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“The Plains Commence: Lewis and Clark on the Middle Missouri.”

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America Looks West
Lewis and Clark on the Missouri

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Cover: Silhouetted by the setting sun, a replica keelboat and pirogues, used in the filming of the large-format movie Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West, ply the Missouri River near Niobrara, Nebraska. Photo by Eric Fowler.
Inside Front Cover: A stretch of the Missouri, near Niobrara, Nebraska, resembles the natural river with backwater sloughs and marshes alongside the serpentine main channel. Photo by Eric Fowler.
Above: Portraits of Meriwether Lewis (left) and William Clark painted by Charles Willson Peale.
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The Plains Commence

By Jay H. Buckley

The Expedition left the more wooded, well-known lower Missouri, and entered a strange new land of endless grass. Here, they found new species, held councils with Indians, punished lapses in discipline and buried a comrade.

The Corps of Discovery awakened to a damp morning on July 14, 1804. Rain had fallen all night and the wetness delayed departure until 7 a.m. A half-hour later, an ominous black cloud blew in, accompanied by wind and rain that pummeled the 55-foot keelboat and two pirogues. Unable to seek safety on either shore - because of banks caving in on one side and snags lining the other - the men anchored the keelboat midstream and braced for the squall to pass.

White-capped waves broke over the gunwales as wind tossed the craft, nearly pushing it onto a sandbar island. The men jumped overboard on the leeward side and put their shoulders to the hull to keep the keelboat from running aground. After 40 minutes, an eerie calm suddenly fell over the river and it became as smooth as glass.

The Corps had been traveling the Missouri River a little more than a week since it had shifted from a westerly course to a more northerly one. Although exhausted by the stifling summer heat and their struggle against the muddy current, the men noticed a change in the beautiful landscape. Away from the river, the hills flattened out and the trees thinned, often giving way to lush prairie grasses. On Tuesday, July 10, just below the present Nebraska-Kansas border and the mouth of the Big Nemaha River, Clark wrote in his journal that, just beyond the hills, "the Plains Commence."

From the mouth of the Big Nemaha River, where they camped the next two days, until their arrival at the Niobrara River’s confluence with the Missouri on September 4, the Lewis and Clark Expedition ascended the Missouri with present-day Nebraska on its left, and what would become Missouri, Iowa and South Dakota on its right.

During these two months the party entered an environment filled with new species of flora and fauna, witnessed the death of a comrade, dealt with the mission’s most serious disciplinary issue, and held its first council with native people.

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Scientific Discoveries

As the Expedition headed northward on July 4, Clark saw that “The Plains of this country are covered with a Leek Green Grass [big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), well calculated for the sweetest and most nourishing hay.” Within a month, this towering western grass would reach heights of eight to 12 feet. Clumps of trees, pools of water and shrubbery covered with delicious fruit stretched before them, as if Mother Nature was determined to beautify the landscape with sweet-smelling flowers and “So magnificent a Serenity.”

On July 12 from the top of an Indian mound near the mouth of the Big Nemaha River, Clark “had an extensive view of the Surrounding Plains, which afforded one of the most pleasing prospects I ever beheld.” Walking on the Nebraska shore in a painting made in 1832, artist George Catlin assumed an aerial vantage point, above a group of Indians on a bluff, to show a panoramic view of the confluence of the Platte and Missouri rivers.
near present-day Omaha, Clark recorded that about a mile distant from the river
the country was “one Continued Plain as far as Can be seen.”

The beautiful landscape of the Great Plains received frequent mention in
Expedition journals. Bald loess hills with occasional timber near the river extended
from the east bank. To the west, a beautiful rolling prairie of waving grass
stretched before them. On July 20 on Nebraska’s Weeping Water Creek, they
chronicled that “The Soil of Those Praries appears rich but much Parched with
the frequent fires.” In addition to fires started by lightning, Indians set fire to the
Plains to signal others. Fire renewed the prairie and suppressed the trees, which
attracted game and provided forage for Indian ponies.

A river ran through it, and President Jefferson understood the importance and
value of rivers. He envisioned the Missouri as the most practical and direct water
route across the continent, a vital commercial avenue for the expanding American
fur trade. Longer than the Mississippi and draining an immense watershed, the
Missouri flowed out of the Rocky Mountains. Jefferson hoped its headwaters
would be but a short portage to the source of the Columbia River, although this
would later prove wishful thinking. For the time being, however, finding the
fabled Northwest Passage seemed a distant problem, while simply ascending the
Missouri was the more immediate challenge.

