Chapter 2
Montana’s First People

- What was Montana like before the first non-Indians arrived?
- Who called Montana home and how did they live?

The very first people to live in this region were resourceful. They were good at figuring out how to find or make what they needed, and they used what the land had to offer. They hunted and gathered food. They made tools, homes, and clothing. They traded with one another. They created art. They studied the stars, and they held religious ceremonies. Members of Montana’s tribal nations are the descendants (a person’s children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, etc.) of the very first people to live in this region.

Many of the animals that lived in Montana during the ice age are now extinct (gone).
12,000 TO 8,000 YEARS AGO (THE EARLY PERIOD)

No one knows exactly when people first came to Montana. We do know that people were living here over 12,000 years ago.

The land was very different then. It was the end of the last ice age. Ice covered much of Montana. The first people lived on the edge of the ice field. They hunted mastodons, mammoths, and ancient bison using short heavy spears.

These first peoples traveled in small groups. They knew where to find the things they needed. One place might have a special kind of stone, perfect for making hammers. Another place might have flint for making knives. They traveled to these places to gather the resources (useful things) they needed. They carried everything they owned with them. Do you think they owned a lot of things?

We don't have any pictures of ice age Montana. Here is what one artist thinks it might have looked like.
HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?

There are no newspapers, photographs, or letters describing life during the ice age. So how do we know what it was like?

Archaeologists are scientists who study the past by analyzing artifacts (objects created by people) that people have left behind. If an archaeologist looked through your garbage can, what could she learn about you?

Archaeologists’ close study of ancient (very old) artifacts is one way we can learn about the distant past.

Oral histories are important stories people pass down. When your grandparents tell you what life was like when they were young, they are sharing oral history. Oral histories are another way we can learn about the past. Montana Indians have oral histories that have been passed down for centuries. For example, the Salish and Pend d’Oreille oral histories describe giant animals. They also describe great floods, like ones that geologists (scientists who study the earth) believe happened 12,000 years ago.
8,000 TO 1,500 YEARS AGO (THE MIDDLE PERIOD)

About 8,000 years ago, the place now known as Montana began to grow warmer and drier. Many of the giant, ancient animals became extinct (gone). Smaller animals, like deer, antelope, and rabbits, filled the plains (flat land). More plants appeared. The people learned how and where plants grew and how to use them to make food, medicines, rope, shelters, and baskets.

*Early peoples relied on plants for food and medicine. These women are digging prairie turnips to help feed their families.*
As the environment (land, water, climate) changed, the people adapted (changed to fit new conditions). The big heavy spears they used to hunt large animals did not work for fast-moving game, so they learned to make new tools like atlatls (spear throwers).

The number of people who lived here grew. People still lived in small family groups, or bands, but they were more likely to meet other groups as they traveled. When two bands met, they shared information and ideas. They also traded with one another.

1,500 TO 300 YEARS AGO (THE LATE PERIOD)

About 1,500 years ago, the climate (typical weather conditions) changed again. The region became a little wetter and cooler. Bison (buffalo) filled in the grasslands. Soon they became the most important source of food for the people who lived here.

The bison provided many other things people needed as well. People made tipi covers and clothing from the hides, pillows from the hair, waterproof bags from the bladders, drinking cups and spoons from the horns, and knives and other tools from the bones.

Sometimes people worked together to lure herds of bison over cliffs in large communal (group) hunts. Other times smaller groups of hunters trapped bison in deep snowbanks.
At some point, people tamed dogs. Dogs became an important part of everyday life. Before horses, people used dogs to help them carry their things when they moved camp.

**THE EARLY CONTACT PERIOD, 1492–1850**

Europeans first came to the Americas in the 1500s. They arrived far from Montana, but they still changed life here.

**Horses**

The Spanish brought horses to the Southwest. Tribes in the Southwest began trading horses to other tribes. By the mid-1700s horses had come to the **Great Plains** (the flat land region west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains).

Horses changed everything. Horses could carry more weight for
farther distances than dogs could, so people could travel farther to hunt. As tribes traveled farther, trade increased. Through trade, many items made in Europe or on the East Coast of the United States came to the plains: beads, iron pots, knives, cloth, metal arrowheads, and guns.

Horses became almost as important to tribal people as bison. Capturing horses from other tribes became a way to gain honor. People measured their wealth in horses and gave them as gifts.

Horses led to more conflict between tribes, but they also provided more opportunities (chances) to trade and share ideas.

**Disease**

Imagine what would happen if a strange new disease (sickness) came to your town. The disease is very painful—and deadly. Most of the people who catch this disease die. The doctors do their best to treat it, but nothing they do
works. That’s what happened to American Indian tribes when Europeans arrived in the Americas.

Europeans did not mean to bring new diseases, but they did. Native Americans had never been exposed to these diseases. Their bodies did not know how to fight them off. Disease spread when people met to trade. These deadly diseases may have come to our region by the mid-1500s. Fur traders wrote about a huge smallpox epidemic (rapid spread of disease) here in 1782. Some experts believe that many tribes lost between 50 to 90 percent of their people to these new diseases.
These diseases changed everything. Survivors were very sad. Some tribes became powerful (because more of their people survived). Others became weak (because so many people died). Some tribes combined to form new tribes.

