A Windfall for Educators: The Lewis & Clark Bicentennial

By Robert C. Carriker

Every April I present a "sample" class on the Lewis and Clark expedition to 45 high school seniors who have been admitted to Gonzaga University. They come to campus to see if the school's and their educational goals are compatible, and to that end each prospective student is encouraged to attend two or more "sample" classes. For 50 minutes I use pictures and questions to probe their basic understanding of the Corps of Discovery in an exercise called "Test Your IQ on Lewis and Clark."

The recent good news is that nearly 100 percent of the students admit they have "heard something" about the Lewis and Clark expedition. And a majority acknowledge that the words "Lewis and Clark" are currently associated with the term "bicentennial." That means that some teacher and/or parent has been making the past relevant to the present and/or the students are being informed by some element of the media. But even if the response in any given year would have been reversed—*i.e.*, if almost none of the students had heard of the Lewis and Clark expedition—I would still use the story of the expedition to showcase the kind of multi-disciplinary learning that takes place in a college classroom. The experiences of the captains have extraordinary potential to not only further a person's education but also to encourage learning. And that would be just as true at the elementary and secondary levels as it is at the university level.

Let me illustrate some ways in which the Lewis and Clark expedition can expand as well as elevate a person's history IQ. I will take my examples from the 139 miles of the Snake River that Lewis and Clark traveled for six days in October 1805.

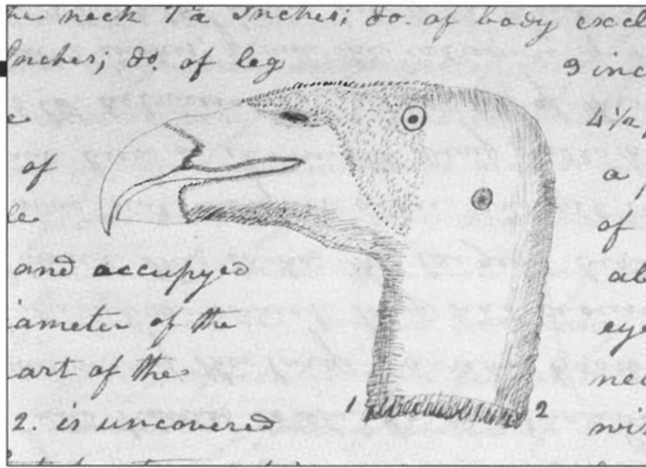
Everyone knows that Lewis and Clark wrote journals. They wrote about 750,000 words between them, and their journals were first edited in 1904-05 by Reuben Gold Thwaites. The modern edition, prepared by Gary Moulton for the University of Nebraska Press, began to appear in 1983 and concluded in 2001 with the publication of volume 13. Volumes 5, 6 and 7 cover Lewis and Clark in Washington—periodically interspersing comments about Oregon—as the expedition navigated the Snake and Columbia rivers. The periods of October 10 through November 25, 1805, and March 23 through May 5, 1806, amount to 416 pages in the Moulton edition of the journals.

In the Lewis and Clark journals it is written that on October 11, 1805, as the Corps of Discovery proceeded on just west of present-day Clarkston, Washington, William Clark "saw a curious Swet house under ground, with a Small whole at top to pass in or throw in the hot Stones, which those in threw on as much water as to create the temporature of the heat they wished."

Clearly, Clark is referring to a sweat lodge. If Clark was "curious," so might be the modern-day student. Maybe. Sometimes. It will take some research to find out. Herein lies a teaching opportunity. At that moment in 1805, Meriwether Lewis was in a "blue mood" and not writing in his journal. Actually, he stopped writing on August 26,1805, and did not resume his journalistic endeavors—save for 11 irregularly placed comments—until January 1, 1806, a gap of more than four months.

Happily, there are other journal writers who saw what Clark saw—Sergeant John Ordway, Sergeant Patrick Gass, and Private Joseph Whitehouse—though none of them improves upon Clark's observation. But Lewis writes in April 1805 that in addition to the captains there were seven other journal writers—a total of nine. If we have the journals of Clark plus three others, and we know that one of the diarists had died by this time, and we know that Lewis was not writing, that means that there still may be three journals out there waiting to be discovered. Maybe. Keep in mind that since 1953, Clark's field notes have been discovered in an attic desk; a fair copy of Private Joseph Whitehouse's journal, which extended his narrative by almost five months, surfaced in a bookstore, and Lewis's *Astronomy Notebook* also surfaced. Thus, Clark's short comment on his first full day in Washington has raised questions that require both research and speculation.

Have we now exhausted the possibilities for this simple 40-word entry by seeking out the remarks of three enlisted men?

