HISTORY COMMENTARY

EDITOR'S NOTE
This address was originally delivered on July 4, 2000, at Fort Columbia, Chinook, Washington, near the site of the Corps of Discovery's "Station Camp."

THE VOTE: "Station Camp," Washington

By Dayton Duncan

On November 2, 1805, the Corps of Discovery completed its descent through the last of the great cataracts of the mighty Columbia River—a harrowing series of waterfalls, gorges and rapids that had begun with Celilo Falls nine days before.

Early that morning the expedition's dugout canoes were prepared for the final mile and a half of rapids. Hollowed out from Ponderosa pines only a month earlier when they were back with the Nez Perce, these dugouts were big and bulky, hardly designed for quick maneuvering in white water. Nevertheless, the expedition's best boatmen put them onto the current and then steered madly as these floating tree trunks shot through the foaming chaos of water and rock. One of the canoes, Clark noted in his journal, struck a rock and split a little; three others took in water during the wild ride.

All in all, this final hazard, roughly four miles of boiling rapids and falls that William Clark called "the Great Shute," was surmounted safely. Clark had taken the precaution to order most of the baggage removed from the canoes earlier in the day and portaged around the rapids. And for this job, he says, he "dispatched all the men who could not swim." That's a prudent commander for you—always getting the most out of his men, whatever their shortcomings. But it does beg a question about their recruitment back on the far side of the Mississippi nearly two years earlier. If you were about to set off on an expedition across the continent to find an all-water route to the sea, wouldn't one of the top requirements be the ability to swim?

It must have been a great relief—for swimmers and non-swimmers alike—to load up the canoes below the final rapids and ease onto the broad Columbia. Relief, followed by excitement, because each mile they traveled now gave them new evidence that they were at last nearing the ocean.

They noticed a tidal rise of 9 inches on the river's shore and, a day later, an 18-inch rise and fall. On November 3 they passed the point where Lieutenant William Broughton, sailing upriver from the sea during Vancouver's expedition of 1792, had turned his ship around and headed back to the Pacific; they had finally emerged from a blank map to reach previously explored territory.

Better yet was news from the people Clark called "our Indian friends." "Towards evening," Joseph Whitehouse wrote in his journal, "we met several Indians in a canoe who were going up the River. They signed to us that in two sleeps we should see the ocean vessels and white people." According to Clark, that same day a large group of Indians in two canoes, coming upstream from the Columbia's mouth, "informed us they saw 3 vessels below."

Imagine the talk in camp that night. Three ships with white people only "two sleeps" away! To fully understand how electrifying that news must have been, consider what they had just been through. When they left Fort Mandan in North Dakota back in April, they had expected to find the fabled Northwest Passage, follow it through the single line of mountains conjectured on their maps, reach the ocean in late summer, and then head back east, perhaps return to Fort Mandan before winter. That was the theory.

Instead, they encountered one unexpected obstacle after another, time-consuming delay after time-consuming delay:

- A week deciding whether the Marias River was actually the Missouri.
- Nearly a month, instead of half a day, portaging around the Great Falls, which turned out to be five waterfalls instead of one.
- The agonizingly slow ascent of the Jefferson and Beaverhead rivers, taking them parallel to the mountains instead of through them.
- And then, at Lemhi Pass, the unexpected obstacle to trump all others—mountains, where mountains were not supposed to exist. No Northwest Passage. No short portage. Instead, weeks of stumbling through the Bitterroots—cold, wet, starving, and as close to lost as the Corps of Discovery ever found itself.

And let's not forget what emotional toll was exacted each time their canoes picked up speed and headed toward the thunder of yet another Columbia River chute and cataract. Even the swimmers must have come to dread that sound.

But now came the promise of a reward for all that toil and trouble: three ships only "two sleeps" away—ships that could replenish their increasingly short supply of trade goods; ships that could provide them with news from home and, more importantly, take back news of their great achievement; ships that could provide them with the first whiskey they had tasted since they drained their last barrel on the Fourth of July at the Great Falls. All of that, only "two sleeps" away.

On November 4, at a large Indian village where the men feasted on wapato, Clark noted "uriopian" goods everywhere he looked: guns, powder flasks, copper and brass trinkets, some tailored clothes. Farther downriver, Sergeant John Ordway says, they met an Indian who "could talk & speak some words of English such as curseing and blackguard."

On November 6, according to Clark, they met another English-speaking Indian. This man told them a "Mr. Haley" traded regularly with them at the river's mouth not far away. That night the men recorded a tidal rise and fall of three feet.