**TRIBES OF MONTANA**

By about 1820, most of Montana’s current Indian tribes were already here. Many had been here since *time immemorial* (as long as anyone could remember). Each tribe had its own language, history, and ways of doing things. Some tribes were close allies (friends). Others sometimes fought. Each tribe had its own homeland, where its tribal members spent most of their time. However, people often traveled outside their homeland to hunt, gather important resources, and trade with other tribes.
GLOSSARY

Abandon leave
Adapted changed to fit new conditions
Allies friends
Allotment portion
Allotment policy dividing Indian reservations into separate farms for each family
Amber yellow
Ancestors family members who lived long ago
Ancient very old
Archaeologists scientists who study the past by analyzing objects people have left behind
Artifacts objects created by people
Assimilate/assimilation to be absorbed into the majority culture, in this case, the white American culture
Atlatl a spear thrower
Bacteriology the study of bacteria
Badlands an area created by erosion of rocks and hills with little vegetation
Band group
Bison buffalo
Boom time of great prosperity or rapid growth
Capotes coats made from thick wool blankets
Chinook a warm wind that blows down the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains
Claim take for their own
Climate typical weather condition
Communal group
Constitution document that sets the rules for government
**Continent** one of the main areas of land on earth

**Continental Divide** a mountain ridge that separates North America and determines whether water flows east to the Atlantic Ocean or west to the Pacific Ocean

**Culture** a shared system of behavior, attitudes, and understandings; language, customs, and ideas

**Descendants** a person's children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, etc.

**Discrimination** treating a group of people unfairly

**Disease** sickness

**Distinct** separate

**Diversity** variety

**Drought** lack of rain

**Economy** businesses and jobs

**Environment** land, water, climate

**Epidemic** rapid spread of disease

**Erosion** the process by which rock or soil is gradually taken away by wind, rain, or water

**Essential** most important

**Extinct** gone

**Extinction** death of a species

**Fell** cut down trees

**Fertile** good for growing things

**Foothills** hills at the edge of a mountain range

**Geography** where things are, the study of particular places

**Geologists** scientists who study the earth

**Geology** minerals, rocks, and soil and the study of these things

**Great Plains** the flat land region west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains

**Homesteader** someone who received land from the U.S. government in exchange for farming that land
Immigrant someone who moves to a new country to live
Immigrate move from one country to another
Indian agent a person (usually non-Indian) who the government put in charge of a reservation
Industries types of businesses
Leased rented
Lumber wood for building
Mechanization using machines to do the work that people once did
Natural resources things found in nature and used by people
Negotiate discuss to come to an agreement
Northern Divide landform that separates water that flows north from water that flows south
Opportunities chances for something better
Oral histories important stories people pass down
Pacifist someone who believes that problems cannot be solved by fighting
Pelts skins
Plains flat land
Poultry birds raised on farms, like chickens and turkeys
Poverty being poor
Prairies flat grasslands
Precipitation rain and snow
Predate come before
Prospectors people looking for gold or other precious metals
Published printed
Pull factors things that make people want to move to a new place
Push factors things that make people want to leave their homes
**Push-pull factors** things that influence immigration (that push you out of your home country and pull you to another place)

**Reservation** an area of land that a tribe or tribes reserved (kept) for their own use

**Reserved** kept

**Residents** people who live in a place

**Resilience** strength

**Resourceful** good at figuring things out

**Resources** useful things

**Sovereign** self-governing

**Sovereignty** self-rule

**Spacious** large

**Specific** exact

**Strike** gold discovery

**Suffrage** vote

**Suffrage activist** someone working to win women the right to vote

**Surplus** extra

**Taxes** money people pay the government so the government can provide services

**Timber** wood for building

**Time immemorial** as long as anyone can remember

**Toxic** poisonous

**Traditional** old

**Transcontinental** all the way across the continent

**Transport** move

**Treasurer** the person who keeps track of an organization's money

**Treaty** agreement between nations

**Union** an organization that stands up for workers' rights and fights for better pay

**Unique** not the same as any other
CHAPTER 2 - MONTANA'S FIRST PEOPLE

Montana Historical Society is abbreviated as MHS.

p. 13, Merrell Mural by Karen Carr, 2019

p. 14, Ice age people, courtesy Montana Department of Transportation

p. 15, top, Hagen Site, chert drill, ca. 1450-1525, MHS 1987-57.17, gift of the Central Montana Historical Society

p. 15, middle, Anzick Site, chert preform, ca. 12,500 BCE, MHS L2014.01.02, on loan from Dr. Melvyn and Helen Anzick and Sarah Anzick

p. 15, bottom, Anzick Site chalcedony Clovis point, ca 12,500 BCE, MHS L2014.01.28, on loan from Dr. Melvyn and Helen Anzick and Sarah Anzick

p. 16, Fertile Crescent by John Potter (Anishinaabe), oil on foam board, 2007, MHS 2007.07.01

p. 18, Buffalo Hunt, On Snow Shoes by George Catlin, hand-tinted lithograph, ca. 1850, gift of Marguerite Labrot Spence in Memory of William H. Labrot, MHS 1979.12.21

p. 19, Untitled ledger drawing by A ho ‘Ka Qar’ish (Apsáalooke), mixed media on muslin, 1886, lent by W. W. Case, MHS L1921.01.01

p. 20, The High Priest by Lone Wolf (Hart Merriam Schultz, Blackfeet), oil on canvas, 1923, MHS 1996.01.105

p. 21, Map by Geoff Wyatt, Wyatt Design