In Another Time
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Published by Utah State University Press

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In Another Time.
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The First Utahns

People of the Desert Culture First Inhabited the Great Basin
11,000 B.P. to A.D. 1776

Even prehistory has to start somewhere. In Utah, it’s likely that could be 11,000 B.P. (before the present). That, at least, is a verifiable date, according to evidence unearthed by archaeologist Jesse D. Jennings in his storied excavation of Danger Cave east of Wendover in the 1950s. Perhaps, just perhaps, the earliest inhabitants of that portion of the Great Basin we now know as Utah were people of the Desert culture.

The prevailing theory among scientists for years has been that early man migrated to the North American continent across the Bering Strait land bridge between Siberia and Alaska in about 20,000 B.P. During the ensuing centuries, these small bands of nomads—hunters of bison and other big game—made their way south to warmer climes, reaching the caves around Great Salt Lake along the way.

Jennings’s dig showed the Danger site ante­dated all but a few of the excavated campsites in North America and was perhaps as old as Clovis man (named for the Clovis, New Mexico, site dis­covered in the late 1920s). What the archaeologist had unearthed was a “full and intimate glimpse into an entire lifeway geared to an ecosystem we could visualize and understand.” The thirteen-feet-deep layers of trash in the floor of the cave surrendered the story of early man, and data gleaned from other cave sites—Jukebox, Hogup, Raven, Cowboy, and Sudden Shelter—all played a role in reconstructing an image of early Holocene life.

Jennings later learned the same adaptation to desert environment revealed by the cave excavations was found in the ethnological record of historic Numic-speaking tribes (Shoshoni, Ute, and Paiute) of the West. His findings at Danger Cave suggested to the archaeologist the existence of a long-lived and widespread Desert culture in the Great Basin and that Danger Cave had been home until recently (say, 250 years ago) to the Shoshoni-speaking Gosiutes. The desert way of life persisted, and as historian Dale L. Morgan explained, “The lives of all these peoples were shaped by the peculiar nature of the country they occupied.”

When the Spanish introduced horses to the New World, it was but a matter of time before the animals migrated north via the Utes and Comanches to the Shoshonis. While horses revolutionized the lives of all these tribes, Morgan pointed out the animal was of little service to the Paiute and Shoshoni bands in western and southern Utah, whose lives continued to follow more closely the Desert culture pattern.

There were no horses at all in the West—or anywhere else in America for that matter—when the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortés landed on the coast of Veracruz in 1519, bringing with him ten stallions and six mares. As the
Spaniards moved inland against the Aztecs in Mexico and on into the American Southwest, they brought more and more horses for use as mounts and pack animals. Then, in 1680, came the revolt of the Pueblos of New Mexico against their white masters. Thousands of horses, now without owners, ran loose, to be taken by any Indian with the opportunity and the will. Within fifty years of the revolt, as a result of intertribal trading and theft, the Shoshonis and Comanches had horses.

Canadian explorer and map-maker David Thompson spent the winter of 1787–88 in the tent of an old Piegan warrior named Saukamappee, who told him of the band's first glimpse of a horse in 1730 after a raid in the south on the Snakes (Shoshonis). Thompson, then a Hudson's Bay Company apprentice and clerk living among the Piegans, made notes in his journal of the old warrior's story:

"After all the war ceremonies were over," Saukamappee said, "we pitched away in large camps with the women and children on the frontier of the Snake Indian country, hunting the bison and red deer, which were numerous, and we were anxious to see a horse, of which we had heard so much.

"At last, as the leaves were falling, we heard that one was killed by an arrow shot into his belly, but the Snake Indian that rode him got away.

"Numbers of us went to see him, and we all admired him; he put us in mind of a stag that had lost his horns, and we did not know what name to give him. But as he was a slave to man, like the dog, which carried our things, he was named the Big Dog."

While the lifestyle of the Plains Indians now underwent a radical change, with the horse enabling them to become nomadic hunters on a scale undreamed of before, the situation was quite different in the Great Basin. "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," Morgan writes. The historian is quick to point out, however, that the Desert culture represented 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."

When the first white men entered Utah is still, and always will be, a matter for conjecture. Myths and tale-tellers will forever cloud the slate upon which history is recorded. But insofar as the record is recoverable, it is the Spanish to whom the honor of being first is bestowed . . . until some other evidence is discovered.

As the Spanish moved ever north along the Pacific Coast, they had by the 1770s established a half-dozen missions in California. The next logical step was to connect these with Santa Fe, the first capital of the new Mexico. To that end, two Franciscan fathers, Atanasio Domínguez and Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, formed an expedition to trace a route to Monterey. The two friars had agreed to leave on their journey July 4, 1776, a date otherwise well remembered in American history, but unforeseen developments, including Escalante falling ill, postponed departure from Santa Fe until July 29.

They were accompanied by Don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco, a retired artillery officer and militia captain who was to be the expedition cartographer; Andrés Muñiz, the interpreter, and his brother, Antonio Lucrecio Muñiz; Don Pedro Cisneros, the alcalde (mayor) of Zuni; Don Joaquin Lain; Lorenzo Olivares; Juan de Aguilar; and Simon Lucero. Later, the party would include runaway servants Felipe and Juan Domingo; Atanasio, a Sabuagana Yuta (Ute) Indian; and Silvestre and Joaquin, Laguna Yutas from Utah Lake. The three Yutas acted as guides.

Escalante believed the way to Monterey most likely would be north and west of the Hopis, through the lands of the Yuta to the north. During August, the expedition made its way through present Colorado—reaching the area of Dolores and Montrose and crossing the Colorado River west of Rifle—to the vicinity of Rangely and then into Utah near Jensen, where the explorers crossed the Green River.

By September 23, 1776, the priests and their party reached a Laguna village at Utah Lake. In succeeding days, they visited other villages in the vicinity of Spanish Fork and as far north as American Fork, where the Lagunas listened to the messages translated by Andrés Muñiz and expressed a willingness to become Christians. The friars discovered a fishing culture in the region, bearded Indians who seined the lake and whose men wore bones as nose ornaments. They also heard of a salt lake to the north.

With winter coming on, the priests were in a quandary: whether to push on to Monterey, which Miera insisted was less than a week’s journey
away, or to return to Santa Fe and plan an exped­
tion the following year to the Lagunas. The friars
decided to cast lots and put the decision “in the hands of God.” And so they did on October 11 just north of present Cedar City. The choice fell to Santa Fe, and the expedition turned south, leaving what is now Utah at a point east of present St. George. After a grueling journey through Arizona following the base of the Hurricane Cliffs eastward, passing south of Pipe Springs and Fredonia, across the Kaibab Plateau, and down into House Rock Valley, they reached Lee’s Ferry. They reentered Utah briefly near Wahweap Lodge, eventually located the old Ute Ford (later named Crossing of the Fathers in their honor), and waded across the Colorado, heading south to Oraibi and on into Zuni, New Mexico, in late November. The padres finally arrived at Santa Fe on January 2, 1777.

For all their peregrinations, had the priests turned north another forty miles that September at the main Laguna village at present Provo, the annals would have read quite differently: Great Salt Lake discovered by the Spanish priests Domínguez and Escalante in 1776. But that would have to await the next whites through Utah, legions of often unrecorded fur trappers and traders, some from Canada and not a few from New Mexico—Taos trappers, mostly.

So it stood until the turn of the 19th century.