By the following morning they must have been bursting to put

their paddles in the water. The anticipation was as palpable as the morning fog, so thick they couldn't see across the river. But on they went, piloted through the dense mist by an Indian wearing a sailor's jacket. They stopped at another village, and once again, according to Whitehouse, Indians "made signs to us that there were vessels lying at the Mouth of this River."

"We proceeded on," Ordway wrote, and for the first time since the morning they had left Fort Mandan in April, that phrase had more expectancy than resigned perseverance embedded in it. At last the fog lifted—and the Corps of Discovery was treated to a breathtaking, heartstopping vista. For the first time in a long time, the western horizon offered them something other than a discouraging surprise.

"Ocian in view!" Clark wrote in his notebook, cracking open exclamation points like champagne corks. "Ocian in view! O! The joy."

They encamped that evening opposite Pillar Rock, and though the journals make passing mention of dampness and difficulty finding a suitable place for the night, there's no mistaking the emotion of the day. "Great joy in camp," Clark wrote, "we are in view of the Ocian, this great Pacific Ocean which we [have] been so long anxious to see."

Those familiar with this story already know that Pillar Rock is hardly on the Pacific shore. It wasn't the ocean that Clark was so excitedly describing—it was Gray's Bay. I imagine that Clark himself quickly realized this. But after traveling more than 4,000 grueling miles up the entire length of the Missouri, across those tremendous mountains, and down the treacherous rapids of the Clearwater, Snake and Columbia—and given the anticipation that had been building steadily for five days—he can be forgiven for jumping the gun by a few miles.

Let's give him and the rest of the Corps of Discovery this moment of jubilation. Let them savor it: "Ocian in view! O! The joy." Let them bask in their joy. They earned it.

There's another reason to give them that moment, because on the next day, November 8, they received their official early-winter welcome to the Pacific Northwest, and they realized once more that nothing ever came easily for the Corps of Discovery.

A typical November coastal storm engulfed them as they inched along the shore of Gray's Bay, restricting them to only eight miles that day. Some Indians bearing salmon for trade blithely passed them in their elegant canoes, but the swells rolling in from the ocean storm rocked the expedition's lumbering dugouts so badly that several men got seasick. So did Sacagawea, who had been longing like the rest of them to see what her people called "the Stinking Lake." Those dugouts, crucial as they were to the Corps of Discovery, turned out to be even more poorly suited for the rough waters here at the Columbia's mouth than they had been for the river's rapids.

The words "wet and disagreeable" appear in several journals that day, a phrase that would soon replace "we proceeded on" as the expedition's mantra. "We are all wet and disagreeable," Clark wrote, "and we are at a loss to... find out if any settlement is near the mouth of the river." The waves forced them to stop near Gray's Point, where they camped in the margin between the high and ebb tides.

In the night, the high tide overwhelmed them, and they scrambled to save the canoes and their baggage from destruction. Things only got worse the next day. It rained hard all morning, and as the wind picked up with the afternoon floodtide, huge driftwood logs—some of them 200 feet long and 7 feet in diameter—were loosened from the shoreline and sent crashing and thrashing around the campsite, now inundated with water.

With "every man as wet as water could make them," Clark reported, "every exertion and the strictest attention by the party was scarcely sufficient to defend our canoes from being crushed to pieces."

Some of the men had been drinking the brackish water of the estuary, and it had a laxative effect on them like a dose of Rush's Thunderbolts. Patrick Gass tells us the only fresh water to be had was found in the rainwater collecting in the canoe bottoms. For obvious reasons, they did not "proceed on" that day; they camped again in the same spot, at a place Clark called "Dismal Point."

But they were, to borrow a phrase, "undaunted." "Not withstanding the disagreeable time of the party for several days past," Clark wrote that night of his crew, "they are all chearfull and full of anxiety to see further into the ocian." They had been through violent storms before out on the Great Plains, and they must have assumed that this one would pass just as those had.

They couldn't have been more wrong. On the morning of November 10, the storm still raged. During a lull they loaded their dugouts and left Dismal Point, hoping to round Point Ellice and reach the coast. But as they approached the point, the wind and waves returned, forcing them to do the one thing the Corps of Discovery hated more than anything else: retreat and give back two hard-earned miles.

They unloaded their canoes, waited for the low tide, loaded up again, and tried once more to round Point Ellice. Furious waves defeated them again, forced them into another begrudging retreat to find a spot to camp for the night.

