

The Voyage of Lewis and Clark

Discovery

What was in this land Jefferson had bought? Only a few Europeans had ever been inside it, and then mostly along the narrow ribbons of its major rivers. To unveil Louisiana's secrets Jefferson organized a "Voyage of Discovery". It would be the first and the longest of the United States' journeys into the uncharted wilderness.

For Jefferson the Voyage was the realization of a compulsive dream. He was an inveterate – if armchair – Westerer. More, he was a scientist by hobby, and he had a scientist's need to know what was in the unknown. He also had a politician's need to know if a Northwest passage existed, which would connect shining sea to shining sea. For 20 years Jefferson had tried to have someone explore the lands west of the Mississippi. In 1786 he had encouraged the Connecticut adventurer John Ledyard to walk across Russia, boat the Bering Straits and then walk eastward to St Louis (Ledyard never got further than Irkutsk in Siberia). As Secretary of State, Jefferson had again backed another frustrated trans-America exploration, that of the French botanist André Michaux in 1793.

(The idealistic Michaux became sidetracked by the French Revolution.) It was not until he became President that Jefferson could finally find the men and the money to journey the continent. The Voyage of Lewis and Clark was begun even before Jefferson had Louisiana in his pocket. Jefferson browbeat Congress into stumping up \$2,500 for his enthusiasm in January 1803, two clear months before Napoleon agreed to sell.

With the Louisiana deal completed, Jefferson could move more openly. To lead the expedition he chose his personal secretary, Captain Meriwether Lewis, a 28-year-old Virginian. With the President's concurrence, Lewis invited his old friend, William Clark, to be co-leader. Clark accepted. The President gave the two men detailed and precise instructions on their task. By his charge they were to "explore the Missouri river, and such principal stream 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 purpose of commerce." If the primary purpose of the expedition was imperial, it was also to observe and record the soil, topography, flora and fauna of the lands it passed through, and to note the languages and traditions of the peoples it encountered.

That the Voyage would accomplish so much of its grand brief was due to the quality of its commanders. Lewis had a talent for naturalistic observation. Clark, a 32-year-old Kentuckian, was a skilled map-maker. Both men were experienced soldiers, having fought in the Revolutionary War and under Wayne at Fallen Timbers. Such was their friendship that they co-led the Voyage, in defiance of military hierarchy, from first to last in complete harmony.

By July 1803 Lewis and Clark were ready to leave the East. They travelled overland to Pittsburgh, descending

the Ohio by keelboat, and then ascending the Mississippi to St Louis, which was to be their jumping-off point into the unknown. At winter camp by the banks of the river they drilled the recruits to their "Corps of Discovery" in the techniques of frontiersing.

On 14 May 1804, Lewis and Clark began their historic ascent of the Missouri. With them went 27 unmarried members of the Corps. Two non-military personnel were also in the party: George Drouillard, a half French-Canadian interpreter, and York, an African-American slave Clark had inherited from his father. Within a few days the party, travelling in an iron keelboat and two pirogues, had left all signs of civilization behind them, and the "Big Muddy" had begun to reveal its watery dangers. Only ten days into the journey, Clark recorded in the expedition's red-morocco bound journals:

Set out early. passed a verry bad part of the River Called the Deavels race ground, this is where the Current Sets against some projecting rocks for half a Mile . . . The Swiftness of the Current Wheeled the boat, Broke our Toe rope, and was nearly over Setting the boat.

As they struggled upriver, they endured other problems of nature. Members of the party were frequently ill. On 6 June Clark wrote: "I am Still verry unwell with a Sore throat & head ache." Fifteen days later, he noted: "The party is much afflicted with Boils, and Several have the Deasentary, which I attribute to the water." There were difficulties with discipline as well:

Camp New Island, July 12th. 1804.

The Commanding officers, Capts. M. Lewis & W. Clark constituted themselves a Court Martial for the trial of such

prisoners as are Guilty of Capital Crimes, and under the rules and articles of War punishable by DEATH.

Alexander Willard was brought forward Charged with "Lying down and Sleeping on his post" whilst a Sentinel, on the Night of the 11th. Instant" (by John Ordway Sergeant of the Guard).

To this charge the prisoner pleads Guilty of Lying Down, and Not Guilty, of Going to Sleep.

The Court after Duly Considering the evidence aduced, are of the opinion that the Prisoner Alexdr. Willard is guilty of every part of the Charge exhibited against him. it being a breach of the rules and articles of War (as well as tending to the probable distruction of the party) do Sentence him to receive One hundred lashes, on his bear back, at four different times in equal proportion, and Order that the punishment Commence this evening at Sunset, and Continue to be inflicted (by the Guard) every evening until Completed.

