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Indians of eastern New Mexico

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INDIANS OF EASTERN NEW MEXICO

by

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GENERAL BACKGROUND

The first humans to reach eastern New Mexico probably came to this area more than twelve thousand years ago. How much earlier is speculative. Estimates range from a minimum of twelve thousand years to a maximum exceeding fifty thousand years. None of the sites approaching maximum antiquity have widespread archaeological acceptance. Our earliest accepted archaeological horizon dates about 11,500 years ago. Here Llano or Clovis man hunted an extinct elephant, known as the mammoth, using only a stone-tipped spear as his hunting weapon. Points, the technical name for spear or arrow heads of Clovis style, have been found in each of the contiguous forty-eight states, and in southern Canada and northern Mexico as well (Figure 1). Clovis or Llano man was a pioneer, perhaps even the discoverer of the "New World." Sweeping into a human void, he quickly established his kind and way of life throughout most of North America.

Eastern New Mexico is the area from which the story of the Paleo-Indian was first told. The Folsom Type site in northeast New Mexico was the first widely accepted Early Man site in the New World and the Blackwater Draw site near Portales, New Mexico, was the first multicultural Paleo-Indian site, and without doubt the largest and best site involving Clovis Man who hunted the five-ton, now-extinct, mammoth (Figure 2).

Acceptance of the considerable antiquity of Paleo-Indian remains came in 1926 when Howard Cook and J. D. Figgins traveled to Folsom, New Mexico to excavate fossil bison, first discovered in 1893 by a Negro cowboy, George McJunkin. Nineteen projectile points now identified as Folsom were found in association with the remains of twenty-three bison (Figure 3). Initial geologic studies suggested an age of 25,000 years for the site; later estimates, using radiocarbon and other sophisticated dating techniques, place it in the 10,000 to 11,000 time period.

The earliest archaeologists in the Paleo-Indian field concentrated on the sparsely covered and often eroded areas of the High Plains and Southwestern deserts. Within a decade, approximately twenty separate Paleo-Indian complexes were identified and found to occupy the time period between 10,000 and 5,000 B.C. During this period the climate fluctuated, but trended gradually toward decreasing effective moisture and culminated in the Altithermal period about the fifth millennium before Christ. With the onset of the Altithermal, the last of the Pleistocene megafauna disappeared and the Paleo-Indian big-game hunting tradition came to an end (Figure 4).

On the High Plains, four projectile point types appear to be associated with cultural material older than 10,000 years. The Folsom point has been dated at the Lindenmeier site in Colorado at about 8800 B.C. Its prototype, the Clovis point, dates about 9300 B.C. The Sandia point still lacks an acceptable

radiocarbon date, but recent investigation by Agogino and Haynes indicates that it is no older than the Clovis culture. Finally the Agate Basin culture evidently immediately post-dates Folsom, between 8000 and 8500 B.C.

All those early points are typologically sophisticated, and one would normally expect to find their prototypes either within the Americas or in areas adjacent to the Bering Straits, the most acceptable land bridge to the New World. Until now these prototypes have not been found or at least, not recognized. Most points from Siberia are different in style, tradition, and technique from the New World Paleo-Indian points. The few found with similarities to Paleo-Indian points in the Americas prove to be more recent than the New World types, and appear to be the result of cultural backwash from the Western Hemisphere. Actually, the points closest to the Paleo-Indian tradition to be found in Asia are from Japan, but it is difficult to picture the "First Americans" coming by way of the Aleutian Islands. The hypothesis that man appeared in America before the time of any of the presently identified cultures cannot be rejected out of hand. There may well have been small groups present whose technology was not advanced to the stage of making bifacial projectile points. If this were the case, the number of pre-projectile point sites recognized could be expected to be small in view of the tendency of American archaeologists to identify cultures largely by point types.

The Clovis point, as far as we know, is the oldest well-defined projectile point in the New World. In both style and chronologic position it seems to be ancestral to the Folsom point. The Clovis or Llano complex as identified in the High Plains or Southwest is associated with a preference for, or dependence on, mammoth hunting and is defined by the use of large fluted points, side scrapers, graters, bone points and foreshafts, and crude hammerstones. The most significant sites are the Dent site, Colorado; Blackwater Draw, New Mexico; the Miami and McLean sites in Texas; the Strecker and Domebo sites in Oklahoma; and the Naco and Lehner sites in Arizona. In the last five years intensive excavation at the Mockingbird Gap site, located a few miles from the Trinity atomic bomb test site in New Mexico, has produced over one hundred whole or fragmentary Clovis points, making the site the most productive discovered to date. This site is currently being excavated by George Agogino from the Paleo-Indian Institute of Eastern New Mexico University and Robert Weber from the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. Radiocarbon dates have been obtained from four Clovis sites: Naco, Lehner, Domebo, and Dent. All the dates cluster about 9300 B.C. The Dent date of 9240 B.C., plus or minus 500 years, was obtained by using a new chemical technique that removed the preservative from the bone and tusk of one of the Dent mammoths, kindly supplied by Dr. H. M. Wormington of the Denver Museum of Natural History.

