



Lewis and Clark reach the Pacific Ocean

1805

They were the advance probe into the nation's unknown wilderness. Beginning in 1804, pathfinders Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led their small Corps of Discovery on the greatest scientific fact-finding expedition of the 19th century. While charting the land, meeting its inhabitants and cataloging its plants and animals, the men blazed a trail westward. Their journey through the newly purchased Louisiana Territory, across the Rocky Mountains and on to the Pacific Ocean opened the way for America's great westward expansion.

Early in 1803 President Thomas Jefferson presented a message to Congress stressing the need "... to explore the river Missouri from its mouth to its source ... and the Indians inhabiting it ... even to the Western Ocean." Congress approved and Army officers Lewis and Clark were chosen to lead the expedition. Over the next few months, they recruited the men who

would make up the Army's Corps of Discovery. On a site near St. Louis, the men selected, mostly experienced frontiersmen, prepared for the expedition.

The journey began on May 14, 1804 as three boats carrying the men and six tons of supplies and equipment started up the muddy Missouri River. One of the last cabins they were to see for two and a half years belonged to Daniel Boone, the best-known pathfinder of a generation earlier. Appropriately, Lewis and Clark were "jumping off" from a point where Boone and others ended their explorations.

After five long months of adventure-filled and physically demanding travel up the Missouri River, the corps reached a Mandan Indian village. With bad weather rapidly closing in, they decided to spend the winter with the friendly Mandans. During the encampment, Lewis and Clark met Sacagawea, an Indian girl who was to be-

come a valuable guide and friend to the corps. She was a Shoshone who had been taken from her tribe a few years earlier and was familiar with the country between the Mandan village and the Shoshone lands near the Rocky Mountains. Anxious to see her people, Sacagawea volunteered to travel with the expedition. Her ne'er-do-well French trapper husband also tagged along.

In early Spring 1805, the party split up. Eight men were ordered to report to President Jefferson in Washington. The majority of the Corps continued west. Each mile became more difficult as they traveled — frequently the boats had to be pulled through the cold, shallow water.

In June they reached a landmark known to the Indians as the Great Falls. Lewis described the roaring cataract as "The grandest sight I ever beheld." It proved to be as awesome as it was beautiful. Nearly a month of hard labor in bad weather was needed to get around the falls. Their luck changed in August when they met the Shoshone tribe — Sacagawea's brother was the chief, and her presence ensured their safety.

With horses acquired from the Shoshone, the corps — still accompanied by the Indian princess who wanted to see the Great Ocean — crossed the cold, hazardous mountains.

The going was so rough that the horses could not be ridden and had to be led like pack mules. Food became so scarce that they were forced to eat their supply of tallow candles. Illness also overcame many of the men. Though sick and weak himself, Clark doctored everyone until they recovered.

Regaining their strength, the explorers crossed the mountains. In hastily made canoes, they raced down the Clearwater and Columbia Rivers trying to reach the ocean before winter set in. On November 7, 1805 they first saw the Pacific. Half of the expedition was accomplished.

Following a mild but wet winter the corps began retracing its steps on March 23, 1806. The return over familiar ground was easier. They reached the Mandan village in five months and, after bidding Sacagawea good-bye, they headed down the swift Missouri. At noon on September 23, 1806 — after a journey of two years, four months and nine days — the men of the Lewis and Clark expedition returned to St. Louis.

Their 8,000-mile trek into the wilderness revealed detailed information about the previously unknown lands. It also sparked the imaginations of thousands of explorers and settlers who soon followed in their footsteps to the West Coast.