Chapter 2

First Comers

No one knows when man first came to dwell in the immense valley of the Great Salt Lake. That puzzle is a part of the greater puzzle as to when man first came to live in the New World itself.

It was long believed that primitive man arrived in America only within the last few thousand years. But in 1926 at Folsom, New Mexico, chipped flint darts were found embedded in the bones of a prehistoric subspecies of bison; soon after at Lindenmeier, Colorado, was found a prehistoric campsite used by the Folsom people, and still another campsite was shortly found at Clovis, New Mexico. Challenged by such discoveries, archeologists soon were finding the characteristically chipped “Folsom points” the length and breadth of the great Mississippi Valley, from the Rockies to the Appalachians.

After a period of skepticism archeologists began seriously to postulate that perhaps 20,000 to 30,000 years ago the Folsom man had come to the American continent across Bering Straits, and moved southward down the great corridor of western Canada into the Great Plains. Though nothing else might be known of him, it could be assumed that he was the product of a long technological evolution; this was demonstrated in the craftsmanship required to shape his flint darts. Obviously a nomadic bison hunter, the Folsom man lived in no settled places, leaving no old habitations archeologists could dig out; with no farming implements or utensils for seed gathering except skin bags, he had no wealth of possessions to scatter about after the careless fashion of the human race, possessions to be found by the scientists of a far future day. While archeologists were still chewing on their new problem, fresh discoveries were made. In Yuma County, in eastern Colorado, flint points were found differing from the Folsom points so markedly as to be clearly the product of a different culture. Successive discoveries indicated that both Folsom and Yuman peoples had lived primarily on the eastern slopes of the Rockies, though scattered Folsom and Yuman points found in the Great Basin showed that these ancient hunters, or peoples kindred to them, had ranged through this region as well.

Still there was some question about the antiquity of Folsom and Yuman man. Archeologists disinclined to believe that either dated back to glacial times, so it was therefore a revolutionary discovery that was made in 1933 by Dr. M. R. Harrington at Gypsum Cave, in southern Nevada. Digging down through many layers of deposits in the floor of Gypsum Cave, down through the remains of relatively recent Indian cultures, Dr. Harrington came upon an amazing deposit—layers of what could be identified as the excrement of the extinct ground sloth, a glacial-age animal which had laired in this cave. And below this was found not only fossil remains of the sloth—wisp's of coarse, yellowish hair, bones and claws—but charred pieces of wood, flint dart points, primitive ropes fashioned from twisted sinew and even short, painted wooden shafts, which possibly were primitive atlatls, spear throwers.

Here, at last, was triumphant evidence that man had been contemporary in America with glacial-age animals, that the history of man on this continent went back perhaps 25,000 years. However, the flint dart points in Gypsum Cave were as distinct from Folsom and Yuman points as these were from each other. And still another turn was given the puzzle when archeologists found in the Mohave country points of a fourth type, the Pinto.

Soon investigators were reporting the discovery of intermixed Yuman and Folsom points on the one hand, and Gypsum and Pinto points on the other. In such circumstances archeologists always set up a desperate yell for stratigraphy—for careful determination of the circumstances under which two cultures are found together and to which lies deepest, so that something may be worked out in the way of relative chronology. Just such a cry went up, and before long a site discovered in southeastern Wyoming showed that the Folsom people had antedated the Yuman, however ancient the latter might prove to be.

The antiquity of such finds does not begin to compare with that of remains found in Asia, where protohuman skulls have been found to indicate that man existed perhaps so long as 400,000 years ago, nor have these finds lent any color of belief to the idea cherished by some that man originated in the New World rather than in the Old.
But the demonstrable time that man has dwelt in America was doubled, trebled or even quadrupled.

And there was now a starting place for working forward as well as backward. Archeology previously had labored patiently with the great Pueblo cultures of the Southwest, searching for clues as to their origins. The Pueblo peoples, so called because the sixteenth-century Spanish explorers found them living in settled villages, could be divided into five successive periods, which, with the help of a chronology based on annual tree rings counted in the timbers of their ruined buildings, could be dated back to about 800 A.D.

