



## Ancient Ancestors Walking All Over Clovis First Academics

*Jim Willis*

21st Century man is very conscious of the carbon footprint he leaves behind, but footprints of people who lived about 23,000 years ago have just walked all over modern man's Clovis First Theory. The Clovis First Theory insists that the very first people to enter the Americas were Paleolithic hunters who followed game animals across what was then a so-called land bridge, which was really much bigger than the word 'bridge' implies, that connected Asia and Siberia to Alaska. This migration took a long time. It went on for thousands of years. No one suggests that a single family of people walked all the way from Lake Baikal to Montana. It was a gradual process that included many generations. They moved slowly, adapting to conditions as they went, sometimes staying in the same area for generations. But when these people finally reached Canada, the theory says, they eventually spread out and covered North America, Central America and then South America. It postulates a migration from the north that began some 16,500 years ago and ended about 3,000 years later, when rising sea levels flooded what is now called Beringia.



*The blades of the Clovis culture had distinctively shaped stone spear points, bifacial and typically fluted on both sides, known as the Clovis point. (Public License)*

## Hunting With Clovis Spears

Once here in the Americas, the people invented the Clovis Point, which is considered to be the first American invention. It was a fluted spear point whose sheer beauty has never been rivaled. Because the first example of this point was found near the town of Clovis, New Mexico, the people who made it were called Clovis people. For a long time, and in many corners of the archaeological world even today, they were called the First Americans. In the 1960s it became popular to declare with great confidence that these people, armed with their wonderful invention, were the ones who hunted the great mastodons to extinction. Their arrival seemed to coincide with the disappearance of the great beasts, so why not? It was a great theory back then, partly because the urbanization of America had led a lot of people into cities and hunting was

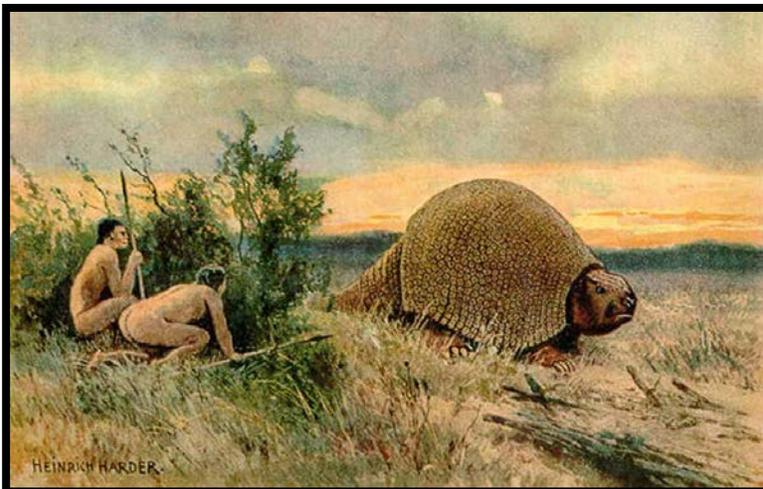
becoming a sort of social stigma.



*Book illustration of  
Early humans  
slaying a mastodon  
(Public Domain)*

But to read those articles now, they seem illogical in one

respect. One moment the author is saying how risky and difficult it was to take on a mammoth. Paragraph after vivid paragraph talked about the danger. *National Geographic* was hugely popular in those days, partly due to beautiful and vivid artist's renditions of a supposed mammoth hunt, showing modern man's brave ancestors surviving by bringing down great, lumbering beasts, sometimes at the expense of their lives. But then, after showing how hard it was to kill a mammoth, the same authors would blithely move on to say that mammoths were hunted to extinction all across the breadth of North America because the great beasts were so unused to people that they just stood there and let people walk up and throw one of their Clovis-tipped spears into their sides. Down they went, victims of superior technology. The two contrasting pictures never quite made sense. But a lot of people bought it. Those were simpler days.



