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NOT FOR THE TIMID OF HEART

Damn!" I said.

The dates hadn't come as a real surprise. We had suspected we were getting into a nasty realm where traction was poor and plenty of archaeologists before me had spun out. But here they were, two apparently firm dates that would completely change my life. Maybe these two "facts" in front of me—so neatly typewritten, so crisp, so cool—were wrong, I had little reason to think so. Whatever the extent to which I had been steering my career as an archaeologist, it was now about to veer and yaw off into the archaeological badlands. So my first reaction, standing in a ten-foot-deep excavation about thirty-five miles southwest of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was to say, out loud, "Damn."

It was July 13, 1974, and I held in my hand a report from an impeccable source, the radiocarbon-dating lab at the Smithsonian Institution. Most Americans rightly considered the Smithsonian the very essence of the Authentic, and archaeologists all knew it as one of the very best dating facilities then in existence. Even so, I knew perfectly well that once my colleagues got wind of these two dates, they would start throwing verbal rocks at me and my crew.

On the piece of paper in my hand were eleven dates, all of them ordinary, unsurprising, nothing to really catch anyone's attention, except for the two that challenged one of American archaeology's most cherished dogmas.



J. M. Adovasio during the 1975 excavations at Meadowcroft Rockshelter.

The two dates were based on charcoal taken from two firepits, or hearths, near the very bottom layer of soil and rock that lay on top of the bedrock floor of a large shallow “rockshelter” or “rock overhang” called Meadowcroft Rockshelter. They said that humans had been there using these two hearths in about 13,000 B.C. (The actual dates were $12,975 \pm 650$ B.C. and $13,170 \pm 165$ B.C.) That meant that people had been here in western Pennsylvania some four thousand years before any human being was supposed to have set foot anywhere in this hemisphere. That no one had been here as early as these dates suggested was a tenet of archaeology that had come about in the 1930s, when a distinct kind of stone spear point had been discovered near Clovis, New Mexico, associated with the bones of a mammoth. Clovis Man, a mighty hunter, the dogma went, was the first here, and the dogma had survived hundreds of challenges in the intervening forty years.

In 1975, just a year later, we obtained more dates that confirmed the first ones. These were announced in an archaeological journal and picked up by *The Washington Post*, which published the news a couple of days before President Nixon resigned his office. With the future of the Republic in some jeopardy, nobody much cared about my dates or what most normal



General view of Meadowcroft Rockshelter from the south bank of Cross Creek, facing north.

people would consider a relatively minor flap in a fairly arcane subject of little contemporary import: When did the first humans reach North America?

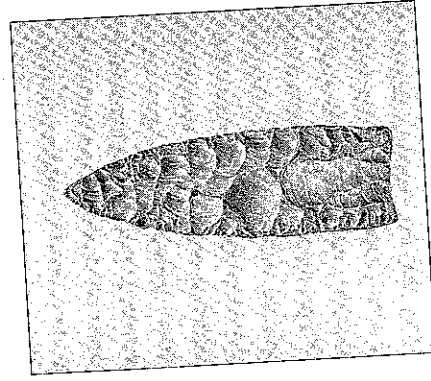
But it seems that when the future of the Republic is secure, the World Series is decided, and other major preoccupations are satisfied, the American public does like to get caught up in a good controversy, even on so remote a subject as the populating of the New World at some time long before memory. That subject has never been more controversial than in the past few years, and not just in academic circles. It has recently erupted onto the covers of newsmagazines and even into federal courts. It has been said that academic disputes are so bitterly waged because the outcomes are of so little lasting importance. This one, however, has stirred up not only scholars but also many of today’s Native American peoples by casting doubt on the legitimacy of their claim to be the descendants of the first Americans. It even brought a momentary epiphany to a band of Scandinavian-American loonies who, in their fifteen minutes of fame, laid fleeting claim to the title (and lands) of the first Americans. In the field of North American archaeology—almost never a realm of courteous and collegial discussions over a bit of

brandy before a toasty fire—it would be putting it mildly to say that hackles have been raised. The work of lifetimes has been put at risk, reputations have been damaged, an astounding amount of silliness and even profound stupidity has been taken as serious thought, and always lurking in the background of all the argumentation and gnashing of tenets has been the question of whether the field of archaeology can ever be pursued as a science.

My intention, back in the early 1970s, was to involve myself in nothing of this sort. Up to 1974, I was looking forward to a career teaching the most rigorous techniques of field archaeology and a lifetime as an expert in a tiny pond in the mostly stone-filled archaeological landscape. I studied the artifacts that tend to turn up the least often in the archaeological record: baskets, cloth, cordage, nets, sandals, and the like. These are called perishable artifacts for the obvious reason that they tend to rot away over time, vanishing from the record, unlike a stone arrowhead, which can lie in the ground dormant but intact for eons.

But now I was going to turn out to be the latest of many to tilt at what has been called the Clovis Bar.

The Clovis Bar went up soon after the first Clovis spear points were found. They were exquisitely made, the result of very fine, very controlled chipping, or flaking, and were also “fluted,” meaning that a long vertical



*Schematic of a Clovis point
from Blackwater Draw, New
Mexico, drawn by S. Patricia.*

flake was chipped off both sides of the point's base in order to produce grooves. This so-called fluting was unique in the archaeological record anywhere on the planet: only in America. Clovis points then began to turn up here and there around the West and then elsewhere, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean and even on down into Mexico and points south.

