



## What the Lewis and Clark Expedition Means to America

By Dayton Duncan

### EDITOR'S NOTE

The following speech was presented at the May 1997 National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Council meeting in Nebraska City, Nebraska.



In the spring of 1805 Lewis and Clark and their Corps of Discovery passed the mouth of the Yellowstone River into what is now Montana, pushing forward, farther than any white men had gone before on the Missouri. The riverbanks swarmed with game—and the men were astonished not only at the number of animals but at their relative tameness.

"I think that we saw at one view nearly one thousand animals," wrote Sergeant John Ordway. "They are not today very wild, for we could go within 100 yards of them in open view, before they would run off, and then they would go but a short distance before they would stop and feed again."

"Saw a buffalo calf," he continued, "which had fell down the bank and could not get up again. We helped it up the bank and it followed us a short distance."

The first bighorn sheep they had ever seen appeared on cliffs above the river. Geese, swans, pelicans and cranes flew overhead. Bald eagles were everywhere, and Ordway got the quills from one of them to use in writing his daily journal. Beaver were so numerous that the smacking of their tails on the water kept Clark awake at night. Lewis had brought along a Newfoundland dog, and it caught an antelope crossing the river. The men briefly made pets out of a litter of wolf pups.

"The game is getting so plenty and tame in this country," Ordway finally wrote, "that some of the party clubbed them out of their way." Then he looked down on the ground and saw the biggest paw prints he had ever seen. He and the other men began to get excited. The previous winter the Hidatsas had told the explorers about a bear they would meet farther west: big, ferocious, absolutely fearless, and almost impossible to kill. On April 29 Lewis and another hunter finally saw their first one and killed it. It was a grizzly. The bear was big—nearly nine feet from nose to hind toe, an estimated 400 pounds after it was dressed—and while he could understand why Indians might be frightened of one, Lewis wrote in his journal that Americans with muskets had little to fear.

Then they met another grizzly. And then another, and another. Some took 10 to 12 slugs to kill. Some chased the men up trees,

across the plains, over the river bank. Finally, a chastened Lewis wrote in his journal, "I find that the curiosity of our party is pretty well satisfied with respect to this animal."

Over the last 15 years I have retraced the Corps of Discovery's route from St. Louis to the Pacific and back four times. More times than I can count, I have made additional trips to specific locations along their route. In making our recent documentary film I have stood on the deck of a keelboat near St. Charles as it pushed through the red mist of early dawn and navigated against the Missouri's relentless current. I have sweltered in the heat in Iowa. In Nebraska and South Dakota I have been eaten alive by chiggers and mosquitoes. I have slept in an earth lodge in North Dakota when the temperature outside was 30 degrees below zero. A few days later, when it was even colder and the radio was warning North Dakotans to stay indoors, I was standing with a cameraman, knee deep in snow, shooting a scene at the McLean County Historical Society's reconstruction of Fort Mandan.

I have been through the magnificent White Cliffs of the Missouri about six different times—once with Steve Ambrose nearly 15 years ago when the temperature was in the 90s; another time, more recently, with my friend and colleague Ken Burns when a thunderstorm broke over our campsite, invaded the ground beneath our tents, and left us cold and sodden for the next two days. I have stood in awe at the base of the Great Falls, unfurled a 15-star flag at the summit of Lemhi Pass, been caught by surprise in a sudden snow squall in early October in the Bitterroot Mountains. I have gotten seasick in a boat bobbing and rolling on the swells in the mouth of the Columbia. And I have spent a truly unforgettable night at Fort Clatsop, alone with the spirits of the Corps of Discovery. As I read from their journals, I could share their mixed feelings of accomplishment and homesickness as they huddled on the Pacific Coast with an entire continent between themselves and their countrymen.

And yet, I must say, "I find my curiosity with respect to this expedition is *never* satisfied."

Why is that? What is it about the expedition that keeps drawing me back? I don't think it's some personal quirk of my own, because I have met many people, from all walks of life, with the same fascination and for whom an interest in the Lewis and Clark expedition is the only thing they share in common. What does the expedition mean—not just to me and so many other Americans, but to America itself? Let's consider the possibilities. For starters, there's a fascinating cast of characters:

➤ Meriwether Lewis—the brilliant but troubled commander. His journey took him from the comfort of the White House at the

side of one of our nation's greatest presidents—and greatest minds—to becoming the first United States citizen to reach the Continental Divide, then on to the Pacific and back to Washington, D.C., where one senator told him it was as if he had just returned from the moon. Along the way, in describing an almost indescribable landscape, he penned some of the finest, most lyrical passages ever written by any explorer—or any writer, for that matter. His “scenes of visionary enchantment” from the White Cliffs and his description of the Great Falls rank as classics in American literature. Sadly, his personal journey took him to a darker rendezvous with his own demons at Grinder's Stand three years after becoming a national hero.

