was a stick-like device about two feet long, weighted and fashioned to

*Original tunnel dug in Spiro Mound to find artifacts.*



hold a spear securely. It allowed greater *velocity* and whip action and enabled the hunter to hit an animal as far away as 300 feet with a great deal of force. Folsom people, the next known inhabitants of Oklahoma, also used the *atlatl*.

Said to have lived some 10,000 years ago, Folsom people lived a cooperative existence. They hunted in groups and worked together for the common good of everyone in the group. Their primary source of food was the huge early bison. One method of killing bison was driving a herd over a cliff. This provided a large, easy harvest, but much was wasted. More commonly, a single bison was isolated from the herd and surrounded by several hunters, who killed the animal by throwing spears into its body.

**AGRICULTURE AND TRADE.** Although progress continued, there is no evidence that ancient Oklahomans lived in towns in the western part of the state, but there are long periods of time for which there are no clues concerning their existence. As recently as 800 years ago, however, it appears that there were still no towns in the west. At best, groups of farming Indians built their homes close together and in large enough numbers that they might be classified as farming villages. The farmers worked together and gave each other support and protection from raiding enemy tribesmen. They hunted rabbits with small nets, and they 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 have named them the American Vegetable Triad. The varieties of corn, and sometimes of squash and beans, varied from place to place. But basically these three crops were the main staples of tribes all across the Americas.

Western Oklahoma Indians were fine craftsmen, making excellent stone knives and points. These were often traded to tribes from farther west who brought pottery from New Mexico, *obsidian* (volcanic glass) from Montana, chalcedony from Colorado, and even a few seashells that possibly came all the way from California. The most important trade item Oklahoma tribesmen had to offer was salt. The Great Salt Plains still exist today as a natural *phenomenon* and as a reminder of the unknown numbers of people who survived during hundreds of years because of salt obtained there.

Life in western Oklahoma was more difficult than in eastern Okla-

homa in those days. The western half of the state received little precipitation, and most of that came all at once in the spring, flooding rivers and streams that merely trickled or dried up the rest of the year. Vegetation was carefully cultivated and sheltered as much as possible against the high winds.

*Giant mastodons roamed North America from 3.75 million to 10,000 years ago. Mastodons are related to mammoths and modern-day elephants.*

Eastern Oklahoma, on the other hand, enjoyed heavy rainfall and lush vegetation, and its inhabitants enjoyed a more leisurely lifestyle. People lived in towns 800 years ago. They built their towns close to rivers, lived in permanent dwellings, and were primarily farmers and small-game hunters. They grew a different variety of corn from that grown in the west, but their main crops were squash, beans and corn, nevertheless.



**SPIRO MOUND.** Unearthed in the 1930s, one of the nation's most important archeological locations is near Spiro, Oklahoma, in LeFlore County. An enormous man-made mound constructed of cedar logs covered with tons of soil, it was a ceremonial center and burial ground. When opened, it revealed *numerous* details of a highly advanced, sophisticated culture. Although no written material was found, the elaborate artwork and other *artifacts* made it possible for *archeologists* to reconstruct the lifestyle of the Spiro people.

Believed to be ancestors of the Caddoan tribes, these people lived in eastern Oklahoma from about A.D.500 to about A.D.1300. Their culture was so far advanced that much of their work was specialized. Probably most people were farmers and hunters, but some were weavers, spinning

fibers and weaving cloth from wild hemp, wild cotton, nettles, and feathers. (Wild hemp was used in making rope for many years.) Others were builders and architects. Still others developed special artistic talents, such as pottery-making. Part of the artwork found in the Spiro location bears a strong resemblance to art designs of the Mayan culture.

The Spiro economic system was very advanced for its time. Some of the people were successful merchants and traders. Some Spiro traders traveled far away to trade with people in other places, just as distant traders traveled to eastern Oklahoma. They came from places as far away as the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes. Spiro traders likely traveled similar distances on their business trips.