Obviously, however, the nomadic hunters who once had dwelt in the Southwest had not just suddenly built themselves immense, mud-walled villages and taken to raising maize, beans and squash. It had to be guessed that there had been an interim period when these Indians had built semipermanent buildings which they had occupied during the season maize was being cultivated, the rest of their time going for the age-old pursuit of game. This interim culture archeologists called the Basket Maker and it was accepted as a practical reality for years before actual remains were found to substantiate its existence. Ultimately the Basket Maker period was divided into two, Basket Maker I, of which very little is known even yet, and Basket Maker II, whose rock shelter and cave dwellings have been found in many places throughout the Southwest.

The chronology of the Pueblo and Basket Maker cultures together could be carried back to perhaps 500 A.D. But there the puzzle rests: what of the 10,000 year gulf between Folsom or even Yuman man and the Basket Maker I? It is not alone the interrelationships of Folsom, Yuman and Gypsum man, complicated by that other tantalizing culture, the Pinto, which has to be worked out. The relationship of all these to the Basket Maker has to be established.

In the midst of these puzzles the Great Salt Lake suddenly becomes interesting and important. Glacial and postglacial man must be sought out where he lived. His old campsites must be found on the banks of ancient riverbeds, or along the shores of ancient lakes. Areas of the Great Basin which now are the most arid of deserts were, in glacial times, green and inviting with forest and meadow. Hunters here could seek out the musk ox, the camel, the horse, even the mastodon and the mammoth; or, perhaps, harvest the seeds of the abundant grasses. The shores of old Lake Bonneville were undoubtedly many times visited by these lost races of men during the time when the lake was carving out caves along its shore line. When the lake level fell, as evaporation sucked up its waters, the caves that had been created were attractive places for men to shelter themselves from the inclement weather.

So the ancient caves of the Great Salt Lake region, like those of other old lakes in the Great Basin, offer inviting locations for determined new researches. Archeologists have dug in the caves along the shore lines of vanished Lake Lahontan in the western part of the Great Basin, in similar caves along the shores of old Lake Mohave in the southwestern reaches of the Great Basin, and they are digging now in the caves carved by old Lake Bonneville.

What is found in these caves will have a limited antiquity. The caves could not have been occupied before the recession of the Pleistocene lakes, which began perhaps 25,000 years ago. Older evidences will have to be searched for elsewhere; campsites must be found on ancient watercourses—a difficult job to begin with, and necessarily to be attended by much good luck if anything is recovered after so many thousands of years.

Still, the caves are a starting point; the archeologists as they dig patiently in one cave after another can work forward in time, hoping to learn of the relationships of one culture to another. Absolute dating of whatever is found is attended by many difficulties, with a wide range of possible error. Yet the resources that archeology brings to such tasks are surprising. There is always the fact of bedrock or its equivalent, the virgin gravels deposited by the ancient lake before its withdrawal from the cave. If human remains are shown in very close association with virgin deposits, with little intervening mud, dust or other sterile depositions, there is a high probability that the cave under investigation was occupied soon after its abandonment by the lake.

In 1930-1931 Dr. Julian H. Steward of the University of Utah carefully explored two caves on Promontory and another at the south shore of Great Salt Lake near Black Rock. In these caves he found remains of a new culture, which he labeled the Promontory. The Promontory people were evidently a race of bison hunters, nomads who entered the Salt Lake Basin from the north. The
These first Pueblo peoples in the Salt Lake country lived in pit houses, small adobe habitations in the form of a truncated cone, and had a pottery of poorer type than characterized peoples living farther south. To a greater extent than was usual, they combined hunting with agriculture; perhaps the difficulties of growing maize at a point so far north as the Great Salt Lake contributed to this continued dependence on hunting.

About 1000 A.D., the Pueblo peoples in the Southwest, in southern Utah and Colorado, and in New Mexico and Arizona, began to leave their small masonry houses to live in large, terraced pueblos of three or four stories, the beginning of the time of great cultural advances called Pueblo III or Great Pueblo. This was not, however, echoed in the Salt Lake country. Instead, the Pueblo people in the north began to abandon their habitations and migrate southward.