➤ William Clark—gregarious, steady, trustworthy; a self-taught mapmaker of the highest order. He, I believe, was the rudder of the expedition, the man who kept things moving on an even keel. My own belief is that there could not have been a “Lewis expedition,” even though Jefferson always considered it as such; without Clark we might not be preparing for a bicentennial celebration.

➤ York, Clark's slave, startled Indians who had never seen a black man. They called him “Big Medicine” because of his size and color. Oh, if only he had kept a journal! What we might learn from someone, raised a slave because of his color, who found himself in cultures that honored him because of his color.

➤ Sacagawea, the Shoshone Indian woman, and her baby Jean Baptiste. I wish she had kept a journal, too. Some novelists have tried to overstate her role—and her relationship with Clark—but the facts are really enough. Who can estimate what it meant to the men, as they dragged their canoes against the swift, cold, shallow current of the Jefferson River, to learn from her at Beaverhead Rock that they were finally reaching the headwaters of the Missouri and the homeland of her people? And no novelist in his or her right mind would ever try to concoct the amazing coincidence that the Shoshone chief upon whom the entire success of the expedition rested—the man who could either provide the expedition with horses it needed to cross the mountains or leave them to their own devices—would turn out to be Sacagawea's brother.

➤ Toussaint Charbonneau, Sacagawea's husband, about whom neither Lewis nor Clark ever had one good word to say—except that he made an exquisite white pudding, *boudin blanc*, using a recently emptied buffalo intestine.

➤ Pierre Cruzatte, the one-eyed boatman who played the fiddle while other men danced and who almost killed Lewis by mistaking him for an elk; and George Drouillard, the master hunter. They were the sons of French-Canadian fathers and Indian mothers.

➤ Shannon and Ordway, Whitehouse and Gass, and so many others, including John Colter, who was destined to remain in the West and become one of America's first “mountain men”—the direct link between the expedition and the next phase of the nation's expansion into the West.

And then there's an equally diverse and fascinating cast of Indian people the expedition met along the way:

➤ Wise and proud people like Black Buffalo of the Teton Sioux, who defused the tense moment that could have ended the expedition before its first summer was over.

➤ The generous Sheheke of the Mandans, who told Lewis and Clark before that harsh winter in North Dakota, “If we eat, you shall eat; if we starve, you must starve also.”

➤ Cameahwait of the Shoshones, whose people were starving, who had to decide whether to delay the annual buffalo hunt in order

to help the first white men his tribe had ever encountered.

➤ Twisted Hair of the Nez Perce, whom Clark described as a cheerful, sincere man. And the old Nez Perce woman the expedition does not mention but who may have persuaded her people to befriend the strangers from the East: Watkuweis, who told the Nez Perce, “Do them no hurt.”

All of them—and so many others—were told that they had a new “Great Father” in the East, and were promised health and prosperity now that the United States was claiming the West—a promise I believe Lewis and Clark made in good faith, but a promise that, we now know, the nation that followed them across the continent did not fulfill.

There is one essential person who never made it west of the Blue Ridge Mountains—Thomas Jefferson. To Lewis he was “the author of our enterprise”; Clark called him “that great Character the Main Spring of the action.”

With Jefferson's involvement the expedition takes on a larger meaning. Intermingled with his dispatching of Lewis and Clark, Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory, an incredible act of diplomacy that doubled the size of his country and changed the course of American history.

With Jefferson there is an analogy between the Corps of Discovery and the race to the moon 150 years later. Think of all the connections. This was the first official exploration of unknown spaces ever undertaken by the United States. It was prompted by an international race for prestige and control of those spaces. Jefferson told his rivals that the expedition was for science, then he sold it to Congress on commercial benefits. It was staffed by the military and employed the latest technology—the air gun and Harpers Ferry rifles; portable soup, that Tang of the early 19th century; and the keelboat, the biggest vessel the Missouri had seen at that point, the Saturn booster rocket that lifted them to the edge of the unknown before dropping back to “earth.” The explorers brought back samples they collected—and though prairie dogs aren't moon rocks, they still generated intense interest among the public. The men returned as national heroes, with gala balls in every town rather than ticker-tape parades. Some, like the astronauts who followed, had difficulty adjusting to civilian life after re-entry. And, of course, the project overran its budget. Throughout it all was the mind of Thomas Jefferson, with Monticello as “Mission Control.”

What does the expedition mean to America? Consider this: The long trajectory to the moon and beyond was launched by Jefferson in the model he conceived with the Corps of Discovery. And the country's push to become a *continental* nation was also set in motion by the same remarkable president.

