

Lewis and Clark Expedition

In 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark began an exciting adventure. They led a group of American **explorers** on a long trip. There were no cars or airplanes. The men used boats and horses. They went through land in which only Indian tribes lived. They left from the mouth of the Missouri River. They went all the way to the Pacific Ocean and back. They were called the Corps of Discovery. Their journey was almost 8,000 miles long. It took them two years to make. Part of the trip was along the Missouri River in what is now South Dakota.

The explorers wanted to see if they could get to the Pacific Ocean by river. They also wanted to make friends with the Indians. They hoped to trade with them in the future. On the trip, the explorers kept **journals**. Every day they wrote about the things they saw. They wrote about things so that scientists and settlers could read about

them. Many tribes of Indians lived along the way. Interesting animals did too.

The Louisiana Purchase

The story of Lewis and Clark starts with Thomas Jefferson. He was president of the United States. It was 1803. At that time, the country ended at the Mississippi River. Most Americans lived near the Atlantic Ocean. The land that would one day be South Dakota lay between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. This whole area was known as Louisiana. Many American Indians lived there. A few **fur traders** did, too. Most white people had never been there. To them, it was the “Great Unknown.”

Thomas Jefferson had a dream. He dreamed that one day the United States would stretch from ocean to ocean. Trains and cars did not yet exist. Few people thought that so much land could be united into one country.

President Jefferson thought it could be. He wanted to know if the Missouri River ran all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Or did it connect with other rivers that did? Could these rivers be used as a highway?

The president asked the United States Congress to **authorize** an **expedition**. It would go across Louisiana. From there, it would go into the Pacific Northwest. Congress said yes. Jefferson chose Meriwether Lewis to lead the expedition. Lewis asked a friend to share the job. His friend's name was William Clark. The two men were the captains.

At the same time, the president **negotiated** with France to buy Louisiana. The United States paid three cents an acre for the land. It was called the Louisiana Purchase. It made the United States twice as big as it was.

The purchase of Louisiana was good news for Lewis and Clark. Now the men would explore part of their own country.

Then they would move into the Pacific Northwest. This area was also called the Oregon country. England, Russia, Spain, and the United States claimed this land. Lewis and Clark would give the United States a stronger claim. They would explore it for the government.

On May 14, 1804, the Corps of Discovery started up the Missouri River. They left from near Saint Louis, Missouri. There were nearly fifty men. One was a black man named York. The men moved upstream in a big boat and two canoes. The river was not easy to **navigate**. In eleven days, they went only sixty miles. Not until August did they get as far as present-day Elk Point, South Dakota.

Vocabulary

authorize (v.), to give power or money to
expedition (n.), a trip or journey with goals
explorers (n.), people who travel to new places to learn

fur traders (n.), people who buy and sell
animal furs for a living

journals (n.), books that people write ideas
or experiences in; a diary

navigate (v.), to travel in and control the
path of a boat or plane

negotiated (v.), made a deal with others

Meeting the Tribes

Lewis and Clark were not the first white people to visit the future state of South Dakota. Fur traders like Pierre Dorion and Toussaint Charbonneau did, too. Lewis and Clark's trip was the first **official** expedition.

The Corps of Discovery reached the mouth of the Big Sioux River in August 1804. They hiked six miles to Spirit Mound. The Indians thought little devils lived on this hill. The explorers did not see spirits. They only saw "a most beautiful landscape," Clark wrote.

Lewis and Clark next met with a group of Sioux (Dakota, Lakota, Nakota) Indians. The explorers had been waiting to meet the Sioux. They were a large and powerful nation. These Indians controlled the upper Missouri River. Their strength was famous as far away as Saint Louis. The corps met the Yanktons, or Nakotas, at Calumet Bluff. They were near today's Gavins Point Dam. It was late August.

Pierre Dorion acted as **interpreter**.

He was a French-Canadian fur trader. He lived with the Yanktons. Lewis and Clark met Dorion coming down the river in June. Dorion was going to Saint Louis to sell furs. Lewis and Clark hired him to go back up the river with them. He would talk to the Indians for them.