This one was even worse than the previous campsite. They stowed their baggage on high rocks but searched in vain for an adequate place to sleep. "Here we scarcely had room to lie between the rocks and water," Patrick Gass wrote, "but we made shift to do it among some drift wood that had been beat up by the tide."

Whitehouse wrote that during the day they could watch porpoises, sea otters, ducks and sea gulls in great abundance, but all they had to eat that night was pounded fish purchased farther up the river. Their hopes—like the tides—had risen and fallen twice during the day. Adding to the indignity, the point that had turned them back now blocked any view toward the ocean they had been "so long anxious to see." Today we call it Point Ellice. On Clark's map it appears as Point Distress.

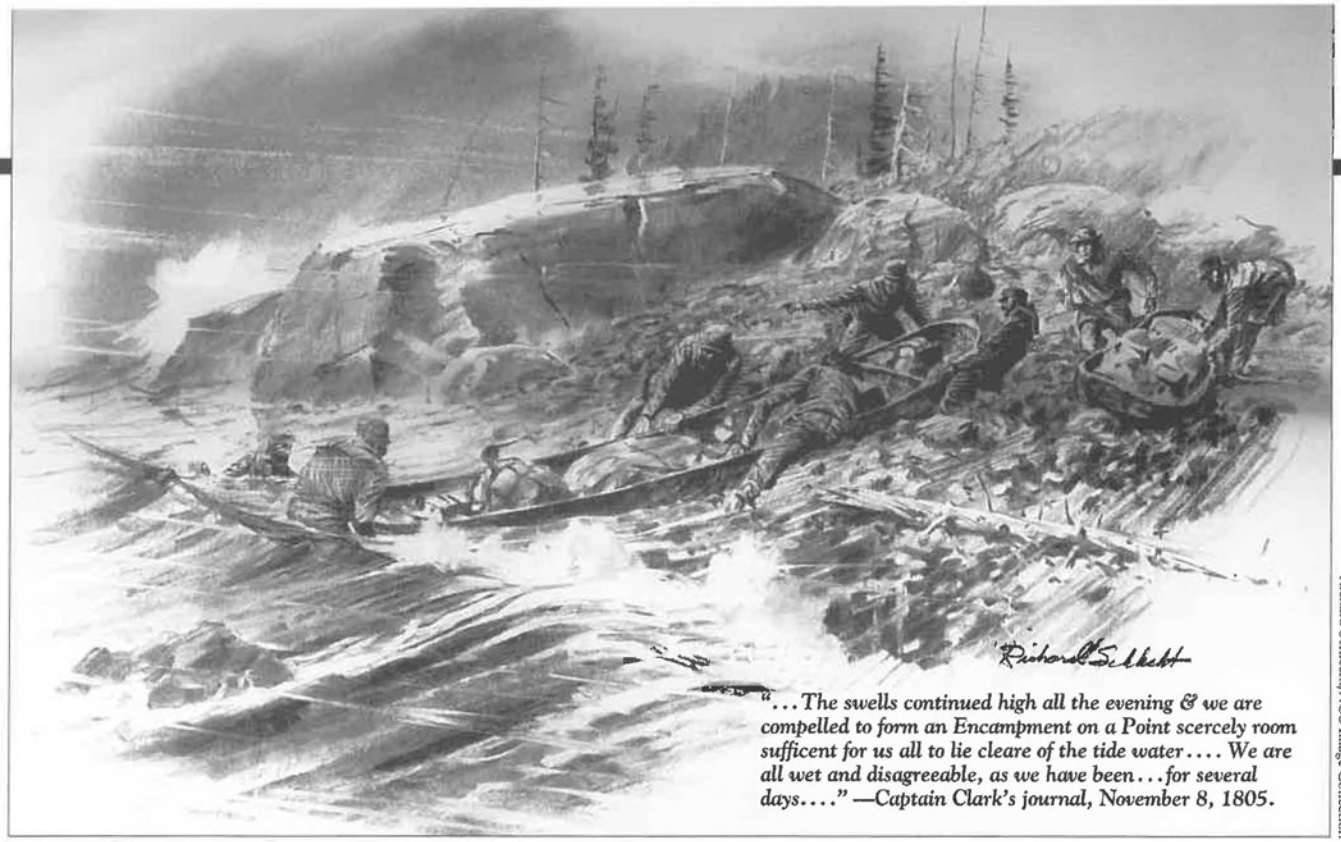
The storm pinned them there for four days. Without tents, they tied blankets and mats to poles in an effort to protect themselves from the rain as they huddled on the driftwood. But each high tide forced them to temporarily abandon even this makeshift camp and cower in the rocky crevices until the water receded.

