Early Oklahoma hunters shaped hard stones into arrowheads.

Chapter 2

First White Visitors

**EARLY WHITE VISITORS.** There is almost as much uncertainty concerning the origins of the first white people to visit Oklahoma as there is concerning the origins of the first Indians. For many years, Francisco Vasquez Coronado was thought to have been the first in 1540.

The discovery of runestones near Heavener in eastern Oklahoma at one time pointed strongly to Viking visitors some 500 years earlier than the Spaniards. **Runes** are the letters of the **Teutonic** alphabet, an ancient writing system adopted by the people of Northern Europe, particularly the Norsemen, or Vikings.

If the runestones are genuine, then in November, A.D. 1012, some travel-weary Viking was following the treacherous Arkansas and Poteau rivers, making his way through the Winding Stair and Sugar Loaf mountains. He stopped along the way to record the journey he and his companions were making. Perhaps he anticipated its find by some future explorer or inhabitant, and he wanted it known that he had been there before them. Perhaps he feared that he would never again see his homeland, and he wanted someone to know where he had gone.

On the other hand, if the runestones are not the work of an eleventh-century Viking, they may be the sentimental carvings of the Swedish leader of a group of Germans who tried to colonize that area for the French in the early 1700s. If this is the case, as some scientists believe, then Coronado and his army were probably the first Europeans to enter the area that is now Oklahoma.

Today, reputable scientists believe that these are colorful stories but consider the Heavener runestone a “hoax” which means the stories of early Vikings and other visitors are not true.
**CORTES.** In Latin America, Cortes had defeated the Aztec nation by capturing one man, Montezuma, their god-king. The Spaniards assumed that all Indians were ruled by the same type of government as the Aztecs. Therefore they failed to control the Indians to the north, even after defeating them in battle. In fact, the god-king concept of the Aztecs was that one ruler ruled many clans and segments of the mighty nation. In the north not only did separate tribes have their own chiefs, but most tribes had several chiefs. The religions and governments of northern Indians were diverse, and each tribe was a separate nation. The Spaniards did not come prepared to deal with that situation.

**CORONADO.** In 1540, Don Antonio de Mendoza, “the good vice-roy,” had been appointed by Spanish Emperor Charles V to rule New Spain. He sent the Spanish cavalry under the command of Coronado into the unknown north country to search for gold. The conquistadors were *invincible*, and they considered all strangers their enemies. Spain was the most powerful nation in Europe, even in the world. Mendoza was confident that Coronado and his army would find and conquer the fabled
Seven Cities of Cibola. It was said that common utensils there were made from gold and that jewel-studded houses were built many stories high.

Had the Spaniards been less powerful and more friendly, history might have set quite a different course, for after crossing Oklahoma and turning west, the army did find the famous cities. From a distance the houses, well-fashioned pueblos built several stories high, sparkled as though weighted down with precious jewels. Greedy for gold, the Spanish army attacked and defeated the settlement, only to find that their “jewels” were nothing more than **gypsum** glistening in the sun. The conquering Spaniards found a little silver, some fine clay pottery, and a few trinkets. They found no gold.

Coronado and his men defeated all the cities. Coronado hoisted the flag of Spain and claimed new territory for the emperor. He recorded what he had seen in places no other white man had traveled. He found food and salt in Indian storehouses. He sent out scouting parties that explored the Little Colorado River and found the Grand Canyon. He executed many of the people he had conquered. For a year, Coronado and his men moved back and forth across the plains and mesas, fighting and searching. They never found gold. In the spring of 1542, they returned to Mexico.

The Spaniards defeated the inhabitants of Cibola with relative ease. They had three distinct advantages — the horse, the gun, and the wagon. They were able to ride in and attack and to flee swiftly because of their horses. The Spanish guns made death much more certain at greater distances than the Indians’ arrows and stones. With their rolling boxes, the Spaniards were able to carry necessary **ammunition**, food and other items for life and defense wherever they went. These items bore the element of surprise against an otherwise able enemy and left the Indians at the mercy of the Spanish Conquistadors.

