

Clovis People: The Original North Americans - Historian Dan Flores Explains

The Joe Rogan experience What happened with the Folsom story is that there was a there was a flash flood on a river called the Dry Cimarron River in the August of 1908 And in the aftermath of that flash flood this African American cowboy uh name Charles mcjunkin is out riding fence for one of the local ranchers seeing what he's gonna have to repair And as he's riding along his horse suddenly pitches up and its hooves slide in the mud right to the edge of this freshly cut about 30 ft chasm in the slope that he's riding And when he leans out of his saddle and looks down into this this cut what he sees are bones of a gigantic size that he's never seen before I mean this is a guy who he had been on the buffalo hunting plains back in the 18 seventies So he had seen buffalo butcher he knew what bones from big animals look like but these were giant bones And so this guy mcjunkin started trying to call attention to this site He never was able to do so and get any archaeologist out or paleontologist out to look at it Uh He dies in 1922 but about four years after his death uh this museum curator from Denver a guy named Jesse Figgins comes down and brings a crew down and I mean what Figgins is interested in He's sort of an amateur guy himself He's just interested in some fancy big bones for his museum up in Denver But his crew starts digging into this site and they began uncovering these giant bison What they're finding is a side of bison antiques These giant bison that became extinct about 10,000 years ago The ones that the Folsom people had particularly specialized in hunting and as they're excavating the site in the first summer they come across just sort of lying in the debris a couple of points like they've never seen before which are three or four inches long and have these thin flutes on either side at the base There's one there's yeah there's one right there The fulsome point So what fins guys realize is that the hurdle for convincing the world the scientific hurdle for convincing the world that humans had been present in America at the time everybody thought Indians had only been in America for maybe a couple of 1000 years before Europeans got here But the hurdle was finding an extinct animal out of the Pleistocene indicating that it had been killed by human technology while the animal was still alive And the next summer I mean it happened to be a summer when the Smithsonian had just published an article by some fancy archaeologist saying you know North America has no antiquity in its

history Indians have only been here for most 2000 years probably less than that And within about two months of that article coming out this crew finds the scapula of one of these bison they're excavating with one of these Clovis points embedded three quarters of the way into the bone And at that point they stop digging they call on all the famous archaeologists in the United States Uh A guy named Alfred Kidder was the most famous archaeologist in America at the time And he comes takes a look and proclaims this one of the greatest discoveries in American history So they don't have radiocarbon dating yet and nobody knows how old this is All they know is that that particular bison species has been extinct for quite a while Figgins says this site is 400,000 years old but when we finally do get radiocarbon dating about two decades later it looks as if a band of folsom hunters using ad adults using spear throwers had killed 32 bison antique in what had once been a box canyon on the southern plains 12,450 years ago And so suddenly that discovery in the early 20th century in the 19 twenties gives America a kind of an antiquity that it had never had before And within a decade we discover the Clovis site which is out on the Texas New Mexico border And the Clovis site is of these elephant hunters who are actually even older than the Folsom people And this pushes when they're finally radiocarbon dated that site pushes uh the dates back to the 13,000 year range So what these discoveries in the twenties and thirties are finally indicating that contrary to what most Americans of the 20th century think America is a brand new place History dates to the time Europeans got here in the 16 hundreds Uh you know Indian people have only been here a couple of 1000 years Suddenly we realize America is this really vastly old place and that sets up the subsequent story that I mean I try to what I try to do I mean I was an English major as an undergraduate So I'm kind of drawn to narrative storytelling uh telling a lot of stories And when you write a book with about 66 million years of history you obviously have a lot of opportunity to tell stories because there are a lot of stories in a span of time like that What when you say that the Clovis points and the folsom points with the the fluted uh part of it so I could attach a stick to it There's no people in Europe that figured this out No this was uh an American invention Uh did they use in Europe they were just using uh blade points sometimes with uh with the ears at the bottom So the ears yeah the ears So you have a a triangular point and it has two ears coming out and you attach you use the ears as a place to attach the raw hide And so this was metal No not metal What were they using flint They were using flint as well So so when they were making these points they were just doing it in a