What else does the expedition mean? If you are interested in ethnology, there exists no better record of the dizzying diversity of Indian peoples of the West at the dawn of the 19th century than the journals of Lewis and Clark: people who lived in teepees and followed the buffalo herds on horseback; people who dwelt in permanent villages of earth lodges and tilled the soil; people who lived on rivers and survived on fish; people who braved the ocean, traveling by boat; people who for hundreds of generations had called the land *their* home; people without whose help the expedition would never have succeeded.

Some of the tribes had never seen white people before. As Joseph Whitehouse wrote of one encounter, “They signed to us that they

thought that we had rained down out of the clouds." Other tribes were already well-acquainted with whites, such as the Indians of the lower Columbia who had long contact with sailors. Wrote Lewis:

*The persons who usually visit the entrance of this river for the purpose of traffic or hunting I believe are either English or American. The Indians inform us they speak the same language with ourselves and give us proofs of their veracity by repeating many words of English, such as musket, powder, shot, knife, file, damned rascal, son of a bitch, etc.*

Whatever their previous history, each tribe's customs, habits, dwellings, food and other details of their lives were studiously recorded in the journals. And they are invaluable today, not only to modern scholars but to people in those tribes who wish to reach across nearly two centuries of ceaseless change to recapture part of their own traditions and history.

The expedition is important to science—descriptions of 122 animals and 178 plants never before written down for what Lewis called "the enlightened world." Beyond that, the journals provide vivid descriptions of a terrain filled with wildlife in ways none of us will ever see: Plains covered by elk and antelope and buffalo herds numbering, Clark estimated at one spot, nearly 10,000; herds that made him stop his canoes on the Yellowstone for hours as the beasts crossed the river; prairie dog villages covering ten acres of ground; grizzly bears living on the plains; California condors flying overhead near the Pacific; and the Columbia River literally choked with salmon.

But more than anything else, this is a great story—our nation's own Odyssey, filled with hundreds of smaller, equally great stories and moments.

Sad moments—like the death of Sergeant Floyd during the first summer, just upriver from Nebraska City. "I am going away," he whispered to Clark, "I want you to write me a letter." Then, before he could dictate it he died, and the Corps of Discovery buried their comrade on a bluff that still carries his name.

Playful moments—like holding foot races and games with the Nez Perce to get in shape for the return crossing of the daunting Bitterroots. They even played a game of base, a precursor of baseball.

Moments of incredible drama—the tense confrontation with the Teton Sioux, Private Richard Windsor hanging on for dear life on a slippery cliff over the Marias River, the deadly fight with the Blackfeet, the moment at Lemhi Pass when Lewis's exultation at finally reaching the Continental Divide was confronted by the vista before him of endless mountains where mountains were not supposed to exist. And the ordeal of crossing those mountains. It was snowing and cold. There was no game to speak of. They ate some of their horses; they even ate some of their candles to survive.

Clark, not exactly a whiner in his journals, wrote on September 16: "I have been wet and as cold in every part as I ever was in my life; indeed I was at one time fearful my feet would freeze in the thin mocassins which I wore. To describe the road of this day would be a repetition of yesterday, except the snow, which made it worse."

Two days later John Ordway, camping at what the expedition named Hungry Creek, had this to say: "The mountains continue

as far as our eyes could extend. They extend much further than we expected."

At Lemhi Pass a myth that had begun with Columbus—the myth of an easy Northwest Passage—had been mortally wounded. But in the Bitterroots—in the fallen trees and steep slopes and cold camps without food, in those mountains that Patrick Gass called "the most terrible mountains I ever beheld"—the myth finally died.

There are also significant moments of American history with the expedition—and, I think, lessons to be learned from them. In a nation that celebrates individual achievement, the Corps of Discovery succeeded through cooperation and teamwork. The captains broke military protocol and shared the command. They broke it again at the mouth of the Columbia when the expedition needed to make the crucial decision of where to



"Captain Clark and his men shooting Bears," from Patrick Gass's journal of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

spend the winter. Instead of simply issuing an order, the captains allowed each person a vote in the matter.

There they were, the members of this remarkable, diverse community in and of itself, which had traveled through the homelands and been befriended by so many other communities of native peoples; there they were, beyond the fixed boundaries of the United States, having crossed the continent the nation would spend the rest of the century expanding across, and they made this decision democratically by involving everyone. *Everyone*. York voted—a half century before slaves were emancipated and enfranchised. Sacagawea voted—more than a hundred years before women or Indians were granted the full rights of citizenship. It was, as we say in our film, Lewis and Clark at their best, which I believe is America at its best.