During their search for riches, Coronado had traveled back across part of Oklahoma and western Kansas and had found a Wichita-type village inhabited by a tribe of tattooed farmers. Friar Juan de Padilla, a chaplain with the expedition, decided to return there when Coronado’s army returned to Mexico. Padilla wished to establish a mission for the tribe. He was accompanied by Andres de Campo, a Portuguese soldier. They ministered to the tattooed people during most of 1542 and then traveled back through central Oklahoma to visit another tribe. En route, they were attacked by a hostile tribe, and Padilla died. DeCampo and a handful of Mexican-Indians escaped. Following that time, these men spent several
Scraping tools were made from chipped stone by early Oklahoma Indians.

SPANISH LEGACY. When they departed, the Spaniards left a legacy of distrust, hatred, and violence. Most important, however, they left horses. Nothing changed the life of the western tribes as did the horses. Hunting was easier from horseback. The use of horses made them more powerful in warfare, just as they had made the Spaniards too powerful to defeat. Horses soon became the mark of wealth among those tribes. Two hundred years later, when white men again encountered the western Indians, their horses made them more formidable foes than Coronado had faced.

DE SOTO. Other animals brought for the first time into North America by the Spaniards were pigs, goats, sheep, cattle, and chickens. Hernando De Soto brought many of them because he didn’t know if sufficient food would be available to feed his army. De Soto had been sent to the New World to conquer Florida, and the Spanish emperor had made him governor of Cuba and Florida.

De Soto’s army expected to find wealth in Florida similar to the jewels and precious metals found in South America by Cortes. When they failed to find what they were seeking, they pushed on into the interior of the country. They fought the Choctaws in the Mississippi Valley and continued westward. They crossed the Mississippi River in May, 1541, and persisted onward.

De Soto’s private secretary, Rodrigo Ranjel, kept the official record of their journey. When the army reached the Grand and Arkansas River valleys in eastern Oklahoma, he recorded intricate details of what they saw. He wrote about “wild cows” that the Indians killed and about how the “cow skins” were used in many different ways. He described the complicated stockades which protected many Indian towns and villages. He told of elaborate temples in which complex rituals were performed. He told of friendly native people wearing beautiful clothes and adornments of shell
and pearl. These inhabitants guided them through the wilderness from place to place, until the Spaniards made it plain they considered the natives as nothing more than beasts to be chased by their dogs.

Finally, tired of being mistreated and robbed, the Indians became hostile toward De Soto and his men. The Spaniards, at last convinced that they would find no gold, turned back to the Mississippi River, where De Soto died of an illness on May 15, 1542. Half of his original force survived to return to Panuco, Mexico, by following the river south.

Controversy has arisen as to whether De Soto actually came within
the borders of present-day Oklahoma. Ranjel’s writings seem to indicate, however, that the expedition reached the Arkansas River and perhaps came even further into the eastern part of the state.

**ONATE.** The last major Spanish expedition into Oklahoma was led by Don Juan de Onate in 1601. Again it was a search for gold. Taking artillery carts and more than 700 horses and mules, Onate and his men followed the San Buenaventura (Canadian) River to the Antelope Hills in the western part of the state. They marched northward into Kansas and on to the country of the tattooed people. The Quivira, or tattooed people, probably lived near the location of what is Wichita, Kansas, today.

Upon their arrival, Onate’s army was attacked vigorously by the Quivira, who had greeted Coronado quite placidly 60 years earlier. The fight was so violent that most of the Spaniards were injured and forced to return to their encampment on the Rio Grande.

Although he was not interested in it as a prize, Onate recorded the beauty of the virgin land of the Great Plains, the huge herds of buffalo which grazed upon it, and the remarkable fruits and grasses he saw growing there.

**La SALLE and La HARPE.** Just as the Spanish came to seek their fortunes in the new land, so did the French — but the French did not want to conquer. The French wanted to trade, and to trade for furs in particular. Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle, never saw Oklahoma, but in 1682 he claimed the area for France. He claimed not only the Mississippi River Valley, but the rivers which flowed to the Mississippi as well. He named the area Louisiana in honor of the French ruler, King Louis XIV.

