

LEWIS AND CLARK: Perspectives for Students and Teachers

by Herman J. Viola



[Editor's Note: *Lewis and Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition* opened May 12 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History and will close mid-September. More than 450 artifacts illustrate cultural encounters along the journey of Lewis and Clark, including the many American Indian tribes they encountered. In the exhibit, visitors follow the steps of Lewis and Clark across America. In schools today, students learn about the Lewis and Clark expedition at different grade levels. It is a drama of adventure and discovery covered in many textbooks focusing on the American Experience. In connection with this exhibit, Curator Emeritus Herman Viola has lectured widely and shares with *AnthroNotes*® readers his insights into using the "Corps of Discovery" as a model for integrating social studies strands such as history, culture, civics, economics, and geography. The article includes teaching activities, many of them using the journals of Lewis and Clark. For a taste of the expedition in the explorers' own words, a readily available paperback abridgement with modernized spelling is *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, edited by Anthony Brant, with an afterward by Herman J. Viola, National Geographic Society, 2002.]

Nearly 200 years ago President Thomas Jefferson commissioned his young friend Meriwether Lewis captain of the "Corps of Discovery," a daring effort to unlock the mysteries of the vast interior of the North American continent. Lewis, in turn, convinced his former comrade-in-arms William Clark to share with him the hardships and glory of this unique commission, which today is remembered as the Lewis and Clark Expedition. By any standard, it was as successful as it was monumental. The expedition was a triumph for the young republic, for Jefferson, and for the members of the Corps of Discovery, who are deservedly honored as American heroes today. Indeed, our country might now be entirely different had it not been for their courage, their determination, and their faithfulness to each other and to their president.

The Lewis and Clark Story can be told from many different perspectives, including history, culture, civics, economics, and geography. In this article, I focus on some of

the lesser known aspects of the Lewis and Clark Story to illustrate how this familiar topic can be naturally integrated into various social studies classes and perspectives. Throughout, there are some brief activity ideas for the classroom.

Teaching About the Expedition

History

Two hundred years ago, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark of the U.S. Army led their Corps of Discovery across the North American continent to the Pacific Ocean. The guiding hand behind the Corps of Discovery was President Thomas Jefferson. In January 1803, he requested \$2500 from Congress to defray its costs, citing the need to encourage trade with the western Indians. Jefferson outlined a modest effort to reach the Pacific Ocean by sending a few soldiers up the Missouri River until they reached some westward flowing river, presumably the Columbia, and then continuing on to the Pacific coast. Congress accepted his claim that the trek across the continent would have commercial value and authorized the use of federal funds for salaries and supplies. In so doing, the Congress blessed scientific exploration under military auspices, thereby setting a precedent for the scores of other government explorers who followed.

Promoting American commerce may have been the official purpose of the expedition, but Jefferson's instructions to Lewis and Clark provide compelling evidence that the acquisition of knowledge about the Far West was paramount. In addition to finding a possible Northwest Passage that could link the west and east coasts of North America, the explorers were to observe the vegetation; record weather conditions; seek and identify wildlife, especially animals believed to be rare or extinct; and to befriend the western Indian tribes, learning as much as possible about their strength, militancy, and life ways.

Jefferson admonished the captains to take "great pains" with their notes, ensuring their accuracy and legibility. To guard against loss, he also advised them to make multiple copies, placing these "into the care of the most trustworthy of your attendants."

History Teaching Activity

Lewis, Clark, or both wrote a journal entry for nearly every day of their journey, but they did not attempt to detail all their activities. Instead, they wrote highlights of the day as they considered them to be important. Assign different entries from the journals for students to read, then ask them to explain the passages and tell why they think Lewis or Clark chose to record the information the way they did in these entries.

Culture

The Corps of Discovery demonstrated teamwork at its best—people from very different cultural, educational, social, and ethnic backgrounds working successfully for a common goal. With the party was a Shoshone woman, Sacagawea; her infant son, Jean Baptiste nicknamed Pomp; an African American man named York, a slave at the time who worked with Clark; several French boatmen; and two dozen soldiers of mixed ethnic and national heritage, including one who had recently immigrated to America from Germany. Meriwether Lewis was a patrician; his comrade William Clark was a product of the frontier. Yet all of them were totally dependent upon one another for their well-being and the success of their mission.

