

Lewis & Clark's Corps of Discovery



Bill Stephens photo.

The American Outdoor Epic

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2004 marks the 200th anniversary of Lewis and Clark's amazing journey.

On the evening of June 26, 1804, three vessels carrying 48 men came ashore from the Missouri River on a point of land at the mouth of the Kansas River. The vessels included a 55-foot keelboat, 8 feet wide with large sails, as well as two smaller wood boats called pirogues. The nearest white settlement, La Charette, was about 294 miles downstream on the Missouri River. There could have been a Kanza Indian watching the group as they secured their boats at a site we know today as Kansas City.

While French explorers and trappers had known this region since 1713, this group surely

looked different to any Kanza Indian watching. And they were. They flew a flag with red and white stripes and a small field of blue. And while some of the men were indeed speaking French, those who wore uniforms, spoke English. Several were giving orders. They were well-armed with muskets, rifles, tomahawks, large guns on each of the small boats (blunderbusses), and even a small cannon on the large boat.

The group seemed unfriendly. While several stood guard, most were chopping down trees and building a 6-foot-tall pile of wood across the point. (The redoubt of logs was built to protect against attack, and trees were cleared to

allow celestial readings to obtain latitude and longitude.) The group might have appeared like a well-organized war party.

But if Kanza Indians were watching, they did not to meet the strangers then, nor two years later when the expedition returned downstream in large dugout canoes. This group was in fact a unit of the Army of the United States of America, a country only 28 years old. And while they had some of the most advanced weapons of the day — flintlock rifles, muskets, and even an air rifle — their intentions were not aggressive.

The group was the expedition under the command of Captain Meriwether Lewis and William Clark: the “Corps of Volunteers for Northwestern Discovery”. They were traveling under orders from President Thomas Jefferson, which, first and foremost, included extending U.S. foreign trade and finding the best route to the Pacific Ocean via the Missouri River. The fabled Northwest Passage was thought to include an easy hike over Appalachian-like mountains to the great river of the west that flowed to the ocean. The group would discover that the “easy hike” was a misconception.

Lewis’s orders also included establishing commercial alliances with native people. The political motive was to keep the Europeans from becoming established in the potential new lands of the U.S. The business to be done was the fur trade. Beaver and other fur were in great demand in Europe and Asia.

Another reason to meet the

inhabitants of the West was to inform them that, from the European view, the land they lived on was now part of the United States. The recent Louisiana Purchase had doubled the size of the U.S., adding 800,000 square miles. The area involved stretched from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains and was home to thousands of Native Americans. To the men of the expedition, though, the most essential reason to meet the natives was to get their help, which would be necessary to the expedition’s success and survival.

A third objective was to examine and report on the land and its “productions.” Being a man of Enlightenment Science, President Jefferson wanted Lewis to collect information on everything — geography, rocks, minerals, soils, climate, fossils, plants, animals, and the native people.

Lewis left Pittsburgh with the keelboat in August 1803, maneuvered it down the Ohio River, and hired men along the

way. He met Clark near Louisville, Ky. They enlisted more men, and preceded to St. Louis, picking up soldiers from military posts.

Forty-eight men started out from their 1803-1804 winter camp, across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. The crew was a microcosm of America, including men with various ethnic backgrounds. Among the regular soldiers from the Army were Irish-Americans and German-Americans. Lewis and Clark were stock from Virginia planters. “Recruits,” hired mostly from the Louisville area, were rugged young frontiersmen mustered in as Privates. French boatmen were hired to help get the vessels up the river the first year. One of them, Pierre Cruzate, was French-Omaha, and a fiddle player who often entertained the crew. George Droulliard, a French-Canadian-Shawnee was hired as an interpreter. Clark took along his slave, York, who worked with the enlisted men, hunted, and mystified the



Jeffrey Bender photos

The horizon looked much different when the men of the “Corps of Discovery” landed at the mouth of the Kansas River in 1804. The top photo shows today’s view of Kansas City. The right photo shows reenactors in a camp that may look very much like Lewis and Clark’s camp 200 years ago.



Indians. Another “member” of the expedition was Lewis’s Newfoundland dog, Seaman.

The first year, the group moved upriver to the Mandan-Hidatsa Indian villages. The following spring, some of the soldiers and most of the Frenchmen returned to St. Louis with the keelboat. The expedition continued west with 33 people, including French-Canadian interpreter Toussaint Charbonaue, his young Shoshone Indian wife, Sacagawea, and their infant son John Baptiste. This group traveled to the Pacific and back.

Throughout their journey, the Corps met more than 50 Indian tribes, and they were surprised to learn, at the time, that the natives were “as numerous on the Columbia, [river] . . . as the whites are in any part of the United States.” With few exceptions, they found the Indian people to be friendly and generous, and Lewis knew the expedition likely would not have gone further than the Rocky Mountains without their help.