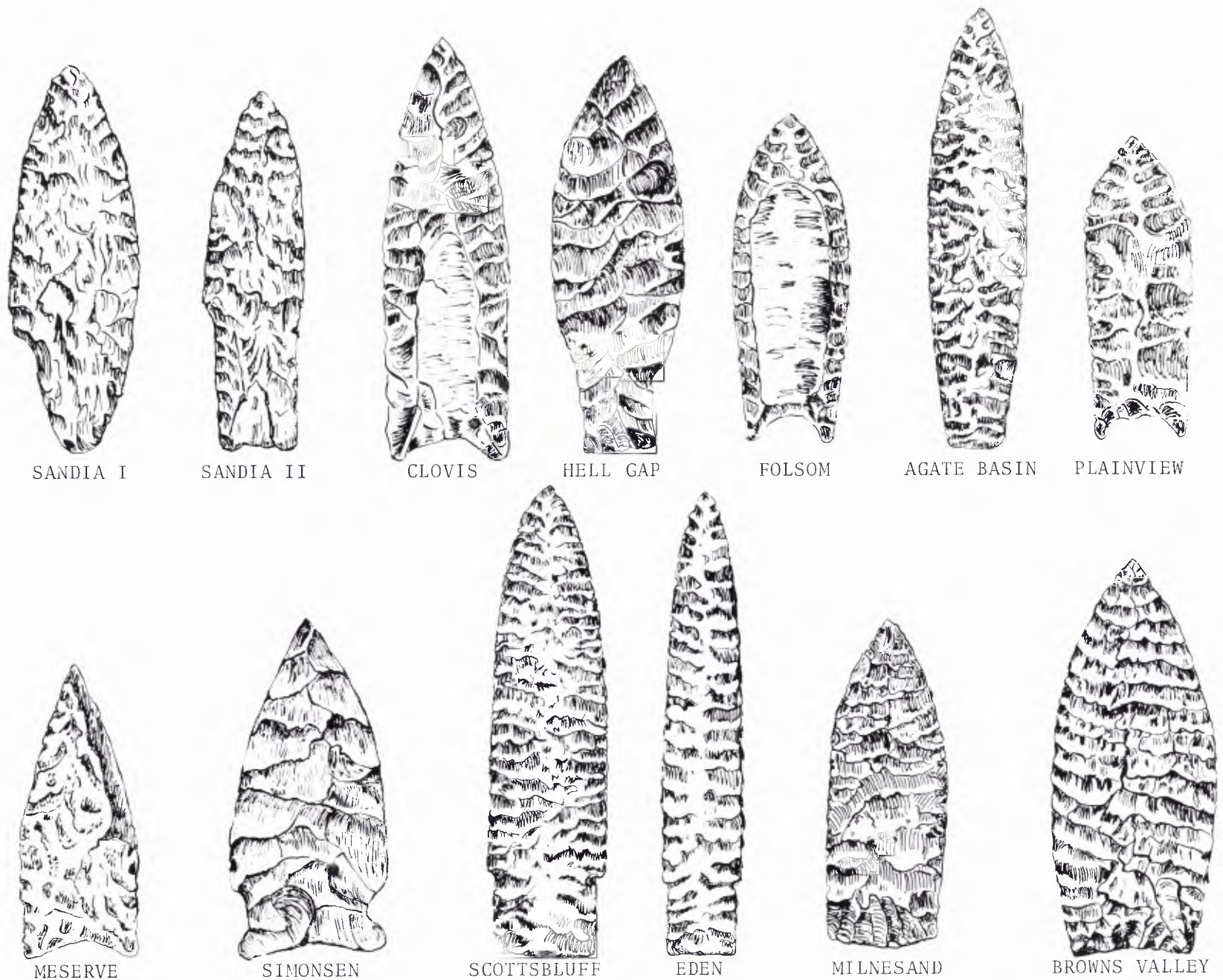


Figure 1. Paleo-Indian point types commonly found in the Southwest. The Sandia and Clovis points are more than 11,000 years old; Hell Gap, Folsom, and Agate Basin are about 10,000 years old; Plainview, Meserve, and Simonsen points are roughly 9,000 years old; Scottsbluff, Eden, and Milnesand points date about 8,500 years old; the Browns Valley point is about 8,000 years old. (drawing by Sue McLean)