*Illustration of Paleo-Indians hunting a glyptodont by Heinrich Harder (1858-1935) (Public Domain)*

While this theory was being touted about and written up in high school textbooks, however, the information that giant sloths, huge beavers, immense bison, saber-

toothed cats, dire wolves, short-faced bears, and even a type of spruce tree, went extinct at this same time was quietly suppressed. To advertise this information would serve to weaken the whole Clovis First theory. After all, why would a hunter seek to bring down a spruce tree with a Clovis point?

### Coming To America

Today, though, it has become untenable to stick to Clovis First. Did people cross into the Americas by way of Beringia? Unequivocally, yes. But was Beringia the *only* geographical area to put out a welcome mat? Certainly not. Then as now, America seemed to be a melting pot, open to immigrants from all over. They walked in on foot, they came here by boat, they followed coast lines, they explored rivers, and generally took advantage of a land consisting of two continents that were rich in resources and opportunities.

But when did they start arriving? Who were the very first Americans? To close off any door but Beringia is to run smack into glaciers that did not start to melt until relatively recently. But to add boats to the equation, or postulate an ancient time way back before the last Ice Age when Beringia was also open to foot travel, opens a lot of avenues of entry. The problem is that many archaeologists who based their life's work on Clovis First do not want to allow their ancestors to be a lot older than is currently considered acceptable. Take away boats, take away age, one is stuck with Clovis First. Those 'takeaways' are too big a hurdle for many archaeologists to accept. "Where is the evidence?" they shout. "Show me some proof!"

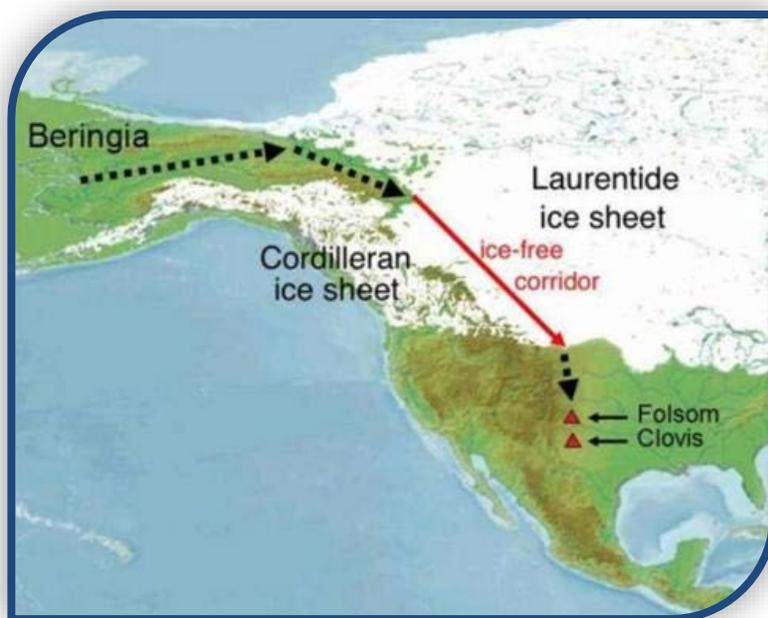
Thus, the circular reasoning has run for almost a hundred years. "Clovis First is the gospel," says academia. "We are not going to waste money chasing a crazy theory. When you reach a Clovis layer, stop! Don't fritter away funds that could be used to do real archaeology." So, there it is. It is entirely possible that for almost a century there was little evidence to the contrary because the establishment had declared such evidence off limits. How can one accumulate evidence if one is not permitted to look for it? For almost a hundred years the public has been spoon-fed a mistaken theory. Those who dared to question the whole process were emotionally and financially bullied, sometimes driven right out of the field.

