An *Albuquerque Journal* reporter was on the phone. “Have you heard of the recent discoveries at Pendejo Cave here in New Mexico?” he asked and then added, laughing, “Do you know what ‘Pendejo’ means in Spanish? Our readers sure do!” I had heard. I did know. And what I said next—foolishly, in retrospect—nearly got me pummeled one night in a hotel bar in Brazil by Scotty MacNeish: excavator of Pendejo Cave, grand old man of archaeology . . . and former Golden Gloves boxing champion.

The fight was about a discovery as profound—or trivial—as fingerprints. Not just any fingerprints: MacNeish came out of Pendejo Cave and announced he’d found human fingerprints that were upwards of 37,000 years old, instantly tripling the then oldest accepted antiquity for the arrival of humans in the New World (the Clovis archaeological presence, dated to nearly 11,500 years ago). When the reporter asked what I thought of MacNeish’s claim, I replied, “You’re not going to convince me until you’ve fingerprinted the crew.”

Granted, it was a flip response. But I thought the point reasonable. To persuade an extremely skeptical archaeological community to accept this unparalleled discovery, MacNeish would have to demonstrate those fingerprints were just as old as advertised, and not odd clay globs his excavators had inadvertently imprinted and later mistook for archaeological specimens. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. I thought I was being helpful. MacNeish thought otherwise. It surely didn’t help that my response led to his Pendejo Cave claim being named one of that year’s *Albuquerque Journal* Cowchip Award winners (I don’t think I need to explain why the Cowchip is not a coveted award).
When we bumped into each other in that bar a year later—ironically, we’d both been invited to Brazil to examine another purportedly ancient site—MacNeish swore furiously at me for accusing his crew of faking evidence. Faking evidence!? Only after fifteen minutes of very fast talking, spent just beyond the distance I guessed he could still throw a punch at age seventy-five, was I able to convince him that wasn’t my point at all. I am not sure he ever believed me. I know he never forgave me. But he did send me a reprint of the article he published on the Pendejo Cave fingerprints, and even autographed it: “Finally got it published,” he scrawled across the top, “in spite of you.”

Fair enough.

I framed the reprint, and it’s prominently displayed in my office—perfect witness to the heat that’s generated in the search for America’s first peoples.

Not that this is anything new. Questions about the origins, antiquity, and adaptations of the first Americans, although easily asked, have proven extraordinarily difficult to answer, and have been contentious since first posed in modern form in the 1860s. Those questions are still the focus of research today, albeit using vastly different theoretical, analytical, and archaeological tools; involving a far wider range of contributing disciplines; and producing a stream of publications that in the last several decades has become a raging academic torrent. The intervening century and a half has witnessed multiple site discoveries, conceptual breakthroughs, pivotal moments that have propelled and guided research, and cycles of bitter controversy and grudging, short-lived periods of peace. We’ve learned a great deal.

Still, in just the last dozen years much of what we knew—or thought we knew—about the peopling of the Americas has been turned on its head by new discoveries, new analyses, and new controversies, all of which cut across multiple disciplinary lines. The biggest difference? Before, we spoke of the possibility of a pre-Clovis presence in the New World in hypothetical terms; now it is a reality, and it’s a whole new archaeological world as a result. In the scramble to right ourselves, many ideas—some controversial, others outlandish—are being tried on for size. It’s the natural course of affairs in scientific change, and no cause for alarm. Yet.

