

## Ancient Civilizations of North America

by John M Repp

The Great Courses have given us 24 lectures on 4 DVD's "[Ancient Civilizations of North America](#)" Edwin Barnhart, a director of the [Maya Exploration Center](#), gives the lectures. They opened up a whole new world for me! For the past several centuries, we in USA have been taught about native cultures by conquerors and colonizers, or by Hollywood with "cowboy and Indian" movies. To say the least, those sources were deceitful.

But these lectures, with some visuals, are delivered by an archaeologist. They give us a new and different perspective: the peoples of North America built **thriving cities and villages, well-built family houses, extensive trade routes, irrigation canals in some places for irrigation their crops, fields for playing sports, and earthwork pyramids**. Most of the ruins of these peoples were destroyed by European settlers since the mound pyramids or high points of the cities were built of earth, not stone like in Mexico. Also, later their cities had palisades surrounding their cities which were made of tree trunks which rotted away. The palisades came after warfare became more common.

The whole time period covered by the lectures is many millennia. The first migrants came from Asia via Beringia, now the Bering Sea, when the sea level was lower and it was a land bridge. When the ice age ended, mastodons, mammoths, and the giant bison became extinct. There is a fossilized giant bison in the Orcas Island museum with a broken arrowhead in it.

Also, another personal story: one summer while I was in high school, I worked with archeologists at Indiana University. They had me learn all the bones in a human skull and then gave me a big box of mud that contained a broken skull. I had to clean all the bones of the skull and paste it back together. It came from one of the mounds in Illinois.

During this long, long period, there was technological progress. The natives used baskets before they mastered pottery. They used spears and spear-throwers before they got the bow-and-arrow. There were many civilizations that rose and fell over the long period covered in this lecture series. One thing missing was a writing system, but they had art and symbols that they used to tell stories. Many different languages were spoken.

Later, most of these civilizations based their diet on the "three sisters": corn, beans and squash. Farming corn came after it was brought up from Mexico about 4000 years ago. In some of the later civilizations, they grew cotton. In California, they learned to eat acorns which required hours of leaching tannin to make them edible. In the northwest, they preserved and ate salmon. Some of these later cultures had astronomers that lined up their monuments to solar and lunar movements indicating the beginning of summer and winter. [Cahokia](#), the ruins of which are just east of St. Louis, was the largest city, but there were many others like [Poverty Point](#).

As the centuries went on, class-conflict developed as did some human sacrifice and warfare, but overall they did not have the advanced technology i.e. guns that made modern wars so deadly.