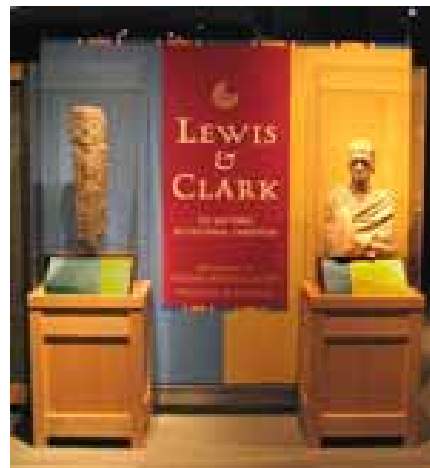
The members of the expedition were dependent upon each other, but they were also dependent upon the Indian peoples they met along the way. In truth, the Lewis and Clark expedition would be a footnote of history had the Indians met them with hostility instead of friendship. The Corps of Discovery and the Indians they encountered formed a partnership of sorts that enabled the explorers to complete their mission with a minimum of conflict and disruption. The Indian tribes along their route of travel formed a chain of friendship that stretched from the Mandan villages on the Upper Missouri across the Bitterroot Mountains and then along the Columbia River to the Pacific Coast. Each link in that chain was an Indian community that fed and sheltered the soldiers, providing them with a lifeline that enabled them to pass safely through that uncharted landscape. The Flathead, the Mandan, the Shoshone, and the Nez Perce, to name but a few of the forty or more tribes and bands they encountered, supplied them with food, gave them an opportunity to rest,

and often provided advice about the route that lay immediately ahead. Without this assistance, Lewis and Clark could not have succeeded. .

After toiling to the headwaters of the Missouri, the corps had to abandon the boats and obtain horses from the Shoshone and Flathead Indians in order to cross the formidable and snow covered Bitterroot Mountains, a challenge for which they were totally unprepared encumbered as they were by some 3000 pounds of lead, gun powder, paper, camp gear, weapons, and assorted gifts for the Indians. The route they used was the Lolo Trail, a rugged, twisting, tree-strewn pathway established by the Nez Perce Indians, a Pacific Northwest tribe who began venturing onto the northern plains to hunt buffalo after acquiring horses. Even with horses to carry their gear, however, the explorers had a difficult time crossing the Bitterroots, which seemed to have no end.

After surviving the hazardous crossing, getting food and help from the Nez Perce, and then building another fleet of dugouts, the explorers finally descended the Columbia River to the Pacific where, in a dramatic gesture, Clark carved the following words on a massive spruce: “Capt. William Clark December 3rd 1805. By land from U. States in 1804 and 1805.”

The Indian woman, Sacagawea, joined the corps at Fort Mandan. Only a teenager at the time, she was the wife of the French trader Toussaint Charbonneau, who had purchased her and another Shoshone woman from the Indian raiders who had captured them. Contrary to



Lewis & Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition was organized by the Missouri Historical Society.

popular belief, Sacagawea was not a guide, but her mere presence proved invaluable because it suggested to wary Indians met along the way that the Corps of Discovery had peaceful and not warlike intentions. Shortly after joining the enterprise, Sacagawea gave birth to a son they named Jean Baptiste but who the explorers dubbed Pompey or “Pomp.” Clark later educated Pomp in St. Louis at his expense. Another valued member of the expedition proved to be Private Pierre Cruzatte, part French and part Omaha Indian. An interpreter and musician, he carried a violin that did much to boost morale along the way. Each of the team contributed his or her various skills and experience to make the whole enterprise a tremendous success in the early exploration of America’s west.

Culture Teaching Activity

Divide your class into five groups of students and assign each group one of the American Indian tribes that Lewis and Clark encountered on their journey (the Blackfeet, Flathead, Mandan, Shoshone, and Nez Perce tribes). Ask each group to research its assigned Indian Tribe, and report back to the whole group what they found out about the tribe’s culture and history. How was each group different from the others; how did each group make its living and interact with other tribal groups; how did each face the challenge of the explorers, and later the settlers?

Government/Civics

Both Lewis and Clark expected to hold the rank of captain, but because of bureaucratic interference in the Department of War, Clark received only the commission and pay of a second lieutenant. During the expedition no one was the wiser. Lewis always referred to his co-commander as “Capt. C.” in his journals, and there is no evidence of any disharmony between them because of their unequal status, but the situation irritated Clark, to say the least, since he had earlier been both a captain and Lewis’s superior officer. Upon his return, Clark returned the commission to the Secretary of War with a testy note and no one except his closest friends ever knew that he had been “captain” in name only during the expedition.

The Corps was a military operation and as such was organized in typical military hierarchy. Yet, on November 24, 1805, while huddled together on a sandy beach in sight of the Pacific Ocean, the Corps of Discovery did something unusual for a military unit of any kind. They

voted on a crucial issue: Where would be the best place to set up camp for the winter? Not only did the soldiers vote, but so did everyone else in the party, including York and Sacagawea. Each of their votes was recorded in the diary entry for that day. This was certainly an unusual and special moment in American history because neither African Americans nor women had yet won the right to vote in the United States. In this, as in other ways, the Corps of Discovery foreshadowed the future of multicultural inclusiveness of American democracy.