So much has changed that my previous book on the topic, Search for the First Americans, published in 1993, is now woefully out of date (more embarrassing: used copies are now selling for one dollar on the Web, and the press that published it has folded; these two facts, I choose to believe, are unrelated). At the time I wrote Search for the First Americans, geneticists were only just beginning to peer into corners of the human genome to use DNA to trace our collective ancestry; the excavation and analysis of the Monte Verde site in Chile—then one of several candidates for great antiquity in the New World, and not the first among all—was just being wrapped up; Pleistocene geologists had only glimpsed the complexity of the causes as well as the climatic and ecological consequences of the Ice Age (Pleistocene), especially the frenetic changes at its end, which were occurring just as the first Americans were radiating out across the continent; and the now infamous Kennewick skeleton still lay buried in the banks of the Columbia River, yet to make its 60 Minutes debut with Leslie Stahl or become the
centerpiece of a costly lawsuit that exposed deep rifts within the archaeological community, and especially between those who study the past and those—Native Americans—who are its living descendants. These and a gaggle of other developments have wrought a sea change in our approach to and understanding of the first Americans. It’s time for a fresh look.

This book was originally intended as a second edition of *Search for the First Americans*, but my attempt to gently insert new material, delete stale parts, and patch up original but still-serviceable bits proved impossible, and I soon gave up the effort. I had underestimated just how much had changed—including my own thinking on many of these matters. So I instead tore down each of the original chapters to their foundation timbers, discarded unwanted parts (and even one unwanted chapter), added several new chapters, and then rebuilt the whole from the ground up to reflect all the changes in evidence, emphasis, and thinking. The basic framework remains, and some of the load-bearing elements of a chapter, if judged sufficiently robust, were allowed to stay, along with stories that were just too good not to retell. Much of the new material is based on articles I’ve published in recent years in a variety of scholarly journals and books, and road tested in my classes, so it has been through the wringer of peer review from colleagues and—perhaps a more stringent test—has had to pass muster with my students, undergraduate and graduate alike. The result is the book before you: more than twice as long, far wider in range, more detailed in coverage than *Search for the First Americans*, and because it supersedes and replaces the earlier volume, deserving of a new title: *First Peoples in a New World: Colonizing Ice Age America*.

**WHAT THIS VOLUME IS . . .**

*First Peoples in a New World* is my effort to explain the twists and turns of the search for the first Americans, the controversy that has long enveloped it, and what we’ve learned of who they were, when and from where they came, and how they colonized what was then, truly, a New World. Although I am an archaeologist, I am by nature eclectic in my approach to scientific problems, and have spent a fair amount of time on search and seizure missions behind interdisciplinary lines looking for help from geneticists, geologists, linguists, and physical anthropologists in answering stubborn archaeological questions. And there are few questions more stubborn or that lend themselves so readily to an interdisciplinary solution as the peopling of the Americas. *First Peoples in a New World* is thus not just a synthesis of the intellectual history and current state of the archaeological understanding of the peopling of the Americas, it’s also a close look at the evidence being brought to bear by non-archaeologists to this problem—and an effort to see whether we can all get along.

In fact, this book centers around two interlocking themes. The first is what we know of the first Americans—about who they were, where they came from, when we think they arrived, how many early migratory pulses there may have been, and by which route(s) they came to the Americas. It’s also about the climatic and ecological conditions of the
Ice Age terrain they traveled and the diverse landscapes they encountered, their adaptive responses to the challenges of colonizing an uninhabited and unfamiliar world, the speed with which these pedestrian hunter-gatherers moved across their new world, their effect on the native animals of the Americas—and whether they had a hand in the extinction of some thirty-five genera of Pleistocene mammals. Finally, it is about the evolutionary processes and pathways they blazed, and the long-term consequences of their prehistory.

The other theme is about how we know what we know about the first Americans. It is about the methods archaeologists, geologists, linguists, physical anthropologists, and geneticists are bringing to bear on the problem of origins, antiquity, and adaptations (my non-archaeological colleagues will, I hope, forgive my trespassing). Because these approaches yield very different kinds of evidence, they are not easily reconciled, nor do the practitioners in each field sing in harmony. Hence, it is important to understand how they (we) arrive at our conclusions, and just how reliable those conclusions might be.

