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Summary, Themes, Discussion Questions, and Resources for:

“When Did People Arrive in Montana?” Excerpt from Land of Beginnings: The Archaeology of Montana’s First People by Douglas H. MacDonald
Montana The Magazine of Western History, Winter 2024.

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When and how people first arrived in the Americas is exactly the kind of question we want to ask emerging students of history: the answer is worth pursuing even if (*especially if*) the answer is elusive. With present-day Montana sitting at the bottom of the ice-free corridor that would have connected Beringia to the rest of North America about 11,000 years ago, Montana students can begin to wonder how Montana and its archaeology play a role in the pursuit of this answer.

This short excerpt is worth a read if you teach any lessons on archaeology, the Ice Age, Indian Education for All, or Montana history. The article contains an overview of theories, facts, and sites that complicate the once prevailing “Clovis-first” theory (which is to say that the first Americans came here about 11,000 years ago via the Bering Strait land-bridge and then the ice-free corridor). A key focus of the article is whether Montana’s Lindsay mammoth site offers clues about whether pre-Clovis people hunted or butchered mammoths in present-day Montana more than 12,000 years ago. For now, the most famous Montana archaeological site from this period is the Anzick site (near Wilsall), which the article also discusses. In addition, it addresses other pre-Clovis sites and their attending scholarly debates within the Americas.

Themes

- **Archaeology:** What theories can archaeologists reasonably draw from the evidence they excavate?
- **Indigenous Peoples and Migration:** How can students study oral traditions in conjunction with archaeology?
- **Stone Age History:** What is Clovis and what is pre-Clovis?

Why This Works in a Montana 6-12 History or Science Class

Chapter 2 of the Montana history textbook *Montana: Stories of the Land* contains great explanations about Clovis, radiocarbon dating, mammoths, archaeology, and how oral traditions from Montana tribes must be considered when wrestling with the question this article poses. For example, consider this quote from page 29: “For now, no one has the complete answer to the question, ‘Where did Montana’s first people come from, and how did they get here?’ People keep discovering new evidence to help answer this question. Meanwhile, it is important to recognize the value in using both oral histories and archaeology to better understand the past.” Indeed, and that is precisely why considering the evidence and debates from this article would benefit teachers and students, because it is part of the process of being a student of history.

High school students in science or history classes could easily digest sections of this article, and middle or elementary school students could benefit from insights gained by teachers who read this article and use other sources (below) to help students think about the same question the article poses.

Interdisciplinary Approach: Combining archaeology, science, and history, this article asks major questions on the peopling of North America

Local Relevance: Mapping famous Montana archaeological sites

Critical Thinking: Why ask and investigate questions that seem unanswerable?

Classroom Activities

1. Studying Projectiles

Objective: Compare archaeological evidence on a timeline.

Activity:

- Have students study a chart of different sized projectile points and have them theorize why they get smaller the closer they are to the present-day.

2. Using of Oral Traditions

Objective: Analyze oral traditions for cultural and historical evidence of life after the Ice Age.

Activity:

- Have students listen to Indigenous-told oral traditions that emphasize hunting, struggle for survival, or migration.
- Have students record or chart what these stories reveal about survival after the Ice Age.

3. Exploring the Clovis Child Burial

Objective: Examine the significance of the Clovis child for tribal people and archaeologists.

Activity:

- See the [Investigating the Clovis Child Burial Lesson Plan](#).

Discussion Questions

- Why can't historians and archaeologists answer the question "When did people arrive in Montana?"
- Why is trying to answer this question important?
- Let's say an archaeologist believes that humans arrived here 11,000 years ago. What new information, discoveries, or ideas might cause them to change their mind?
- What possible information could a Montana tribe's oral histories offer us about early human arrival in present-day Montana? (see pages 24-25 in *Stories of the Land*)
- For students who read parts of the article: Why is there scholarly disagreement over whether the Lindsay mammoth site had signs of human butchery of the animal?

Classroom Resources

Montana Stories of the Land Textbook [Chapter 2](#) with worksheets and materials - especially pages 24-30 with [Attending Lesson Plans from the Montana Historical Society](#)

[Lindsay Mammoth site video from Museum of the Rockies](#)

Stone Age Explorers - [PBS Nova Educational Links](#) - includes map of pre-Clovis sites

[Montana History of Our Home Textbook](#), pages 14-15

[Stones and Bones Lesson Plan](#) and Footlocker (PDF) - Montana Historical Society

[Investigating the Clovis Child Burial Lesson Plan](#) (PDF) - [Perhaps the best resource to use in tandem with information and insights gained from this article.](#)

[Brief Summary of Migration Theory using Alaskan coastline and kayaks/boats](#)

[White Sands Human Footprints](#) - NPR Article