*Fijian voyaging outrigger boat with a crab claw sail. The New Mexico footprints and other recently discovered evidence suggest that the First Americans arrived by sea from Eurasia before the Clovis culture arrived in Alaska via Beringia. (Louis Le Breton / Public domain )*



## Footprints In The Sand

Now, thanks to sharp eyes and painstaking work, that evidence has come forth into the light of day in White Sands National Park in New Mexico, only 200 miles (321 kilometers) away from Clovis, the site that gave the Clovis Culture its name. The new evidence, consisting of thousands of 23,000-year-old human footprints scattered over some 80,000 acres, predates the Clovis Culture by more than 7,000 years.



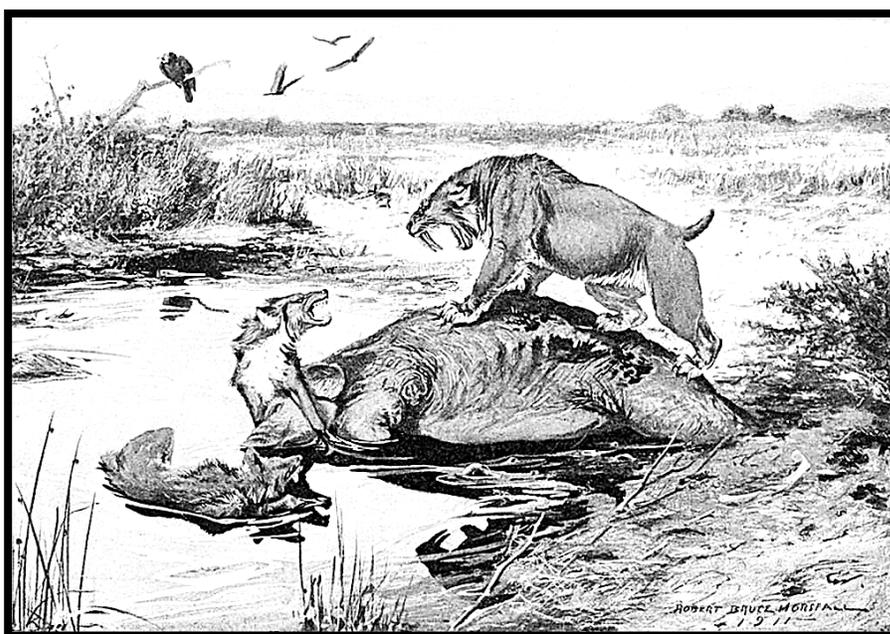
*The Beringia Land Bridge. Did the earliest people entering the Americas trek this or pass by it in their boats? ( CC BY SA 3.0 )*

One group of footprints consists of a single traveler, who walked in a straight line for a mile and a half. Others were made by energetic children, who ran from place to place, back and forth, while jumping up and down, as children will do. Yet another

set of tracks clearly shows the place where an obviously tired mother placed her very young child down on the ground, presumably to gain a few minutes of rest.

The traditional argument against pre-Clovis sites is that most of the evidence so far has consisted of stone projectile points. Stone cannot be radio-carbon dated, so its apparent age is determined by dating the organic soil in which the artifacts are found. If the scientist doing the examining chooses to follow the accepted archaeological, academic dates, it is easy to make the argument that somehow a 12,000-year-old projectile point could somehow have migrated to older soil by migrating down a fissure in the soil or somehow being buried under more ancient, carbon-based strata.

But when David Bustos, the park's resource program manager, first spotted the footprints in 2009, and began to invite experts to the scene, it was obvious that something special was about to happen in the world of anthropology. The importance of the discovery was perhaps best summed up by Ciprian Ardelean, an archaeologist at Autonomous University of Zacatecas in Mexico: *"I think this is probably the biggest discovery about the peopling of America in a hundred years. I don't know what gods they prayed to, but this is a dream find."*



*Two dire wolves and a saber-toothed cat (Smilodon) with the carcass of a Columbian mammoth at the La Brea tar pits by R. Bruce Horsfall (Public Domain)*

Evidence indicates that the footprints originally formed when groups of people traversed the damp, sandy ground on the margin of an

ancient lake. When lake sediment slowly filled in the prints and the water receded, the ground finally hardened. Later, due to the slow but relentless work of erosion, the prints gradually resurfaced, until they were eventually spotted in 2009. Thanks to the invention of ground-penetrating radar, their entire three-dimensional structure can now be observed, including marks of heels and toes.