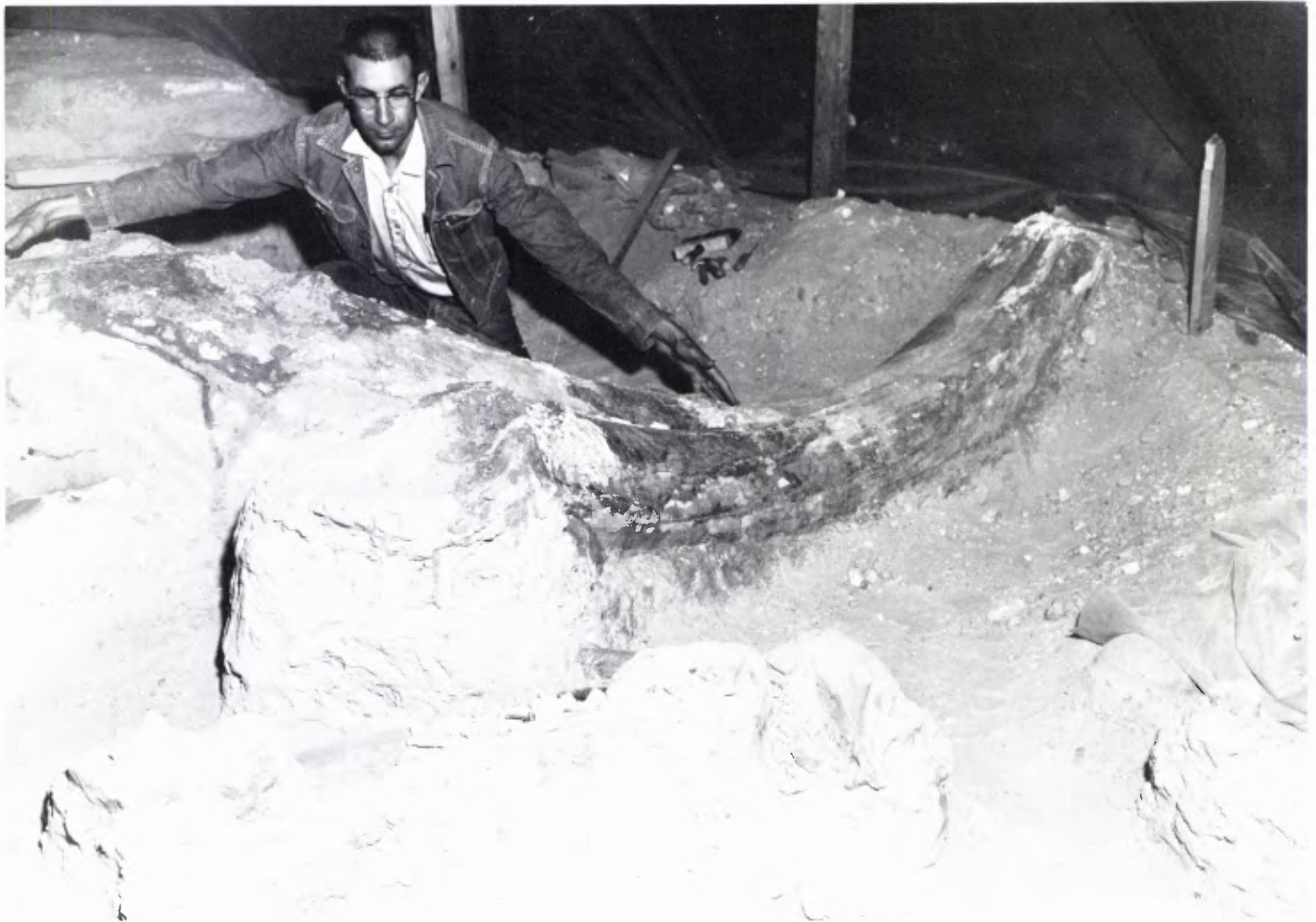


Figure 2. Assistant Curator, Blackwater Draw Museum, Jim Warnica, examines huge tusk from mammoth killed by man at Blackwater Draw site.

For many years, points typologically close to the western Clovis style have been found on the surface of the eastern part of our country, but the absence of good faunal associations, adequate stratigraphy, and radiocarbon dates made their age speculative at best. Now some of these sites provide a workable stratigraphy, and the few recently obtained radiocarbon dates will aid in assessing the Eastern fluted point tradition. The Debert site of Nova Scotia with good stratigraphy and Carbon 14 dates of roughly 10,600 B.P. shows promise of giving added clarity to the Eastern fluted point tradition.

