

Lesson Forty-Eight

Lewis And Clark Expedition

LESSON IDEA

To show the importance of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in opening up the western wilderness to Americans and in blocking the territorial ambitions of England, France, and Spain.

PREPARATION

Review last week's lesson, especially George Washington's quotation about our relations with European powers. Provide a copy of the map on page three for each family member. Read the "During The Week" section and assign the suggested projects.

IN THE SPACIOUS, sun-filled office of the President of the United States, two men were engaged in a conversation that would set in motion one of the most dangerous and difficult explorations in U.S. history. The older of the two, a tall redhead, was President Thomas Jefferson. The other was Meriwether Lewis, a captain in the U.S. Army who was also Jefferson's secretary.

The two shared many interests. Both were Virginians, gentlemen farmers, scholars, and amateur botanists. Their conversation on this particular day, as on many others, concerned the wilderness lands west of the Mississippi River and the search for a waterway connecting the east coast of the new nation with the Pacific Ocean. Belief in the existence of such a connecting waterway, commonly called the Northwest Passage, dated back almost to the time of Columbus. In the minds of merchants, explorers, and statesmen, there had to be such a river road; the logic of geography required one. The English, French, and Spanish had all searched for one without success, but they had at least narrowed the possibilities to the Missouri and Columbia Rivers. Why do you think a Northwest Passage would be so important to those foreign nations? [Ask each family member for an opinion.]

There was great wealth in the northern sec-

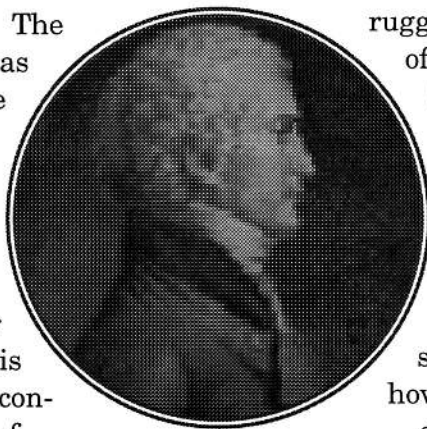
tion of the American continent. The trade in beaver skins alone was worth millions. But this potential fortune in furs depended on a relatively cheap and easy transportation route from Indian camps to ocean ships. England had ready access to the Indian camps through her Canadian holdings, the Great Lakes, and Hudson Bay. But a Northwest Passage would reduce transportation costs and enhance profits. It would do the same for the French, helping them to compete with England. Spain was interested in discovering a Northwest Passage for yet another purpose: it could serve a barrier to prevent the English from moving south from Canada to conquer the Spanish territory in New Mexico and California.

(That showed how little they knew about the rugged Rocky Mountains or the amount of land separating New Mexico from Canada.)

The United States was anxious to frustrate the ambitions of all three nations and force them off the American continent. Do you remember why? [Review several of the quotations from last week's lesson, and remind family members how much American leaders mistrusted the totalitarian European governments.]

As early as 1783 Thomas Jefferson had promoted exploration of the western wilderness to find a Northwest Passage. He proposed the idea to George Rogers Clark, the famous frontier leader of the American Revolution, but nothing came of it. In 1793, he helped the American Philosophical Society raise funds to back a western journey by the French botanist Andre Michaux. Meriwether Lewis, then 18, asked to go along, but the expedition ended before it began when it was discovered that Michaux's loyalties were not to America, but to the subversive revolutionaries of France.

Jefferson apparently kept young Lewis' enthusiasm for western exploration in mind, for in 1801 he invited Lewis to suspend his budding army

