

ABOUT THIS PLAY:

Around 1911, a cowboy named George McJunkin rides near Folsom, New Mexico. In a dried-up stream, he discovers some giant bones. Among the bones are pieces of chipped stone. Excited by his discovery, McJunkin writes to experts to get help.

About 15 years later, some of those bones and chipped stones reach Jesse Figgins, a scientist at the Colorado Museum of Natural History. He believes that people chipped the stones into points and used them as spearheads. The points, Figgins believes, show that humans lived in North America thousands of years ago.

But he has to prove his idea to other scientists. So, in the summer of 1927, he goes to Folsom with other leading scientists.

CAST

*Narrator

Alfred V. Kidder, Scientist from the Peabody Museum, Massachusetts.

Frank H.H. Roberts, Jr., scientist from the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Barnum Brown, scientist from the American Museum of Natural History, New York City

Jesse D. Figgins, scientist from the Colorado Museum of Natural History

***Short Legs**, 14 years old

Mother

Laughing Water, 12 years old, Short Legs' sister

Grandmother

Quick Feet, his friend, 15 years old

Deer Killer, a hunter, 19 years old

Wise Leader, the tribal chieftain

The Mystery of the Folsom Spear

ACT ONE

Narrator: On September 4, 1927, a group of scientists gathers at the digging site near Folsom.

Kidder: Well, Jesse, you are right. The spearhead is definitely right in with the bison's bones.

Roberts: You've already shown that the bones belonged to 23 bison of a type that became extinct 10,000 years ago. The spearheads must be that old, too. You've proven that there were humans hunting in North America 7,000 years before we all thought there were!

Brown: This is a big day for you, Jesse.

Figgins: It's a big day for science and for our knowledge of the earliest Americans. I've always thought these bison were killed by humans. Why else would so many of the skeletons we've found be missing their tailbones? It's clear that the bison were skinned and their tails taken with the fur.

Brown: The earliest Americans needed the fur to protect themselves. In those days, the earth's climate was generally colder than it is today.

Kidder: But, in some ways, you know, these bones raise more questions than they answer.

Brown: You've seen the evidence yourself. . . .

Kidder: Yes, and I agree now that there were people living here 10,000 years ago. But how did they live? Their only tools were made out of wood, bone, and

stone. And they didn't even know how to farm.

Figgins: I know what you mean, Al. When I look at these spearheads, I wonder what happened here. How did men armed only with spears kill 23 bison – bison much bigger than today's American buffaloes? They didn't have bows and arrows.

Brown: They might have had atlatls (at-LAT-els). Those handheld launchers would put a lot of force behind the spears.

Figgins: Yes. You know, that spearhead by the bison's bones fascinates me. It proves that people existed here 10,000 years ago. I wonder what the story behind it is.



ACT TWO

Narrator: Like the scientists, we can only take an "educated guess" how these bison were killed. But, piecing together the evidence, we might imagine a few families gathered together 10,000 years ago. Their small shelters, made of branches covered with furs, protect them against the

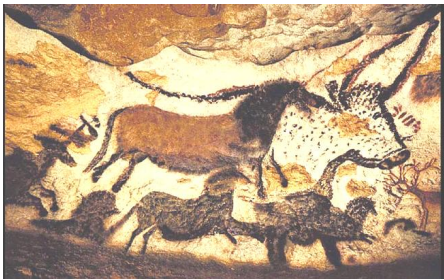
cruel wind of early winter. Short Legs, a boy small for his age, sits with his family before a fire outside their shelter.

Mother: Take more meat, my children. The spirit of the Great Bison is good to us today.

Laughing Water: Yes, the herd of bison is near. The men have been making their spears and preparing for the hunt all day. Tonight, they will dance and pray to the Great Bison to give them the power of hunting magic. Then they will be ready to hunt tomorrow.

Short Legs: I wish I could go with them.

Laughing Water: You are too small! You would only get in everyone's way. You are the size to hunt lizards, not deer or buffalo.



Short Legs: And you are too foolish to even scrape animal hides. No hunter will ever be interested in a girl with such a foolish tongue!

Mother: Shush, the two of you. The hunt is hard and dangerous. Many do not return. Your father and grandfather were killed by charging animals. I am grateful that my only son is still too small to go.

Short Legs: But my friend Smooth Stone, who played with me all my life, goes on the hunt tomorrow.

Laughing Water: He is called Quick Feet now. He makes spears and has a man's name.

Short Legs: He is allowed to go on the hunt. When will I be allowed to go on my first?

Mother: When the men think you are tall and strong enough, my son. Have patience.

ACT THREE

Narrator: A few hundred yards away from the main camp, five men sit around another fire. They have spent the day chipping away at stone to make spearheads. Then they bind the spearheads to sticks to form spears. Quick Feet has tied his last spear too quickly. As he lifts it up, the spearhead falls off the stick.

