

The Land Bridge Story

The history of the United States begins with the first people in North America thousands of years ago. They are the ancestors of present-day Native Americans, or American Indians. An **ancestor** is an early family member.

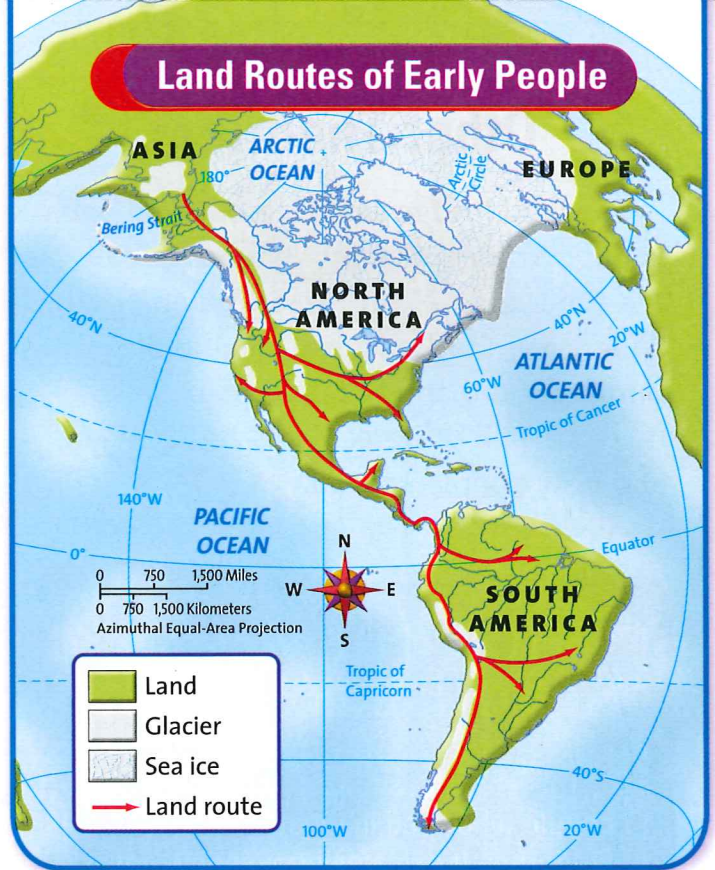
A Cold World

How did these first people arrive in North America? After many years of study, scientists are still not sure of the answer. However, they do have several theories, or possible explanations. A **theory** is an idea based on study and research.

One theory is that there was once a "bridge" of land between Asia and North America. Scientists call this land bridge **Beringia** (buh•RIN•jee•uh). It was named for the Bering Strait, the body of water that now separates Russia from Alaska.

Many scientists believe that thousands of years ago, there were several Ice Ages. During these long periods of freezing cold, slow-moving sheets of ice called glaciers (GLAY•sherz) covered large parts of Earth.

Scientists think that so much of Earth's water was trapped in these huge glaciers



MOVEMENT About how many miles is it from Asia to the tip of South America?

