

## **Lewis & Clark**

On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1804, Meriwether Lewis and his friend William Clark left St. Louis, Missouri to explore the uncharted territories of the new Louisiana Purchase. They left with a letter from President Thomas Jefferson in their hands, stating that “the object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River, and such principal streams of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean . . . may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.”<sup>1</sup> Two years later, when Lewis and Clark returned from their expedition, there was not much celebration. The world paid little attention to what they had done. Lewis and Clark instead gained fame over the decades. Now their group the Corps of Discovery is famous and everyone knows the names of their leaders. What people slowly began to realize was that the Lewis and Clark expedition had brought back important exploratory information regarding the geography, the biology, and the native cultures of the new western world.

In 1803 France sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States for monetary reasons so they could fund their war against the British. For only \$15,000,000, Thomas Jefferson bought 820,000 square miles of land (this converts to 3 cents and acre).<sup>2</sup> Jefferson purchased this land partly for political purposes and partly for scientific ones. The land would provide ample room for the expansion of the United States, but the new territory was also full of endless new plants, animals, fossils, and geography. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Jefferson’s Letter,” (<http://www.mt.net/~rojomo/landc.htm?1>, June 1803).

Jefferson bought the rights to those new discoveries. At the time of his purchase, two-thirds of the population lived within fifty miles from tidewater. A hundred years later, the country would span from ocean to ocean. “From the beginning of the revolution, he thought of the United States as a nation stretching from sea to sea. More than any other man, he made that happen. His motives were many. . . He rejected the thought of North America’s being divided up into nation-states on the European model. He wanted the principles of the American Revolution spread over the continent, shared equally by all.”<sup>3</sup>

People consider Lewis and Clark and the men of their Corps of Discovery explorers, yet their exploration was different from what most of the famous explorers did. These men traveled to an area unexplored by the European world, but that is where the correlation ends. Outdone only by Ernest Shackleton, they did not have any mutinies, and only one death (due to a ruptured appendix). Even Lewis’s dog, Seaman, survived. There was only one battle, which involved the Blackfeet Indians, and only two men died in that skirmish. The Corps did not explore primarily for gold or glory either, but for a water route to the Pacific. Most importantly, the party left with little pomp and circumstance, and they returned home to virtually the same lack of celebration. There were no parades, no nationally inspired pride, and no newspaper headlines. Generally, when an exploration expedition returned home, there was an amazing amount of glorified celebration, but the Lewis and Clark expedition did not end the same way that most expeditions did.

These men came home to a rapidly growing nation. People wanted to get out there, to go west. Lewis and Clark simply led the way. These two men spanned a continent, met with the natives living in it, and returned home with great stories to tell

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<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Discovering Lewis and Clark,” (<http://www.lewis-clark.org/>, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, Undaunted Courage. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

and important information to share. The places they went to were habitable places, and they opened up the west for people to settle. The Lewis and Clark expedition proved to the nation that people could and would survive out there. Now, over 39 million people live in the eleven states that Lewis and Clark traveled through. That is seven times more than the population of the entire country when they set out on their expedition.<sup>4</sup> Now, the Lewis and Clark trail no longer means merely what the Corps of Discovery experienced, it also means the stories about what has happened on that trail for the 200 years since then. Yet the first journey always tends to be the most important.

On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Corps of Discovery left St. Louis to venture into the newly purchased and unexplored Louisiana Territory. Meriwether Lewis, the secretary and child protégé of Thomas Jefferson, and his friend and fellow soldier William Clark led the expedition. The Corps consisted of approximately 31 men. Chosen from an applicant pool of about 100, they were strong, healthy, unmarried, adaptable, and, most importantly, adventurous. Because of a wish for secrecy, the men had received only vague information of where they were going, and for how long that they would travel. Yet this did not stop them.

For approximately three years, these men lived together day in and day out. They were the “permanent party”. Others joined at various times, but the actual corps of discovery only consisted of the 31 enlisted men, Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and Seaman, Lewis’s Newfoundland dog.<sup>5</sup> In Clark, Lewis found a man with whom he could cooperate. “They recognized each other’s particular strengths and weaknesses and forged themselves and the rest of the expedition into a team that was greater than the sum of its

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<sup>4</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Discovering Lewis and Clark.”

