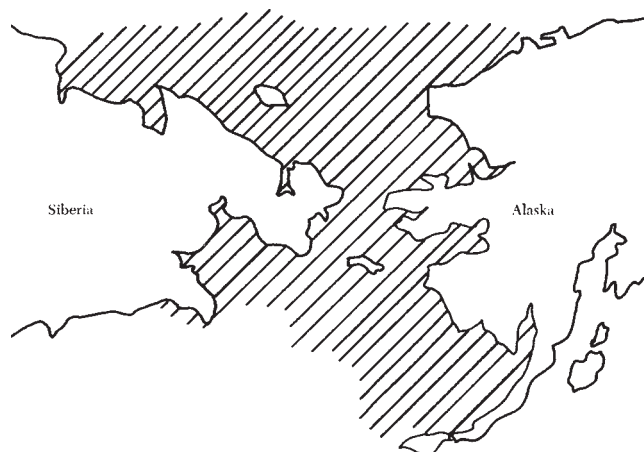


## PALEO-INDIAN PERIOD

THE EARLIEST PERIOD in Iowa prehistory is sometimes referred to as the “Paleo-Indian” or “Big-Game Hunting” stage. It represents the first time that we find evidence of people living in the state. The remains of even earlier people have been found in North, Central, and South America and suggest that the Western Hemisphere was colonized by 20,000 years ago, and possibly earlier. It is believed that the very earliest immigrants entered the New World from Asia at various times throughout the last “Ice Age,” or Pleistocene epoch, when vast ice sheets partially covered the northern parts of North America and Eurasia. These ice sheets, or glaciers, locked up thousands of cubic miles of water, thereby lowering sea levels on a worldwide scale and exposing many areas of land formerly covered by water. One of these was an area beneath what is now the Bering Strait, a narrow strip of water that separates northeastern Siberia and western Alaska. It is believed that at several times during the Pleistocene when sea levels were lowered, this area emerged as dry land forming a broad bridge between the two continents. Across this bridge (sometimes referred to as Beringia) both plant and animal species gradually migrated, including the first human immigrants. Since the interior of Alaska appears to have been ice-free at these times, there was an open corridor south into North America.



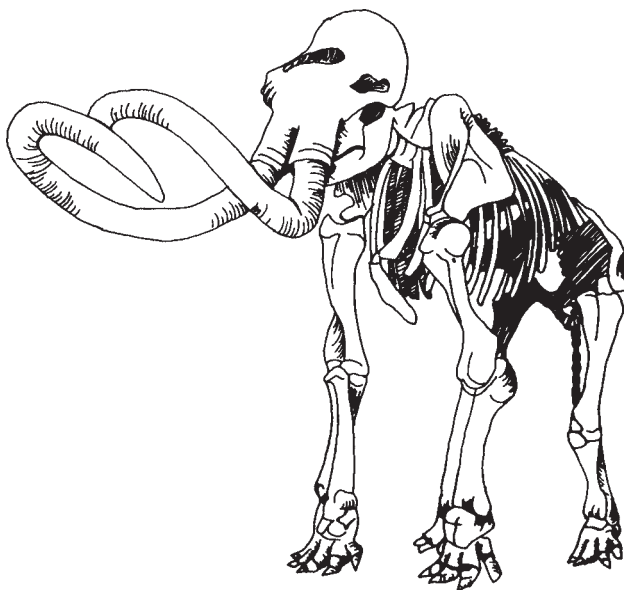
*“Beringia,” the Bering Strait Land Bridge, is indicated by the hatched area.*

So far, Iowa has not revealed the remains of these very earliest inhabitants. Evidence of their descendants, the people of the Paleo-Indian period, is itself somewhat limited and has come almost exclusively from finds of lanceolate (leaf-shaped) projectile points discovered on the surface of the ground. While the maximum time range for the Paleo-Indian period in North America may extend from 15,000–8,000 BP (“before present”), the earliest remains in Iowa are perhaps



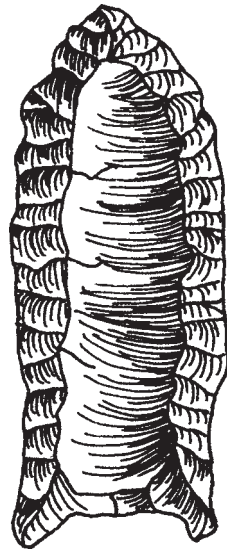
*Clovis spearpoint hafted to its shaft.*

13,000 years old. They consist of projectile points from the Clovis and Folsom complexes. In Iowa, early Paleo-Indian sites tend to be found near streams or rivers, and are particularly abundant in confluence areas and in areas of high quality chert or flint. To date over 200 Clovis and Folsom points have been recorded. Clovis points are typically 3–6 inches long, thin, laurel-leaf shaped and finely chipped. They have one or more short flakes (flutes) removed on either face, extending from the base up the center portion of the point towards the tip. It is believed that the removal of this flute made it easier to haft the point to the shaft.