More misery. The steady rain saturated the soil on the steep slopes above them, and small stones began sliding off onto them.

More misery. At three in the morning on the 12th, the storm sent sheets of lightning and hail against the exposed crew. There was a short period of clearing light at dawn. Then an ominous black cloud rolled in from the southwest and, as Clark wrote, "the heavens became darkened." Then followed more hard rain and wind, and waves that were the highest yet.

In the midst of the gale some Cathlamets paddled up, stopped briefly to sell the hungry explorers 13 sockeye salmon, and then, as if the huge swells were nothing out of the ordinary, they paddled on downstream and out of sight. The men watched them depart, envying both their seaworthy canoe and their nimble skill in such rough waters. "They are on their way to trade those fish with white people," Clark noted, "which they make signs live below, round a point."

The captains then dispatched three men to attempt another



Richard Schlecht/NGS Image Collection

"...The swells continued high all the evening & we are compelled to form an Encampment on a Point scercely room sufficent for us all to lie cleare of the tide water.... We are all wet and disagreeable, as we have been...for several days...." —Captain Clark's journal, November 8, 1805.

passing of Point Distress—to see if they could find those white men, or at least a better bay for a decent campsite. The point defeated them once more.

They tried again the next day. This time Colter, Willard and Shannon made it around Point Distress and disappeared. Back at camp there was nothing to eat again but pounded fish. Whitehouse wrote that his buffalo robes were falling apart. Ordway reported that the storm continued raging. Gass summarized it as "another disagreeable rainy day."

Something about this situation seems to have brought out the best in William Clark's journal writing. Meriwether Lewis was in the midst of one of his long gaps in record-keeping—more than three months in this case—but Clark rose to the literary occasion.

From the moment he wrote "O! The joy," his journal entries seem to be more descriptive than usual and filled with empathy for the plight of his men, reflecting what must have been going on in both captains' minds. On the 12th he wrote:

> *It would be distressing to a feeling person to see our situation at this time, all wet and cold with our bedding &c also wet, in a cove scarcely large nough to contain us, our baggage in a small holler about 1/2 a mile from us, and canoes at the mercy of the waves & drift wood.... Our party has been wet for 8 days and is truly disagreeable, their robes & leather Clothes are rotten from being continually wet, and they are not in a situation to get others, and we are not in a situation to restore them.*

By November 14 his concern had deepened. The robes and half of the few clothes the men still had were now rotted away. He could see snow on the high mountaintops to the south. "If we have cold weather before we can kill & dress skins for clothing" he wrote, "the bulk of the party will suffer very much." Earlier he had called their situation disagreeable. Now, he said, "Our situation is dangerous."

That afternoon, Colter arrived back in camp by land with his report from the scouting mission. The news was discouraging: No sign of white men. But, said Colter, if they could manage to get beyond Point Distress, there was a sandy beach for a better encampment.

Lewis decided to set off on foot with four men to scout farther up the coast for trading vessels. Clark was to lead the rest of the party on one more attempt to round the point.

That night, I think, was one of the low points for the Corps of Discovery. Patrick Gass wrote that this weather was "the most disagreeable I had ever seen." That's a telling statement from someone who had gone through a North Dakota winter of 45 degrees below zero and howling winds; blistering hot days in Montana punctuated by hail storms that had knocked men to the ground and the constant presence of mosquitoes that made every day a slow torture; and then snow squalls in the Bitterroot Mountains where some of the men had walked with rags wrapped around their feet. But the storm at Point Distress, according to Gass, was worse than all that—"the most disagreeable I had ever seen."

Anyone who's done any camping knows how miserable it can be during a rainstorm. Hot weather can be uncomfortable; cold weather and snow can be uncomfortable—even dangerous. And yet there can be an exhilaration about meeting the challenge of those extremes. Rain, on the other hand, is dispiriting even with the best of camping equipment to keep you moderately dry. Imagine camping in the rain without tents. Imagine that rain going on day after day, night after night, for two weeks, rotting your clothes away.

Gass's statement tells us as much about psychology as the weather. It tells us the expedition's state of mind. Clark shows us even more. This was, he wrote, "the most disagreeable time I have experienced, confined on a temp[estuous] coast, wet, where I can neither get out to hunt, return to a better situation, or proceed on." Unable to "proceed on"—can you imagine a worse feeling for the Corps of Discovery?