Having been found with mammoth remains, Clovis points clearly were the work of people who lived in North America during the last Ice Age, which scholars at the time were sure had ended around 10,000 years ago. As the decades went by, an accurate dating technique—radiocarbon dating—permitted many Clovis finds to be dated with some precision. It turned out that these people lived between 11,250 and 10,550 years ago (or from 9250 years B.C. to 8550 B.C.). Then, suddenly, humans didn't make Clovis points anymore. More important, no one could find any evidence that people had lived in North America earlier than Clovis Man. This, then, was the Clovis Bar, and while some archaeologists over the years announced new evidence that humans had been here at an earlier date, most North American archaeologists were not merely content with the bar but built their scholarly career on its foundation.

Frankly, in the early 1970s, I didn't give much of a hoot about Clovis Man. Most of my research with perishable artifacts had been done in the Great Basin area of the West on what is called Archaic material, artifacts that were more recent than Clovis. To the extent that I had ever bothered to think about it, I believed the idea that Clovis Man had leapt fully armed (out of the head of some Siberian Zeus) into midcontinent and proceeded to overrun the hemisphere in less than a millennium to be, at best, an oversimplified notion and, at worst, hopelessly naive if not simply dumb. To my mind, the Clovis First hypothesis did not allow enough time for the diversity of lifeways that had come into being shortly after the last Clovis point was chipped 10,500 years ago—not to mention the diversity that appeared to exist even during Clovis Man's tenure.

I also knew, from studying the remains of perishable artifacts of early societies—that is to say, the efforts mainly of women—that most of my Clovis-loving colleagues had a phallocentric, lithic hang-up: as noted, stone is far more likely to be preserved in the ground for long periods, and people associate stone artifacts such as projectile points with males. For some seventy years, Clovis Woman was conspicuous by her absence.

In any event, I knew there would be trouble when I went up against the Clovis Bar with my pre-Clovis dates. The annals of North American archaeology are peppered with reports that this or that site showed clear and unimpeachable evidence of human habitation in North America before 11,500 years ago. Many of the hundred-odd claims were advanced with great vigor, often with promotional campaigns worthy of Madison Avenue. And virtually all of them were soon consigned to a well-deserved oblivion. Though my own interests lay elsewhere, when I began work at Meadowcroft, I was aware, like anyone in the field, of some of these archaeological train wrecks. Indeed, I knew that the cavalcade of loser localities was taken by many archaeologists as proof that no one was or could have been in the New World before the fluted-point makers. Such a belief is, of course, not science. And it is not logical. It is, in fact, more like a religious dogma.

One of my colleagues once said that a great deal of American archaeology has been "a pissing match to see who can come up with the oldest spear point." Just why so many people—archaeologists and all manner of laymen—want the Americas to have been inhabited anciently as opposed to only recently is a question not often asked and with few straightforward answers. After all, Americans pride themselves as a nation on having accomplished a great deal in a very short period of time—going from a ragtag collection of rebels to the world's only superpower in little more than two hundred years. Why, then, do they want America's prehistory to be such a long-running show?

Of course, some Native Americans feel that they themselves were the first humans and originated here on this continent—some of them call it Turtle Island—later migrating to become the people found in all other parts of the world. Linguists, confronting the existence of some nine hundred Indian languages in the New World at the time of European colonization, want more than twelve thousand years for all those languages to have come about. Back in the nineteenth century, once Europeans had discovered Neanderthal Man and early stone tools, many Americans simply wanted their own ancient and primitive people.

Whatever the reasons, many laypeople and science journalists will grab hold of any piece of news, any assertion, however flimsy, that the first Americans arrived longer ago than previously thought, even as far back as

hundreds of thousands of years, and hug it to their bosoms so tightly it is very difficult to root out. Some professional archaeologists are driven by the same urge, creating a situation in which expectations override a calm, cool assessment of the facts. This isn't science either.

So we have two extremes here. Many scholars of such matters refuse to entertain any evidence whatsoever of an earlier arrival—in spite of what appear to be facts. Indeed, archaeological history can appear to be full of hidebound, grumpy naysayers throwing cold water on the hopes and dreams of both Indiana Jones types and some serious archaeologists as well.

The subject of the first Americans has always been, and may always be, a mare's nest. Certainly, it is now a nearly open field again. A few years back, Dave Meltzer, an archaeologist at Southern Methodist University and an assiduous historian of the search for the first Americans, inscribed a copy of one of his books to me with a bit of doggerel that recounted some of the flak I had, by then, received for the Meadowcroft dig. It ended:

*The tattered flag still flies, on the banks of old Cross Creek,
Adovasio is wiser now, more gray hairs, but still standing
on his feet.*

*What lessons learned? Many true ones to last,
and even one about archaeology, the science of the past.
The lesson is one that all should know from the start,
When it comes to the first Americans:
Archaeology ain't for the timid at heart.*

The quest to discover who the first Americans were and when they got here began long before there was such an enterprise as archaeology. We like to think that today archaeologists practice a craft free of preconceived notions, but such notions are still to be found and not all that far below the surface. One that is much with us, for example, is embodied in the phrase still much in use: *Clovis Man*.

The best way to understand all this is to start at the beginning—with the early notions about who the American Indians could have been and how they could have gotten here. Without knowing this tale, with its heartfelt philosophical certainties and astounding leaps of imagination, one

can't fully understand the situation into which I was thrust by the receipt of those fateful pre-Clovis dates. Ever since three barely seaworthy ships fetched up on a Caribbean isle, manned by Europeans with their preconceptions, the native peoples of the Americas and their deep history have baffled most non-Native Americans.

THE FIRST AMERICANS