When the Expedition reached the mouth of the Platte River on July 21, it
left the lower Missouri and entered its middle reaches. Clark wrote that
“This Great river [the Platte] being much more rapid than the Missourie forces
its [the Missouri’s] current against the opposit Shore, ... we found great difficulty
in passing around the Sand at the mouth of this River.” Lewis, Clark and six men

On August 11, 1804, Lewis and Clark
and a party of 10 men climbed
300 feet above the Missouri River,
near the present-day line between
Thurston and Burt counties in
Nebraska, to Blackbird Hill. They
planted a flag on the grave site of
Omaha Indian Chief Blackbird, who
had died in about 1800 of smallpox
along with hundreds of others in his
tribe. Returning from the hill, Clark
noted, “... the river may be Seen
Meandering for 60 or 70 Miles.”

One of the bends he saw is now cut
off from the river and forms Badger
Lake State Wildlife Management Area
in Iowa. The next day at noon Clark
sent a man overland to the previous
day’s lunch site. He measured the
isthmus at 974 yards, but the Corps
had taken the 18%-mile river course —
a day’s travel. (A modern aerial
photograph of the Badger Lake
oxbow is on page 120.)
On the 13th the boat was pulled into the stream and secured, and the camp was established on the high ground opposite.

On the 14th a canoe was constructed and the camp was moved a short distance up the stream. The canoe was composed of a number of poles lashed together and was propelled by means of oars. The camp was then moved a short distance further up the stream, and the canoe was launched.

On the 15th the canoe was paddled up the stream a short distance, and the camp was moved again. The canoe was used for transportation of supplies and for the exploration of the region.

On the 16th the camp was moved again, and the canoe was used to explore the region further up the stream. The canoe proved to be a valuable means of transportation in the region.

On the 17th the camp was moved further up the stream, and the canoe was used to explore the region yet further. The canoe was a valuable means of transportation in the region, and the camp was moved frequently to follow the course of the stream.

On the 18th the canoe was used to explore the region yet further up the stream. The canoe proved to be a valuable means of transportation in the region, and the camp was moved frequently to follow the course of the stream.

On the 19th the canoe was used to explore the region yet further up the stream. The canoe proved to be a valuable means of transportation in the region, and the camp was moved frequently to follow the course of the stream.

On the 20th the canoe was used to explore the region yet further up the stream. The canoe proved to be a valuable means of transportation in the region, and the camp was moved frequently to follow the course of the stream.

On the 21st the canoe was used to explore the region yet further up the stream. The canoe proved to be a valuable means of transportation in the region, and the camp was moved frequently to follow the course of the stream.
One of the most fascinating yet enigmatic figures of the Lewis and Clark Expedition was William Clark's slave York. He was the only member who had no choice about whether or not he would go. As a slave, he was bound to do what he was told by his master, yet as a member of the Corps of Discovery, he participated fully in one of the seminal events of American history. York and Clark probably grew up together, and were about the same age. York was a large man, perhaps a little overweight, and very strong.

Trouble began between Clark and York after the Expedition. York apparently asked Clark for his freedom, citing his good services during the Expedition and his wish to live with his wife in Kentucky. Clark refused until after 1816. Clark later reported that York died of cholera in Tennessee before 1832.

ascended the Platte in a pirogue for several miles before turning back.

Significant stands of timber had become scarcer since the mouth of the Big Nemaha, so much so that they rated mention in the journals when encountered. As the boats passed the Platte, Clark began looking for a place to rest the men for a few days, a place "Calculated to make our party Comfortable in a Situation where they Could receive the benefit of Shade." They did not find the timber they sought in the campsite that night, July 21, near the mouth of Papillion Creek in Sarpy County, Nebraska. They found their shade the next day at a place Clark would name "White Catfish Camp."

Clark masterfully chronicled the Missouri River's course and served as the Expedition's principal cartographer. He proved an exceptionally gifted maker of maps and created nearly 200. His notation of key geographical features, detailed charts of the course of the Missouri and its tributaries, and his judgment of distance proved exceptionally accurate.

On July 23, while waiting at White Catfish Camp for a possible Indian delegation to arrive, Clark started "Corrying a Map of the river below to Send
A Newfoundland dog named Seaman accompanied the Corps of Discovery. Captain Meriwether Lewis purchased his "very active, strong, and docile" companion for $20 in the eastern United States. As the Corps traveled up the Missouri River, Seaman's contributions made him a valued member of the group. Soon all referred to him as "our dog."