It is entirely possible that they were driven before the invading Promontory people, beginning about 1100 A.D., and the continued southward movement of the invaders may have been responsible for the ultimate abandonment of the great pueblo ruins still to be seen in southeastern Utah and adjacent Colorado and New Mexico. Archeologists are seeking now to establish whether the Promontory people could have been the ancestors of the Navaho, a fascinating idea to be worked on from both ends, tracing the Navaho backward and the Promontory people forward in time.

Archeologists maintain due reserve about this idea, but they are quite certain that the Promontory people had nothing in common with the Shoshonean peoples who occupied the Great Basin at the time white explorations began; their cultures are too dissimilar.

The Shoshonean culture seems first to have appeared in the western half of the Great Basin and to have spread eastward perhaps 500 or 600 years ago. In the course of their migrations the Shoshoni became differentiated as several peoples. One group, the Comanche, split off to penetrate as far south and east as the plains of central Texas. The Ute moved into western Colorado, northern New Mexico, and eastern Utah, occupying the mountainous area south of the Uinta Mountains and east of the west face of the Wasatch Mountains, including some fertile valleys at the base of the Wasatch, like Utah Valley. The Shoshoni proper, as they have been known in historic times, occupied western Wyoming, southern Idaho, northern
The Great Salt Lake

Utah and parts of northern Nevada and eastern Oregon. The Western Shoshoni occupied parts of western Utah and central and eastern Nevada. The Southern Paiute occupied western and southern Utah, while the Northern Paiute occupied western Nevada up and down the long front of the Sierra Nevada.

The lives of all these peoples were shaped by the peculiar nature of the country they occupied. In contact with the Spanish frontier, the Ute and Comanche acquired horses which spread north to the Shoshoni and thence to the tribes of the Pacific Northwest. Horses revolutionized the lives of all these tribes, enabling them to become nomadic hunters on a scale hitherto undreamed of, and to associate in numbers and effect a close tribal organization such as had never been possible before. They were enabled to strike long distances for game; specifically, to invade the Great Plains in quest of buffalo. The Comanche so mastered the horse culture as to make themselves the terror of the southern Plains; their very name still has a blood-curdling ring. And the Shoshoni suddenly found themselves enabled to withstand the shock of the Siouan pressure upon their Flank—

...extend out upon the Plains.

The horse, however, was of no service to the bands of Paiute and Western Shoshoni overspreading western and southern Utah and eastern and southern Nevada. Lacking buffalo, this desert region could not support a horse culture, and the best uses to which these Indians could have put horses would have been to eat them. The Indians here necessarily were hunters of small game and gatherers of seeds and roots. They lived on rabbits, gophers, ground squirrels, lizards, snakes, fish, insects of all sorts, seeds, edible plants and roots of every kind. These were the “Diggers” of America’s literature of universal disgust, declared to represent man in his lowest state. Even in our own time writers have not been wanting to say that the Diggers “had no culture,” or had “lost their culture,” to the point of degenerating below the use of fire.

But this is mistaken. The life of the “Diggers” represents a necessary adjustment to the conditions of environment; theirs was a technology no less specialized than the techniques of living worked out by the Plains tribes. The desert country except in special situations would not allow large concentrations of population. The basis of social organization was normally the family, and the Western Shoshoni, for example, knew nothing of tribal chiefs until intrusive white men acting for a remote “Great White Father” created a need for someone who could assume authority to act for a band or a whole “tribe.” But within the small familial organization the Diggers had intricately developed techniques for living from season to season—for hunting antelope, for gathering seeds and piñon nuts, or for roasting and storing crickets and grasshoppers. An oyster and snail-eating race of white men could regard their staple diet with disfavor as shocking evidence of bestiality—but this would seem to be a matter of narrow prejudice.

