The First Americans

Modern humans – Homo sapiens – first appeared in Africa. In the last 2 million years we have spread throughout the world. By about 10,000 years ago we were living in all the modern continents. When and how did the first humans get to America, a continent which is separated from the rest of the world by two great oceans?

The Ice Age is a key part of the answer to both questions. During the last Ice Age so much water was frozen into glaciers that the sea level dropped by about 140 m. This meant that Alaska (on the northern tip of North America) was joined by land to Asia, over what is now the Bering Sea. Historians call this lost land Beringia. It existed for thousands of years before the sea level rose and swallowed it up. So the answer to how humans first got to America is simple – they walked.

It is a mistake to think that groups of early people meant to cross Beringia to get to America. The groups were nomads who got their food by hunting animals and gathering plants and fruits. Slowly, over hundreds of generations, more and more people migrated to North and then South America.

The great Laurentide and Cordilleran glaciers separated Beringia and Alaska from the rest of America. Historians are agreed that there was a gap between the two glaciers, which became the main route south. Some historians claim there was a second route, west of the Cordilleran glacier and down the coast.
By 11,000 years ago both North and South America were settled by people we now call Indians. There were many different Indian peoples, each with its own culture. They settled the two continents which stretch from near the South Pole to near the North Pole. There are many types of landscape and climate; different cultures developed to match the differences of land and climate. In the area covered by modern California, for instance, people spoke more different languages than in the whole of Europe. Many of these groups left remains from their prehistoric past. When the early European settlers found the remains of these prehistoric peoples they were puzzled. They were unwilling to believe that the Indians were as sophisticated or powerful as the remains suggested.

**Activities...**

1. **a** Copy the graph in Source A.  
   **b** Mark on your copy the point at which you think people first settled in America.  
   **c** Explain your reasons for your choice.

2. Why is the date of the remains at Fell's Cave seen as so important in dating the first settlement of America?

3. There were many different Indian cultures in North America. California had more different cultures closer together than any other area. Can you suggest why?
Many different Indian cultures grew up in America. Historians have often tried to classify them into types. This makes comparison easier. It also helps historians work out the relationship between different tribes and nations.

The most useful division may be into different environments. Some historians have developed a classification based on geology, climate, and plant and animal life. All tribes living within one of these areas would face the same conditions and have the same sorts of opportunities and problems. In some ways this is obvious. Indians in the Arctic region could hardly depend on gathering acorns for their food supply, nor could the woodland tribes of the north east depend on hunting sea mammals.

Environment did not decide everything about the way Indians lived. Within each of these areas there were a variety of ways of life. Some Indians were warlike and others more peaceable, some were nomads and some settled farmers.

Another way of classifying Indian tribes is by the languages they spoke. Linguists believe that over 200 different languages were spoken in North America before the first Europeans arrived. These languages can be divided into groups of languages with close links. All these languages were quite different. Speakers of two languages within the same group would be speaking languages as different as French is from Spanish or Italian.

The South East  Fairly flat lands covered by evergreen forests. High rainfall.
The South West  Mountainous, with some areas of desert and some prairie grassland. Low rainfall.
The Plains  Largely flat, with a mixture of plains (short) and prairie (taller) grassland. Low rainfall.
Plateau and Basin  Forested mountains to the north and land more like the plains to the south.
California  Fertile coastal area divided from the rest of America by mountain ranges and deserts.
The North West Coast  Mainly coastal with high rainfall and a mild climate.
The Sub Arctic  Harsh climate, very cold in winter, with open woodland and tundra.
The Arctic  North of the treeline, permafrost.
The North East  Deciduous and evergreen forests. High rainfall.
This unit completes the introduction to this study of the Indian peoples of North America. As you have seen, there are two big problems to overcome. How can we find out about the Indian cultures from inside, rather than seeing them through the eyes of outside observers, many of whom were hostile? And should we generalize about such a diverse group of peoples?

The rest of this book uses a case study approach. It concentrates on different groups and regions selected to show something of the variety of Indian lifestyles. It also looks at the effect that contact with the European settlers had on those groups. The main case studies are about the Plains Indians and the Indians of the North West Coast. Just to underline the cultural variety, though, the last unit of this part of the book concentrates on a very different culture – the Pueblo Indians of the South West.

**Activities...**

1. Write out the sentences below, putting the correct heads and tails together.
   **Heads**
   - Historians have used different
   - One way is by the environment they lived in
   - Not all tribes in any group
   **Tails**
   - another way is by language groups.
   - would live in the same way.
   - ways of classifying Indian tribes into groups.

2. In what ways could you classify people in your school to help outsiders understand it?

3. What sort of classification might an historian find useful if he or she were studying:
   - a the settlement of Indians as they moved south from Beringia in the prehistoric period?
   - b a possible connection between geography and lifestyle?