Newfoundland dogs of the early-19th century were black and white, gangly, hard-working, water dogs descended from retrievers and shepherds brought to eastern Canada by French and English colonists. Clearly possessing a combination of traits from his forebears, Seaman was a strong swimmer, exceptional hunter and stalwart guard.

Floating down the Ohio River to meet William Clark, Lewis wrote that: "I made my dog take as many [squirrels] each day as I had occasion for; they swim very light on the water and make pretty good speed my dog would take the squirrel[s] in the water kill them and swimming bring them in his mouth to the boat." Seaman later hunted pronghorns and deer the same way, by overtaking them "attempting to swim the river," drowning them and dragging them back to shore.

Occasionally, Seaman hunted beaver. In one incident, he almost died when a "beaver bit him through the hind leg and cut the artery; it was with great difficulty that [Lewis] could stop the blood." Journal entries show the explorers fretted while their comrade struggled to recover.

Although barely healed, 10 nights later Seaman's instincts were tested when a bull bison stormed into camp. Lewis describes how the enormous beast ran "in full speed directly towards the fires within 18 inches of the heads of some of the men who lay sleeping." Seaman saved them "by causing [the bull] to change his course ..."

Despite being well cared for, on occasion Seaman disappeared, only to reappear farther upriver. Once the men were worried when Seaman was gone overnight and "much satisfied" when he returned unhurt the next morning.

While the Corps was headed west on the Columbia River, Seaman impressed a group of Clatsop Indians. Upon the Corps' return the next year, these natives stole Seaman and brought him back to their village. At the prospect of losing his "much prized" associate, Lewis immediately dispatched a small party to retrieve him.

One of the greatest compliments Lewis and company bestowed upon their four-legged companion was noted in the Lewis's July 5, 1806, journal entry. While traveling along the Cokahlanikat River (today known as the Blackfoot), Lewis described the entrance of a large creek 20 yards wide. He named this tributary Seaman's Creek and the Newfoundland's place in history was assured.

Although not mentioned in the journals after July 15, 1806 at the Great Falls of the Missouri, Seaman probably survived the journey. How, after all, could the Expedition's journalists not have recorded a fatal calamity befalling "our dog"?

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"Our Dog" Seaman

Terry Fingerhut
On July 20th, 1804, Clark wrote, "I went out above the mouth of this Creek [Weeping Water Creek in Nebraska] and walked the greater part of the day thro' Plains interspersed with Small Groves of Timber on the branches and Some Scattering trees about the head of the runs, I Killed a Verry large yellow wolf." This was probably a gray wolf (Canis lupus nubilus), which followed the buffalo herds, and is now extinct.

to the P. [President] U.S." In addition to his numerous, detailed maps charting the Missouri, he also prepared corrections on a general map (see maps on pages 94-97) that Nicholas King had made in 1803 that Clark modified through observation and calculation. This, too, he would send back to the President in the spring of 1805.

Scenery was not all that held the captains' interests. Lewis's training in Philadelphia had prepared him to identify, collect and catalog known and unknown species of animals and plants to send back to Jefferson and scholars in the East.

The tallgrass prairie provided a mosaic of colors as wooded hillsides of oak, walnut, hazelnut, and cottonwood along the river gave way to chokecherries, wild black cherries, plums, grapes, elderberries, gooseberries, and strawberries. Violets, goldenrods, and other blooming flowers burst in an explosion of color. From the Kansas River to the Niobrara, Lewis used his botanical training to identify and add 11 new plants to their herbarium, five of them new to science, including buffaloberry (Shepherdia argentea), found at the mouth of the Niobrara River about September 4, 1804.

Satisfying zoological interests, the captains noted geographical range, color variations, abundance, habitats, and distribution of animals along the way and collected specimens to help scientists classify, catalog, and describe them. The men saw their first beavers (Castor canadensis missouriensis) on July 5 when Lewis's dog, Seaman, flushed several from their lodge, and saw them more frequently with each passing day. The abundance of beaver would be the impetus for the fur trade, the initial American expansion into the West.

On July 20, while following a small stream most of the day hunting elk, Clark killed "an emence large yellow wolf." It was likely a new discovery, a prairie gray wolf (Canis lupus nubilus), the now-extinct species of huge gray wolf that followed the buffalo herds. The Frenchmen called the stream "the water which
cries,” today’s Weeping Water Creek in Cass County, Nebraska.

On August 23, Joseph Field killed the Expedition’s first buffalo (*Bison bison*) near the present location of Vermillion, South Dakota. Although they had seen buffalo and buffalo sign, the animals had eluded them to this point. Farther upstream, buffalo would roam in immense herds too numerous to count.