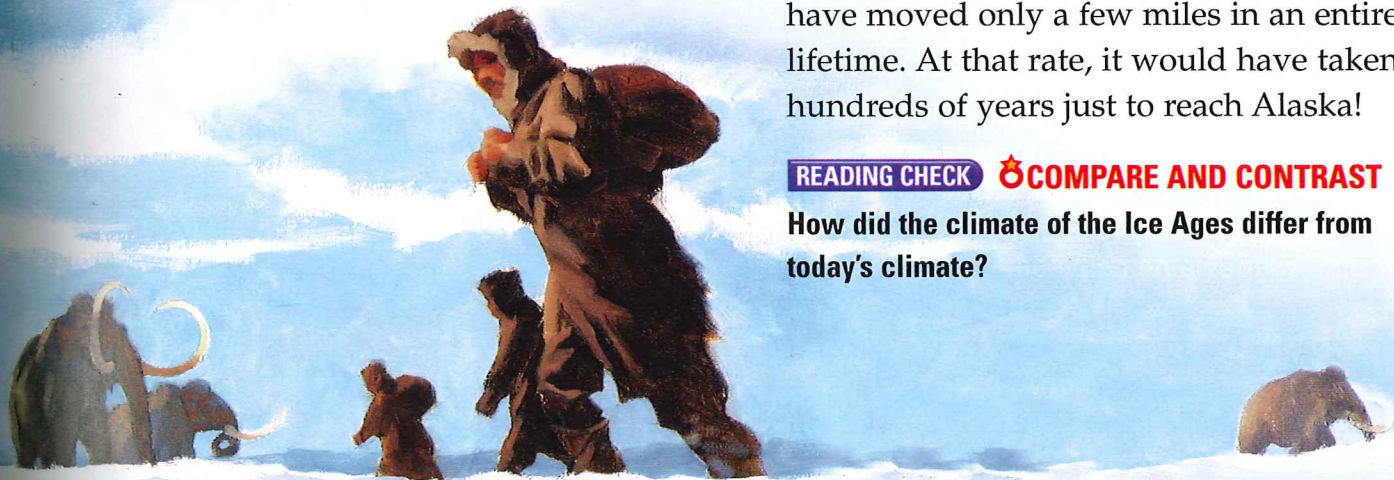
that the level of the oceans fell by as much as 350 feet. Because of this, Earth had more dry land than it does now.

A Long Journey

Many scientists believe that about 12,000 years ago, groups of hunters and their families crossed the land bridge from Asia to North America. This **migration**, or movement of people, probably took place very slowly. Groups may have moved only a few miles in an entire lifetime. At that rate, it would have taken hundreds of years just to reach Alaska!

READING CHECK **COMPARE AND CONTRAST**

How did the climate of the Ice Ages differ from today's climate?





► **EARLY PEOPLE** worked together to hunt large animals, such as this woolly mammoth.

Early Ways of Life

Early people most likely led a nomadic way of life. They moved from place to place, living in caves or in tents made of animal skins. They kept moving, following animals they hunted. Scientists know this because they have found spear points and other artifacts near the bones of ancient animals. **Artifacts** are objects made by people.

A Changing Way of Life

Giant animals, such as mastodons and woolly mammoths, once roamed North America. Early people hunted these animals. They ate the meat and used the fur, skins, and bones to make clothing and tools. They also gathered wild foods, such as nuts, plants, and roots. For this reason, scientists refer to these people as hunters and gatherers.

Slowly, the climate changed, becoming warmer and drier. About 8000 B.C., the giant animals became extinct, or died out. People had to find new sources of food. They began to fish and to hunt smaller animals. Over time, they made new hunting tools, such as the bow and arrow.