Admittedly, talking about how we know what we know is not nearly as satisfying as talking about what we know, but it’s vital all the same, especially in light of how this topic is often portrayed in the popular media. Our contentiousness encourages journalists, science writers, and filmmakers to pitch a story of the peopling of the Americas around colorful characters, raging controversy, and outrageous theories—we don’t lack for any of these—especially if it involves that hackneyed theme of an iconoclastic scholar David fighting the establishment Goliath to prove the revolutionary idea that (fill in the blank) proves everything science has ever thought was wrong. The headlines fairly leap from page and screen: “American Indians were not the first ones here!” “Siberian hunter claims extinct Ice Age bears still alive!” And, for conspiracy buffs, “The suppressed story of the people who discovered the New World.” One doesn’t have to make these up: the last is the subtitle of a just-released book.

Those of us in the business are not without sin. We feed the beast, holding press conferences to announce the discovery of the (latest) oldest site in the Americas, make claims on camera that would never pass muster in the professional journals, or give flip comments to reporters about our colleagues’ discoveries (like, say, “Fingerprint the crew”) that stoke the fires of controversy. Indeed, as I was writing this book, a group of geologists and archaeologists launched a press campaign proclaiming that a comet blasted the earth in the late Pleistocene, an unwelcome ET that wreaked havoc on global climates, destroyed North America’s megafauna, and devastated Paleoindian populations. They might be right, but it’s customary in science to build the case and publish the evidence before issuing the press release about the conclusions.

However entertaining the often-gossipy popular accounts of this controversy—especially when it’s not your ox being gored—they rarely provide accurate or complete details of the science behind it all, or its results. Having long been a participant in the pre-Clovis controversy, and particularly its tipping point at Monte Verde, I can easily
see that commentary on it by individuals who view it from the outside bears only a passing resemblance to what I saw actually happening. In fact, not only do these error on what happened publicly, but they also naturally miss much of what went on behind the scenes, and those who put dialogue in our mouths to recreate events are usually completely wrong.

Moreover, there is the inescapable fact that beneath all the tabloid talk, there are legitimate scientific and substantive reasons why we disagree about issues, why the same archaeological (or linguistic, or genetic, or skeletal) evidence can and often is viewed very differently by different investigators, and why there is ambiguity and disputed interpretation. Challenging though it may be at times, to truly understand the peopling of the Americas requires probing deeply into how this knowledge is created, shaped, and put to use. Only with that understanding is it possible to appreciate, despite evidence converging from so many diverse fields, why questions about the first Americans are among the most contentious in anthropology, and may remain so.

Finally, and though it may go without saying, I confess I am not without sin. My voice has long contributed to the din over the origins and antiquity and adaptations of the first Americans, and I have been directly involved in disputes over key pre-Clovis sites, in contesting the claim the Americas were colonized from Ice Age Europe, in debating the role of Paleoindians in the extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna, and in seeking to understand how hunter-gatherers met the challenges of moving across and adapting to the vast, unknown, diverse, and changing landscapes of Pleistocene North America.

I have had my own ox gored.

I will nonetheless do my best to present the different sides of a disputed issue, but the reader is forewarned. *Caveat lector.*

. . . AND WHAT THIS VOLUME IS NOT

This book is not about the Ice Age peopling or Paleoindian archaeology of the entire New World: it’s mostly about *North America*. This is so for several reasons, not least that Pleistocene glaciation, climates, and environments play out in very different ways in the Northern and Southern hemispheres, and so, too, the archaeological records are dissimilar. Even using the term pre-Clovis in South America is a misnomer since Clovis fluted points, strictly speaking, only reach as far south as Panama. Covering the entire hemisphere would double the size of an already large book, and is unnecessary in any case since there are several volumes that ably cover the South American ground, leaving me free to concentrate on North America, which is the region of my own archaeological field research and expertise.