Agriculture was almost entirely limited to the south. In the Sevier Valley the Pahvant Ute grew maize, beans and squashes, the name Corn Creek surviving to memorialize this accomplishment; and still farther south, in the Virgin River Valley the Southern Paiute subsisted primarily by cultivation of the soil, resorting even to irrigation.

The valley of the Great Salt Lake itself was strangely a neutral ground. Commonly the Ute did not go north beyond Utah Valley, while the Shoshoni regarded the Bear River as the southern limits of their territory. At some time early in the nineteenth century, however, a small band split off from the Utah Valley Ute to move north into the Salt Lake Valley and intermarry to some extent with their Shoshoni neighbors; this was Wanship’s band, subsequently known favorably to both the mountain men and the Mormons. Another small band under the chief Gosip also established itself in Salt Lake Valley; little is known about this band or its chief, except that he died early in 1850.

In the valleys and among the mountains at the southwest shore of the lake dwelt four or more bands of Indians locally known in Utah history as the Goshoots or Goshutes (now authoritatively rendered “Gosiute”) who seem to have been disliked and feared by their tribal neighbors, but modern ethnological research has found them indistinguishable from the Western Shoshoni who occupied eastern Nevada.

The various Indian bands the length and breadth of Utah occupied homelands with quite definite territorial boundaries, and well-understood rituals attended the entrance of members of one band into the homeland of another. Those failing to observe these social
The Great Salt Lake

usages might be presumed enemies on whom the members of the individual bands could fall without ceremony. Warfare, however, was not common to the Utah Indians in prewhite times. The poverty of the environment made warfare a luxury overexpensive; the Indians were kept too busy finding food to go searching for trouble.

After the Ute acquired horses and learned that there was a market in New Mexico for Indian slaves, they made periodic incursions among the Southern Paiute, either trading for children, whose starving parents might be induced to sell, or simply kidnapping them; for this reason some of the southern bands were decimated by the time of the Mormon entrance into Utah.

Although the Northern or Plains Shoshoni enjoyed a bad reputation among the fur traders in the first few years of white penetration of their country, about 1830 they mended their ways and ever after were known above almost any other Indians as the white man's friends. Influential in the maintenance of such relations was the great chief Washakie, who came to power in the 1840's.

The Ute, by contrast, were somewhat temperamental neighbors, particularly after the chief Walker (anglicized from Wakara) made his mark about 1840. Walker, whose name meant "Yellow," seems to have been born about 1808 on the Spanish Fork River in Utah Valley. He rose to eminence, so Theodore Talbot was informed in 1843, through being such a good trader, trafficking with the whites and reselling profitably to his people. About the same time he began levying a polite blackmail on the caravans traversing the Spanish Trail to California, and in 1845, with a growing taste for plunder, he conducted a memorable horse raid upon the southern California ranchos. Frémont, who encountered him while coming up through Utah in the spring of 1844, gave him a romantic write-up which insured his prestige among the whites and his literary immortality, but until the early 1850's he was a lesser chief, owning as a superior his half-brother, Sowiette. After the Mormon migration to Utah, Walker had an equable interview with Brigham Young and was baptized into the Church and even ordained an elder, after the Mormon fashion of the time. He encouraged the Mormon settlements in Sanpete and Little Salt Lake Valleys, but in 1853 he fell out with his white brethren over their interference with his Indian slaving and briefly went to war.

First Comers

Since the Mormons regarded the Indians as the "Lamanites," who had been cursed with a dark skin as told in the Book of Mormon, but who were destined to be redeemed and become a "white and delightsome people," they exhibited a generally kind attitude toward them. Brigham Young never tired of reiterating that it was cheaper to feed than to fight the Indians, and he declined to go to war with Walker, arranging instead a council of peace on the Sevier River the following spring. Walker died in January 1855, accompanied to the spirit world by 12 or 15 of his best horses and by 2 squaws and 2 slave children, sacrificed by his tribesmen.

The one other Indian war of note in Utah was fought out in central Utah in 1865-1868, when the Ute chief, Black Hawk, carried on a harassing guerilla warfare. In this case the Mormons had no choice but to fight, and a number of small skirmishes took place before a treaty of peace was negotiated.

