Lewis & Clark's Water Route TO THE Northwest

The Exploration That Finally Laid to Rest the Myth of a Northwest Passage

Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

William Clark, brother of George R. Clark (of western military fame), was a soldier designated by Meriwether Lewis to join him as co-leader of the transcontinental expedition.

Meriwether Lewis, chosen in 1801 to plan a Pacific Northwest scientific expedition, was instructed to adopt a Missouri-Columbia boat route that turned out to be imaginary.

BY MERLE WELLS

Discovery of an overland water route to Puget Sound or the mouth of the Columbia River kept several prominent explorers—Alexander Mackenzie, Lewis and Clark, and David Thompson—busy for more than two decades beginning in 1789. Although Samuel Hearne's Coppermine River exploration in northern Canada had totally discredited any possibility of an Arctic Ocean commercial route by 1772, interest in some kind of Northwest Passage from Europe to Asia survived for another generation. Searches for an interior water route across North America continued until Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis in 1806. At last they could report with complete assurance that any further hunt for an upper Missouri portage to any upper Columbia destination would prove unproductive.

With their negative disclosure, Lewis and Clark had accomplished their primary purpose, in a reverse sort of way. Thomas Jefferson's instructions required them to ascertain where navigation of the Missouri and Columbia rivers converged in a

(presumed) short, convenient portage. Their industrious pursuit of a good transcontinental water route had directed their entire expedition along an ultimately impracticable line. In so doing they removed all chance of finding a workable transcontinental line. In sum, the vaunted Lewis and Clark expedition had been unknowingly designed for failure.

Nevertheless Lewis and Clark certainly succeeded in defining what was needed for transcontinental travel westward to Pacific Ocean ports. Rather than a riverine passage, an acceptable overland road would become essential. Again, this was precisely what their explicit instructions, focused on an imaginary boat passage, had prevented them from finding.

Upper Missouri exploration had attracted Lewis for a great many years, so any opportunity to gain United States government funding for such an enterprise was more than welcome. His long-term objective had been to ascend the Missouri River drainage to its western source. President Thomas Jefferson, who had inspired Lewis to such an overwhelming ambition, insisted that scouting out western Missouri navigable waters (and their Columbia contact) should control all route decisions. Considering that Lewis had shown less than total enthusiasm for turning up an imaginary Missouri-Columbia ship canal, he may have had more than a slight suspicion that such a project was dubious, at best.

A decade before Lewis set out, Alexander Mackenzie had completed a much more difficult task of transcontinental exploration farther north. He had to cover a great deal more distance before he located an impractical route. Mackenzie's extension of Canadian exploration had led to some very interesting findings.

Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

This drawing of a white salmon trout, or coho salmon, along with its detailed description, occupies a whole page in Clark's diary entry of March 16, 1806.

In 1789 Mackenzie descended a truly impressive northern river that went on a lot farther than he preferred to go. In his search for a Pacific coastal port in a region (modern British Columbia) that Captain James Cook had already examined, Mackenzie noticed that he was getting very much farther to the West without having struck salt water. That was a bad sign. He also noticed that he had reached a land of perpetual summer sunshine—even at midnight—so he could no longer take astronomical observations of stars to tell just exactly how far west he was getting. His Mackenzie River system, with a total length of 2,635 miles, terminated in an Arctic outlet too far west to do him any good.

Four years later Mackenzie returned to explore an obscure river connection (later named for Simon Fraser) to his Mackenzie system. That drainage would have taken him to an ocean outlet more to his liking, but the Fraser River descended through a frightful canyon. Following sound advice from his Indian consultants, he cut directly westward overland to the coast rather than follow the Fraser River south to its mouth. In this fashion Mackenzie proved that no practicable water route for transcontinental traffic existed north of a Columbia River outlet, where its existence had been suspected since 1775.

Long before Mackenzie's venture, Coronado and his followers noticed that, aside from lacking seven cities of gold, Kansas did not offer convenient river approaches to Pacific destinations. These findings left no option, aside from upper Missouri possibilities that Jefferson sought to pursue. Even there, French exploration had already cast doubt on the chances of finding a viable river access to a good western river drainage. French fur hunters had discovered in 1742 that powerful bands of the Snake tribe controlled access to much of that land. Anyone wanting to continue west of the divide needed assistance and guidance from that group. The Snake Indians were Sacajawea's people, and she happened to know just how easy a time they would having paddling boats over Lemhi Pass. So Lewis and Clark consulted further with Sacajawea's Snake band concerning their objective.

Many Boise Shoshoni moved over a lot of territory after they acquired Spanish horses. They knew about South Pass and how to connect through to St. Louis. They recommended what would later become the Oregon Trail route through Boise and South Pass as superior to Lewis's North Pass at Lemhi. (In fact, Robert Stuart's 1812 Astorian expedition learned about South Pass from another Boise Shoshoni informant while camped not much more than 40 miles west of Boise.) If Lewis and Clark erred in supposing they had found as good a transcontinental route as they could have, their failure resulted from their inability to move their river expedition fast enough to get through to a superior route in time to use it.

Another more difficult problem with any upper Missouri route did not escape Lewis's attention. Blackfoot resistance to any intruders—a point that gained notice in his accounts—made that route impractical for early trappers anyway. So, together with important geography lessons, Lewis and Clark learned some disappointing information about Indians that fur hunters soon confirmed. Altogether, their claim that they had disclosed as good a route as geography allowed—even though plausible then—must be discounted after 1808.

[Lewis and Clark's] industrious pursuit of a good transcontinental water route had directed their entire expedition along an ultimately impracticable line.

Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and their journal editors clearly followed a wise course in not overemphasizing any search for a fictitious Rocky Mountain water crossing. Hardly anyone would have been attracted to that kind of approach anyway. In evaluating Lewis and Clark's exploration, which undoubtedly has provided a national treasure of ethnological and other scientific information, an allowance must be made for their attempt to follow a water route.

But misdirected wandering is inherent in any genuine exploration through difficult country. If they had been lucky enough to learn that they should have left the Missouri route near present-day Helena, they could have gone directly to Missoula and anticipated David Thompson's practical and more advantageous Pend d'Oreille course. Saving a lot of time, they could have realized a more useful objective than the Lolo Trail. Returning to St. Louis many months earlier, they would have omitted a thousand miles or more of exploration. However, in return for hearing about a much better route two years sooner, those who benefited from their eventual reports would have learned a great deal less about many interesting western areas.

As matters worked out, Thompson discovered a way to get through northern Idaho's rugged terrain within four years of Lewis and Clark's misfortune. Stuart followed by finding South Pass and passage through southern Idaho in 1812. Satisfactory routes for commerce and emigrant traffic from St. Louis and Missouri River terminals to Washington that had eluded Lewis and Clark thus were discovered long before they came into general use. Even so, a great deal of other useful information came from Lewis and Clark's transcontinental exploit.

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***FRONT COVER:** "Building the Settlement on Bush Prairie, New Market," one panel of a five-piece series created by Jacob Lawrence in 1975 for the Washington State Capital Museum in Olympia. The series was based on the life of pioneer George Washington Bush. See story starting on page 14. BACK COVER: "Log Storage Pond—1950," photographed by Josef Scaylea at a Weyerhaeuser mill near Snoqualmie in King County. See story starting on page 32. (Museum of History and Industry, Seattle)*