About That Bering Strait Land Bridge....
Let's Turn Those Footprints Around

There is no argument among serious researchers that a mongoloid stock first colonized the New World from Asia. Nor is there controversy about the fact that these continental pioneers used the Bering Land Bridge that then connected the Asian Far East with Alaska.

Gerald F. Shields et al., American Journal of Genetics, 1992

The bigger the lie, the more likely it will be believed.

Joseph Goebbels, nazi propaganda minister, 1937

Tailoring the facts to fit one's theory constitutes neither good science nor good journalism. Rather, it is intellectually dishonest and, when published for consumption by a mass audience, adds up to propaganda. Such is the case with Tim Friend's September 22, 1993, article in USA Today, "Genetic Detectives Trace the Origin of the First Americans," advancing the latest set of "proofs" that the Western Hemisphere was initially populated by people migrating across a Bering Strait land bridge from Asia. One problem with the version of this idea described by Friend, as with all its previous incarnations, is that it is politically rather than scientifically motivated. It ignores or contradicts much available evidence, and it is at least tacitly racist. Since this is such a sterling example of what is commonly referred to as "eurocentric bias" in academia and the media,
it seems worth going into in some depth. To do this, we must first trace the history of the myth. We will then address defects in current iterations of Bering Strait migration orthodoxy, and draw conclusions accordingly.

Enforcement of a Myth

I prefer archaeological dates, when available, but the archaeology of America is more like a battlefield than a research topic. Given the circumstances, I suppose it is reasonable to be cautious. Only if I were forced to bet, I would prefer older dates.

Luca Cavalli-Sforza, 1992

Clearly, the maintenance of the “status quo” is a powerful force to be reckoned with. However, the World—and what we don’t know about it—would be less than it is today if we did not allow ourselves to challenge traditional foundations, knowledge, and assessments. The current resistance to ideas of change in many scientific fields... parallels the difficulty faced by turn-of-the-century American avocational and professional anthropologists in [asserting] that American Indians had an autochthonous origin in the Americas.

Alvah M. Hicks, 1994

When Thomas Jefferson first used his Notes of Virginia to advance in 1781 what became the “Bering Strait Hypothesis” in the United States, he not only attributed a mysterious “origin in Asia” to American Indians, he used “Biblical Time” to frame the argument. By this he meant that Indians could not have arrived in this hemisphere more than three millennia earlier. His express purpose was to foster the misimpression that our coming was so recent that we were no more indigenous than the Europeans who were invading our territories. It followed, so said Jefferson, that we could therefore be no more possessed of “aboriginal” rights to our land than were he and the other invaders. They themselves were thereby freed from moral constraint, in their own minds at least, to take whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted it.

Although Jefferson’s timetable never made the least scientific sense, mainstream anthropologists—for political, economic, and cultural reasons, which are in hindsight easy enough to see—quickly queued up to defend it, and continued to do so for well over a century. As late as the 1940s, the canonical “truth” insisted upon by anthropology’s leading “experts”—men like Ale Hrdlicka, curator of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum from 1909 to 1941—was that Indians could not have arrived in the Americas more than 3,000 years ago; in 1928, Hrdlicka even “had the boldness to decree at a meeting of the New York Academy... that there could not have been a Paleo-Indian.”

[Hrdlicka’s] authoritarian and negative stance on matters of early man—that is, an American population earlier than historic Indian—was so rigorous and ably defended that for decades American scholars gave no serious thought to the possibility that the occupancy of the Americas was anything but recent—no deeper than 2,000 to 3,000 years in time.

Meanwhile, anyone suggesting that Indians might have been here for some longer period was branded a crackpot: or scholarly heretic, their evidence automatically dismissed as being fabricated or at least too “controversial” to be taken seriously.

The first skeleton discovered in North America from deposits from the last glacial age, which lasted from 70,000 to 10,000 years ago, was an apparent drowning victim (1931, Minnesota Man). The relic had an appearance much like present Indians, and Hrdlicka quickly attacked the conclusions of the excavator, Dr. A. E. Jenks of the University of Minnesota, claiming Jenks had merely discovered the recent burial of a modern Sioux Indian.

Similarly, the pathbreaking discoveries in southern California made during the 1930s by Dr. George F. Carter, then Curator of Anthropology at the San Diego Museum of Man, later a geologist at Texas A&M University—among them the pair of so-called San Diego Skulls—were laughingly dismissed as “Carterfacts.” It was only when the cumulative weight of evidence from sites near Folsom, New Mexico, and Clovis, Texas, forced the issue did the “truth” of “responsible” anthropological dating begin to be revised to some extent. Even as projectile points from these two locations were found intermixed with, and even imbedded in, the bones of animals known to have been extinct since the last Ice Age—thus proving that Indians had to have been in North America for at least 10,000 years, Hrdlicka and his followers were still denying everything to maintain [their] position that man could be anything, anything at all, but not ancient in America.