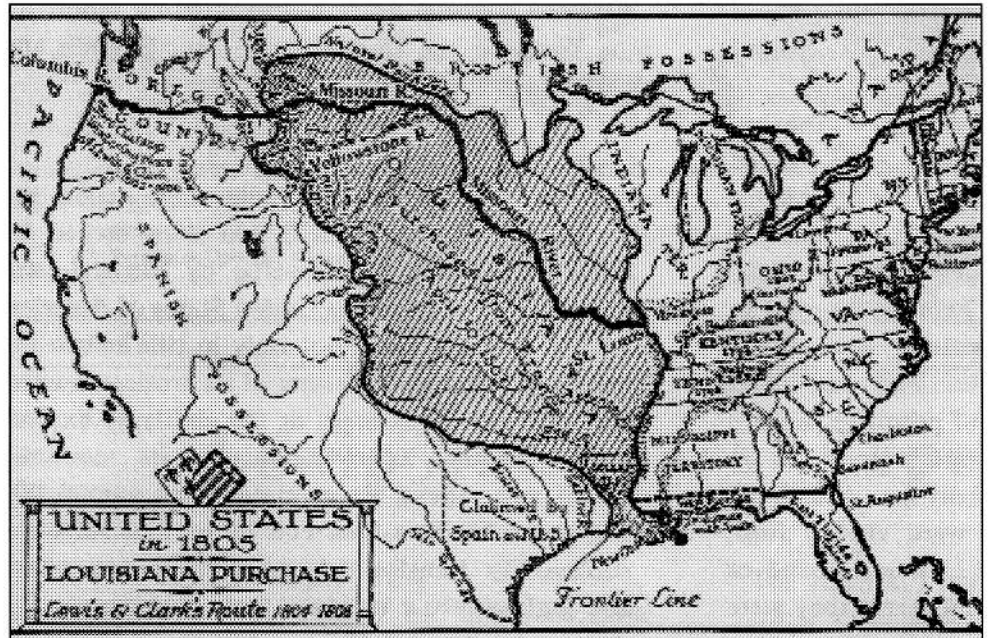


Meriwether Lewis

career and come to the nation's capitol. "The appointment to the Presidency of the U.S.," Jefferson wrote Lewis, "has rendered it necessary for me to have a private secretary." Yet the new president wanted more than a secretary. The job he offered Lewis, at \$500 a year, was equivalent to an aide-de-camp. "Your knowledge of the Western country, of the army, and of all its interests and relations," reason Jefferson, "has rendered it desirable for public as well as private purposes that you should be engaged in that office."

The next two years were devoted to preparation as Lewis absorbed knowledge and skills from the scientists, diplomats, and politicians who surrounded the President. Events moved rapidly toward a crisis as Spain sold her interests in the vast Louisiana territory to Napoleon Bonaparte, and then, without warning or explanation, closed the port of New Orleans to American frontiersmen. Even before Jefferson began bargaining for the purchase of New Orleans, he was making plans for Lewis to head an expedition into the northwest to find a practicable water road to the Pacific. Publicly, it was to be a geographic and scientific expedition; privately, it was to be an American thrust into the wilderness to discover the Northwest Passage and to keep foreign influence from mushrooming west of the Mississippi. While James Monroe and Robert Livingston negotiated with Napoleon in Paris, Lewis was in Philadelphia studying botany, zoology, and celestial navigation, and working feverishly to ready men, boats, and supplies for the expedition.

What surprising development occurred in Paris that made Lewis' new assignment even more important to the new nation? [Review the major points of last week's lesson: the sudden French decision to sell the entire Louisiana territory to the U.S., the vaguely defined Louisiana bound-



STARTING from St. Louis on May 14, 1804, Lewis and Clark led their men up the Missouri, across the Rockies, then down the Columbia to the Pacific Ocean. On their return trip, Clark explored the Yellowstone while Lewis followed the Marias and the Missouri. They returned to St. Louis September 23, 1806 — the first Americans to cross the North American continent.

aries, and the enormous potential for expansion that the purchase offered our country.]

Lewis needed a corps of 30 or 40 men, including, as he phrased it, "some good hunters, stout, healthy, unmarried men, accustomed to the woods, and capable of bearing bodily fatigue in a pretty considerable degree." He also needed a co-leader, someone he could trust and who could assume complete leadership if necessary. His choice was William Clark, the younger brother of Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark. The two men complemented each other perfectly.

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Both Lewis and Clark kept daily journals describing their journey in minute detail. Originally published in seven volumes, and a volume of maps, there are numerous condensations available. One of the most interesting is the edition edited by Bernard DeVoto (*The Journals of Lewis and Clark*). DeVoto's introduction is sufficient reason to include the book any family library, as it summarizes both the events that preceded the expedition, and those that made the adventure so important to the expansion of America. Another fascinating in-depth study of the epic journey is *Meriwether Lewis: A Biography* by Richard Dillon.

Both books are in print.

Lewis was the diplomat, scientist, and farsighted thinker; Clark, the negotiator, engineer, geographer, and master of frontier survival skills. Both were experienced rivermen, natural and skilled leaders, and extraordinarily intelligent. Yet theirs was not a command by committee. On Jefferson's authority, Lewis had promised Clark (a man four years his senior) equality of command and a captain's commission, but the War Department had commissioned Clark a second lieutenant and refused to change his rank. Lewis nevertheless ignored Clark's official rank and treated him as an equal. Had a dispute over authority arisen, however, Lewis was (by personality, temperament, and title) the natural commander.

Let us look at the route Lewis and Clark traveled. [Distribute copies of the map on page three.]

Commencing from St. Louis on May 14, 1804 with a corps of "robust, healthy, hardy young men," the explorers moved upstream as far as the present state of North Dakota. They established winter quarters at a site that they named Fort Mandan, near the junction of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. [Locate this point on the map.] It may appear on the map as an easy journey, but the Missouri is anything but a gently flowing river. As the *Sioux City Register* described it in 1868, "Of the variable things in creation, the most uncertain are the action of a jury, the state of a woman's mind, and the condition of the Missouri River." According to one boatman, it "plays hide-and-seek with you today, and tomorrow follows you around like a pet dog with a dynamite cracker tied to his tail."