4. What advantage is there in studying Indian tribes from different areas in more detail?
The Plains Indians

The Sioux was the largest and most powerful tribe on the Plains. They called themselves the Lakota (or Dakota or Nakota depending on their dialect), which means ‘allies’. Sioux is an abbreviation of an Algonquin word for ‘enemy’. There were three main groups of Lakota: the Eastern, the Middle, and the Western or Teton, which is the group we will study. Within the Teton there were important sub-tribes: Oglala, Brule, Sans Arcs, Minnekonjou, Two Kettle, Hunkpapa, and Blackfeet.

At the start of the 19th century the Lakota were nomads. They had little contact with Whites, but their lifestyle had been greatly changed by the horse, first brought to America by the Europeans. For most of the year the sub-tribes, or smaller bands, would wander the plains. Large gatherings of many bands were quite common, especially for religious festivals. Most of the Lakota regarded the Black Hills of Dakota as sacred land. This was the area of many of the great gatherings.

A travois, for carrying the tipi and all other goods from camp to camp. Before they had horses, Plains Indians used dogs to pull the travois.

The home of the Plains Indian is from 12 to 20 feet in diameter and about 15 feet high. The fire is built in the centre and the smoke escapes through the aperture at the top. It is usually in cold weather too full of smoke to be bearable to anyone but an Indian. The beds are piles of buffalo robes and blankets, spread on the ground close to the outer edge. They serve as sleeping places by night, and seats by day. In this small space are often crowded eight or ten people. Since the cooking, eating, living, and sleeping are all done in the one room, it soon becomes inconceivably filthy.

A description of Indian tipis by Colonel Dodge, an American, in a book written in 1877.

The tipi is a much better place to live in. Always clean in winter, cool in summer, easy to move. Nobody can be in good health if he does not have all the time fresh air, sunshine, and good water. If the Great Spirit wanted men to stay in one place, he would make the world stand still, but He made it always to change.

Chief Flying Hawk of the Oglala (1852 – 1931).
Lakota camp, painted by Karl Bodmer in 1833. At the top of the tipi is a cowling which acted as a chimney. It could be shifted according to the wind direction.

Some of the tipis were reduced to bare skeletons of poles; the leather coverings of others were flapping in the wind as the squaws pulled them off. One by one the tipis were sinking down, and where the great circle of the village had been only a few moments before, nothing now remained. The covers of the tipis were spread on the ground, together with kettles, stone mallets, great ladles of horn, buffalo robes, and cases of painted hide, filled with dried meat. Squaws bustled about in busy preparation. The horses were patiently standing while the lodge-poles were lashed to their backs. Each warrior sat on the ground, by the decaying embers of his fire, unmoved amid the confusion, holding in his hand the long trailing rope of his horse.

From 'The Oregon Trail' by Francis Parkman, 1847. Parkman was a young American who spent 1846 travelling in the West. He lived for some weeks with the Lakota band described in this extract.

**Activities...**

1. Which do you think gives the most reliable description of a tipi, Source B or Source C?

2. a. Using all the sources, describe a tipi and a travois.
   b. What were their advantages for nomads?

3. What can you say about the different roles of men and women among the Lakota?

4. How might a family like that shown in Source D react if they were offered a modern house instead of their tipi?
The Buffalo

At that moment each hunter violently struck his horse. Each horse sprang forward, and, scattering in the charge in order to attack the whole herd at once, we all rushed headlong at the buffalo. We were among them in an instant. Amid the trampling and the yells I could see their dark figures running hither and thither through clouds of dust, and the horsemen darting in pursuit. The uproar and confusion lasted but a moment. The buffalo could be seen scattering, flying all over the plain singly or in groups, while behind them followed the Indians, yelling as they launched arrow after arrow into their sides.

The boys, who had held the spare horses behind the hill, made their appearance and the work of skinning and cutting up began all over the field. The hides and meat were piled upon the horses and the hunters began to leave the ground.

Francis Parkman’s description of a buffalo hunt he went on with an Oglala band in 1846.

A buffalo hunt painted by George Catlin, about 1835. Catlin had spent time with Indians on the Plains, and went with them on at least one hunt.
I returned first. In about an hour Kongra-Tonga, with his arms smeared with blood to the elbows, returned. He sat down in his usual seat. His squaw gave him water for washing, set before him a bowl of boiled meat, and, as he was eating, pulled off his bloody moccasins and put fresh ones on his feet. Then he went to sleep.

The squaws unloaded the horses, and vast piles of meat and hides were soon gathered before every tipi. All the squaws and children were gathered around the piles of meat, looking for the best portions. Some they roasted on sticks before the fires, but often they dispensed with this operation. Late into the night the fires were still glowing upon groups of feasters engaged in this savage banquet.

