



View of St. Louis, 1846, by Henry Lewis. Courtesy The St. Louis Art Museum

Gateway to the West

Here, near Gateway Arch, the Missouri River empties into the Mississippi. That is why young Pierre LaCledé founded the vil- lage of St. Louis here in 1764. He intended it to be a trading center, and the Missouri water highway was vital to any plan to tap the wealth of the West. His judgment proved sound.

In 1803 Lewis and Clark outfitted here for their epic explora- tion of the Louisiana Purchase. Three years later they returned, and reported that the western part of the continent was a fabu- lous land, thick with beaver. Soon St. Louis became fur trader to the world, and the pleasant park where the arch now stands was an exotic and busy place. In candle-lit shops and taverns,

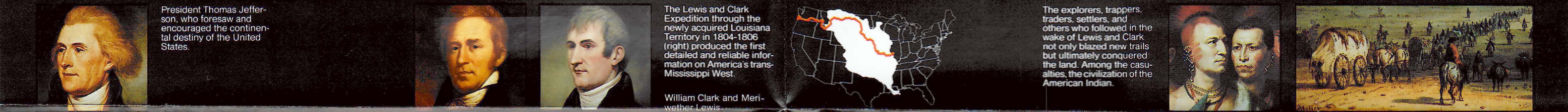
rough-looking men spoke names from the geography of fantasy as though they'd just gotten back—for they had: Santa Fe . . . Great Salt Lake . . . Absaroka . . . Yellowstone. Their furs piled up in warehouses along the waterfront, and on hot days even a stranger could guess the city's main business. The boom lasted until about 1840, when prices fell. But a different, even greater period was just around the corner.

The new boom was westward emigration. The fur trappers' stories had whetted the appetites of land-hungry settlers in the East and even in Europe. At the same time the steamboat came into its own, and the river's importance multiplied. The old wharf at the foot of

the Arch, where four boats tie up now, saw scenes of confusion that sometimes bordered on chaos. Pioneers, merchants, ne'r-do- wells, immigrants, all came in on steamboats that sometimes moored to other steamboats since the whole wharf was full. (This is the period of Henry Lewis' painting above.) They outfitted here and headed west, to Oregon's land or California's gold. The city grew as merchants sprang up to supply the pioneers' needs. Occasionally disaster struck. In 1849 a fire burned the whole downtown area (approximately the present park), and this was followed by a murderous cholera epidemic. But the presence of the cathedral (the spire by the tree in the painting) and the court- house (shown here with its original smaller dome) indicates that

St. Louis was no longer just a frontier settlement, but the com- mercial crossroads of the West.

In 1874 Eads Bridge was finished and the railroad era began; steamboats gradually became fewer and fewer. Then in 1890, the U.S. census said there was no more frontier. Today the waterfront is a quiet grassy park. But St. Louis—and the Nation—have not forgotten this city's past. The courthouse—affectionately called "the Old Courthouse" now—is preserved in the park and visitors tour it daily; the Old Cathedral still is open for visitors of all faiths; traffic still rumbles across Eads Bridge; and over it all towers the stunning Gateway Arch. This is a place for remembering.



President Thomas Jefferson, who foresaw and encouraged the continen- tal destiny of the United States.

William Clark and Meri- wether Lewis

The Lewis and Clark Expedition through the newly acquired Louisiana Territory in 1804-1806 (right) produced the first detailed and reliable infor- mation on America's trans- Mississippi West.

The explorers, trappers, traders, settlers, and others who followed in the wake of Lewis and Clark not only blazed new trails but ultimately conquered the land. Among the casu- alties, the civilization of the American Indian.

Exploring the West

In 1800 the United States stretched from the Atlantic to the Mississippi—and stopped. An impartial observer would have seen little chance of the young, struggling country ever reaching the Pacific. But President Thomas Jefferson was not an impartial observer. He sought at least free navigation of the Mississippi for the young country, and possibly he was thinking beyond that as well. But France claimed most of the other side, and Napoleon appeared to be contemplating a New World empire. Napoleon's problems were real: he faced yellow fever, distance, and British seapower; and Jefferson made sure Napoleon knew the vigor and determination of the American people. Napoleon, needing money for European adventures, chose to sell Louisiana to the United States. Without a shot, the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the Nation.

