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BEGINNINGS

In the middle of New Mexico, the grama-grass plains of the Estancia Basin spread like a tan carpet between desert mountain ranges. A lone bee patrols the purple cholla cactus blossoms, and the red and yellow "firewheels" turn slowly to follow the sun. Broad pastures, with fences that disappear in the distance, rise to the gentle highlands surrounding this basin.

Here in this remote, quiet valley, the weathered ruins of three Indian villages and their Spanish colonial missions are preserved in the three units of Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument. The silence belies the remarkable human history of this place, and the ultimately tragic drama that unfolded here in the seventeenth century, when the expanding empire of Spain finally reached these peaceful Indian towns.

The bedrock that rims this basin lies almost hidden beneath the dark green pinyon and juniper trees. Part of it is the dark red shale and sandstone of the Abo formation, laid down on coastal plains 250 million years ago. To the south the outcrops are gray, slightly younger San Andres limestone, formed when Permian seas swept over southern New Mexico. To the west rise the dramatically upswept blocks of the Sandia and Manzano mountain ranges, and to the east are the low, hard granite Pedernals.

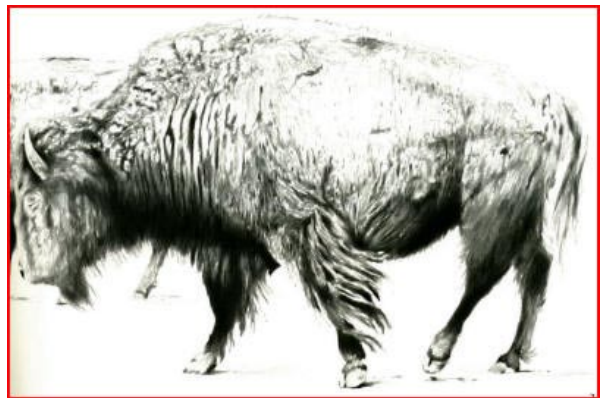
Even to the casual observer, the Estancia Basin looks as though it could have been a lake, and it once was. Just ten thousand years ago, recent as geologists count time, glaciers covered much of North America. Though the great ice sheets did not come as far south as New Mexico, temperatures here were slightly cooler then. More rain and snow fell than the sun could evaporate, and the basin filled with water.

Aerial photographs reveal concentric "bathtub rings" of beach line where the ancient lake paused as it rose or fell. Water ran into this basin, but usually did not have a way out. Runoff from the surrounding area washed minerals into the lake and, as water evaporated, these minerals were left behind and concentrated. Fossils of *Protelphidium obiculare*, a tiny salt water "foram," have been found in the Estancia Basin bedrock, which confirms that the ancient lake was brackish.

People first saw the sun sparkling on that lake millennia ago. They camped by lake-feeding streams and by springs, occasionally leaving behind tools and other artifacts. Today they are called the Clovis people, named for the New Mexico town where their artifacts were first found.

Ten thousand years ago Clovis families looked out on a different Estancia Basin than we see today. The area was green then, not red-brown desert. Rain brought its blessing to grass and moss, to bushes and trees. Elephant-like mammoths lumbered across the grasslands. Clovis people scavenged the great animals but occasionally hunted them, too—no small feat for people who only had stone weapons. Camels, giant sloth, and *Bison antiquus*, the huge, now-extinct relative of today's bison—all were familiar to Clovis people who ranged the country.

As the mammoths disappeared, hunters relied more on bison. With different needs they developed different tools, enough so that anthropologists give these later people a new name, the Folsom Culture. The Folsom lance point is a masterpiece of flint-knapping, difficult to reproduce even today.



Evidence of these early Clovis and Folsom cultures is scant. They left little, save a few camp or kill sites and some marvelously made Folsom points. Yet it is evidence enough to know people lived here, in a world greatly different from our own. Imagine the taste of prehistoric mammoth and bison, and what it must have been like to face them with only stone-tipped weapons.

Over centuries the climate warmed, and the great ice sheets to the north retreated. Precipitation decreased while evaporation increased. With the drying came the dying, and the great herds slowly became extinct. Lake Estancia also disappeared, leaving behind a brown-green grassy bowl with low-lying "salines" that become ephemeral salt ponds during the short rainy season.

The small bands of people living off the land adapted. In their constant search for food, these people rarely stayed in one place for long. They hunted small game when it was available, and gathered ripe pinyon nuts in the mountains and fat yucca pods in the flats. The land was a giant pantry to them.