Finally, in 1948, reigning dean of American anthropology Alfred L. Kroeber “resolved” the dispute, offering a grudging admission that Indians had unquestionably been present in North America for “as long as” 12–15,000 years, while, in the next breath, announcing that this was to be the new limit for “responsible estimates” concerning the duration of human occupancy in America.

It may be said that in the opinion of most Americanists, ethnologists as well as archaeologists, the first human immigrants arrived in the Western Hemisphere in late Pleistocene times. The meagerly known Clovis, Folsom and similar cultures... represent this early level of
culture,... If anything earlier than Clovis and Folsom existed in America, it has not been found.\textsuperscript{13}

Not only did Kroebere's canonical pronouncement conspicuously avoid mention of the anthropological establishment's earlier dating "errors," it was itself deliberately inaccurate and misleading. Logically, the notion that people might have first migrated across the Bering Strait into America 15 millennia ago, and have been simultaneously living in Texas and New Mexico, made sense at all; in order to have been residing in these southerly locales, they would have necessarily had to have crossed over the fabled land bridge at some point much earlier.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, at the time of Kroebere's pontification, a number of finds---Carter's, for example---clearly pointed to southerly habitation by humans thousands of years before they supposedly first arrived in Alaska.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet, more than two decades later, champions of orthodoxy like the University of Arizona's Vance C. Haynes were still parroting Kroebere's misleading evidence to the contrary notwithstanding: "After 40 years of searching, little positive evidence for earlier occupation of the New World has been found."\textsuperscript{16} During the interim, of course, a number of discoveries had so thoroughly punctured the lie to Haynes' assertion as to render it absurd. From 1951 to 1955, for instance, a series of excavations by geologist Thomas E. Lee on the Shugatikan Reserve, on Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron, yielded materials dated at "30,000 years minimum" by Dr. Ernst Antevs of Haynes' home institution.\textsuperscript{17}

Then, in 1956, Phil Orr, an anthropologist with the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, collected bone fragments from a site on southern California's Santa Rosa Island which were radiocarbon-dated at 30,000 years.\textsuperscript{18}

In 1958, a bone sample found in conjunction with a Clovis projectile point near Lewisville, Texas, was radiocarbon-dated by scientists from the Humble Oil Company Laboratory at 37,000 years; a subsequent test at UCLA dated it at 38,000 years.\textsuperscript{19} This was followed, in 1953, by the discovery by geologists A. MacStalker of remains near Taber, Alberta, which are at least 35,000---perhaps as much as 60,000---years old.\textsuperscript{20} In 1967, the world-renowned Louis Leakey---the discoverer in 1959 of Australopithecines, the oldest known pre-human remains (9 million years), as well as those of Homo habilis, the second oldest (3 million years) during the 1960s---examined a skull found near Laguna Beach, California, by an amateur archaeologist named Howard Wilson; Leakey and Ranier Berger, a UCLA archaeologist and geophysicist, dated it at 17,000 years.\textsuperscript{21}

And the evidence continued to pour in after Haynes' 1969 article. Although Orr's early reports on his Santa Rosa finds were, like Carter's on San Diego, ridiculed by the anthropological status quo, he was eventually born out right. In 1977, Ranier Berger established conclusively through radiocarbon dating that remains taken from the same locality could be dated at least 40,000 years old.\textsuperscript{22} By that point, Carter's two San Diego Skulls had also been dated by Dr. Jeffrey Rada using an even more sophisticated technique based on the racemization of aspartic acid, at 44,000 and 48,000 years respectively.\textsuperscript{23} Meanwhile, another 1975 racemization test by Bada---this one of remains unearthed by Stanford University archaeologist Bert Garow near Sunnyvale, California, in 1972---had yielded a dating of 70,000 years.\textsuperscript{24}

The response of mainstream anthropologists to all this was probably best articulated in 1976 by Robert Heizer, at the time nearing the end of his career as a Brahmin of the Anthropology Department at the University of California at Berkeley. The dates reported by Berger, Bada, and others were simply "too old," he stated unequivocally and without further investigation.\textsuperscript{25} Plainly, as an ordained "expert" on indigenous "prehistory," Heizer rejected the idea that his convenient theories should be confounded by the introduction of mere facts. Certainly, he was not alone in holding this profoundly anti-intellectual view, nor did it prove to be transient.