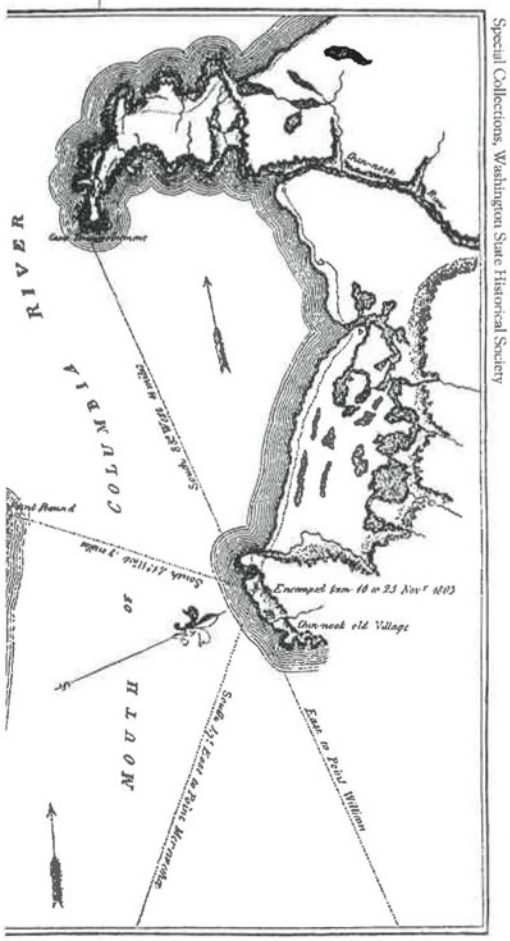
On November 15 everyone was itching to move. The wind stopped them once more, but during a brief pause in the afternoon they were finally able to round Point Distress, go past an empty Chinook village of 36 houses, and reach what came to be called Station Camp. George Shannon joined them from his scouting mission with five Indians. The only white men he had seen were Lewis and his party, heading on their own reconnaissance.

The high tide and big waves convinced Clark to set up camp. There was no use in trying to go any farther, he noted. From here they could survey the entire mouth of the Columbia. He called this bay Haley's Bay, after the man they had heard so much about but never met. Station Camp would be their home for ten days. "Here we formed a comfortable camp," Gass wrote, "and remained in full view of the ocean, at this time more raging than pacific."

Their first full day, the 16th, got off to a good start. The weather cleared enough for them to put out articles to dry, and the hunters were dispatched. They returned with two deer, a crane and two ducks. York, Clark's slave, added to the larder with two geese and eight brants he had shot. That night's meal must have seemed like a feast.

From the journals it seems clear that everyone assumed this was as far as they would go. They could hear the surf, according to Whitehouse, and Gass noted that in the distance they could see "waves, like small mountains"—waves, I might add, that had just crossed the widest stretch of the Pacific between Asia and North America. Barring some discovery by Lewis (maybe he would return with news of a trading post or ship), there apparently was no talk of wintering on the coast.

Whitehouse wrote: "We are now of the opinion that we cannot go any further with our Canoes, & think that we are at an end of our voyage to the Pacific Ocean, and as soon as discoveries necessary are made, that we shall return a short distance up the river & provide our selves with winter quarters."



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Gass noted: "We are now at the end of our voyage, which has been completely accomplished according to the intention of the expedition, the object of which was to discover a passage by the way of the Missouri and Columbia rivers to the Pacific Ocean; notwithstanding the difficulties, privations and dangers, which we had to encounter, endure and surmount."

This is a moment every parent who has traveled with his or her family immediately understands. It's that moment when "Are we there yet?" is replaced by a different question: "Can we go now?"

This map from the first published version of the Lewis and Clark journals shows the mouth of the Columbia River. The north/south directional arrow points to the location of Station Camp. The land protuberance below "Chin-nook old Village" is Point Distress.

On November 17 the hunters brought in three deer, two ducks and four brant geese. The men measured the rising tide at eight-and-a-half feet. After conferring with the chief of the local tribe, Clark recorded that their name was Chinook and that they numbered 400 souls. In the evening Lewis and his scouting party returned after searching the coast for 30 miles, according to Whitehouse, who quickly summarized Lewis's answer to the question on everyone's mind: "They had seen," he wrote, "no white people or vessels."

A day later Whitehouse would write that the captains named the farthest point Cape Disappointment, "on account of not finding vessels there." He was wrong, of course. English sea captain John Meares had given it that name in 1788 during his fruitless search for the mouth of the Columbia—and so it appeared on the maps the captains had brought along. But Whitehouse's misperception only further proves the explorers' state of mind—in an expedition that often gave descriptive and suggestive names to every landmark, Cape Disappointment made perfect sense.