Field also brought in an animal none of the party had ever seen. It was about the size of a beaver, with hair like a pig, a head like a dog with short ears, and a tail like a groundhog. The Frenchmen called it a “brarow.” Today, we call it a badger (*Taxidea taxus*).

Lewis killed a bull snake (*Pituophis melanoleucus sayi*) that he mistook for a rattler but that upon further examination, revealed it had “No pison teeth therefore think him perfectly innocent.” On another occasion near the Little Sioux River, something large and white covering the water in the distance baffled the men. They found it to be a mass of feathers about 60 yards wide that continued for several miles. The men’s curiosity was satisfied when they rounded a bend and saw several thousand white pelicans (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) on an island.

Private Silas Goodrich, the Expedition’s best fisherman, caught several blue catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*) on July 29. The boiled-down fat of one of them yielded a quart of oil. On August 16, Goodrich and 12 other men caught 709 fish of various species. A week later, two of the men caught nine catfish weighing a total of about 300 pounds.

On July 29, probably on Boyer Chute Wildlife Management Area just north of present Omaha, they saw evidence of “the ravages of a Dreadfull harican which had passed obliquely across the river from the N.W. to S E about twelve months Since.” The tremendous force of a tornado had snapped trees four feet in diameter like twigs and left fallen timber strewn about.

Fortunately, the Expedition never encountered a tornado, but it did face stiff winds on many occasions. On August 23 near Vermillion, South Dakota, flying sand blew “like a Cloud of Smoke from the Bars,” obstructing their vision.

**In Sickness and in Health**

Lewis and Clark passed along the eastern edge of the Great Plains during the sweltering summer months. On July 7, the temperature climbed to 96 degrees. The heat, coupled with the high humidity of the region, drove the heat index over 100 degrees regularly. Whether using poles, oars, or ropes to move the boats upstream, the men expended tremendous energy against the five mph current, making anywhere from five to 20 miles per day, depending on the wind and weather.

“It is wothey of observation to mention that our party has been much healthier on the Voyage than parties of the Same Number is in any other Situation Tumers have been troublesome to them all,” Clark noted on July 20. Other ailments plagued the men, who labored all day in dirty, wet clothing. Infections, lesions, and boils were bad enough, but the incessant biting of ticks, deer flies, and unending hordes of mosquitoes was maddening. The party might have enjoyed the gently evening breeze on July 27, but the thick and troublesome mosquitoes “were raging all night, Some about the size of house flies [flies].”

The captains, especially Lewis, applied a variety of medical techniques of the period to combat various afflictions. When symptoms of the ague or malarial fevers arose, quinine extracted from Peruvian, dried bark of trees of the genus *Cinchona* that are native to the Andes, was used to ease the symptoms. A combination of bleeding and purging with laxatives was also used. On August 23, Lewis suffered a mild case of poisoning from tasting minerals that contained an unhealthy dose of something.

One advantage of encountering new plants and wildlife was the diverse diet it provided the men. The party was beginning to run out of condiments like butter. The abundant fruits, berries, and edible plants provided the vitamins necessary to

In present-day Burt County, Nebraska, the Corps came upon a puzzling sight on August 8, 1804. For a distance of almost three miles, they found a large mass of white feathers floating on the river surface, nearly covering a width of 60 or 70 yards. The mystery was solved when the explorers came upon a sandbar where 5,000 or 6,000 white pelicans (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) were feeding on fish. After Lewis shot one of the birds, the Expedition came to a halt while Lewis examined it. He had water brought from the river and determined the bird’s pouch could hold five gallons of water.
Lewis and Clark gave the Jefferson Peace Medal to Indian leaders as a symbol of friendship from their "chief" in Washington. Other gifts the explorers carried included beads, knives, flint strikers, vermilion paint and hatchet heads.

ward off scurvy, a common affliction of many early expeditions. In addition to the deer and elk brought in by George Drouillard, John Colter, and the other hunters, the Expedition occasionally feasted on catfish and waterfowl. To celebrate his 34th birthday on August 1, Clark dined on a meal fit for a king. The main course of fat venison, elk fleece, and beaver tail was followed by a scrumptious dessert of cherries, plums, raspberries, currents, grapes, apples, gooseberries, and hazelnuts.

On this stretch of the journey, Sergeant Charles Floyd became ill and died. He was the first U.S. soldier to be buried west of the Mississippi. In the 2½-year Expedition fraught with dangers of attack, rattlesnakes, grizzlies, and the cold,
Floyd was the party's only casualty on the journey.