<sup>5</sup> Irving W. Anderson, “The Corps,” ([http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/inside/idx\\_corp.html](http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/inside/idx_corp.html), 1997).

parts.”<sup>6</sup> This friendship and trust later proved vital to the success of the expedition. On April 7<sup>th</sup> in 1805, the permanent party would leave Fort Mandan where they had wintered, and head for the Pacific. They left with everything that they thought they would need, including newly invented thermometers, 150 yards of tent and sheet cloth, 12 pounds of soap, 193 pounds of “portable soup” (boiled down soup to make it more transportable), thousands of presents for the Native Americans, 45 flannel shirts, 15 rifles, almost 6000 doses of different drugs, ten books, and one map.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most important reason the Lewis and Clark expedition left was to find a water route to the Pacific. Thomas Jefferson, inspired by men such as Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Captain James Cook, said that the object of their mission was “to explore the Missouri River . . . [in hopes that it] may offer the most direct and practicable water-communication across the continent, for the purposes of commerce. Beginning at the mouth of the Missouri . . . to the ocean.”<sup>8</sup> Following these orders, the trip westward lasted until December of 1805. The corps followed the Missouri River as long as they could. At the headwaters of the Missouri, they portaged and paddled until they reached the continental divide. At the top of the continental divide, a shocked Lewis saw that the mountains did not immediately recede again to another river that would lead them to the ocean. Instead, the entire span of the Rocky Mountains stood before him and the Pacific. It was here that Lewis sadly realized that his original speculations about the trip's easy geography were wrong.

That same day, Lewis ascends the final ridge toward the Continental Divide . . .  
Climbing the rest of the ridge . . . he expects to see from the summit a vast plain

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Clinton, “The Lewis and Clark Expedition,” (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian/issuesall/issues96/aug96/bill.html>, August 1996).

<sup>7</sup> David Neiman, “To Equip an Expedition,” ([http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/inside/idx\\_equ.html](http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/inside/idx_equ.html), 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Jefferson, “Letter”.

to the west, with a large river flowing to the Pacific: the Northwest Passage that had been the goal of explorers since the time of Columbus. Instead, all he sees are more mountains.<sup>9</sup>

The collective wisdom of the continent's geography immediately “went out the door.”<sup>10</sup> The Corps had planned to have a simple portage over the divide, which would lead them to another waterway to the Pacific. Instead, they had an enormous stretch of mountains in front of them as far as Lewis could see. The Corps struggled on, over passes, down rivers, past Native American settlements and through thick woods.

It was a long journey from the continental divide to the Pacific. They reached the Oregon Coast in November 1805 and built Fort Clatsop to serve as a winter residence. In April of 1806, the Corps headed home. The expedition split into three groups on the return trip so they could explore as much new territory as possible. The three routes are outlined in blue the map on the following page. The route outward is in red.<sup>11</sup> Each expedition mapped more territory and wrote down everything that they found out about the surrounding land. They traveled through virtually every type of geographical area and they recorded it all. The maps that they brought back helped guide people through the west for years to come. The three groups reunited at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers. The Lewis and Clark expedition ended up traveling more than 2000 miles in two years.<sup>12</sup> They had found a route to the Pacific, and therefore accomplished Jefferson’s primary goal. Yet there was more to the Lewis and Clark expedition than geographical knowledge. They saw and recorded countless plants, animals, fossils, and

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<sup>9</sup> Davie Neiman, “Timeline.”

<sup>10</sup> Bill Clinton. “Expedition.”

<sup>11</sup> PBS Online, “Maps,” ([http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/archive/idx\\_map.html](http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/archive/idx_map.html), 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Gerald F. Kreyche, “Lewis and Clark: Trailblazers who opened the continent,” ([http://www.findarticles.com/m1272/n2632\\_v126/20301222/p1/article.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/m1272/n2632_v126/20301222/p1/article.jhtml), Jan 1998).

geographical markers. They came into contact with numerous Native American tribes and they brought back a wealth of information to share with their young country.

