

Imagine planning to cross an unexplored wilderness. How would you prepare? What dangers would you expect? The following article describes how Lewis and Clark and their team faced these and other challenges.

MAGAZINE ARTICLE

HISTORY ●

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Into the Unknown: The Incredible Adventures of Lewis and Clark

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Expedition leaders Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were restless. They had spent the summer and early fall of 1804 transporting supplies 1,600 miles up the Missouri River from St. Louis, Missouri, northwest to present-day North Dakota. Traveling by boat, they had hauled 200 pounds of gunpowder, 150 pounds of soap, and hundreds of pounds of other food and supplies. Unable to travel in winter, the men stayed at Fort Mandan. They talked to the Indians, French-Canadian trappers, British traders—anyone with even a shred of information about the mysterious lands ahead. By early April 1805, the ice in the river was breaking up, making travel by boat possible again.

You Need to Know...

In 1800, about two thirds of the people in the United States lived within fifty miles of the Atlantic Coast. Only ten percent lived west of the Appalachian Mountains! For most Americans, the West was a vast, unknown region. Anxious to learn more about what lay beyond the Mississippi River, President Thomas Jefferson asked his friend and personal secretary, Captain Meriwether Lewis, to lead an expedition into the wild West. Lewis, in turn, asked Captain William Clark to be his cocommander. Both were experienced military men, but each brought his own unique qualities to the team. Clark, like Jefferson, respected the Indians. He was outgoing and cheerful, and his skills as a surveyor and engineer came in handy. Lewis, on the other hand, was wary of Indians. He was more reserved and enjoyed studying the plants and animals encountered by the group. In this selection, you'll learn how this exceptional team forged their way westward—and into the pages of history.



▲ Meriwether Lewis.



▲ William Clark.

acquired (ə-kwīrd'): gained possession of something by one's own efforts.

commissioned (ka-mish'and): gave an assignment or an order.

Lewis, 30, and Clark, 34, were eager to continue their journey.

President Thomas Jefferson himself had sent out this expedition. He had just closed the biggest land deal in the history of the United States. From the French he had acquired the Louisiana Territory, an area so huge that it doubled the size of the country. It extended far west of the Mississippi River, where no American citizen had ever stepped foot. Jefferson had long

been fascinated by the territory's unknowns. He dreamed of finding a river route large enough to carry trade vessels from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. He imagined finding minerals and new species of plants and animals. He also wanted to learn about the Indians who lived there. He commissioned army officers Lewis and Clark to explore and map the land. Their mission: Find the source of the Missouri River, cross the Rockies, then follow the largest river west to the Pacific Ocean. They would also establish trade with the Indians, assuring them the United States government wanted only friendship.

Finally, on April 7, 1805, the expedition left its winter quarters to push into unfamiliar lands. Thirty-four people set out that day: Captains Lewis and Clark; York, Clark's slave; 26 army volunteers; a Mandan Indian; and two French-Canadian interpreters, one with his Indian wife, Sacagawea, and their infant son. Jefferson called the group of explorers the Corps of Discovery.

The territory was uncharted. The captains would have to make maps as they went, getting directions from the Indians they met along the way. The explorers would have to carry their supplies in canoes, camp in tents, hunt animals for food, and trade for other supplies. From what they understood, Lewis and Clark planned to canoe to the Missouri's source; portage, or carry, the canoes across a

narrow range of low mountains; then paddle the rivers all the way to the ocean. In the planning, such a journey seemed relatively easy. The actual journey was not.

Danger Ahead

The expedition had heard rumors of warlike Indians ahead. They saw no such Indians during the summer of 1805. They did see a great variety of animals roaming the treeless prairies in what is now Montana. In his journal one explorer wrote that he spotted "buffalo, elk, and antelopes, with some deer and wolves."

The Mandans had told of the strong, fierce grizzly bear. Lewis found tales of the bear difficult to believe until May 14. That evening six hunters shot a grizzly, but the bear chased them, even when shot again. Two men fled to a cliff above the river, with the bear close behind. Now they had nowhere to go but into the water 20 feet below. The bear followed! Finally a man on land killed the animal with a shot to the head.

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As the explorers paddled farther up the Missouri River, the landscape began to change. Now there were rolling hills. And by late May they saw huge mountains in the distance. To survey the area Lewis climbed a bluff overlooking the river. To the west he saw a few peaks. "From this point," he wrote on May 26, 1805, "I beheld the Rocky Mountains for the first time."

Lewis led the group upstream but soon reached a fork in the river. Which stream was the Missouri? The Hidatsa Indians had said there would be a great waterfall on the Missouri. Ten days later he heard the "tremendous" roaring of the falls and knew the explorers had chosen the right course. Lewis wrote that the beauty of the falls filled

Secret Mission?