By now, it seems, all hope of finding a trading settlement or a harbor full of boats or meeting the renowned "Mr. Haley" had pretty much vanished, and you can sense the men's minds turning back upriver.

Remember, their mission had been to reach the ocean, not remain there. And their original plan had been to touch the sea, turn around, and get as far back east as possible. Clark himself had noted in his journal on the way downriver that the mouth of the Sandy River would make a good wintering spot. But now he asked if anyone else wanted to hike to the ocean shore with him—perhaps to make one last attempt at spotting a ship, perhaps simply to satisfy himself by reaching the continent's edge, where the horizon is filled only by water.

Only 11 said yes, they wanted to come—and two of those, the Field brothers, had just returned from the coast with Lewis. Think about that—out of an expedition of 33 intrepid explorers, nearly half—16 to be exact—didn't see any need to go the extra few miles. In their mind, they had reached the ocean. "All others," Clark wrote of them, were "well contented with what part of the ocean & its curiosities which could be seen from the vicinity of the our camp."

You can almost see them rolling their eyes in the universal sign language that says, "Can we go now?"

But Clark and 11 others set off on November 18. Over the course of two and a half days they went past the place the Indians had told them the trading ships often anchored, shot down a California condor whose wingspan they measured at 9 feet and whose head would eventually be displayed in Peale's museum in Philadelphia, climbed the headlands of Cape Disappointment, hiked along the sandy shore of Long Beach, and turned back to Station Camp.

"The men appear much satisfied with their trip beholding with estonishment the high waves dashing against the rocks & this emence ocian.... Men all chearfull," their captain wrote, and then added that they "express a desire to winter near the falls this winter."

This is a little different from the standard "can we go now" moment. But we can still recognize it. It may have been the first (but certainly not the last) time that American male tourists, after racing over every possible obstacle to reach a historic and scenic spot in the West, looked out at the sweeping vista for a few minutes, then looked at their watches, and said, "Okay, let's get going."

Back at Station Camp, both before and after Clark's return, a steady stream of Indians—Chinooks and occasional Clatsops from across the river—came to trade and visit. From those visits, several things were becoming clearer.

First, if they wanted success in trading, the explorers needed more

blue beads than they had brought along. Sacagawea had to sacrifice a belt of blue beads to purchase a robe of two sea otter pelts desired by the captains. By implication, they could not hope to purchase a winter's worth of food with what few trade goods they had left; they would need to hunt to survive.

Second, although the rain had let up a little, this was obviously a place where blue skies were the exception, not the rule. Several of the men noted the extraordinary hats the natives made of white cedar and bear grass—"very handsomely wrought and waterproof," according to Gass—and one explorer purchased one in exchange for an old razor. By implication, people don't make finely wrought waterproof hats in places where it doesn't rain a lot.

Third, the traffic of trading vessels was certainly both common and heavy here. In addition to all the previous evidence, one Indian woman was seen with the name J. Bowmon tattooed on her left arm; many Indians showed the ravages of venereal disease; and a Clatsop showed up with red hair, light skin and freckles. But the main trading season seemed to be over.

All those delays that had brought the Corps of Discovery to this area in November instead of in the summer, as they had originally planned, had probably cost them their most likely opportunity to contact a vessel. What seaworthy captain in his right mind would try to approach an already treacherous coast during November storms like these?

The men's journals suggest that the consensus to head back east had hardened. "The wind blew so violent today," Gass wrote on November 21, "and the waves ran so high, that we could not set out on our return which it is our intention to do as soon as the weather and water will permit."

Whitehouse is more specific. "The Swell in the River," he wrote, "ran so high that it detain'd us at our Camp from going up the River again, to look out for winter quarters."

The storm worsened on the 22nd. The wind blew "with violence," according to Clark, throwing the river out of its bank in waves that once again overwhelmed the camp and split one of the canoes. The Chinooks who were visiting crowded with the explorers into the crude shelters the men had made. Gass thought the river was the roughest he had yet seen. Clark deployed another exclamation point to write, "O! how horriable is the day."

"Can we go now?"

On the 23rd, the storm abated a little, but rain fell at intervals. Sometime during the day, Lewis got out his branding iron—the special one that said "U.S. Capt. M. Lewis"— and somewhere near this spot blazed his name and the date on the side of a tree. Clark pulled out a knife to carve his name, the date, and "by land" on an alder tree.