different way they were doing it in a different way So they figured out the same sort of technology kind of attaching a stick but they had different methods that seemed to be just be human ingenuity When when did they figure that out Well they certainly figured it out by uh what's called the salute and culture which is a sort of a contemporary with Clovis They're hunting big animals Um They're hunting mammoths and rhinos and things like that in Europe So that's in the 16,000 17,000 year range Yeah So this this fluted idea is a distinctive North American invention Is there any difference in the quality of the type of the stone that was accessible to people in North America versus Europe Well I mean both places had outcrops of flint and flint and obsidian were the 22 types of stone you went for But uh North America had some really great flint and obsidian outcrops And one of the things that's really pretty fascinating about these Clovis people about Clovis of the beautiful and it's and they were all over America By the way there are more of their points discovered in the Southeast and in New England than there are in many places in the West So this is not just a Western phenomenon this just happens to be where we discovered them first but they were all over America But they went for they seem to be making pilgrimages to four or five locations that had the absolute best sharpest hardest flint in America And they would go back to those spots again and again and again kind of had a in their minds a mental geography of where these locations were Yeah So they one of the great things about the whole Clovis period to a little lesser extent Folsom is that there are these spectacular blades that they did and sometimes they would do blades that were like eight or nine or 10 inches long And there are some of them caches of some of these blades of that size that indicate they were never used They basically were kind of ceremonial objects I mean I kind of argue in the book I mean it's pretty much speculation because we don't really know a huge amount about these people But one of the things I I argue is that they unlike in Western Europe they didn't leave us Grand cave art of these animals that they were hunting It's almost as if their tools were their art and it was their tools kind of represented uh this ultimate technology the the sublime technology that they would actually create in some form in blaze that they never really used to hunt just to have a ceremonial objects So it's a I mean it's a really fascinating story I mean we've known about the Clovis people obviously for a long time we've been trying to figure out of course other explanations for what happened to the animals of the Pleistocene because we lost a lot of them during the Pleistocene And people have proposed all sorts of other theories

But one of the strange things about this story I mean I tried to do a book that's based on all the latest science I could find and all the best uh people who are doing archaeology and paleontology and genomic science I mean that's one of the possibilities these days It's we have genomic science that's able to tell us things now that we've never known even over the last 15 or 20 years And one of the fascinating things about it is that it's almost like climate change We've tried to come up with every other possible explanation to let ourselves off the hook for climate change but it almost looks like this is an old attribute of of human self-interest and human nature We tend to not want to blame ourselves for very much at all We tend to look for other excuses for things and none of the other suggestions about what might have happened Uh Other than humans probably entered a continent with animals that were completely naive about us and in the time that it took them to smarten up and confront us we were able to scatter them enough that what we kind of think now is that we may have gotten like populations of mammoths so separated from one another that they couldn't exchange their genes and they may have succumbed to I don't know if you've probably heard of what happened to the mammoth on Wrangell Island There was a group of mammoths out on an island um in the uh the sea off the coast of Alaska that were caught by rising waters in the Bering Sea and were isolated and survived down to about 4000 years ago But even though humans never found them even though the climate changed the animals were fine until they finally reached a point where they had a small enough genetic diversity that as they enter bred with one another over and over again mistakes began to build into their genome to the point where they finally became unable to reproduce And 4000 years ago without any other effect being present they died out Do we have biological remains or skeletal remains of Clovis people and people from that that time period Yeah we do There's a there's a actually a Clovis burial site in Montana of uh of two infants a young child and an infant And they were buried with ceremonial Clovis points several inches long covered in sacred what we think was sacred red ochre Um And that particular site in 2014 uh The local native people in Montana is near Bozeman uh and the local native people and uh and archaeologists um went out to the Shiels River the nearby Shiels river And after studying uh these these uh young skeletons uh they reburied them in the Shiels river So they returned them to the earth in 2014 So they reburied them in the same site where they found them near the same site Yeah they were found Now they were found on the banks of the Shiels river That's interesting that they chose to do that because I can understand why

they would think to respect the bodies and bury them But I could also understand like for science like what an incredible discovery Yeah Well they they did do uh science on them but their genetic material was there there was no physical tissue or anything not that I'm aware you know and I could be wrong about that but I don't think so Do they have an understanding of where these people might have come from Originally They seem to have come Yeah And again because of we do have some uh some sites uh I mean the closest people ended up all the way down into South America And we do have genomic evidence from some of the sites that have preserved enough DNA to make educated guesses about this That their origin was probably the Lake Baikal region in Siberia Uh And that they probably when the ice sheets opened they probably came down in two different migrations