*The Imperial Mammoth of North America was hunted by Paleo-Indian people.*

*A Folsom spearpoint.*



At sites outside of Iowa, Clovis points have been found together with large extinct game animals such as mammoth, horse, camel, and certain forms of bison that Clovis people hunted. The name “Big-Game Hunting” stage refers to the importance these animals seemed to have had in the economy of these early Americans. It seems certain that smaller game and some plants were also utilized, but we know far less about them from archaeological remains. So far in Iowa, Clovis points have been found across the state, but only from the surface of the ground or in disturbed contexts. Most were discovered by private individuals and remain in their collections. The largest number occurs in southeast Iowa. In 1965 on the eastern side of Hare Run, a small tributary of the Cedar River in Cedar County, a cache of some 11 complete and fragmentary fluted points was recovered from the Rummells-Maske site. These specimens were in the plowzone and had been disturbed as a result of farming. Most were identified as the Clovis type. More recently, a Clovis point found in Woodbury County retained blood residue sealed beneath a layer of calcium carbonate. Chemical analysis indicated the point had been used to hunt deer or elk.

Folsom points typically occur at kill sites where a second variety of extinct bison was hunted. Folsom spearpoints are smaller than Clovis points, are less leaf-shaped, and have a concave base with ear-like projections on each side. A deep flute, which sometimes runs almost the entire length of the point, is found on both faces. The base and lower edges of Folsom points were ground or dulled. The dulling allowed the point to be hafted to the shaft without cutting through the sinew or material used for binding. Once again, Iowa has produced only surface finds of Folsom points with the majority found in Mills County.

The cultural remains of later Paleo-Indian peoples are also present in Iowa. Artifacts of these later peoples elsewhere in North America have been grouped into what is referred to as the “Plano Culture.” It is characterized by a number of lanceolate projectile points that generally lack fluting. Some of these points show a pattern of long, thin, pressure-flaked scars that run horizontally across their surface. Among the many types are Meserve, Milnesand, Browns Valley, Portales, Angostura, Eden, Agate Basin, Hanna, Duncan, Midland, Hell Gap, Cascade, Plainview, Scottsbluff, and Dalton. Once again, many of the artifacts of the Plano cul-



*An Agate Basin-like point from the Cherokee Sewer site.*

ture are found associated with game animals killed by Plano hunters. In some instances, these are modern species of bison, antelope, and others. In Iowa points resembling Eden and Dalton types are known mainly from surface finds. Meserve points have been reported from Mills, Allamakee, Louisa, Henry and Polk counties. Some 27 Milnesand type points were found in Mills County. Excavations in the lowest level (Horizon III) at the Cherokee Sewer site produced the remains of a point in association with modern bison in a context that dates to 8,500 years ago. Although once believed to be an Agate Basin point, this identification has since been challenged. Other Agate Basin points, however, have been reported from northwestern Iowa. Finally, a portion of a possible Scottsbluff type point was recovered from the excavation at the Soldow site in Webster County.

The way of life of Iowa’s first inhabitants during the Paleo-Indian period is assumed to have been predominantly nomadic with a specialized economy that concentrated on hunting herds of large game animals. From various sites outside the state we know that Paleo-Indian hunters often worked together to drive herds of bison over cliffs or into areas where they might be more easily killed and then butchered. In addition to the spearpoints so typical at Paleo-Indian sites, other artifacts include knives, scrapers, abraders, choppers, rubbing stones, and some bone and antler artifacts. Most of these can be seen to relate directly to the processing of game and the dressing of hides. Although almost nothing is known of the social organization, housing, or more perishable artifacts of Paleo-Indian people (like clothing), it is assumed that social interaction necessary for driving herds of game would have involved cooperation among hunters and an established pattern of social control. Housing would probably have been temporary, involving some sort of branch or bone frame with a covering of skins or mats. Clothes likewise would have been made of skins. Unfortunately, these are the kind of items that do not withstand the test of time, and so we are left to speculate about them.

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