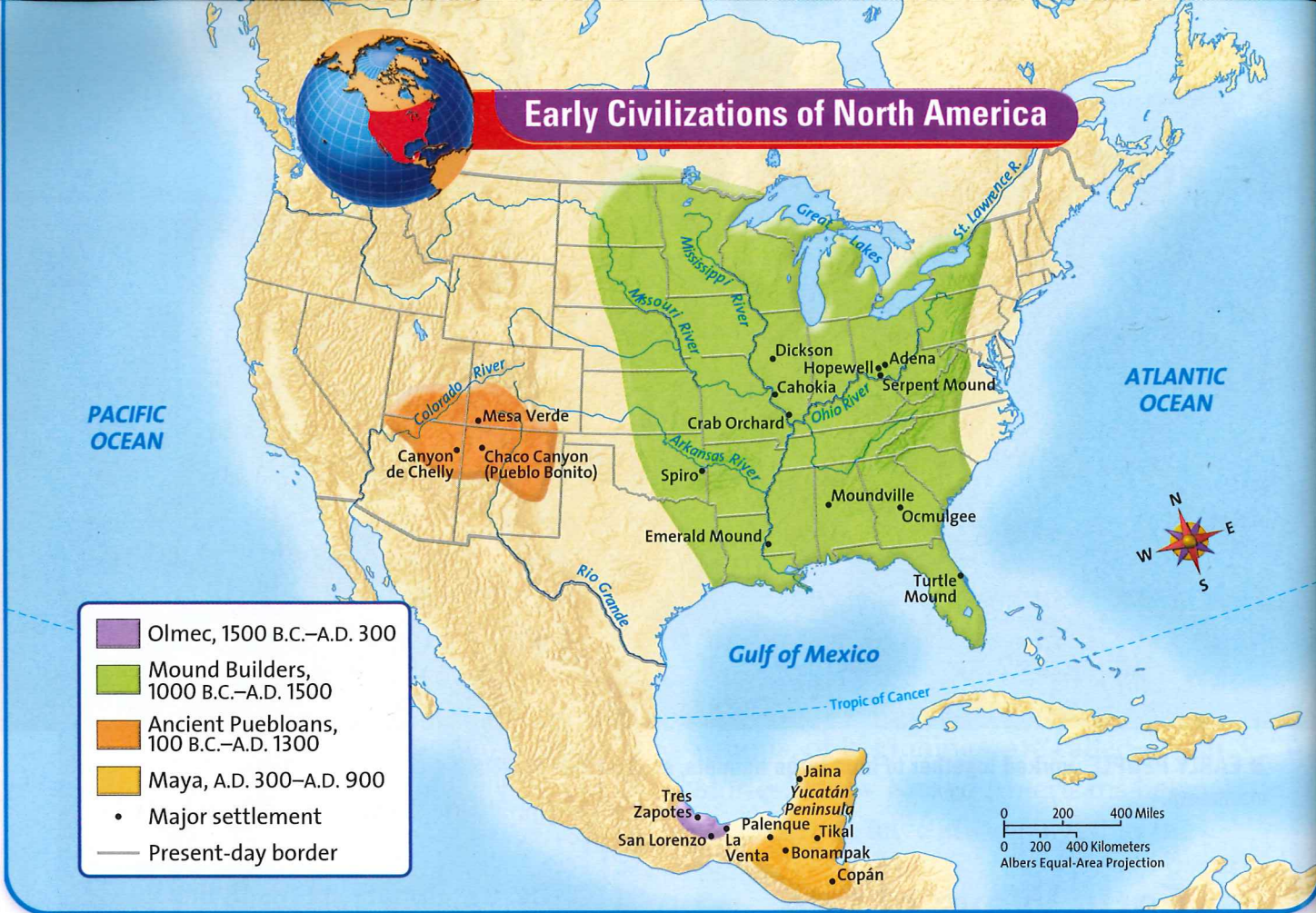
About 3000 B.C., some people in the Americas began planting seeds and growing crops such as corn and beans. Agriculture, or farming, gave people a reason to settle in one place. As groups raised more food, the population grew.

Some early people formed what are now called tribes, groups who shared the same language, land, and leaders. Each tribe developed its own culture, which made it different from other tribes.

READING CHECK **SUMMARIZE**

How did farming change life for people?

Early Civilizations of North America



LOCATION Which civilization was located farthest south?

The Olmec and the Maya

Over time, groups began to form civilizations. A **civilization** is a group of people with ways of life, religion, and learning. With a more settled way of life, some civilizations built large cities that became centers of learning, religion, and government.

The Olmec Civilization

The Olmec civilization was one of the earliest in the Americas. From about 1500 B.C. to A.D. 300, the Olmec ruled most of what is now southern Mexico.

The oldest Olmec city that scientists have discovered is **San Lorenzo**. Like

many Olmec cities, it is located near a river. The Olmec used rivers to travel between cities and build a trade system. Olmec artifacts have been found across Mexico.

A strong trade system was just one achievement of the Olmec. They also created systems of writing and counting. These systems helped the Olmec develop a 365-day calendar.

No one is sure why the Olmec fell from power, but we know that they influenced other cultures. Today, some historians call the Olmec the “mother culture” of the Americas. That is because many Olmec customs, or ways of doing things, were continued in later civilizations.