Even after another 15 years of revelations accruing from discoveries---including the Meadowcroft site in Pennsylvania (dated at 20,000 years),\textsuperscript{26} the Alice Boer site in Brazil (20,000 years plus),\textsuperscript{27} the Monte Verde site in Chile (30,000 years plus),\textsuperscript{28} the Tlapacoya site near Mexico City (22-24,000 years),\textsuperscript{29} Old Crow and Bluefish Lake sites in the Yukon (40,000 years plus),\textsuperscript{30} the dating of skulls found much earlier near Los Angeles (23,600 years),\textsuperscript{31} and Otavalo, Ecuador (30,000 years),\textsuperscript{32} the dating of a skull found in California's Yuma Valley (22,000 years)\textsuperscript{33} and the so-called Black Box Skull (52,000 years),\textsuperscript{34} and others---in mid-1992, an exhibition on Aztec culture held in celebration of the Columbian Quincentennial at the Denver Museum of Natural History included a placard proclaiming categorically that American Indians first came to this hemisphere "across the Bering Strait... some 15,000 years ago."\textsuperscript{35}

At the same time, those who have challenged convention in this respect by finding and publicizing physical evidence contradictory to it---Berger and Bada, for instance, or the independent archaeologist Jeffrey Goodman, and even Richard "Scotty" MacNeish, former President of the Society for American Archaeology, Director of the R. S. Peabody Foundation for Archaeology, and winner of the A. V. Kidder Award for Archaeology in 1971---are consistently ridiculed and marginalized wherever possible.\textsuperscript{36} Nor have figures like George Carter ever really been rehabilitated by their "colleagues" in the discipline of anthropology, even long after their "ridiculous" contentions have been proven correct.\textsuperscript{37}

The fact that "The Great Man," Louis Leakey---because of his own discovery of what he thought might be a 100,000-year-old site in the Calico Hills in southern California during the 1960s---shared many of the opinions of dissidents like Carter and Bada towards the end of his life is a matter carefully excluded from polite academic conversation.\textsuperscript{38} With the exception of a few arch-reactionary nay-sayers like the inimitable Vance Haynes,\textsuperscript{39} the anthropological establishment has opted to turn a blind eye, essentially pretending the
Calico Hills phase of Leakey's work never occurred. For an overview of the most important sites in North and South America, see Maps I and II.

The Land Bridge

Data have been presented on site after site with dates and geological context telling of occupations [in America] earlier than Clovis.

Herbert L. Alexander, 1978

I sense that most conservative thinkers, on the basis of the evidence reported from widely separated localities ... are now willing to concede that man probably entered America during a major interstadial of the last Glacial Period (at least 25,000 years ago).
With rare exceptions, no general archaeological formulations attempt to weave the phenomenon presented as evidence to the Pre-Clovis contention into the generally acknowledged fabric of world prehistory.

Roger Owen, 1984

Actually, aside from arrogance and obstinacy, there are some very solid reasons for anthropology’s Brahmins to have been so adamant in their resistance to datings earlier than 13,000 B.C. in the Americas. One of these concerns the geological realities of the Bering land bridge itself. There have in fact been three, and perhaps four, appearances of this phenomenon within “Human Time.” The most recent of these began about 23,000 years in the past, and ended 8,000 years ago. The one before that lasted from about 35,000 to 27,000 years ago. While there may have been another approximately 70,000 years back, the next occurrence which has definitely been established dates from a point ending some 170,000 years ago. Earlier than that, not enough is known to say.31

The problems with this are monumental. As was noted in the preceding section, there were irresolvable questions of chronology already imbedded in Alfred Kroeber’s extremely limited acknowledgment of site datings. For his descendants now to admit to the accuracy of datings of even 20,000 years in locales like Texas or southern California—given the absolute minimum time required for humans to have dispersed from Beringia to these locales under ideal conditions42—would be to render orthodoxy untenable. This is to say that they would, as a concomitant, be forced to concede that passage over the most recent Bering Strait Bridge, even if they were to revise their estimates of the moment for its first usage backward all the way to 23,000 years, cannot possibly account for indigenous American populations en toto.

Noted Mexican anthropologist José Lorenzo has remarked upon such chronological difficulties with respect to the 8,500–year-old Fells Cave site near Tierra del Fuego, at the very tip of South America. Although the dating of Fells Cave falls within the conventional timeframe, strictly speaking, Lorenzo finds it bizarre to suggest that some sense of “manifest destiny [caused its inhabitants] to set track records for the course from the Bering steppes to Patagonia.”43

On their face, these problems might be solved, and Bering Strait ideology sustained, simply by abandoning the most recent land bridge in favor of the next older, placing the date of first entry into the hemisphere at some point 30–35,000 years ago. Clearly, such a Kroeberesque maneuver would encompass a host of the datings which so flatly contradict convention in its present form. However, any such revision is blocked by methodological considerations. Both of the most recent land bridges emerged during the so-called Wisconsin glacial period, which lasted from about 70,000 years ago to a point around 10,000 years ago.44 During this Ice Age, access routes southward from Beringia were completely blocked by a glacial mass up to two miles thick.45