The people of the Corps made a journey of epic proportions for their time, covering about 8,000 miles in three years. They went west and came back, 40 years before masses migrated west via the Oregon Trail. The extreme conditions and danger they overcame are popular heroic aspects of the expedition. Hardships included everything from mosquitoes and grizzly bears to starvation and hunting accidents. They were self-reliant and adept in survival skills, such as hunting, fishing, carpentry, hide tanning, cooking, butchering, camping, blacksmithing, and woodsmanship.

They took along tons of equipment, food, presents and trade goods, but mostly lived off

the land and what they received from Native Americans. They traveled by manufactured boats, dugout canoes, horseback, and on foot. The work of travel at times was almost unimaginable. In Montana they portaged heavy dugout canoes, food, and equipment 18 miles at the Great Falls area. There were numerous near misses that could have ended the expedition or resulted in severe injury or death. Only one member died — Sergeant Charles Floyd. It is generally accepted that he died of appendicitis and in 1804, nothing could have been done anywhere to save him. Two other deaths attributed to the expedition included two Blackfoot Indians, killed while attempting to steal guns and horses after misunderstanding the Corps’ intentions.

The Corps of Discovery experienced the raw, wild American West unlike anyone who followed. They encountered huge herds of buffalo, elk, deer, and pronghorn. At the mouth of the Kansas River, they saw “emmence numbers” of Carolina Parakeets, the only North American parrot, and a bird none of us will ever see alive.

The journey would take three years to complete, instead of two as Lewis had planned. They were the first from the United

States to learn first-hand of the vastness of the West and the extremes of geography — the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Lewis collected hundreds of plant and animal specimens, rocks and minerals, wrote hundreds of pages of descriptions, noted daily temperatures and other climate factors, and wrote page after page about the ethnography of the native people. Lewis and Clark were among the first to describe common western plants and animals, including much of our Kansas wildlife.

The story of Lewis and Clark’s expedition is so big and encompassing, it is difficult to



Bill Stephens photo

Many of the men were soldiers, picked up from military posts or recruited in Louisville, Ky. While their intentions were peaceful, the group was well-armed.



Jeffrey Bender photo

Above are some of the tools used to navigate unknown lands, including a sextant, octant, compass, chronometer, surveyor's chain and artificial horizon.

know where to start telling or learning. It involves so many aspects of history, humanities, science, and even technology. However, some of the more important lessons are perhaps those of human values such as courage, patriotism, friendship, teamwork, and understanding of cultures, as well as respect for the land and its resources. The 200-year anniversary of this expedition provides an opportunity to reflect on those things.

Events and exhibits commemorating the Expedition will occur across the U.S., especially along the Corps' trail. Events started in January 2003, and will run through 2006. There are 15 "National Signature Events" along the route. Along with the events, the National Park Service is sponsoring a traveling exhibit called "Corps of Discovery II," which includes two exhibit tents and the Tent of Many Voices for multi-media presentations and speakers. Kansas is privileged to have the biggest holiday event. July 3 and 4, 2004 will be the primary dates of "A Journey Fourth" to

commemorate the expedition's observance of the first 4th of July celebration west of the Mississippi. Various activities will take place for about two weeks around those dates. (See the web sites below)

Legacy projects are occurring all over the country. New museums, exhibits, education programs, and trails are in the works or completed. In Kansas, projects include interpretive signs at trail sites, new Lewis and Clark trail highway signage, interpretive pavilions with touch-screen kiosks at four locations, and the development of Lewis and Clark Commemorative Historic Park at Kaw Point in Kansas City. In Leavenworth, a statue of "Lewis the Botanist" will be featured. Atchison's projects include riverfront revitalization and new park facilities, boat ramps, and a hiking/biking trail. The exhibit "Beyond Lewis and Clark: Army Exploration in the West" will be at the Kansas Historical Society starting November 2004 and will return, permanently, in 2006 to Fort

Leavenworth (see the lewisandclarkinkansas website).

Another unique opportunity is the National Lewis and Clark Exhibition, which will visit five cities through 2006. The exhibition will bring together, for the first time, many remaining expedition items including journals, specimens, maps, Indian artifacts, and members' personal items. This highly acclaimed exhibition is open in St. Louis through September 6, 2004, and it will be in Denver during the summer of 2005.

Long-accepted theories and opinions about the expedition are occasionally revised when new historic materials are found. There are still mysteries various professional and amateur historians continue to study such as: Where did the iron boat frame end up? Was a buffalo jump really that, as reported by Lewis and Clark, or was it a place where drowned buffalo washed up on the shore at the base of a cliff? And the list goes on.

Looking back 200 years, modern opinions of whether the expedition was a success or a failure vary as much as the people who reflect on them. Maybe that variety of cultures and beliefs is what really makes the Bicentennial of the Corps of Discovery a worthy commemoration. It is a tribute to American democracy and freedoms, and to the land. ♡

For a "keelboat full" of information about the Lewis and Clark Expedition see the following web sites (there are more):

*Kansas Lewis Clark Commission:
www.lewisandclarkinkansas.org
 National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commemoration:
www.lewisandclark200.org
 A Journey Fourth Signature Event:
www.journey4th.org
 Kaw Point Park Projects:
www.lewisandclarkwyco.org*