Other important information the Corps of Discovery brought back was biological knowledge. Thomas Jefferson had told them to take note of “the animals of the country generally, and especially those not known in the United States; the remains and accounts of any of which may be deemed rare or extinct.”<sup>13</sup> As the Corps moved westward, they saw more and more unknown animals. They spotted species completely unknown in the east, such as coyotes, groundhogs, antelope, and mule deer. These animals and plants had not yet been documented by science. Clark was intrigued by these new findings, especially the prairie dogs, and wrote the following:

Discovered a village of small animals that burrow in the ground . . . Killed one, and caught one alive, by pouring a great quantity of water in his hole. We attempted to dig to the beds of one of those animals . . . The village of those animals covered about 4 acres of ground on a gradual descent of a hill, and contains great numbers of holes on the top of which those little animals sit erect, and make a whistling noise, and, when alarmed, step into their hole.<sup>14</sup>

The expedition also saw many buffalo with one herd numbering over 10,000. The herds moved in huge groups across the plains, crossing frozen rivers and fields as they went. Clark found these animals amazing, and wrote as much about them as he could. While they wintered at Fort Mandan, members of the Corps joined the Native Americans to go buffalo hunting. They would kill 15 at a time and save most of the meat for later use. Their meat would sustain them for the remaining cold months at the fort, where it sometimes reached 74 degrees below zero<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Jefferson, “Letter”.

<sup>14</sup> William Clark, “We set the prairies on fire,” (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JOURNALS/LEWIS.html#chpt3>, 1804).

<sup>15</sup> William Clark, “Buffaloes,” (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JOURNALS/lewis3.html#chpt7>, 1804).

Once the Corps left the fort to travel to the Pacific Ocean, the men encountered more buffalo and disagreeable animals such as bears and mosquitoes. Lewis and Clark recorded every new plant and animal in their journals. Numerous birds, trees, fruits, and animals were first discovered in this way. In April of 1805 Lewis and Clark even dispatched a keelboat with about a dozen men down-river to carry back information to Jefferson. They brought back maps, reports from the field, Indian Artifacts, and boxes containing scientific specimens. There were animal skins, Indian corn seeds, skeletons, mineral samples, and even five live animals including a prairie dog.<sup>16</sup> In two years, they documented 178 plants and 122 animals.<sup>17</sup>

As the Corps moved westward, they discovered not only new and interesting biological specimens, but they also met many Native American tribes. In his letter to Meriwether Lewis, Jefferson outlined the way the Native Americans should be treated:

You will therefore endeavor to make yourself acquainted, as far as a diligent pursuit of your journey shall admit, with the names of the nations and their numbers; the extent and limits of their possessions; their relations with other tribes of nations; their language, traditions, monuments; their ordinary occupations in agriculture, fishing, hunting, war, arts, and the implements for these; their food, clothing, and domestic accommodations; the diseases prevalent among them, and the remedies they use; moral and physical circumstances which distinguish them from the tribes we know; peculiarities in their laws, customs, and dispositions; and articles of commerce they may need or furnish, and to what extent.<sup>18</sup>

And so the Corps of Discovery traveled towards the Pacific with these specific instructions in mind. Some of these tribes had never seen white or black men before, while some knew snippets of English and had various European trinkets.

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<sup>16</sup> David Neiman, "A Timeline of the Trip," ([http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/archive/idx\\_time.html](http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/archive/idx_time.html), 1997).

<sup>17</sup> David Neiman, "Timeline."

<sup>18</sup> Jefferson, "Letter".

One of the first groups that the expedition encountered was the Missouri and the Oto Indians. These tribes had already had a lot of exposure to white men. The smallpox virus had hit them hard, and the two tribes combined only had approximately 250 people left. As a result, the Oto and the Missouri were at first wary of the expedition. Here the captains gave their first speech telling the Native Americans that the “great father” now owns their land and they are now all of his “children.”<sup>19</sup> They then gave them the peace medallions commissioned by Jefferson, as well as a few other gifts including tobacco and face paint. In the end, the tribe agreed to travel to Washington, D.C. and open trade negotiations with Jefferson.