Most advocates of orthodoxy have attempted to address this dilemma by suggesting—based on no discernible evidence—the existence of an “ice-free central passage” or “corridor” through the glaciers, by which early migrants supposedly moved southward from Beringia en route to dispersal across the continent.46 There have, to be sure, always been more than a few issues attending this proposition. As Knute R. Fladmark, an anthropologist at Simon Fraser University, has pointed out:

If the initial population moved southward through a mid-continental corridor, one would expect that the oldest sites would occur closest to the southern ice margin, there would be a perceptible temporal gradient from north to south, and that movement into peripheral areas such as ... the Pacific Coast would show a secondary temporal gradient with decreasing age from west to east. In fact, the available evidence reflects no such gradient.47

In addition, Reid Bryson, head of the Department of Meteorology at the University of Wisconsin and specialist in Arctic conditions, studied the matter intensively during the 1970s and found that—far from being the lush passage, laden with game, as proponents described it—any such corridor would have been even more frigid and barren than the glacial mass surrounding it: “Assuming the structure of Arctic air then was like Arctic air now, air moving into southern Alberta and the plains ... should have been about 20° colder after the corridor opened than before.”48 Worse, in many ways, Bryson also concluded that, if the corridor ever existed at all, it could not have come into being until the very end of the Wisconsin Period. Certainly, no such passage existed at a point 30–35,000 years ago, during the very peak of the Ice Age.49 Consequently, no southward dispersal by land was possible during the time the second most recent Beringian land bridge existed.

Some of the more thoughtful proponents of the Beringian hypothesis have attempted to circumvent this dilemma by facing it squarely. Fladmark, for example, has proposed an alternative dispersal theory which has people crossing the Bering Strait and then moving southward, along both the west and east coasts, before turning inland at some point below the glaciers. This at least would certainly retire the “corridor controversy,” and explain some of the otherwise chronologically inexplicable datings along the Atlantic Coast (the 10,600–year-old Debert site in Nova Scotia, for instance).50 What it does not explain is why early migrants would have chosen to traverse the entire Arctic before turning southward along the eastern seaboard rather than following the lead of their relatives moving southward along the few more obvious routes down the Pacific coastline.

Fladmark’s alternative dispersal theory also fails to address the question of how people living deep in the interior of North America at dates contemporaneous with the initial appearances of their coastal cousins managed to get
there so quickly, much less why they evidenced a degree of refinement in material culture suggesting they'd been there a very long time; the Koster site in Illinois, to name but one illustration, is more than 8,000 years old, and is indicative of a long-settled agrarian civilization, living in a substantial town complete with plastered walls in its dwellings. Still less does the concept explain how or why so many sites along the southern Atlantic Coast—the 10,000-year-old Little Salt Spring, near Sarasota, Florida, comes to mind—predate by a considerable margin those in New England and eastern Canada. And then there are the many, many sites which are simply too old to be accounted for by any of these “adjustments.”

For the Bering Strait idea to be salvaged through some revision which might withstand geological/meteorological scrutiny, it would be necessary to seek recourse in the next earlier appearance of the land bridge phenomenon, about 70-odd millennia in the past. Moreover, given the strong possibility that no such formation actually existed at that time—or at least not in any traversable form—what is really at issue is the next earlier verifiable Beringian Bridge, 170,000 or more years ago.

Adoption of either of these alternatives would encompass virtually all of the older datings of sites and remains which are relatively well confirmed (e.g., the Sunnyside and the Black Box Skull), and afford the kind of temporal latitude necessary for possible resolution of questions about how people had arrived in several parts of South America long before they seem to have resided in much of North America. Relying upon the crossing of the bridge 170,000 or so years ago also accommodates the oldest and most speculative of all datings of artifacts—those at Hueytalco and El Horno, Mexico (170,000 years plus), for example, as well as those at Mission Valley, California (120,000 years plus), Texas Street” in San Diego (70–170,000 years), and at El Bosque, Nicaragua (70,000 years plus)—currently on the table.

On the other hand, incorporation of such geological coherence and consistency with existing datings serves to slam Bering Strait adherents squarely up against another sort of chronology. Resort to even the more recent of the two older land bridges, while it might redeem the theory per se, would necessarily place *Homo sapiens sapiens* (“Modern Man”) in the “New World” more than 20,000 years before “he” is supposed to have originated in the “Old World” of what is now western Europe. To accept the older, but more certain, of the two available options would be to destroy anthropological orthodoxy concerning the “ascent of man” entirely. Confronted with this quandary, even a few subscribers to convention have begun casting about for alternative sources of the population which supposedly composed the original “peopling of the Americas.”

Chagrined by the major flaws in the Bering route scenario, a few establishment archaeologists put forth alternative entry routes. The oldest proposed came in 1963 from the late Dr. F. F. Greenman.