The French sought peace and trade with the Indians, but their feelings toward the Spanish were not so friendly. Louis XIV wrote in his memoirs that La Salle hoped to gain control of trade in Louisiana by securing two advantageous ports. He particularly wanted one approximately sixty miles upriver from the Gulf on the banks of the Colbert (Mississippi) River. In addition, by enlisting large native forces, supplemented by 400 or so French soldiers, the explorer planned to expel the Spaniards from the area. La Salle was certain that the Indians’ hatred of the Spaniards would seal any necessary pact between the natives and the French.

Actually, La Salle’s plan might have worked had the French army not encountered so many misfortunes. Lost in the wilderness, seeing their companions die from disease, and further weakened by desertions and
Indian attacks, the French soldiers turned against their leader and killed him in his sleep. The survivors returned to France and left dreams of New World control buried with La Salle.

Less political fur traders carried on the trade with the Indians, however, and in 1718, Bernard de la Harpe began trading along the Red and Arkansas Rivers. He established no permanent trading post, but his records added to the knowledge of historians concerned with that time period.

**Cultural Exchanges.** European-Indian contact began to cause change right away on both sides. Each contributed items to the other’s culture. In addition to corn, beans, and squash, Indians introduced Europeans to pumpkins, avocados, pineapples, chewing gum, chocolate, and other edible products. The Europeans brought peas, pears, apricots and several other fruits the Indians had not tried. They also brought wheat and the animals previously mentioned.

From the Europeans, the Indians learned metal craft. Prior to the coming of the Europeans, the Indians’ primary materials with which to make their tools and utensils were clay, wood, stone, and bone. The Europeans taught them the art of metallurgy, heating metal and hammering it into a particular shape. The Indians began to make a few farm implements and small household items. Some tribes made beautiful silver jewelry, for which they are well-known today.

For many years, Indians continued to trade with Europeans for most of the metal items needed, as they perfected their own crafts. Like the whites, Indians wanted to own knives. However, the most powerful metal item introduced to the Indians by Europeans was the gun. Gun trading was a lively, prosperous, and oftentimes law-breaking business for frontier traders.

Most Indian tribes had some form of system by which the elderly and the disabled were supported. No such system existed anywhere in Europe in the form of a government agency. Sanitation and city planning were developed sciences among some Indian tribes. These abilities account for the absence of certain diseases among the natives, or so some experts believe. Europe, on the other hand, frequently suffered epidemics of various kinds which modern scientists attribute to the lack of proper sanitation.

Perhaps the greatest surprise concerning Indian culture at the time of the Europeans’ first arrivals was the lack of a wheel. In spite of their
advanced technology in some areas, the American Indian had never developed the concept of the wheel. Therefore, some of their technical advancement may have been hindered from the extensive growth that could have occurred with the use of mobile conveyances and other mechanisms made possible by the rolling disc.

Nevertheless, excited explorers transported American art, food, and technology back to Europe while natives employed new items and ideas obtained from the Europeans, and both cultures began an intermingling.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

The following questions may be used for classroom discussion, reading checks, independent practice, or essay tests. Each question should be discussed fully whether in oral presentation or in writing.

1. Explain the purpose of the Coronado expedition and describe the results of the expedition.
2. What advantages did the conquistadors have over the Indians and how did they use their advantages?
3. How did European and American Indian cultures learn from one another?
4. What is the theory of Scandinavian expeditions into the area that is now eastern Oklahoma?
5. How did the attitude of the conquistadors, toward themselves and toward strangers, affect the outcome of the Spanish expedition?
6. Briefly describe Padilla’s expedition.
7. How did the things left behind by the Spanish affect the lifestyles of the Indians?
8. How did the French hope to succeed in their explorations and trade?
9. How did the Spanish and French explorers differ in their purposes and actions as explorers?
10. How did the explorers and the Indians make cultural contributions to one another’s lifestyles?