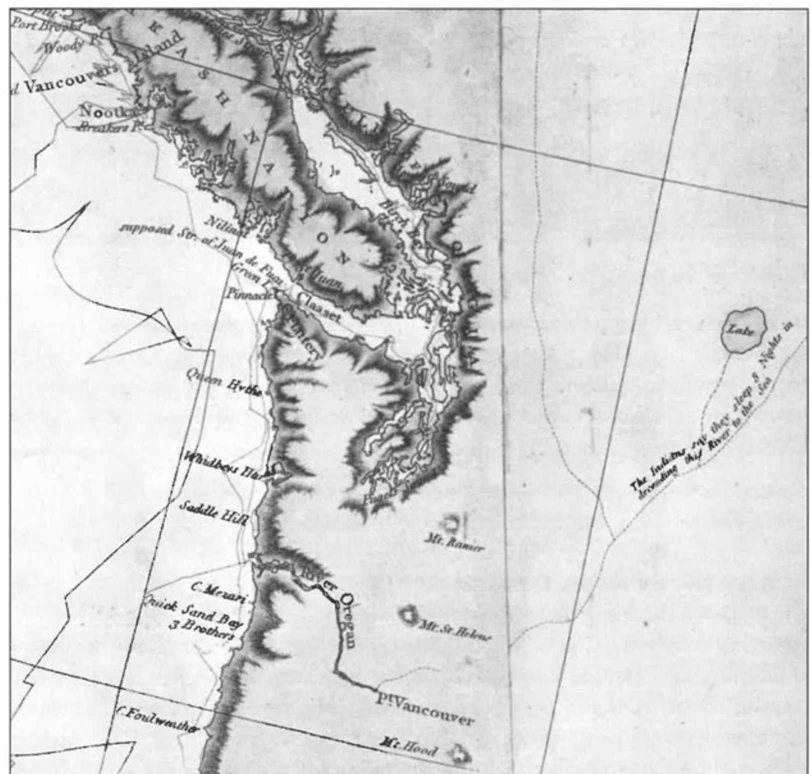


Fortunately, no. Clark's journal entry is actually expanded quite nicely in the notes of Nicholas Biddle, the man who in 1810 began the process of condensing Lewis and Clark's 750,000 words into a narrative of 150,000 words. When he read certain passages that needed clarification, Biddle would jot down his question and the next time he corresponded with, or was visited by, William Clark, he asked. In this case, Clark gave Biddle a 208-word reply that vastly illuminates the use and construction of a Nez Perce sweat lodge. (See Donald Jackson, editor, Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, second ed. [1978]: 532-33.)

And there's more! In 1893 Elliott Coues, a distinguished scholar who had a near encyclopedic understanding of 19th-century scholarship, reedited the Biddle narrative, and in the process he sometimes extended Biddle's work by adding a descriptive footnote. The Nez Perce sweat lodge is one of those times. (See Elliott Coues, editor, *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Lewis and Clark* [1893], pages 626-27 for a 334-word "improvement.") The bottom line is that a simple statement by Clark on October 11, 1805, can be supplemented by the journals of three enlisted men plus the research of Biddle and Coues to produce an excellent image of what Clark saw.

Another example of how the Lewis and Clark expedition teaches research skills is the description of the rapids of the Snake River. The men of the Lewis and Clark expedition navigated 139 miles of the Snake River in October 1805 on their passage to the Columbia River. Today the Snake River has been tamed by a series of four dams put into service between 1961 and 1975, but for the Corps of Discovery there was no relief from the turbulent waters. Clark commented on the rapid water in a more-or-less matter-of-fact manner. But the same is not true of the less sophisticated enlisted men. "This river in general is very handsome," confided Sergeant Patrick Gass, "except at the rapids, where it is risking both life and property to pass." Sergeant John Ordway thought the rapids comparable to floating the trough of a mill race. Private Joseph Whitehouse believed the canoes traveled "swifter than any horse could run." The lesson learned is that no episode in the journals is complete without also checking the entries of the enlisted men. Sometimes they do not enhance the text of the captain's entries—as in the case of the sweat lodge. But most of the time they do. To read only the journals of the captains is to get only part of the story.

It is also important to recognize that the captains wrote multiple entries for any given day. William Clark's entry for October 13 states that the men canoed through "a bad rapid for 4 miles Water Compressed in a narrow Channel not more than 25 yards for about 1 1/2 miles." Later he seemed to change his mind and wrote that: "the water is Confined in a Chanel of about 20 yards between rugid rocks for the distance of a mile and a half...." Did Clark revise his mathematical calculation in the middle of a journal entry? No, it was commonplace for the captains to write two journal entries each



ABOVE: Drawing of a California condor from Lewis's journal.