That said, the South American record is not ignored. I examine hemisphere-wide evidence from language, teeth, genes, and crania relevant to questions of the peopling of North America, as well as the South American sites that figure prominently in the
pre-Clovis debate. The latter are archaeologically relevant since the ancestors of the first South Americans must have come via North America; we haven’t a shred of evidence to indicate South America was peopled directly by ocean crossing. If the oldest accepted sites in the New World are in the Southern Hemisphere—as is the case at the moment—then there must be ones older still in the Northern Hemisphere. Only, we’ve not found them yet—or at least not agreed we’ve found them.

I wrote this book for the general reader and not my archaeological colleagues, who’ve perhaps heard quite enough from me on this subject already. The difference is largely a matter of style rather than substance, but also of coverage. The constraints of space and the demands of the narrative forbade me from mentioning every important site, researcher, argument, or claim (sometimes, I confess, I was glad of it). Accordingly, rather than provide encyclopedic, site-by-site lists of what was found where—the sort of thing only an archaeologist could love—I instead highlight finds that help illustrate broad archaeological patterns and adaptive processes. I provide details as needed, but there’s too good a story to be told here to become bogged down in archaeological minutiae. To further ease the narrative for my intended readers, I have gone against all my scholarly instincts and omitted citations from the text. But I cannot fully shed my obligation to give credit (or blame) for ideas and discoveries. Thus, I have embedded endnotes throughout the book that provide citations to source material, along with occasional follow-up comments.1

Many voices will be heard here, save for an obvious one: those of the descendants of the first peoples, American Indians. I do not omit discussion of their traditional origin narratives out of either disinterest or disdain, or because I think American Indians are unrelated to the first peoples in America. I don’t. Rather, it is because my expertise lies elsewhere. Even so, I am acutely aware that questions of the Pleistocene peopling of the Americas bear on contemporary issues of Native American identity and ancestry, and of “ownership” of the past and present. It’s not a rhetorical question to ask, as Vine Deloria has, if American Indians had “barely unpacked before Columbus came knocking on the door,” will people doubt their claims to the land and its resources? And I am sympathetic to the anger provoked among Native groups by speculations by some archaeologists and physical anthropologists that the Americas were originally peopled from Europe, or not by ancestral Native Americans. Such claims cannot be made lightly nor without unimpeachable evidence, though as will be seen, they have been.

I also recognize that Native American views of their origins are not always consonant with those of archaeology. In some cases—as, for example, Deloria’s piercing Red Earth, White Lies—they furiously condemn it. There are archaeologists who agree: we need to downplay “solid archaeological dogma such as the Bering Land Bridge migration route to the Americas,” they say.2 Here’s my view: the past is large enough to accommodate many different uses (as Robert McGhee put it), and I am content to co-exist.

But more important, I won’t be shy about casting a critical scientific eye on what archaeologists and anthropologists know and don’t know about the peopling of
the Americas. After all, it's only dogma if it's left unexamined. That won't happen here.

Finally, a comment on my use of the terms colonization and New World. I well understand the baggage that comes with both: colonization conjures painful images of the displacement and destruction of indigenous peoples and culture in America after 1492. The word itself is rooted even deeper, in the settlements established in territories conquered by the legions of the Roman Empire (from the Latin coloniae). However, in the 2,000 years since the Romans, and in the centuries since European global expansion, “colonize” has acquired a much broader and more neutral meaning in the sciences to refer to the dispersal of a population or species, and its settlement in a different place. It is in this unencumbered ecological sense that the word is used here, and often interchangeably with peopling or migration.

The term New World was, of course, one applied by Europeans to the Americas. At the tail end of the fifteenth century, the American continent was new. To them. It was hardly new to the Native Americans who were here to greet them, for they were the descendants of peoples who had been living here for millennia. Yet, to speak of the Ice Age colonization of the New World is unquestionably appropriate in this context, for when the first people reached America more than 12,500 years ago, this truly was a New World. In fact, as we shall see, Ice Age America was new in more ways than just a world uninhabited.
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