We camped at this spot for five days, during three of which the hunters were at work, and immense quantities of meat and hides were brought in. For the most part, no one was to be seen in the camp but women and children. Still it presented a bustling scene. In all quarters the meat, hung on cords of hide, was drying in the sun. Around the tipis the squaws, young and old, were labouring on the fresh hides stretched on the ground, scraping the hair from one side and the still-adhering flesh from the other, and rubbing into them the brains of the buffalo, in order to make them soft and pliant.

After making a fire with the buffalo dung, the Indians put rocks in the fire. Next they took the paunch out of the buffalo, and, after emptying it of its contents, turned it inside out and filled it about two-thirds full of water — it must have held between 15 and 20 gallons. Then they took four bows, fastened them together at the top, and hung the paunch between the bows. As the stones were heated they were put into the water-filled paunch, with the same result as if the water had been placed in a tea-kettle on top of a stove or over the fire. The stones were constantly changed. The meat was put in the boiling water and cooked.
As soon as the hides were brought in, the women spread them on the ground and pegged them out, flesh side up. Then three or four women would remove all the bits of meat from the hide. In this work they used a flint or piece of sharp stone before steel and iron came into use among them. After all the meat was removed and it (the hide) had dried out, it was turned over with the hair on top. Then, with a tool made of elk-horn, they scraped off all the hair. This tool, clasped in both hands, was used by the women who worked it towards them. When the hair had all been scraped off, it showed a layer of skin which was dark. This was also removed, showing another layer of white. This the women took off carefully as it was used in making a fine soup. The brains and liver were cooked together, and this mixture rubbed all over the skin. It was then folded into a square bundle for four or five days. A frame was now built to stretch the skin. When the skin was opened it was fastened to the frame with rawhide rope. The mixture of brain and liver was now scraped off and the skin washed until perfectly clean. The women then went all over the skin with a sandstone, which made the hide very soft. A braided sinew was then made taut, like a bowstring. The skin was taken off the frame and pulled back and forth on this sinew by the women, until it was very soft.

With the skins they build their houses; with the skins they clothe and shoe themselves; from the skins they make rope and also obtain wool. With the sinews they make thread, with which they sew clothes and also their tents. From the bones they shape awls. The dung they use for firewood, since there is no other fuel in the land. The bladders they use as jugs and drinking containers. They sustain themselves on their meat, eating it slightly roasted and heated over the dung. Some they eat raw.

A description of the use of buffalo by the Indians of the Great Plains by Pedro de Castañeda, a Spanish soldier who was part of a Spanish expedition to inland North America between 1539 and 1541.

'Tanning done by women' from Eagle Lance's History. The note in Lacotan says, 'Handling the raw hides. There are ten doings connected with this.'
Activities...

1. Does Source B show the hunt described in Source A?

2. Compare Sources C and E.
   a. In what ways do they support each other?
   b. Do they contradict each other at all?

3. Compare Sources F and H.
   a. In what ways do they support each other?
   b. Do they contradict each other at all?

4. What part or parts of a buffalo would an Indian use for the following jobs:
   a. making bedclothes?
   b. making arrows?
   c. making a new tipi cover?

5. Source G describes things that happened over 300 years before the other sources. Does this mean there was no change on the Plains in those years?

6. Why might a historian studying the Plains Indians at the time of Source G (about 1540) find Sources C and E useful?

7. Use Sources A and B to describe how buffalo were hunted.

8. Use Sources D, F, and H to describe what was done back at the camp after a kill.

9. What can you say about the different roles of men and women among the Lakota from the evidence in this unit?
The Lakota believed in **Waken Tanka**, the 'Great Spirit'. He arranged the world so that all living things could help and be helped by each other. When they died they could go to be with him in the **afterlife**. Indian life was full of rituals that had to be observed to please Waken Tanka, or the various spirit creatures, or even the spirits of dead people who had not been able to join Waken Tanka.

Sometimes the whole tribe took part in large ceremonies in the ground inside the ring of their tipis. Sometimes religion was a private thing. Part of the initiation ceremony when boys became men was to go off alone, eat and drink nothing and see nobody for several days. At the end of this time they would get a sign from a **spirit animal**. This animal would then guide their lives. They were supposed to keep a sign from this animal in their **medicine bag**. This was a bag that each man wore around his neck. It was entirely private. This was odd, since almost no other part of life was really private in a Lakota camp. The bag was used to keep things that were of special religious importance to that man. When he died, it was buried with him, unopened.

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Oglala men preparing the ceremonial pipe for a religious ritual, photographed in 1907. A buffalo skull, also used in the ritual, is in front of the men.

