

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-

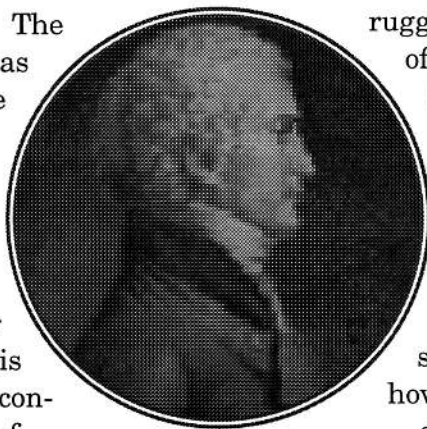
tion of the American continent. The trade in beaver skins alone was worth millions. But this potential fortune in furs depended on a relatively cheap and easy transportation route from Indian camps to ocean ships. England had ready access to the Indian camps through her Canadian holdings, the Great Lakes, 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