From a technical aspect, Folsom points represent an abrupt change in two diagnostic traits, flaking and fluting. Earlier point types, like Clovis and Sandia, were produced entirely by controlled percussion whereas the fine marginal retouch of Folsom points results from pressure flaking. This technique appears to have begun with the Folsom tradition, and continues in the flaking techniques of the Plano cultures. Folsom points are the last in the High Plains to show fluting, although residual flutes are sometimes found in Meserve, Dalton, and Agate Basin points. In brief then the tradition of fluting, absent in the Old World, commences with the Sandia and Clovis points, before 9000 B.C., and terminates in western North America about 7500-8000 B.C.

Certain early unfluted projectile points which otherwise resemble Folsom are frequently called Midland points. The use

of a separate designation, such as Midland, for unfluted Folsom points does not appear to be warranted, and serves only to split an already valid type into unnecessary subdivisions. In the Folsom industry, at least, it can be said that the desired



*Figure 3. One of the straight-horned *Bison antiquus*, taken from the Folsom Type site in northern New Mexico along with one of the points from this site.*



Figure 4. Paleo-hunters stalk *Bison antiquus*. (Drawing by Gale Egan)

effect was the thinness of the midsection of the point. If the finished or nearly finished point was too thick to suit the manufacturer, then a single flute or, more commonly, a flute from each face was removed. This has been demonstrated in an analysis of approximately one hundred Midland and Folsom points from the Blackwater Draw site. It would appear, then, desirable to revise the definition of Folsom points to include the unfluted Folsom type, rather than adding an additional, meaningless designation. This does not mean there are not unfluted Folsom sites, for several have been discovered; but it does mean the unfluted sites designated as Midland are simply Folsom sites where the points manufactured were thin enough so that fluting was unnecessary.

The post-Folsom sequence is still incomplete, but it would seem that a single point style very often dominated vast areas of the High Plains. For instance, the Clovis culture was the dominant culture in the entire High Plains between 10,000 and 9000 B.C. The Folsom culture was dominant between 9000 and 8000 B.C., followed by the Agate Basin culture, which in turn gave way to the Hell Gap culture, and eventually, the Albert and Cody cultures. A comparison between the radiocarbon dates from Blackwater Draw, New Mexico, and the Hell Gap site in Wyoming, shows that approximately the same culture, at both sites, dominated the same time period. From this it may be inferred that these point styles do not represent different peoples at the same time, but actually represent the same people over a broad area of the High Plains, employing a sequence of stylistically related point types through time, each point type seeming to have lasted about 500 to 1000 years before it was replaced by another. The earliest Plano, or post-Folsom, point type that we know of in the High Plains is Agate Basin, which, at the Blackwater Draw site in New Mexico, the Lindenmeier site in Colorado, and the Hell Gap and Brewster sites in Wyoming, is found directly above Folsom. Agate Basin radiocarbon dates are separated by only a few hundred years. The Agate Basin point in the northern

High Plains gave way to the Hell Gap style; then in some areas, to the Albert point, and finally, in the entire High Plains, to the point types of the Cody complex. The Cody complex in turn gave way to a final series of Paleo-Indian point types, generally lanceolate in form with concave bases, and very often with oblique flaking. These point types are known regionally as Angostura, Frederick, Jimmy Allen, or Browns Valley. These point types disappear with the onset of the Altithermal period which brought the Paleo-Indian period of the High Plains to a close.

The Altithermal was a hot dry period that withered the grass, reduced faunal herds, and forced development of a new way of life: an emphasis on food gathering of desert seed crops rather than hunting. This style of life, termed the Archaic, is older than the onset of the Altithermal, but became the dominant form of subsistence once the Altithermal ended the life style of the Paleo-Indian. From this mode of life eventually developed true agriculture, the life-force of the Anasazi peoples: the Basketmaker and Pueblo of New Mexico.

In the last thousand years eastern New Mexico has had migrations of Puebloid peoples coming from the west and building adobe or stone slab houses along the Pecos and Canadian Rivers and their tributaries. About three hundred years ago the Comanche came from the north, at first on foot, later to become the greatest horseman of the southern High Plains. Comanche raiding parties, while concentrated in Texas and eastern New Mexico, occasionally went as far west as Arizona and so far south into Mexico as to threaten Chihuahua City. Other raiders into eastern New Mexico included the Utes and Apache. Shortly after the midpoint of the last century almost all of the existing Navajo nation was forcibly transported to an area southeast of Fort Sumner. Each of these groups has left its mark upon eastern New Mexico, either by discovery of their hunting or campsites, through continuation of their cultural heritage by placenames, or in common words in our Southwest vocabulary.