As in the west, salt was the most valuable trade item, although it was obtained quite differently in the east. Some of the eastern Indians worked at salt "mining," extracting salt from salt spring water by evaporation. They placed the water in large flat pans made of pottery and set them over low fires. When the water was gone, salt was left in the pan.

Other trade items were semi-precious stones such as amethyst and garnet, surplus field crops,



fabrics and carvings, pottery and artwork. In exchange, Spiro Indians received copper from the north, pearls from the south, and other raw materials and items scarce to their country from various places in the eastern part of the continent.

Other groups of people in eastern Oklahoma lived in a style similar to that of the Spiro people. They observed similar customs, made similar pottery, and built similar homes. They were great artists and produced work so near to that of ancient Aztecs and Mayans that many scientists believe they were related to one of those tribes. These people are believed to be related to the people at Spiro mound. Other groups of eastern Oklahoma Indians lived very differently from the Mayan-like groups, however, and are believed to have different origins.

Although much conjecture is made concerning the tribal connections of early people in Oklahoma, there is no certain proof of any of it. The only records of any of the early dwellers are the *artifacts* and rubbish uncovered in “digs” and analyzed by modern archaeologists, and even scientists disagree sometimes on what a “find” tells. We can be certain, however, that these early peoples did exist. They did live, and they hunted and farmed the land now called Oklahoma. Perhaps someday someone will find more *artifacts* which will help explain more about prehistory and the origins of the people who lived here. More especially, perhaps we will discover what became of the early inhabitants of the state.

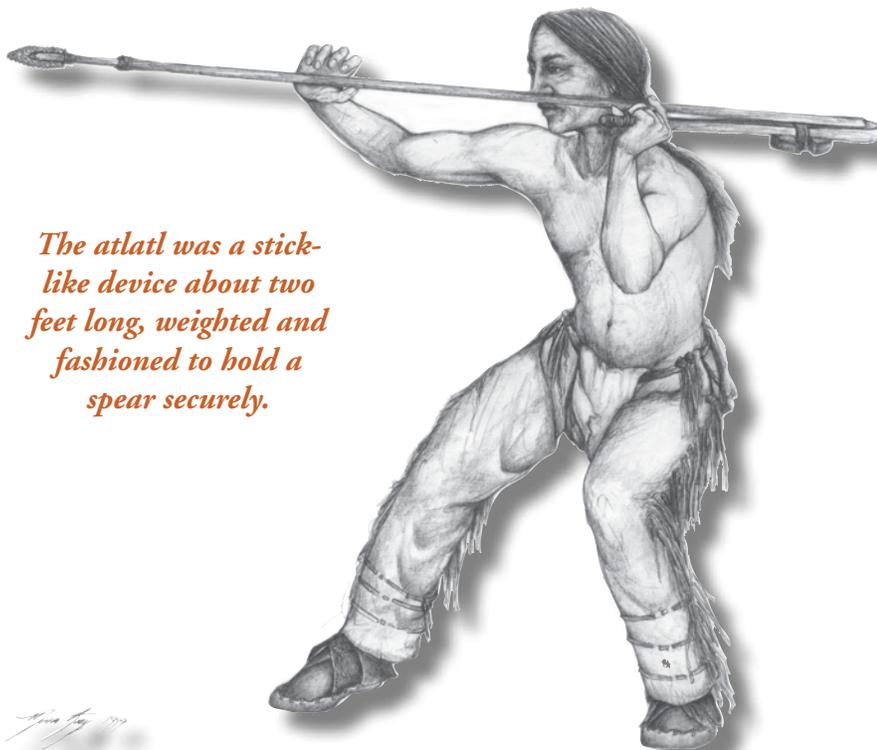
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions may be used for classroom oral discussion, independent practice, or essay tests. Each question should be discussed fully, orally or in writing.

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 the state of Oklahoma.
4. Discuss the advanced state of civilization reached by the Spiro people as evidenced by *artifacts* found in the Spiro Mound.



*View from Mt. Scott near Lawton in southwestern Oklahoma.*



*The atlatl was a stick-like device about two feet long, weighted and fashioned to hold a spear securely.*