WM. CLARK
M. LEWIS

Such an object lesson was not lost on the rest of the party. There were few other breaches of discipline.

Slowly the party inched northward, Clark generally supervising the navigation, while Lewis hunted the riverbanks, making notes and collecting specimens. The men were constantly in wonderment at the beauty of the pristine Western landscape and the profusion of animals: "the whole face of the country," Lewis wrote on one occasion, "was so covered with herds of Buffaloe, Elk and Antelope . . . [they] are so Gentel that we near them while feeding . . ."

At the end of July the explorers passed the mouth of the Platte. On 3 August at Council Bluffs they held their first

parley with Indians, members of the Oto, Missouri and Omaha tribes. In a scene which would be repeated many times in the months to come, Lewis and Clark urged the Indians to live in peace with the White man and gave them medals bearing the likeness of Jefferson, the Great Father who lived in Washington. Lewis also fired off a few exhibition shots from an air-gun ("which astonished those natives") he had brought along.

The Teton Sioux encountered at Bad River were considerably less tractable. On 25 September three Teton chiefs were invited for a council aboard the keelboat. After much drinking of whiskey, Clark escorted them to the bank, whereupon he was suddenly surrounded by warriors with bows drawn. "I felt My Self Compeled", Clark recorded later, "to Draw my Sword." He also signalled to the men in the boat to raise their guns. There were several minutes of stand-off, before one of the chiefs ordered the warriors away.

The chill blasts of autumn found the expedition at the Mandan villages in North Dakota, where they built a log fort and went into winter quarters. During the long icy months at "Fort Mandan", Lewis and Clark made copious notes and maps, supervised the building of dug-out canoes, and held counsel with numerous Indian visitors, from whom they learned much about the territory before them. The Mandan Indians made life tolerable for the party by regal hospitality, which included beaver tail, a considerable delicacy. The Mandan were amused by the White men's dancing, especially that of a Frenchman who could spin on his head.

Not until the end of March 1805 did the ice on the Missouri break up sufficiently for the explorers to recommence travel. After watching the spectacle of Indians killing buffalo floating past on ice floes, the Voyagers moved out from the villages. The keelboat was sent back

to St Louis with expedition records and specimens. The remaining party – those most "zealously attached to the enterprise", according to Lewis – headed upriver to the Great Unknown. With them went three new recruits, a fur trapper named Toussaint Charbonneau, his Lemhi Shoshoni squaw, Sacajawea, and their baby. Sacajawea had been captured as a child by Hidatsa Indians, and knew the way back to the Rocky Mountains, where the Shoshonis lived.

A week later they reached the furthest point known to White traders, the mouth of the Yellowstone. The party pushed on, their light canoes skimming through the shallows. At the mouth of the Marias (named by Lewis in honour of a lover) they made a mistaken detour, before continuing their progress up the Missouri. The hills grew steeper, and on 13 June the expedition reached the Great Falls of the Missouri. To get around them required a back-breaking 25-day portage through rattlesnake-plagued land. By the time they were waterborne again they had reached the foothills of the Rockies. To make progress the canoes had to be dragged through the icy water. Lewis and Clark became anxious to find the Shoshoni, from whom they hoped to secure horses for the passage over the Rockies. At Three Forks they took the northernmost stream, the Jefferson, which Sacajawea informed them led to the Shoshoni villages. For days the party toiled on, but failed to spot a single Indian. Anxious that the Shoshoni might be scared off by the size of the expedition, Lewis went on ahead with a small advance party, following the Indian trail through the Beaverhead Range and crossing the Continental Divide at Lemhi Pass. Soon after, they captured two Shoshoni squaws who agreed to lead them to their village near the headwaters of the Salmon. As Lewis neared the camp, a band of 60 warriors rushed to intercept him. Their hostility abated when they saw that the women were unharmed:

... these men then advanced and embraced me very affectionately in their way which is by putting their left arm over you[r] wright sholder clasping your back, while they apply their left cheek to yourws and frequently vociferate the word *ah-hi-e, ah-hi-e* that is, I am much pleased, I am much rejoiced. bothe parties now advanced and wer all carressed and besmeared with their grease and paint till I was heartily tired of the national hug. I now had the pipe lit and gave them smoke; they seated themselves in a circle around us and pulled off[f] their mockersons before they would receive or smoke the pipe . . . after smoking a few pipes with them I distributed some trifles among them, with which they seemed much pleased particularly with the blue beads and vermillion.

