

NOTES ON INDIAN HISTORY: HOW THE INDIANS GOT TO THE AMERICAS

The story of the American Indians begins thousands of years ago. The first ancestors of the Indians came to America from Asia, probably between 15 and 20 thousand years ago. If you look at a map, you will see that part of North America--Alaska--is very close to part of Asia--Siberia. Today there is less than 50 miles of shallow ocean separating these two continents. Thousands of years ago, when the first people came to America, conditions were somewhat different. The level of the ocean was lower than it is now, and there was a strip of land connecting Siberia with Alaska. Historians call this strip, now covered with water, a land bridge. In those days it would have been easy to walk from Asia to North America over this bridge.

Archaeologists and historians are almost certain that the ancestors of the American Indians came to America over this land bridge. It is not known for sure what these early Indian people were like and exactly why they happened to move to America. In those days all peoples of the world lived by hunting and gathering of wild plant foods. The ancestors of the Indians may have been moving about, searching for new hunting territory. In the stories and legends told by Indian peoples today, there are many instances of a band or tribe splitting into two new groups because of some dissatisfaction or because the tribe grew in numbers so that their land could no longer support all the people. The group breaking away--whatever the reason--would move out and find new territory with game and wild plant foods.

This process of Indian groups splitting and forming new groups has probably been going on for many years. The first people coming to America may have split off from their main tribe or band and were searching for new homes. Probably many groups of people came to America over a long span of time. Gradually these peoples drifted to the south and to the east until there were people all over North, Central, and South America.

There may have been several major migrations of peoples from Asia to America, and perhaps a number of times when small groups came across and added to the growing population of the Americas. It is not known with certainty just when the first migrants came. Some authorities think the earliest peoples might have come to America as far back as 40,000 years ago. There is indisputable evidence from archaeology that there were people here by about 11,000 B. C. Most authorities feel that the earliest arrivals got to America between 20,000 and 15,000 years ago. Some relatively late migrations from northern Asia into northern North America occurred about 5000 to 6000 years ago. It is believed that the ancestors of the Eskimos and the Athabaskan-speaking Indians--including the Navajoes and the Apaches--came to the New World at this time.

The belief that the earliest ancestors of the American Indians arrived in the New World thousands of years ago is supported by the fact that no American Indian language can be definitely connected with any language in the Old World. The Indians would have had to have lived in America a very long time in order for their languages to have become so different from the languages spoken by Asian people. Also, as groups of migrants drifted south and east, and split into more groups--each pursuing their own way apart from the parent groups--the languages spoken by each group continued to develop and change in its own way. Hundreds of years after a group had split, the languages spoken by the new groups differed from each other and from the language originally spoken by the parent group. It has been estimated that by 1492, when Columbus came, there were about 2000 separate, mutually unintelligible languages spoken in native America.