"The party," Clark added, "all cut the first letters of their names on different trees in the bottom." I doubt that there was a tree in the immediate vicinity that escaped their knife blades.

This was not part of the United States at the time. Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase had doubled the size of his country, but the legal boundary extended only to the Rocky Mountains. Because their vessels had been the first to enter the mouth of the Columbia in 1792, both the United States and Britain had staked claims to the Northwest, but both recognized those claims were weak ones.

With each cut into each tree, the Corps of Discovery was strengthening the American claim. "We came by land," was their message. "And we came in numbers." They were planting the flag. They were marking new territory. This was also the most tangible way they could think of to commemorate their remarkable achievement. With each cut, they seemed to be boasting, "I was here. I made it."

Yet there also may have been something less boastful and more pleading in each stroke of their blades—something of a prayer that asked, "Remember me." Some of them—the captains in particular—had carved their names into trees and landmarks at other places. But this is the only instance in which the entire Corps of Discovery participated. I sense a bit of ceremony, ritual, and solemn finality to it. They were consecrating this spot. And they were preparing to leave it.

That night the stars came out, and the morning of November 24 dawned clear and cold, with a white frost on the ground. The men were eager to push toward the rising sun. But the captains delayed them—first to send out hunters; then to air out their sodden clothes and bedding in the rare sunlight; then to take astronomical observations to fix this spot as precisely as they could on Clark's map. Come evening, after some Chinooks stopped by for a smoke and some trading, the Corps of Discovery was still there.

Then occurred what to me was the most powerfully meaningful single moment of an expedition filled with powerful, meaningful moments. This moment was beyond meaningful—it was transcendent. The captains gathered the party together and, in a move that broke with all the rules of military command and protocol, announced that everyone would participate in the decision of what to do next.

Out here, on the continent's farthest shore, beyond what was then the boundary of the United States, the nation's first citizens to travel from sea to sea would do the very thing that defines our democracy—they would conduct a vote.

There is much we simply don't know about this magnificent moment. Why, for instance, did the captains call for a vote in the first place? As military captains they simply could have issued an order. But in this case they didn't. Why?

Personally, I think that while the rest of the party was firmly set on moving upriver, Lewis and Clark had begun to question whether that was the best option. We only know their thinking from the reasons Clark recorded in his vote tally, but it's fair to assume the captains had been talking it over in the few days since Clark's return to camp from his excursion to Long Beach.

If game could be found on the other side of the river—and everyone understood that without game to hunt, no place would support them for the winter—Lewis now wanted to stay as close to the ocean as possible. It held out the possibility of seeing a ship by springtime, he said, and it provided the opportunity to make salt for their food. Besides, he argued, going upriver and wintering closer to the Rocky Mountains would not speed their return home: they would still have to wait for the snows to melt before attempting any crossing next year.

Salt was not a consideration for Clark; he was indifferent to its uses and considered saltwater, in his words, "evil in as much as it is not helthy." But he, too, now preferred wintering near the coast if, as the Clatsops promised, enough elk could be found in the neighborhood. The chance of getting resupplied by a ship with trade goods was worth waiting for, he thought.

The other advantage in Clark's mind was the prospect of a milder climate closer to the sea. The Indians claimed that winters here brought little snow, he noted, and the unusually warm November had convinced him they might be right. "If this should be the case," he wrote, always concerned for the welfare of his men, "it will most certainly be the best situation of our naked party dressed as they are altogether in leather."

I believe the captains had not previously shared these thoughts

with the others. The "can we go now" sense of the enlisted men's journals is too strong and too certain to suggest otherwise. But what's apparent in those journals must have been even more apparent to the captains: their men were fully expecting to evacuate the coast at the earliest chance. Imposing an order contrary to that expectation—even if it ultimately was the best option—would have done more damage to their morale than the storms and waves and Point Distress and Cape Disappointment combined.

And so, perhaps more out of the tactics of leadership than pure democratic principles, the captains called for a vote. This was a stunning—and surprising—act of leadership. I'm sure the captains had already decided what they hoped the outcome would be. But there was no guarantee. They were betting that, left to their own devices and allowed to hear the arguments, the group could be trusted to make the correct decision; and they knew that, regardless of the outcome, the very act of inclusion strengthens the result. That, my friends, is the gamble—and the promise—of democracy.

But how was the vote taken? What was the scene around the campfire on the night of November 24, 1805? Were there speeches by the captains, questions and counter-arguments from the men? Was there a show of hands, a standing division, a ballot, a roll call answered in turn by each person's voiced opinion? When York's vote was solicited, did anyone grumble or sulk that a black man—a slave—had just been accorded as much authority as anyone else?