Deer Killer: Quick Feet, you must be more careful when you make your spear. If it broke like that at the hunt, you could die.

Quick Feet: You forget my new name. I got it by racing to kill a deer. I can always run out of an animal's way.

Wise Leader: Quiet! The spirit of the Great Bison does not listen to boasters. We must pray that it will give us hunting magic – the magic to kill its living brothers tomorrow. There must be no idle chatter while I dance before the fire.

Narrator: A voice from beyond the circle rings out.

Short Legs: Great hunters! I wish to join you.

Narrator: The hunters raise their spears.

Deer Killer: Who disturbs our prayer?

Quick Feet: I recognize the voice. It is my friend Short Legs.

Deer Killer: Oh, that little one. He belongs with the women!

Wise Leader: One who still has only a child's name must not see the hunting dance. If he does, we will not receive the Great Bison's hunting magic.

Narrator: Quick Feet grabs the stick without a spearhead and throws it in Short Legs' direction.

Quick Feet: Go away, Short Legs. Your time will come.

ACT FOUR

Narrator: The next morning, Short Legs watches the men leave for the hunt. Then he goes to his grandmother's shelter.

Short Legs: Grandmother, where are you?

Grandmother: Here, by the fire. I must sit close to keep warm.

Short Legs: Do you want my deerhide cloak, too?

Grandmother: You are a good child. But I do not want to hurt your chances of making it through this winter. My time to die is near.

Short Legs: Oh, Grandmother, you cannot leave us now! Not before I go on a hunt and get a man's name.

Grandmother: That time will be soon. You are a brave boy. The strength of your grandfather is in you.

Short Legs: But I am too small. The men will not let me join them.

Grandmother: When they do, your grandfather's skill will go with you. Wait.

Narrator: The old woman goes into her shelter and comes out with a beautifully chipped stone.

Short Legs: A spearhead! Look how sharp it is. Grandfather made it?

Grandmother: It was the spearhead of the weapon he had in his hand when a bison crushed him. The blood of the bison and of your grandfather is still on it.

Short Legs: I will make a beautiful spear out of it.

Grandmother: Then I will give you his spear-launcher, too. Your grandfather was a great hunter. Now his spirit is with the Great Bison. When you are older, he will help you get hunting magic.

Short Legs: If only I could get the chance now.

ACT FIVE

Narrator: Short Legs goes toward the nearby bison herd to collect dried bison dung, fuel for his grandmother's fire. He passes the spot where the men prayed the night before.

Short Legs: Oh, if only they had let me join them last night! Look, here is the spear-stick Quick Feet threw at me. It is a good stick, well balanced. If I bind Grandfather's spearhead to it, I will have a wonderful spear.

Narrator: Short Legs makes his spear and walks toward the bison herd. In the distance, he sees a group of bison drinking from a stream at the bottom of some low hills. The hunters, readying their spears in their spear-launchers, surround the group.

Short Legs: They will not let me use my spear. But if I get closer, I can watch.

Narrator: As Short Legs gets closer, the men begin to throw spears and rocks at the bison, driving them toward nearby cliffs. One bison, wounded, starts to charge out at the hunters.

Wise Leader: That beast will crush us. Someone, stop him!

Quick Feet: I will try.

Narrator: As the other men scatter, Quick Feet starts to run towards the bison's right side. He positions his spear in his spear-launcher. But before he can throw, Quick Feet catches his legs in some dead grass and falls down. The bison, its horns lowered, starts to charge him.

Short Legs: I must do something to save my friend.

Narrator: Short Legs takes his spear and puts it into his grandfather's spear-launcher. Putting the spear-launcher over his shoulder, the boy flips it forward with all his might. The spearhead plunges deep between the beast's ribs. Bellowing in pain, it staggers, collapses on its knees, and dies.

Short Legs: Get up and run, Quick Feet.

Quick Feet: Short Legs, what magic brought you here and gave you such strength?

Narrator: Wise Leader comes over.

Wise Leader: You have saved a hunter's life. You are worthy of the hunt, Short Legs. Come and join us as we cut up the kill.

ACT SIX

Narrator: That evening, Short Legs and his family sit by the fire.

Mother: Our people have eaten well tonight. I am proud that my son has such great hunting magic.

Laughing Water: And you brought back the biggest bison skin. I will scrape it tomorrow until it is clean and smooth. Then

you will have a man's bison robe to wear.

Grandmother: Your grandfather has gotten the Great Bison's spirit to smile on you, Short Legs. You will be a great hunter, as he was.

Narrator: Wise Leader, Quick Feet, and several of the men approach the family's fire.

Wise Leader: Do not call him Short Legs anymore. He may be small, but he has great strength. From now on, his name is Strong Thrower. He will pray for hunting magic with other men.

Play originally found in Junior Scholastic Magazine.