In some things, it took our country 50 or 100 years to catch up with Lewis and Clark and to follow their example. In some other things—like their relations with Indians—we never did. But the example is still there—a Corps of Discovery that woke up each morning to face an unknown horizon whose only certainty was another day of hard work; a Corps of Discovery that pushed forward, if not with confidence, then with dogged determination to move at least a little farther toward that horizon before the sun went down.

The struggle up the seemingly endless Missouri. The uncertainty—and potential for disaster—with the choice at the Marias River. The month-long portage of the Great Falls—with violent hail storms, broiling sun, maddening bugs, prickly pears, and a rough, broken ground that was wearing out their moccasins every two days. Dragging their canoes up the Jefferson and the Beaverhead. The terrible ordeal over the Bitterroots. And those three discouraging weeks near the mouth of the Columbia, pinned down by storms, their clothes rotting and supplies dwindling, just a few miles from the ocean they had already traveled so many miles and suffered through so much to behold. They captured it all in the three words that form the most recurrent phrase in their journals: “We proceeded on.”



“An American having struck a Bear but not killed him, escapes into a Tree,” from Patrick Gass’s journal of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

What does the Lewis and Clark expedition mean to America? What *doesn't* it mean? It means so much because there is so much to it. And because through the journals it is so accessible, so approachable, so human.

William Clark wrote in his journal for July 19 (the day they passed by what is now Lincoln City, Nebraska) that he named an island they passed Butter Island, “as at this place,” he said, “we made use of the last of our butter.” During the day he left the keelboat and was walking through some woodlands on the shore near here, hunting elk—that’s right, elk, in the Midwest—when, he wrote, “I came suddenly into an open and boundless prairie. I say boundless,” he continued, “because I could not see the extent of the plain in any direction. This prairie was covered with grass about 18 inches to 2 feet high and contained little of anything else.”

These were men from Kentucky, Ohio, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire—wooded places with mostly vertical vistas. And now they are just beginning to enter a strictly horizontal world, for which they were totally unprepared.

“This prospect was so sudden and entertaining,” Clark noted, “that I forgot the object of my pursuit.” Now William Clark was not the kind of man to forget the object of his pursuit, however momentarily. But his first sight of a boundless horizon—this first intimation of the West and what would soon enough become a common sight—literally stopped him in his tracks. It is a remarkable—

and I believe poetic—moment.

From the journal of Patrick Gass we learn that the expedition had set out at sunrise on this day, that they gathered chokecherries during their stop for lunch, and that they encamped for the evening on an island of willows.

Charles Floyd notes that the bushes of chokecherries were “about as high as a man’s head” and that the current they were fighting all day was, in his words, “strong.” John Ordway also mentions the cherries; he adds that William Bratton came across a large quantity of a plant they called sweet flag and that George Drouillard arrived at camp that evening with two deer for their supper.

Joseph Whitehouse adds more details. The weather that day was clear, he wrote, and in the shallow water near shore they saw two catfish—the “largest sized catfish” he calls them—that had grabbed hold of one another and could not let go. One of the French-Canadian boatmen shot them to add to the evening meal’s larder.

According to Whitehouse, the cherries they picked were along a creek they called Butter Run, and not only did they delay until three o’clock there, they put the wild cherries into the whiskey barrel.

That day they rowed the keelboat for what Whitehouse estimated to be twelve miles. Clark called it ten and three-quarters miles, which is probably more accurate, but then again he was lost in rapture out on the prairie, not bending to the oars from dawn to dusk. Whatever the distance, we can imagine them around their campfire that night, the sound of the Missouri’s steady current mingling with the pop and sizzle of burning cottonwood logs. It would be their first night without butter, but they would no doubt be enjoying their meal of venison and catfish and the warm glow in their throats from whiskey with a cherry aftertaste.

They would be tired from their labors, but I imagine Clark’s report of that boundless prairie he had so suddenly stumbled into would have them filled with curiosity about what lay ahead. They wouldn’t know, for instance, that within a month their comrade Charles Floyd would be dead; that farther on they would run out of more things than butter—whiskey, then tobacco—and that there would be times when a good night’s meal would be the flank of a horse or a roasted dog.

And though some of them had joined the expedition with hopes of gaining what John Ordway called “great rewards”—in land, double pay, and fame—I can’t imagine that any of them, sitting near the campfire on that warm night, would have thought that in 1997 a group would be meeting nearby to plan the national celebration of their journey’s 200th anniversary. Across the two centuries that separate us, we cannot speak to them. But if we listen hard enough, we can hear their voices speaking to us—reaching from the past and still calling us toward the next horizon.

“We proceeded on,” they tell us all. “Every day is a day of discovery.”

Dayton Duncan is the writer and co-producer, with Ken Burns, of *Lewis & Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*, a General Motors Mark of Excellence Presentation that aired on PBS in November. Their companion book was published by Alfred A. Knopf.

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