But what had Jefferson bought? He sent the Lewis and Clark Expedition to find out, and it left St. Louis in the spring of 1804. Pushing against the Missouri's muddy current was hard, and the hot, mosquito-infested summer was a good introduction to western travel. Lewis and Clark spent the first winter at an Indian village in North Dakota. There they were joined by a young

Indian girl, Sacagawea, who was to be a definite help on the journey, though not the indispensable guide that later myths made her.

Spring 1805: they began again, up the Missouri. There were "firsts" almost daily: the first grizzly to be scientifically described, the first pronghorn, the first mountain sheep. Wool gave way to buckskin; equipment wore out and was replaced with wilderness substitutes. The Missouri became a mountain stream, then gave out altogether. They purchased horses from the Indians. (Often the expedition depended upon Indians, for shelter, food, guid- ance, and transportation.) Also there was diplomacy, as they informed the Indians of the new United States sovereignty.

Now they were crossing the Rockies. What had been blank spaces on maps in St. Louis turned into great cliffs, tangled timber, and rushing rivers. The two-week forcing of the Bitter- root Mountains, in snow, was the worst hardship of the whole journey. But they made it. They reached the Clearwater River and followed it to the Columbia, which finally led them to the Pacific. Americans had crossed the continent.

The government continued to sponsor exploration of the West. Lt. Zebulon Pike and Maj. Stephen Long both led long treks across the Great Plains and into the eastern Rockies. (They revealed much, but unfortunately they also declared the plains "The Great American Desert," a tremendous misconception that took decades to correct.) Lt. J. C. Fremont's reports of his western travels were accurate, readable and widely distributed. Other government explorers filled in "the areas between" by solid scientific discovery and description, revealing not only paths across the West but what was there as well.

Private citizens filtered west too. There was profit to be made in furs, and soon valleys remote even to Indians beheld an astonishing sight: a figure on a horse, loaded Hawken at hand, slowly pushing up yet another stream. This was the legendary mountain man. His was a precarious existence. There were a dozen ways he could die each day, by cold or heat or thirst, by grizzly or rattlesnake, by falling or drowning or accidental gun- shot. Indians too were beginning to recognize the threat to their homeland, and began a long and bitter resistance that they were destined to lose.

Each summer a supply-laden pack train made the long, danger- ous trek from St. Louis to some agreed-upon "rendezvous" in the mountains, and mountain men gathered from everywhere. They had been living far from their fellows for a year, in constant danger and testing, and now they let loose for a two-week blowout. They drank, gambled, raced horses, fought, and engaged in a legendary talent for exaggerating stories that didn't need it; even unembellished their experiences were extraor- dinary. Mixed in with all of this was an exchange of geographic information among men who'd "been there." Somehow the trad- ing finally got done, and by a remarkable coincidence it seemed that whatever the number of pelts a man had, they just about equalled the cost of supplies needed for the next year. The pack train returned to St. Louis and the mountain men went back to the high places, to trap again, to spend the long winter holed-up in some valley, perhaps with a temporarily friendly Indian band, and to wait for the next rendezvous. But around 1840 the ren- dezvous just weren't the same. Overtrapping and falling fur prices signalled the end of the mountain man era. Theirs had been a hard freedom that in some places—like the Museum of Western Expansion—we can appreciate, but never duplicate.



The Museum of Westward Expansion, located be- neath the Memorial Arch, contains exhibits, films, and artifacts (like those shown here) to help visitors understand what it was like to go west in the 19th century.

Objects are not labeled in this museum, for this is a museum of people, not of things. Ideas are expressed by the words of those who were there. The museum tells their story and, in a broader sense, ours as a nation.

Settling the West

By 1840 the West was no longer totally unknown. The fur trade had revealed the basic river systems, basins, and mountain ranges. The Santa Fe trade was well established, and trade with the western Indians was a generation old. But St. Louis was still, as it had been in 1800, the "jumping off place," where settlement ended and the West began.

The expansion of settlement thus far in the country's history had been rapid and steady. From the Atlantic seaboard the settlers had planted farm after farm, always westward. The pattern was "leap-frog," as each settler went just beyond the furthest farm to establish his own on virgin land, and the individual farm was the basic increment of advance. But at the vast, unfamiliar, treeless plains the process stalled. The Nation's expansion paused, waiting for the proper moment to begin again.

The moment came. Economic troubles in the late 1830's coincided with word filtering back from Oregon that acted as a lure. Farmers suffering Northeastern winters heard that Oregon was a farmland utopia, and near the Pacific too, which meant access to world markets. A thousand private decisions, for as many reasons, brought about an unprecedented phenomenon: a people that had spread across half a continent would now make a 2,000-mile leap to the far side of it.