Lewis and Clark told the Yanktons that Louisiana was now part of the United States. They asked them to trade with American fur traders. The explorers asked the tribe to send chiefs to meet the president.

The Yanktons wanted to trade for guns. Lewis and Clark could not. They needed their weapons for the trip. They gave the Indians small flags and clothing instead. Pierre Dorion told the Indians why. He said that the Americans were explorers, not traders. He helped the Yanktons understand why Lewis and Clark did not trade with them.

The Yanktons agreed to do what the corps asked them. They warned the explorers about the Tetons, or Lakota Sioux. They might not be so friendly. The explorers went on up the river. Dorion stayed behind. He would take the Yankton chiefs to Washington, D.C.

Next the Corps of Discovery met the Tetons. They were near what is now Fort Pierre. It was the end of September. The Tetons were strong. They were well known for making others pay to use the river. Lewis and Clark needed a good interpreter. They had left Dorion with the Yanktons. The explorers used sign language and a little Lakota. They asked the Tetons to accept Thomas Jefferson as their leader. They also asked them to trade with the United States. The Tetons did not like these ideas. They had a **monopoly** on trade on the upper Missouri River. They did not want **competition**.

A fight between two Teton chiefs made matters worse. Lewis and Clark treated Black Buffalo as the head chief. They made Partisan and his men angry. These Indians grabbed a canoe. They told the explorers it was payment for using the river. Clark drew his sword, and the Tetons strung their bows. Black Buffalo calmed them all down. The two groups parted peacefully.

There were more Tetons than explorers. If they had fought, many people from both sides would have died. American history might have been different. Instead, Lewis and Clark finished the trip. When they got back, Americans thought they could settle the West without problems with the Indians.

Next Lewis and Clark met the Arikaras. The Arikaras were farmers. They lived near present-day Mobridge. The Tetons forced the Arikaras to trade with them. The Arikaras had to give them their

crops at low prices. The Arikaras were not allowed to hunt for themselves. They had to trade with the Tetons for everything they needed.

The Arikaras were happy to meet Lewis and Clark, who might bring new chances for trade. They agreed to send a chief to meet the president.

Vocabulary

competition (n.), a struggle with others to control something or to be the best

interpreter (n.), a person who tells people who do not speak each other's language what is being said

monopoly (n.), total control of buying and selling goods

official (adj.), approved by people in charge

Grasslands, Animals, and Plants

The explorers met the Tetons and the Arikaras on the high plains. The high plains lie in the middle of the **Great Plains**. The Great Plains are one of the largest grasslands in the world. In this **environment**, Lewis and Clark saw new plants and animals. The trip between the Niobrara River and the Bad River was the most exciting. Here Lewis and Clark found many plants and animals that scientists had never seen before. It was the most important **zoological** part of the whole trip.

Near Gregory County, South Dakota, Lewis and Clark first saw prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*). They called them “barking squirrels.” Lewis and Clark were right. Prairie dogs are in the squirrel family. These animals dig tunnels for homes and live together in big groups. The size of their “towns” amazed the corps. The first town the explorers saw covered four acres. Prairie dogs still live in South Dakota today.

Their towns are not as big as they once were.

Lewis and Clark called pronghorns “goats” when they first saw them. People today often call them “antelopes.” That name is not right, either. The pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) belongs to a different animal family from the goat or antelope. Lewis and Clark killed the first pronghorn in Lyman County. Lewis thought it ran faster than a race horse. He was right. The pronghorn is one of the fastest animals in the world. Only the cheetah is faster.

Near the same place, the corps killed its first white-tailed jack rabbit (*Lepus townsendi*). Jack rabbits are not really rabbits. They are hares. Hares do not burrow into the ground, and their babies are born with fur. Lewis guessed that jack rabbits could jump up to twenty feet. He was right. Jack rabbits adjust well to South Dakota winter. Their fur turns white to match snow.