"Big Muddy," as it was called by those who knew it best, had brought death and disaster to many would-be explorers long before Lewis and Clark outmaneuvered its treacherous sandbars and deceptive byways. In winter its northern waters became a frozen expanse; in the spring its swift currents hurled chunks of winter ice at any trespassers who ventured into its waters. It was April 1805 before Big Muddy was tame enough for travel and the Corps of Discovery (as the expedition was named) could push into the great unknown where white men had never ventured.

Virtually the entire journey was in country unlike anything the explorers had ever seen. The Rocky Mountains formed an unprecedented,

almost unimaginable obstacle. But just as unfamiliar were the high plains, fierce dust storms, towering plateaus, overwhelming waters of the Columbia River, tremendous forests, enormous buffalo herds, saucy prairie dogs, and the giant grizzly bears. It all added up to something unlike any previous frontier.

Consider, as one example, the grizzlies. When six of the corps were threatened by one of the 600-pound behemoths, four shots were fired and all were direct hits. Yet the grizzly continued to charge at the men. Two more shots found their mark, one breaking the beast's shoulder, but it hardly broke stride. Needing to reload, two of the men rushed for the canoe while the other four ran for cover in the willows. Reloaded rifles belched again, but the bear only became more infuriated. The grizzly chased two of the hunters over a 20-foot bank into the Missouri and came into the water after them. Finally, one of the marksmen still on shore put a bullet into the bear's skull. When the carcass was examined later, it was imbedded with eight rifle balls.

Lewis wrote in his journal: "These bears, being so hard to die, rather intimidate us all. I must confess that I do not like the gentleman and had rather fight two Indians than one bear. There is no other chance to conquer them by a single shot but by shooting them through the brains and this becomes difficult in consequence of two large muscles which cover the sides of the forehead. and the sharp projection of the center of the frontal bone, which is also of a pretty good thickness."

Indians posed another major threat to the expedition, especially the Sioux, the most warlike of the northern tribes. The Sioux bullied other tribes and kept the French and Spanish from entering the Northwest. Yet the American explorers moved in and out of Sioux territory without serious mishap. One historian suggests that both Lewis and Clark must have been masters of primitive psychology, since they made no mistakes in circumstances where others might have fatally blundered. In dealing with the Sioux they were always firm, unafraid, and could not be bluffed. At precisely the right moments they were agreeable, threatening, or defiant. With the less warlike tribes, they were equally firm and unafraid, yet were friendly, fair, courteous, and honest to a fault.

The rugged, awesome, and gigantic Rocky Mountains presented the expedition with its greatest challenge. Traversing them entailed a colossal struggle against hunger, cold, and exhaustion. Lewis described the challenge: "We are now several hundred miles within the bosom of this wild and mountainous country ... without any information with respect to the country, not knowing how far these mountains continue, or where to direct our course to pass them to advantage or intercept a navigable branch of the Columbia [River]." As the corps followed the narrow winding mountain trails, one fact became increasingly apparent: no river or waterway squeezed its way through the bleak, towering heights in a fashion useful for commercial travel.

There was no Northwest Passage, nor would there be. The Rockies simply would not allow it. England would have to use her Canadian routes for trade. Spain could take her fearful eye off the northern wilderness; its geography was a natural barrier to against invasion. And America was free to expand and develop her frontier from the Mississippi to the Pacific.

By December 1805, Lewis and Clark had reached their goal, the Pacific Ocean, and were building log cabins for winter quarters. The campsite was named Fort Clatsop. [Locate this point on the map.] All that remained was the long trek home to give the waiting world its first report on the West—the United States over the hills and beyond the sunset.

Concluding Thought

The rich and majestic wilderness called the Louisiana Territory, which had been owned by France and Spain and coveted by England, now belonged to the United States. It was America's both in title and in maps of exploration. Neither of its previous owners had had either the courage or ability to explore its boundaries, river systems, mountain ranges, valleys, vegetation, and animal life. The epic Lewis and Clark journey in 1804 had successfully transformed a land of rumor and fantasy into a territory that could be seen, measured, and tamed. Hunters, trappers, settlers, and traders would follow in their footsteps and expand the nation's boundaries to the Pacific.

Looking Ahead

Yet another section of the United States was affected by the Louisiana Purchase. It, too, was held by a foreign power. Today it is such a popular vacation spot that it is difficult to imagine that it ever belonged to other nations. Does anyone know the state involved? And what foreign nations held sway over it until the early 1800s? We will answer those questions next week.

DURING THE WEEK

Discuss pioneer life in the West. As a family project, find out as much as you can about the Indian tribes of the Northwest, the Rocky Mountains and their geographic wonders, and everyday frontier life. Assign a member of the family to gather biographical material about Lewis or Clark from such books as Richard Dillon's *Meriwether Lewis: A Biography* and Gerald S. Snyder's *In The Footsteps of Lewis and Clark* (the latter is out-of-print, but may be available at a public library).