Each spring found St. Louis a busy place, as would-be emigrants outfitted, shared anxious scraps of information and misinformation, and boarded steamboats for Independence, there to form into wagon trains. At a meeting in some muddy pasture—noisy democracy—they elected officers, and one April morning they

headed west. Usually an ex-mountain man led the train, with its cargo of dreams, confusion, and determination.

The first weeks were shake-down. The men learned how to hang a harness at night so it wasn't tangled in the morning, and the proper technique for crossing streams. Women learned to cook unfamiliar foods, using buffalo chips for fuel. And kids, on the greatest adventure of their lives, saw their first lizard and stepped on their first cactus. The family wagon became a familiar place. These were not the great freight-carrying "conestogas" of the Santa Fe Trail, but smaller and lighter.

For many, the trip was the great passage of their lives, with new scenery and a brand new life waiting at the other end; but death and tragedy were common on the trail too. Rarely was the cause Indians. It usually came from an accident with firearms or stock, or ordinary sickness made worse by trail-weariness and unsanitary conditions, or—most dreaded of all—cholera. About 10 percent of those who started never made it.

On the high plains the pioneers wondered at the strange, con- torted landscape, so unlike anything they had ever seen before. You can still see it today at places like Scotts Bluff, Chimney Rock, Devil's Gate. Finally a friendly little stream called the Sweetwater led them to South Pass, on the continental divide. They ceremoniously stopped at a small spring on the other side and drank water that, like them, was heading for the Pacific.

They were seasoned travelers now, but a thousand miles had taken its toll and they were weary; yet ahead lay even sterner

tests. They crossed and re-crossed dangerous rivers, and pulled their way between great mountain ranges. Finally the endless journey ended, and they were in Oregon. A few were disap- pointed, for there had in fact been exaggerations in the reports they had received back east. But it truly was a rich land, and many of the pioneers founded successful farms and communities. It was because of them that Oregon and Washington became part of the United States in a settlement with England in 1846.

In 1848 gold was discovered in California, and in a modern trick of alchemy, gold + mania = GOLD RUSH. The flood of people going west now dwarfed the earlier emigrations. Sometimes it seemed that the line of wagons across the country was almost continuous. As the easy gold played out prospectors fanned out over the mountains, working their way inland, to Nevada and Montana and Colorado. Each strike created a new boom town. Some of these ramshackle towns grew into great cities, while others are ghost towns today. Each of them was another step in the settlement of the West.

The Great Plains, crossed by so many enroute to the West, was the last area to be settled. This was not a failure of drive or desire, but of circumstances and technology. Water was deep underground, communications were slow, distances vast. The first successful exploitation of the prairies was raising cattle. The growing industrial cities of the East needed meat, and soon great herds of longhorns began to supply it. It was the era of the unfenced range; longhorns ranged far and wide, then were rounded up, driven to the nearest railroad, and shipped to market. The drives got shorter and shorter as the railroads

pushed further and further onto the plains. When it became fea- sible to fence pastures, the day of the open range was over. It had been a fabulous era, one that added the cowboy to the American gallery of heroes. The invention of barbed wire and the cheap, efficient windmill pump meant that now the plains could be both ranched and farmed.

The first to farm the prairies were called "Sodbusters," and no one ever worked harder. The plains were treeless, so they made their houses of sod. Work started before daybreak and never let up; they endured duststorms in August and blizzards in February, locusts all summer, and drought anytime. And their women! What can we say about those women who endured the primitive con- ditions, the backbreaking toil, the empty loneliness of the prairie farm? They as much as the men were responsible for the check- erboard wheatfields airline passengers see today while flying over the breadbasket of the world.

The century was an astonishing one. Go back merely to 1800, and the Lewis and Clark Expedition had not yet occurred, whole unexpected mountain ranges were behind the mist, the West a blank. A mere 90 years later the Census Bureau reported that there was no longer a definable frontier! The mountain men, the Indians who were displaced, the scared, excited pioneers on the Oregon Trail, the 49ers searching empty rocks for gold, the cowboy on his lonely nightwatch, the even lonelier wife in a sodhouse—all saw their day, and some lived to see it pass and the modern era come in. They should not be forgotten. This place, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, is a monument to them all.