The explorers shot a new type of deer near Chamberlain. They named it a mule deer. To them, these animals looked like other deer in the way that mules look like horses. Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) are bigger and have longer ears than white-tailed deer.

The next day, the corps caught the first coyote (*Canis latrans*). Lewis and Clark had been trying for five weeks to catch one to send back to scientists in the East. Today, the coyote is South Dakota's state animal.

The explorers also made **botanical** discoveries. They wrote in their journals about the plants they found. In August, they wrote about the prairie turnip (*Psoralea esculenta*). The Lakotas called it *tinpsila*. This plant has a starchy root. It can be eaten like a potato. It can also be pounded into a flour and made into bread.

In Bon Homme County, they first saw buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*).

Buffaloberry shrubs have bright green leaves and red berries. American Indians used them for food. They made things like **pemmican**, which they still do. Lewis and Clark made small pies with the fruit.

On September 21, the corps reached the Big Bend in the Missouri River near Fort Thompson. The corps measured the land across to the other side. It was about a mile. By water, it was thirty miles. Near the Big Bend, they found six new plants.

The corps found silver sagebrush (*Artemisia cana*) on October 1. They were near the mouth of the Cheyenne River. Silver sagebrush grows in bunches. It provides **habitat** for many animals. Wildlife also use it for winter food when other plants are covered with snow.

Vocabulary

botanical (adj.), dealing with plants

environment (n.), the natural land and

weather conditions needed by animals or plants to live and grow

Great Plains (n.), a semi-dry region east of
the Rocky Mountains in the United States
and Canada

habitat (n.), a place to live

pemmican (n.), dried meat mixed and
pressed with fat and often dried berries

zoological (adj.), dealing with animals

Journey into the Unknown

The Corps of Discovery left present-day South Dakota on October 14. They moved on to what is now North Dakota. They came to a large Mandan Indian village. It was November. The men had been on the trip for 164 days. They had gone 1,600 miles.

At that time, 4,500 people lived in the Mandan village. In fact, more people lived there than in Washington, D.C. The Mandans were farmers. They traded their crops to other tribes. They traded for horses and buffalo robes. Their village was a trading center. Tribes from up and down the Missouri River came there.

The Corps of Discovery built a fort nearby. They lived there during the winter. Lewis and Clark named it Fort Mandan in honor of their new friends. During the winter, they hired Toussaint Charbonneau as an interpreter. He was a French-Canadian fur trader. His wife was a Shoshone Indian.

Her name was Sacagawea. She had a baby boy. His name was Jean Baptiste.

In the spring, some explorers went back down the Missouri River. They took plants and animals to Saint Louis. The rest of the men went up the Missouri River. Sacagawea and her son went with them. Now they were going into lands that had not been mapped. The Mandan village was the last point on the river that fur traders knew.

When Indian tribes saw Sacagawea and her son, they did not worry. A woman and child with the expedition was a sign of peace. Most tribes greeted Lewis and Clark as friends. Sacagawea was helpful to the corps just by being along. She also helped by knowing landmarks and the Shoshone language. She saved papers and supplies when a boat filled with water. The corps was then in present-day Montana.

Not until November of 1805 did the Corps of Discovery reach its goal. The men saw the Pacific Ocean at last. They built a

small fort in present-day Oregon. They named it for the Clatsop Indians. They moved into Fort Clatsop on Christmas day.

They explored the surrounding country while waiting for spring. A group of men went to the seacoast to make salt. Lewis and Clark had a lot of time to write in their journals. Their writings and the maps they drew were among the most important products of the expedition.

The corps left for home in March of 1806. In August, they were back at the Mandan village. They said good-bye to Sacagawea and her family. Two years after they first came to South Dakota, the corps was there again. The explorers were floating down the Missouri River fast. They went up to seventy miles each day. They quickly left South Dakota behind.

The Corps of Discovery's adventure was over. They were back in Saint Louis. Lewis and Clark had mapped new lands. They had written about interesting plants

and animals. They had made friends with most of the Indians they met. The expedition opened the door for more Americans to go west and settle.