

Americans Before Columbus: What They Had, What They Didn't

I nearly always limit my columns to discussions specifically about the Hill Country, but after watching a TV documentary about conditions in the Americas before Columbus, I thought a few observations about the larger area would be of interest.

Those of us who think mainly about the history of our area tend to think about what the Hill Country was like before and after people of European ancestry moved in, and we envision Texas as being peopled by small nomadic tribes of Native Americans who moved with the buffalo, lived off the land, and had relatively little impact on the local ecology.

But that is a relatively parochial view. There were Indian "villages" in east Texas that were farmers as well as hunter-gatherers, as there were in much of the Eastern half of North America. And to think about the larger scale, there were the huge cities and civilizations such as the Incas of South America, the Aztecs and Mayans of Central America, and the Pueblos of our Southwest. All of these civilizations had huge farms, many irrigated, where they grew corn, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers and squash. Some domesticated turkeys, many fished streams and rivers. The ruins of their cities reveal sophisticated civilizations with advanced knowledge of mechanical and civil engineering, astronomy, and agriculture. Neither the North American or South American people were aware of each other or of the Europeans before Columbus.

So the Americas were not "empty" when Columbus sailed, nor were they peopled by only "ignorant savages" as some explorers referred to them.

But there was a lot that the Europeans had that no-one in the Americas had. Two related things were a written language that could be understood by many people and the printing press. This allowed knowledge to be disseminated much more widely and quickly in Europe than in the Americas.

Some of the most important things Europeans had that the Americans did not were domestic livestock; horses, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and chickens. These livestock all contributed greatly to the ability of Europeans to live in cities and still have plenty of food available. Raising livestock instead of hunting meant people did not need to spend as much time just in the pursuit of food. Being able to plow fields with horses instead of human power, and to thus raise many grain, vegetable and fruit crops was also a great advantage for the Europeans.

The only things close to domesticated livestock in the Americas before Columbus were llamas, which can't be ridden, can't pull a plow, and can't carry much, and the turkey. Americans also didn't have most of the vegetables that are familiar to us today.

What Americans did have was lots more land and lots more game than the Europeans, especially since much of the forests had been cut down in Europe for lumber and farming. But hunting in the Americas was difficult because Americans lacked guns and horses, so hunting buffalo involved stalking by foot or crawling through the grass and using bows and arrows or spears.

One of the important things Americans did not have was small pox, cholera and measles, and thus the American populations did not have the immunity to these diseases that Europeans had. Some estimates are that as high as 90 percent of Native American populations, both north and south, died from these diseases.

Early Settlers to the East coast brought with them the livestock listed above, but also European cereal grains (wheat, barley, oats, rye), and many vegetables and fruit trees. Although they didn't know it at the time, they were lucky that they also brought European honey bees (for honey) that pollinated their fruits and vegetables, because native bees did not recognize those plants as food sources. Unfortunately, Europeans also brought many non-native "weeds" with them as well.

Not everything was transferred from Europe to the Americas. Native Americans gave the Europeans corn, potatoes, tomatoes, sugar, and later cotton and tobacco. And they gave them syphilis.

The horses and guns brought by the Spanish Explorers greatly changed life in early U.S. It made possible the near elimination of the buffalo and made skirmishes among different tribes of Native Americans and between them and the settlers much more deadly. Iron objects such as axes and plows greatly accelerated the destruction of many forests for lumber and farmland.

So early America was not "empty" and without man-made alterations, but the pace of change accelerated greatly after the Europeans "discovered" America.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the book "Hill Country Landowner's Guide". He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.