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No good thing can be done by man alone. I first make an offering to the Spirit of the world, that it may help me to be true. See, I fill this sacred pipe with the bark of red willow.

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The old Indian still sits upon the earth, instead of propping himself up and away from its life-giving forces. For him, to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly. He can see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer to the other lives around him.

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From '**Land of the Spotted Eagle**' by Chief Luther Standing Bear, 1933.
A picture of the things which a man needed to pray, from Eagle Lance's History. Behind the Indian is a sweat lodge, used for ritual cleaning.

Two legs share with four legs and the wings of the air and all growing things. Everything an Indian does is a circle and that is because the power of the world works in circles. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is like a ball. The winds whirl round, and birds make their nests in circles. Even the seasons form a great circle and come back to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood. Our tips are round, like the nests of birds, and they are always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.

They call North American Indians savage, with no religion. I say that they are highly moral and religious beings. I never saw any other people spend so much time worshipping the Great Spirit.

Activities...

1. Study Sources A, B and C. Why do you think these Indians are:
   a. sitting on the ground?
   b. getting the pipe ready with such care?

2. Study Source D.
   a. What items in the list are not in the picture?
   b. What items in the picture do not appear on the list?
   c. What items in the list can you find in Source A?

3. Read Source E.
   a. What reason does the writer give for the Indians camping in a circle?
   b. What advantages would camping in a circle have given the Indians?

4. Read Source F.
   a. Think about European beliefs. Why might some Europeans have thought that the Indians were savages?
   b. Think about Indian beliefs. Why might some Indians have thought that the Europeans were savages?
Some of the Lakota religious ceremonies were for small groups, called societies. Each band had several all-male societies that met together under the name of an animal or some other living thing. Other ceremonies were for the whole band, like the Scalp Dances, held to celebrate victories after battles or raids. Some of them, like the Sun Dance, were for gatherings of many bands.

The Lakota prepared for their ceremonies very carefully. They used particular places, particular clothes, and particular decorations for both themselves and the ceremonial pipes. No matter how big or small the ceremony, great care was always paid to the details. Some rituals, like the Scalp Dance, were performed in one day. Others, like the Sun Dance, needed many days of preparation. The warriors would fast, sweat in the sweat lodge, and pray. The ground would have to be carefully prepared. In the case of the Sun Dance there were several days of dances and other rituals before the key part of the ritual.

The Lakota also had smaller rituals that had to be carried out before battle, or hunting the buffalo, or making decisions. There were rituals that had to be carried out to get rid of evil spirits, or bad spells put on you by your enemies. The influence of Waken Tanka was in everything that the Lakota did, and it is not possible to simply divide these rituals into those that were religious and those that were not.

Indians performing the Elk Dance, from Eagle Lance's History. In this picture of the ceremony, Eagle Lance shows three elk dancers, a medicine man, a man called 'the magic shooter' (who crouches out of sight, supposedly shooting bad magic at the Elk Dancers, which they must dodge), and two women carrying ceremonial pipes. Women did not usually have any part in religious ceremonies. The women here are 'holy women' and were supposed to have magic powers.
The Sun Dance from an early photograph.

Things needed for the Sun Dance:
A red flannel banner, with offerings of tobacco tied to
 twigs fixed onto it.
A bag containing a bag with pemmican [dried meat] in it
 and a bag with red paint in it. Put on the pole.
A buffalo skull, with a blue mark on its forehead, put on
 the pole.
Two ceremonial pipes.
A blue wooden frame to prop the pipes up.
The hole for the ceremonial pole has to be dug by a man
 of good habits. Once the pole is in place the ground
 must be marked into quarters by the priests.

From Eagle Lance’s notes to one of his pictures.

They had been fasting and purifying themselves in the
 sweat lodges, and praying. First their bodies were painted
 by the holy men. Then each lay down under the tree as
 though he were dead. The holy man cut a place in his
 back or chest so a strip of rawhide, fastened to the top of
 the tree, could be pushed through the flesh and tied. The
 man would get up and dance to the drums, leaning on the
 rawhide strip as long as he could stand the pain, or until
 the flesh tore.


Activities...
1 Study Source A.
   a What shape are the tipis laid out in? Why?
   b Copy the picture. Label the ceremonial pipes; the holy
      women, the ‘magic shooter’ and the medicine man.

2 Study Sources B and C.
   a Make a list of the things that are the same in both pictures.
   b Make a list of the things that are different.
   c Do the differences mean that someone is doing the dance
      wrong?

3 Compare Source D with Sources B and C. What are the things on the list
   that you cannot see in the pictures? Why not?

4 Copy Source F. Label the dance area, the barricade, the buffalo and
   bag.