And humans were not the only mammals who left tracks on the ancient shoreline. Dire wolves, which may have been stalking the humans, camels and mammoths, which may have been stalked by humans predators, left signs of their presence. One set of prints even indicate where a giant sloth apparently saw a group of hunters coming, and quietly headed for safety.

## Dating Grass

In 2019, Jeffrey Pigati and Kathleen Springer, research geologists at the United States Geological Survey, went to the White Sands site to explore. By this time the site itself was well-known to the anthropological community, but its age had not yet been determined. Clovis First still remained the academic doctrine, so no one had investigated to any great degree. But as the geologists searched the area, they discovered ancient blankets of ditch grass seeds that had grown by the lake. Grass seeds, which are organic, can be carbon-dated. The results of their tests came as a shock. The seeds came from grasses that had grown thousands of years before the last Ice Age.



*Fossil human footprints in White Sands (Joyradost / CC BY-SA 4.0)*

Knowing that their find was controversial, the researchers embarked on a far more compressive study. *“The darts are going to start flying,”* said Pigati, *“so we better be ready for them.”* They decided to dig a trench near one cluster of prints that contained both human and animal tracks. On one side of the trench, they found layers of grass seeds, forming thick blankets of sediment. Eventually six such layers were recorded, and 11 separate seed beds, the earliest testing out at 22,800 years old. In this sediment, firmly entrenched, with no possibility of the tracks migrating into the area much later, were the oldest footprints yet discovered, left by both humans and a mammoth. In other words, when these seed grasses grew on the shoreline of an ancient lake, almost 23,000 years ago, mammoths and humans lived side by side. The youngest dates were from 21,130 year ago, meaning that people visited this lake, hunting and gathering from its rich resources, for more than 2,000 years.

## Time Stalks Everybody

But at this time of history, the northern glaciers were still firmly in control, blocking any human migration on foot down from Alaska, through Canada. So how did they get here? No one really knows for sure. They might have followed the shoreline, which was mostly free from glacial activity. They might have arrived by boat. They might have migrated north, from Central or South America, or even from the east, according to the Solutrean hypothesis that postulates migration by boat from western Europe.



*A collection of Solutrean tools dated to 20000 to 15000 BC discovered at Crôt du Charnier, Solutré-Pouilly, Saône-et-Loire, France. Archeologist Stanford drew similarities between these and those found at Cactus Hill and noted differences between Clovis blades. (Public Domain).*

Whatever their route, however, the evidence is now overwhelming that they got to New Mexico millennia before the Clovis First doctrine postulates. In the words of Ruth Gruhn, an archaeologist at the University of Alberta, *"This is a bombshell. On the face of it, it is very hard to disprove."*

If humans were living in New Mexico 23,000 years ago, and stayed there for at least 2,000 years, they must have

somehow entered the continent long before that. In the words of Dr. Sally Reynolds, of Bournemouth University: *"That starts to wind back the clock."*

There are, of course, those in the scientific community who, while applauding the careful work being done at the White Sands site, refuse to accept the data without more confirmation. Science breeds fundamentalists just as religion does. But this adds further urgency to the research. Footprints, even those that are 23,000 years old, tend to start eroding once they see the light of day. When exposed, they are subject to wind and rain, just like rocks everywhere. The exposed footprints at White Sands are thus living on borrowed time. *"It is kind of heartbreaking,"* said David Bustos, who discovered the tracks in the first place. *"We are racing to try to document what we can."* Time stalks everybody. The universal task is to do what is possible while the opportunity presents itself, even though the task began 23,000 years ago, on the shores of a lake in ancient New Mexico.

*Top Image: This undated photo made available by the National Park Service in September 2021 shows fossilized human footprints at the White Sands National Park in New Mexico. ( National Parks Service )*

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