Were any eyebrows raised when Sacagawea—an Indian and a woman—had her opinion recorded? Why wasn't her husband's? Was it an oversight or a deliberate omission, some sort of decision that the Charbonneau family should have a single vote; and that Sacagawea's was the one that should count?

Were York and Sacagawea and the men surprised to be asked their opinion in the first place? Or by this point in their long journey did it seem matter-of-fact, the natural result of a process that had steadily bound them together with each mile and each surmounted obstacle, a process that most certainly had not stripped them of their individuality but had steadily forced them to see their survival and their success in terms of community, rather than individually?

We don't know. The journals don't tell us. What we do know is the result of the tally, dutifully set down in Clark's journal. When the vote was concluded, only Joseph Shields still wanted to leave immediately and winter upstream at the Sandy River. All the others were willing to cross the Columbia to what is now Oregon and investigate whether elk and a suitable site for a fort and a place to make salt could be found. If not, then they would "proceed on" upriver.

In that case, seven of them—including Clark—were in favor of going all the way to The Dalles for the winter. Nine—including all three sergeants and Lewis—favored the Sandy River as the back-up option. Thirteen had no preference, as long as it was upriver. Sacagawea's concern was that, wherever they wintered, there be plenty of wapato.

The journals also tell us something else—something as important as the decision itself, perhaps even more important: They tell us the enlisted men's perception of what had just happened. Listen carefully to their words.

Patrick Gass: "At night the party were consulted by the commanding officers, as to the place most proper for winter quarters."

Joseph Whitehouse: "In the evening our officers had the whole party assembled in order to consult which place would be the best for us to take up our winter quarters at."

John Ordway: "Our officers conclude with the opinion of the party to cross the river and look out a place for winter quarters."

It's worth noting that each of them found the event important enough to mention—and therefore it's safe to say that they were speaking on behalf of all the others who weren't keeping journals. But also consider the words they chose. The captains had "consulted" with them, and then concluded with their opinion. The decision had been made by "us" not "them."

Whatever had prompted the captains to use this extraordinary method, it had worked. The decision was the one the captains themselves, I believe, would have ordered. But the process itself had created an even stronger bond within the expedition; 33 individuals merging into a single Corps of Discovery. That's leadership of the highest order. And that's democracy at its best.

We're gathered here on the Fourth of July, Independence Day—a day that commemorates and celebrates a radical premise: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Thomas Jefferson, the man who conceived the Lewis and Clark expedition and who was with them, in spirit at least, all the way across the continent, penned the celebrated Declaration of Independence.

Many of the corps' members had been alive when that radical premise had first been proclaimed. All of them had considered Independence Day of such significance that they made sure to celebrate it each year, wherever they were on their extraordinary journey.

But at Station Camp, on November 24, 1805, they didn't say those words—they lived those words and, if only momentarily, breathed new life into them. When York voted, they were pushing the promise that "all men are created equal" into new territory. When Sacagawea voted, they took those words and crossed yet another boundary. A day earlier, when they had emblazoned their names and initials on the windswept trees near camp, they had stretched the literal boundaries of their nation. They had touched the future, because the nation itself would follow them toward this shore and encompass it in less than 50 years.

But on November 24, 1805, when this important decision was reached by the full participation of every member of the expedition—men and woman, black and white, foreign-born and native born and Native American—at that exquisite moment they also touched the future, a future that would take our nation more than a hundred years to reach.

Nearly two centuries later, as we remember the Corps of Discovery, let's also remember that we must always be pursuing that horizon. Because the moment we do not "proceed on" toward it, is the moment that the vital, insistent heartbeat in Thomas Jefferson's words stops. And if that ever happens, we will become a nation defined only by geographic boundaries, not by an enduring promise. Here, on this spot, the Corps of Discovery stretched those boundaries and gave new life to that enduring promise. This is hallowed ground.

Dayton Duncan is an award-winning writer and documentary filmmaker. Author of Lewis & Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery, *he also wrote and co-produced with Ken Burns a four-hour PBS documentary by the same name.*

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FRONT COVER: Woody Guthrie achieved his greatest productivity as a songwriter in 1941 when he worked for a month as an "information consultant" for the Bonneville Power Administration. Included among the 26 songs he wrote that spring is "Roll On, Columbia," the official Washington State folk song. (Courtesy Bonneville Power Administration)