The expedition then moved upriver, past more Sioux tribes where more encounters occurred. Lewis and Clark had different levels of success with each tribe. The Teton Sioux appeared very hostile and the expedition narrowly avoided a fight, but their neighbors the Arikara were warm and took great pleasure in hosting the expedition. They were interested in York, Clark’s black slave who the Arikara’s thought had some special healing powers. They gave him the nickname “Big Medicine.”<sup>20</sup> Lewis and Clark kept meticulous records of what each tribe believed and practiced, and how they survived. This information in their journals would prove incredibly useful for the settlers who would follow.

The expedition reached the Mandans and their neighbors the Hidatsas in October of 1804. They lived in a major trade center at the end of the Missouri River. There the Corps decided to build their Fort Mandan and winter. The expedition got to meet and experience the other tribes that came there to barter. Crees, Cheyennes, Crows,

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<sup>19</sup> PBS Online, “The Arikara,” ([http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/native/idx\\_ari.html](http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/native/idx_ari.html), 1997).

<sup>20</sup> PBS Online, “The Arikara”.

Assiniboins and even the violent Tetons came. Throughout the winter, the Mandans provided the expedition with food in exchange for trade goods.

Fort Mandan was also where the corps gained an important new member of the expedition. Sacagawea, the Native American wife of the French-Canadian Interpreter Toussaint Charbonneau, would end up serving as the Native American translator for the following two years. The slave wife of Toussaint, Sacagawea spoke Shoshone and Hidatsa. Her “husband” spoke Hidatsa and French, and a member of the Corps, Francois Labiche, spoke French and English. Therefore, Toussaint got hired as a second interpreter as a necessity, but Sacagawea was hired for her knowledge of Native American language and culture, and she would prove very helpful in trade and guiding negotiations. The success of the expedition was also dependent on her.

In the spring, the Corps left Fort Mandan and continued west. They avoided the Assiniboin Indians, fearing to encounter them because of tension between the Assiniboins and the Mandans. Luckily, the Corps succeeded in avoiding the tribe. Lewis and Clark, for the rest of the journey, were well received by the Native Americans. They helped the expedition navigate over the Rocky Mountains, and they helped them through the second winter at Fort Clatsop on the Oregon Coast. The Clatsop Indians frequently visited and provided for them:

The Clatsops also aided the Corps both in preparing for and dealing with the Northwest winter. They informed Lewis and Clark that there was a good amount of elk on the south side of the Columbia, information that influenced the Corps to build Fort Clatsop where they did. When the expedition’s food supplies were running low, the Clatsops informed the Corps that a whale had washed ashore some miles to the south . . . Lewis wrote in his journal that Coboway “has been much more kind an[d] hospitable to us than any other Indian in this neighborhood.”<sup>21</sup>

On their way back from the Pacific they met even more new tribes. The one violent confrontation between the expedition and a Native American tribe for the entire trip occurred with the Blackfeet Indians in late July of 1806<sup>22</sup>. The Blackfeet attempted to steal some of the expedition's horses and guns, fearing that Lewis and Clark would give the horses to the Blackfeet's enemies. In the fight, Lewis' men killed two of the natives. They departed the next morning, and Blackfeet relations remained tense.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the two years that they spent on their voyage, the Corps of Discovery would encounter almost 50 different Native American Tribes. They would bring back priceless accounts of Native American life as the United States began a long and sometimes painful relationship with them. They would learn all about the proper food, navigation techniques, transportation, and shelter to have in the uncharted west.

The Corps of Discovery arrived back in St. Louis on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1806. As one of his first orders of business, Lewis wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson stating

It is with my pleasure that I announce to you the safe arrival of myself and party at 12 o'clock today with our papers and baggage. In obedience to your orders we have penetrated the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean and sufficiently explored the interior to the country to affirm with confidence that we have discovered the most practicable route which does exist across the continent by means of the navigable branches of the Missouri and Columbia River.<sup>24</sup>

And with that the expedition ended.