Government/Civics Teaching Activity

Being a military expedition, the Corps of Discovery soldiers were organized in a military chain of command: officially Lewis was the captain and Clark was a lieutenant although they functioned as co-captains; there were four sergeants, and 24 privates. The other members of the group—three French boatmen, York, Sacagawea, and Pomp—were not employed by the Army and held no official status. Direct students to draw a graphic chart (or graphic organizer) to show the “official” organizational structure of the group. Then have them draw a second chart (or graphic organizer) to illustrate the equality in voting among the expedition members after they reached the Pacific and had to decide where to wait out the winter. Discuss why the expedition itself might have fostered two different ways of “doing business”: the military approach and the more egalitarian approach to decision making.

Economics

The economic aspects of the Lewis and Clark expedition actually began when President Jefferson came to believe that the land and rivers of the Louisiana Territory were valuable for trade. His beliefs were based on a journal written in 1801 by Alexander Mackenzie, a Scotsman and explorer for the British Empire. The journal described Mackenzie’s journey through parts of the Louisiana Territory. Jefferson became alarmed that Great Britain would succeed in finding a path to the Pacific and expand its trade with Asia. Knowing that international trade was vital to the success of the new nation, Jefferson was eager to learn more about the territory before the British and other European rivals could take action.

The journals kept by Lewis and Clark are filled with examples of economic choices that both producers and consumers have to make. For example, with the \$2500

Congress appropriated for the expedition, Lewis purchased about 200 different items for the expedition, including 3500 doses of sweat inducers, 1100 doses of emetic, 50 dozen of Dr. Rush's pills known as "thunder clappers," 30 gallons of liquor, 130 rolls of pigtail tobacco, 193 pounds of portable soup, 500 gun flints, 6 papers of ink powder, 176 pounds of gunpowder packed in 52 lead canisters, plus 420 pounds of sheet lead for bullets that the soldiers would need. For the Indians they would meet, Lewis obtained, among other things he thought would make nice presents and trade items, 33 pounds of beads of assorted colors, 4600 sewing needles, 144 small scissors, 10 pounds of sewing thread, 12 dozen pocket mirrors, and 288 knives. The total weight of all these purchases was about 3500 pounds.

For the most part, Lewis selected well, but there were glaring shortages. Although Lewis and Clark had enough paper and ammunition to make the trip again, the liquor—that was part of the daily ration to the U.S. military at that time—was consumed by the time the explorers reached the Great Falls (Montana) in June 1805; the tobacco ran out while they waited for that winter to end. A serious deficiency was blue beads, which the Indians coveted. "This article," Lewis wrote, "among all the nations of this country may be justly compared to gold or silver among civilized nations."

Lewis and Clark quickly discovered that the Indians were shrewd traders who knew the value of the food, horses, and other goods the explorers needed. Late in the expedition, on the return journey while traveling along the Columbia River, Clark tried without success to buy a horse from an Indian despite offering "a blue robe, a calico shirt, a silk handkerchief, five parcels of paint, a knife, a wampum moon, eight yards of ribbon, several pieces of brass, a moccasin awl, and six braces of yellow beads." This, Clark grumbled, was twice the value of goods he had paid the previous year when purchasing horses from the Shoshone and Flathead.

Economics Teaching Activity

When Captain Clark complained that he was unable to buy a horse despite offering an Indian man twice the value of goods with which he had purchased horses the preceding year, he was exemplifying a basic economic principle—supply and demand. Ask students to explain why the Indian he approached might not want to sell him any horse for any price, and suggest strategies Clark might have used

to "strike a deal" with the reluctant trader. What gifts might a modern day explorer bring to an isolated group of people? What might they want in return?

Geography

The social studies discipline, other than history, that is most obvious in the Lewis and Clark story is geography. Just about every aspect of geography can be found in the diaries Lewis and Clark wrote during their expedition. Jefferson had charged his captains of discovery with measuring the western landscape and this they did with fidelity and accuracy. Indeed, their expedition marked the first effort of the young United States to attempt a scientific survey of the continent, setting the standard that was followed so successfully by later Army exploring expeditions.

The keystone of that scientific survey was mapping the landscape, and Jefferson instructed his captains of discovery accordingly. "The work we are now doing," he advised them, "is, I trust, for posterity . . . We should delineate with correctness the great arteries of this great country; those who come after us will extend the ramifications as they become acquainted with them, and fill up the canvas we begin." Lewis and Clark heeded well Jefferson's admonition. Later explorers filled in the details, but Lewis and Clark compiled the first accurate map of the Far West. In fact, we know today that the Lewis and Clark maps are accurate to within 50 miles of the route they traveled.

Geography Teaching Activity

Select some key locations mentioned in the Lewis and Clark journals. These might include: St. Louis; Bismarck, North Dakota; Great Falls, Montana; Powell Ranger Station or Weippe, Idaho; Ft. Clatsop, Oregon. After students have read the Lewis and Clark entries describing these locations, have them locate pictures (perhaps on the Internet) of the areas today. Ask students to hypothesize about why the locations have or have not developed into populated areas. Students can also map the journey, using the various place names given in the journals.

Historian Herman J. Viola, former director of the National Anthropological Archives, is author of several books dealing with American History, Native Americans, and the Lewis and Clark Expedition.