RIGHT: Arrowsmith map of 1795, revised 1802, "New Discoveries in the Interior Parts of North America," included information from Vancouver's charts and showed the location Mount Rainier, Mount Hood and Mount St. Helens.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Clark called it Ship Rock, but this massive landmark on the Columbia River is known today as Monumental Rock.

day, one a preliminary draft, probably written around the evening campfire, and the other a more-or-less finished product completed during an extended stay. Sometimes the first draft contains a clearer phrase or more extensive information than does the final entry. Read them both! And also the maps. And the periodic "Course and Distance Remarks" in the journals, which are usually monthly, but can also be at irregular intervals. Clark noted, for example, that during a cool morning, on October 14, the expedition navigated opposite a rock shaped "like a Ship." In his second entry for the day, Clark called it "remarkable" and "verry large and resembling the hill [hull] of a Ship...." In his follow-up "Course and Distance Remarks" on October 16, Clark noted a landmark "resembling a Ship at a Distance...." And on his map Clark conferred the name, "Ship rock." In short, Clark seems very sure that this rock looked like a ship. He said so four times.

Yet, Washingtonians today know this landmark as Monumental Rock, in Walla Walla County. Who changed the name on the map? When? Why did the United States Corps of Engineers name their dam Lower Monumental Dam when, clearly, the rock is not just monumental, it is shaped like a ship? Always, always, there is research to be done.

I will stop my examples there—having taken the Corps of Discovery only four days into Washington. But let me offer some classroom assignments that showcase ways in which a study of the Lewis and Clark expedition can introduce students to different research techniques.

1) At times both Lewis and Clark make reference to sources contained in their traveling library—a dozen or so books, several manuscripts, and a half-dozen maps that Lewis and Thomas Jefferson had assembled in Virginia and Philadelphia before departure. How did Lewis and Clark recognize Mount Hood and Mount St. Helens, as they traveled down the Columbia River? Because they had with them copies of published charts originally prepared by the George Vancouver expedition of 1792! How did Lewis and Clark choose such precise words and terms to describe the people, places and natural phenomena that they encountered? Because they had an encyclopedia and a dictionary and a botanical catalogue with them... and in at least two instances the captains borrowed enough from their published sources to have merited being charged with plagiarism under the student code of conduct at Gonzaga University!

2) There is a keen difference in the journals between descriptions the captains made of Native American material culture and the descriptions they made of the cultural traits of the tribesmen. A good example would be to contrast Lewis and Clark's admiration of the canoes crafted by the Indians with their only grudging respect for the canoeists themselves.

3) Compare the artistic impressions of the captains with the reality of what bighorn sheep or salmon or California condors really look like. Sometimes the captains do well, other times they are so inaccurate as to be misleading.

4) Even if a person's focus of interest is the outbound journey of Lewis and Clark (*i.e.*, going west, toward the Pacific Ocean) know in advance that it is necessary to also consult the return journey (*i.e.*, homeward bound, going east to St. Louis) for insights. Lewis and Clark called it "backsighting" when they used a compass and sextant to map where they had been in relation to their current position. The same principle works for modern researchers. For example, on April 27, 1806, during the return journey, Lewis and Clark stopped for three days at the village of Walla Walla chief Yelleppit. The chief proved to be exceedingly helpful by providing the captains with information about an 80-mile-long Indian trail that ran overland from the Walla Walla River to the Clearwater River, thus allowing the expedition to avoid 139 miles of rapid water—going against the current—on the Snake River. To properly understand the foundation of the good relationship between the captains and the chief, it is necessary to read the journals of the expedition for October 18 and 19, 1805—the time of their first encounter with Yelleppit. To consult the journals in only one direction is to receive only a partial story.

The Lewis and Clark expedition is a marvelous teaching tool, and teachers have been using it to improve the educational experience of students for the past several decades. But with the complete publication of the journals of Lewis and Clark, and with the almost daily information coming out about the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, there has never been an easier, more relevant, or more profitable time to use the Corps of Discovery in the school curriculum. The Lewis and Clark expedition is current news, it is a national initiative in education, and it is a windfall for educators because it is diverse, multi-dimensional, and a detective story in its complexity.

And, best of all, you don't have to be enrolled in school to learn about it yourself! Go ahead, get started today!

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FRONT COVER: Detail from the front of a 1948 promotional booklet published by the Richland Junior Chamber of Commerce. Part of the Hanford Engineer Works Village is depicted, with alphabet houses in the background and Columbia High School in the foreground. The "village" was a hybrid development with combined elements of defense housing and company town, but on a colossal scale. (Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society)