The Corps of Discovery was now ready to share their adventure. Yet even Lewis knew that much of what they brought back would be disappointing to the people at the time. Peace had not been made with all of the Native American tribes, and tension had

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<sup>21</sup> PBS Online, "The Clatsops," ([http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/native/idx\\_cla.html](http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/native/idx_cla.html) , 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Encarta Online Encyclopedia, "Lewis and Clark."

<sup>23</sup> Encarta Online Encyclopedia, "Lewis and Clark."

<sup>24</sup> Meriwether Lewis, "Journal Entry September 23, 1806," (<http://www.lewis-clark.org/>, 1806).

even been heightened with the Blackfeet Indians and the Sioux. The biggest failure though, was entirely not their fault. “It was a simple geographical fact. There was no all-water route, or anything close to it, and the Missouri River drainage did not extend beyond forty-nine degrees north latitude.”<sup>25</sup> They had found a route to the Pacific, but it was not a practical one. There were a few congratulatory gatherings for their return, but they ended quickly. The biological information that they brought back with them virtually disappeared from public knowledge for nearly a century. It was not until the west was settled that Lewis and Clark became well known again. “The expedition’s legacy was [at first] fundamentally geographical: Lewis and Clark broke the space barrier, took a “moon walk” that confirmed what thinking people figured they already knew. There was something out there: land!”<sup>26</sup> People were already following their own dreams west to the land of the unknown anyway, driven by their own desires, not what the Corps of Discovery had found.

Yet what they brought back was important. They had returned with mountains of journals and artifacts. The information in these guided explorers yet to come, and taught people about the new and wild west. For some reason though, the people forgot how the information had come to be. Even the names of certain places that had been named by members of the expedition were replaced quickly and often multiple times. There was no published guide by Lewis and Clark, just information via word of mouth regarding what they had found. Thus the people moved west to colonize the rest of the continent with information from the expedition, without knowing what some had gone through to get it. Fur traders, scientists, soldiers, pilgrims, railroad surveyors, farmers and ranchers would

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<sup>25</sup> Ambrose, Undaunted Courage.

<sup>26</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Discovering Lewis and Clark.”

all go west and help form the nation into what it is today. Yet the fact remains that Lewis and Clark were the first white men out there, and every American who followed was following in their footsteps. “Lewis and Clark were the first to see the land and the people along the Missouri and Columbia rivers with the eyes and attitudes of a new nation, grounded in the science and philosophy of the Enlightenment.”<sup>27</sup> They opened up new fields of biology for Americans to research, and they introduced new concepts of exploration, laying the groundwork for those to follow. Expeditions would now not only have a point on a map as a goal, but also they would gather up as much information about the land and people between them and that point. They helped begin a new era of the United States’ history.

And thus the Lewis and Clark expedition ended with not a bang but a whisper. The journals slowly went into print. Not many volumes were sold, but enough to provide the information that passed down for centuries, information that helped give the picture of what waited out there. The Lewis and Clark Expedition may have not been appreciated immediately when they came back, but in the years to come, as the steamships and railroads helped bring the west closer together, what they had found was rediscovered day by day. The geographical, biological, and cultural information that they brought back helped their young nation grow. The Corps of Discovery had tapped into an amazing country, as Meriwether Lewis himself said at a welcome home gathering in Charlottesville Virginia in 1806.

With you I trust that the discoveries we have made will not long remain unimproved; and that the same sentiment which dictated to our government an investigation into the resources so liberally bestowed by nature in this fair portion of the globe, will prompt them to avail themselves of those resources, to promote

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<sup>27</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Discovering Lewis and Clark.”

the cause of liberty and the honor of America, and then to relieve distressed humanity, in whatever shape she may present herself.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Meriwether Lewis, "Consequences," (<http://www.lewis-clark.org/>, 1806).