After several days in the Shoshoni camp, Lewis asked the Indians to accompany him back to the main party of the explorers, who were still at the Jefferson. The Shoshoni became suspicious, and suggested that Lewis was in league with the Minataree and wanted to lead them into an ambush. Only after much haranguing from their chief, Cameahwait, would the Shoshoni warriors go with Lewis to the Jefferson. There, Shoshoni edginess turned to joy. Sacajawea was Cameahwait's long-lost sister.

Furnished with Shoshoni horses, the expedition began its arduous traverse of the Rockies, heading north over Lost Trail Pass, and then down Bitterroot Valley. At the mouth of Lolo Creek in Montana, they went west, struggling through the snow flurries and soaking rain. "I have been wet and cold in every part as I ever was in my life," wrote Lewis. After ten days of misery, they emerged into the open valley of the Clearwater River, where they gave their horses over to the Nez Perce Indians. Pausing only to build new dug-out canoes, the party took to the water on 7 October. For three days they ran rapids, before plunging

into the Snake, and more whitewater. By now the explorers were exhausted and malnourished, Clark noting in the journal on 10 October: "Our diet . . . bad haveing nothing but roots and dried fish to eate, all the Party have greatly the advantage of me . . . as they all relish the flesh of the dogs." Soon after they emerged into the Columbia, the great river of the Far West, which poured them into the Pacific Ocean on 15 November 1805. "Men appear much Satisfied with their trip beholding with estonishment . . . this emence Ocian," wrote Clark in the journal.

Hastening Home

The Corps of Discovery wintered on the south bank of the Columbia, building a post which they named after the nearest Indian tribe, Fort Clatsop. After months made disagreeable by constant rain, pilfering Indians and a scarcity of game, on 23 March 1806 the explorers started for home. They retraced their route to the mouth of the Lolo Creek where, on 3 July, the party split. Clark, heading one group, explored the Yellowstone River and followed it to its confluence with the Missouri. Lewis, with nine men, went directly across country to the Falls of the Missouri. Before descending the Missouri he explored up the Marias as far as Cut Bank Creek in northern Montana. And there, on 27 July, the expedition's long good luck with the Indians finally ran out. A meeting with eight Piegan (Algonquian-speaking Blackfoot) turned quickly and confusingly sour. The Indians tried to steal the White men's guns, and in the ensuing argument a brave was stabbed. At this, the Piegans tried to make off with Lewis's horse. Lewis ran after them:

I called to them [Indians] as I had done several times before that i would shoot them if they did not give me my

horse and raised my gun, one of them jumped behind a rock and spoke to the other who turned around and stopped at the distance of 30 steps from me and I shot him through the belly, he fell to his knees and on his right elbow from which position he partly raised himself up and fired at me, and turning himself about crawled in behind a rock which was a few feet from him. he overshot me, being bearheaded I felt the wind of the bullet very distinctly.

Fearful of Piegan revenge, the explorers immediately started east, riding their horses hard for a hundred miles before they dared rest. But the bodies behind them would not be forgotten. Henceforth the Blackfoot would always have a hatred for the White man.

Near the junction of the Yellowstone and the Missouri the two parties reunited and hastened for home. They reached the earth-lodges of the Mandan on 15 August, where they stopped long enough only to bid goodbye to one of the party, John Coulter, who wanted to go trapping, and to persuade the local Chief, Shaka, to return with them to the United States.

The small band of explorers was back in St Louis on 23 September 1806. They had been given up for dead by everyone except Jefferson.

Lewis and Clark had been gone for two years, four months and ten days. They were the first White men to cross the continent within the limits of the present-day USA. On that entire journey only one man, Sergeant Charles Floyd, had lost his life, and that probably due to a ruptured appendix (untreatable in those years, even in an Eastern hospital). Even Lewis's black Newfoundland dog, Seaman, made it home alive. While they did not find a Northwest Passage - for none existed - they did discover several routes through the Rockies, established friendly

relations with half a dozen tribes, and vastly increased the knowledge of the West's topography, flora and fauna. The Voyage was a giant leap in the opening up of the trans-Mississippi West.

Spain provided a curious footnote. Between August 1804 and August 1806 no fewer than four Spanish expeditions were sent out to stop Lewis and Clark. All were forced to turn around, either by hostile Indians or through desertions in their own ranks. The last penetrated as far north as Nebraska, coming within 150 miles of the Americans without either party knowing it.