The notoriety of being war chiefs fell principally to Walker and Black Hawk; other chiefs in Ute history have been celebrated for their peaceful ways. Wanship in Salt Lake Valley received the Mormon intruders amicably in the summer of 1847, and ultimately a Mormon town was named in his honor. Sowiette, during his years of power, was consistently friendly. In central Utah the Pahvant chief, Kanosh, was celebrated for his good will toward the Mormons, and Kanarra and Tutsegabits, Southern Paiute chiefs, had the same reputation.

Inevitably the Indians were dispossessed of their homelands. Though Brigham Young at one time advocated their entire removal from Utah to some likely location—say the Snake River or the Sierra Nevada, where the government could care for them better and remove them from proximity to the whites—he about-faced to show himself consistently the Indians' friend, urging his Saints to dwell among them, do them good, teach them to farm and graze livestock, and even to intermarry with them. He dispatched missions to seek after their welfare, the most celebrated being the Southern Indian Mission to the Santa Clara Valley in 1854, but others going to Fort Limhi in Idaho, Las Vegas and Carson Valley in Nevada, Fort Supply in Wyoming and the Elk Mountains in eastern Utah. Yet all such earnest gestures of friendship could not prevent the inevitable tragedy of dispossession. The spread of Mormon
settlement deprived all the Indians of their best lands, and they moved sadly in the end to reservations. There are 10 of these in the state today administered by the federal government, and 2 others administered by the Church; the most important of the 12 is the Uinta-Ouray reservation in the Uinta Basin, where the remnants of the Ute are gathered.

What did these Indians make of the Great Salt Lake? No doubt it was accepted without wonder as simply another fact of nature. One name for the lake, as recorded by Lieutenant J. W. Gunnison in the fall of 1849, was “Ah oop pah.” Probably this name came from a Ute informant, but Gunnison neglected to give its significance, and the Ute vocabularies available now suggest nothing more plausible than Ah oomp (pine) + pah (water), an unlikely translation, for the shores of the lake are not forested. Dr. Ralph V. Chamberlin’s investigations among the Gosiute have yielded two names for the lake, “Piá-pa” (great water) and “Titá-pa” (bad water).

The successive white explorers of Great Salt Lake flattered themselves that they were first to navigate the salt waters, and particularly that they were first to visit the islands. But flint arrowheads have been found on Frémont and an Indian burial on Gunnison. During the Stansbury survey of 1850 the surveyors were put to some inconvenience when Indians swam to Carrington Island and helped themselves to the red cloth used to cover the triangulation station. Antelope Island is a case all its own, for by 1840 a son of Wanship had taken up his residence and established a recognized claim of which Frémont, in the course of his exploration of 1845, was obliged to take grave cognizance. How or when this claim was relinquished to the Mormons does not appear, though it may be that this son was identical with the son of Wanship, called Jim, who early in 1848 was killed in a brush with the Utah Valley Utes.

Interesting Gosiute names for most of the islands have been gathered by Dr. Chamberlin. Antelope is “Pa’ri-bi-na” (elk place; elk breeding place). Stansbury is “Ya’ban-go-a” or “Yan-go-a” (meaning not clear). Frémont is “Mo’ko-mom-bite” (from “Mom-bite” meaning owl). Hat or Bird Island is “Pa’u-hna” (sea gull settlement or breeding place). In listing personal names of the Gosiute, Dr. Chamberlin was told of “Pa’wi-noi-tsi,” a man spoken of in tradition who a very long time ago had built a vessel and navigated the lake; his name itself signified the feat, for “pa” means water, and “wi’a-no” to travel or ride. But this Indian of the long ago is otherwise lost to our history.

For Indians as for whites, the Great Salt Lake was essentially a desert of water. In a country where salt was common, its brines had little of interest or significance for them, and it gave them as food only the brine shrimp and the larvae and pupae of the brine flies which were washed up on the shore, together with such waterfowl as could be trapped or shot out of the air. To the poverty of their lives the lake brought only another poverty, another challenge in their age-long struggle to survive.