Lewis wrote Clark a letter asking him to help lead the expedition. In the letter, he asked Clark to keep the mission confidential, since the team was planning to illegally cross land owned by France. By the time Lewis accepted the offer a month later, however, there was no need for secrecy: The United States had purchased the Louisiana Territory from France.

him with “pleasure and astonishment.” As the men continued, they discovered a second set of falls, then a third, fourth, and fifth. For 18 difficult miles they had to portage their boats and all the supplies past the falls.

On August 12 Lewis and several explorers hiked up a slope and at last came to the source of the mighty Missouri. Then Lewis scrambled to the top of a pass and looked out over the great Northwest. He was among the first American citizens to see this part of the world. The view thrilled him—but it also must have chilled him: As far as he could see were ridge after ridge of jagged, snow-capped peaks. He gave up hope of making an easy journey.

Soon, he realized, travel by water would be impossible. The group would need horses to travel over the mountains. Their only hope lay in obtaining horses from the Shoshone Indians who lived somewhere in this vast wilderness.

Sacagawea, a Shoshone herself, had already recognized some landmarks. On August 13 the explorers found the Shoshone. A few days later Sacagawea recognized the chief, Cameahwait. He was her brother! She hadn’t seen him since the Hidatsa Indians had kidnapped her five years earlier. Clark wrote in his journal that the brother and sister had an emotional reunion. Later Cameahwait agreed to sell horses to the explorers and provide them with a guide for the next leg of their journey.

On September 1 the Corps of Discovery continued its journey into the Bitterroots, one of the most rugged ranges of the Rocky Mountains. The group crawled up and down steep, rocky hills, and hacked through thick growth and fallen trees. Horses slipped, stumbled, and fell; one died. In mid-September even their guide got lost.

It hailed and snowed. With no game to hunt and no grass for the horses to eat, all faced starvation. Exhausted and desperate, the explorers ate some of their horses. After days of bitter cold and miles of rocky ridges, the explorers finally got past the mountains and reached a plain in what is now Idaho.

The Nez Perce Indians who lived there fed the grateful explorers berries, roots, and dried fish. But the new diet sickened most of them. Slowly they recovered and built canoes to continue the journey. The rivers flowing west carried them into the Columbia, the powerful river of the Northwest. Now there was another obstacle: a series of roaring, boiling rapids. To the surprise of Indians watching from a rock, the men steered their canoes safely through treacherous rapids, thanks to their skill and determination.

By mid-October the explorers met Indians using items made from European materials they must have obtained from trading ships. That meant the Pacific Ocean couldn’t be far away! Flocks of waterbirds flew overhead. Fog rolled in. On November 7, 1805, Clark wrote, “Great joy . . . in view of the ocean.” They were still on the Columbia but close enough to hear waves crashing on the shore. They had done it! They were the first American citizens to have crossed the continent.

Journey’s End

After spending an uncomfortable, rain-soaked winter at Fort Clatsop near the mouth of the Columbia River in what is now Oregon, the explorers in the Corps of Discovery headed back, reaching St. Louis, Missouri, on September 23, 1806. They had traveled more than 8,000 miles in 28 months. Throughout the expedition Lewis, Clark, and others carefully made maps and drawings and recorded in their journals information about plants and animals and Indians. They discovered hundreds of species of plants and animals—including the prairie dog and coyote—that were unknown to American scientists. Thanks to the expedition, the U.S. would eventually claim

She Moved in Mysterious Ways

Sacagawea has puzzled historians for years. For one thing, the spelling of her name is uncertain. When spelled with a *j*—*Sacajawea*—the name translates as “Boat Launcher.” When spelled with a *g* it means “Bird Woman.” We do know that, as a young Shoshone girl, Sacagawea was kidnapped and later sold to a French-Canadian fur trader. Lewis and Clark met the trader and his Indian wife in North Dakota and invited them on their journey. During the expedition, Sacagawea translated the words and customs of the Indians they met.

Afterwards, some believe that Sacagawea died of a fever. According to Native American accounts, though, she went on to live, speak, and teach among the Shoshone people until the age of 96.

obstacle (äb’stä-käl): something that stands in the way.

treacherous (trech’är-äs): dangerous.

reunion (rē-yōōn’yan): a meeting of people who have been separated from one another.



▲ William Clark’s diary. ■ Why was it necessary for Lewis and Clark to keep detailed records of the team’s experiences?



▲ Sacagawea acted as a guide and interpreter for Lewis and Clark.

the Oregon region, making it possible for pioneers in the 1840s and '50s to settle the West. The expedition also strengthened the fur trade. And Sacagawea? She is believed to have died of fever in 1812. The fate of some of the other explorers is unknown. But not forgotten is the important role they all played in the expedition of Lewis and Clark.

✓ Reading Check

1. Who sent Captains Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition?
2. What was the expedition's mission?
3. At what point did Lewis decide that travel by water would be impossible? How did the group solve this problem?
4. Name two difficulties faced by the expedition in September or October of 1805.
5. The members of the Lewis and Clark expedition were the first American citizens to cross the continent. Name another of their accomplishments.