In late-July, Floyd had been quite sick, but he recovered enough that his illness did not receive further comment in the journals for several weeks. Then, on August 19, he became deathly ill, and died the following day in the early afternoon. A funeral detail carried his body, wrapped in a blanket, up a hill overlooking the Missouri and buried him with full military honors. A red cedar post was erected to mark the spot. Historians have speculated the 22-year-old Floyd died of either peritonitis (a ruptured appendix) or some sort of intestinal infection, neither of which could have been cured by the doctors or medical

The Expedition’s passage up the Missouri River in 1804 was marred by the death of Sergeant Charles Floyd—the only member of the Corps to die on the journey—near present-day Sioux City, Iowa. Floyd probably died as the result of an infected appendix. Clark wrote, “he was buried with the Honors of War much lamented.”
Karl Bodmer painted portraits of (from left) a Missouria, an Oto and a Ponca in 1834. The Corps of Discovery met with with Missouria and Oto tribes, but the Poncas were away hunting when the explorers passed by on the Missouri River in 1804.

technology of the period.

The men elected Private Patrick Gass to replace their fallen sergeant and the captains concurred, promoting Gass a few days later to fill the vacancy.

On August 26, near the present site of Newcastle, Nebraska, Private George Shannon failed to return from a hunting trip and a search party could not find him. Shannon, the youngest and least-experienced member of the party, believed the boats had passed him by and quickly headed upstream to catch them. He pursued the elusive boats for 16 days, surviving on berries and a single rabbit he shot using a stick as a projectile because he had run out of rifle balls. Exhausted and weak from hunger, Shannon finally sat down on the riverbank, perhaps hoping to catch a party of trappers or traders hurrying downstream to St. Louis before winter. He gazed out across the shortgrass plains, his bullets wasted, his nerve gone, his luck running out, and wondered whether or not to eat his horse to survive.

**Indian Encounters and Councils**

With nearly $700 worth of Indian presents loaded in the keelboat, Lewis and Clark hoped to establish friendly relations between the United States and the numerous Indian tribes living in the West. They had brought tokens of empire to distribute to the principal Indian leaders, including flags, uniforms and medals with a likeness of President Jefferson on the front and the motto Peace and Friendship on the reverse side.

The success of the Expedition rested largely on the captains' success in establishing friendly relationships and opening the door for future American
trading ventures. Presents of vermillion paint, glass beads, knives, kettles, and fishhooks provided a sampling of American traders’ wares. After purchasing goods in St. Louis, the captains divided them before packing them into waterproof bags. Clark doubted that the presents would be enough for the many Indians they would meet, and he was right. They did not bring enough. The Expedition never ran out of powder and lead, or paper and ink, but it ran out of Indian presents about the time it reached the Pacific and needed them most.

Lewis and Clark were not the first Europeans or Americans to pass through the homelands of the Otos, Missourias, Omahas, Iowas, Pawnees, Poncas, and Yanktons. In the 1700s French and Spanish explorers had passed nearby and were later followed by Spanish and French fur traders. In the 1790s, Scotsman James Mackay and his lieutenant John Evans had traveled north from Louisiana as far as the Omaha villages, near Homer in Nebraska today, to established a trading post, Fort Charles. It was abandoned in 1796.

In fact, contact with explorers and traders in the late-1700s brought disaster to the native peoples of the region. Repeated epidemics of smallpox, the most recent in 1800, had swept along the Missouri, greatly reducing populations living near the river and it was a primary reason the Corps had difficulty making contact with the tribes. The Corps saw the abandoned villages and burial mounds, and would later visit Ton won tonga, the once large Omaha village near present Homer, Nebraska, where some 400 men, women, and children had perished a few years before.

It must have been a time of great anticipation for the two captains, eager to fine-tune their skills as ethnologists, ethnographers, and diplomats. Jefferson had instructed them to learn everything they could about the Indian nations they met and to treat them as friendly as their conduct would permit.

The captains sought to understand Indian languages, diets, religions, locations, enmities, alliances, and customs. They also relied heavily on information and assistance from Indians, without which the Expedition would have failed. The message the captains delivered and the diplomacy they pursued with the Indians focused on establishing intertribal peace and inviting trade with the United States.

**The Captains Begin Diplomatic Parleys**

Although Clark knew Otos, Missourias and Omahas lived along the river, he postulated that “as those Indians are now out in the praries following & Hunting the buffalow, I fear we will not See them.” The party lingered for a few days beginning July 22 at “White Catfish Camp” probably near present Bellevue, Nebraska, to “Send for Some of the Chiefs of that nation [Otos], to let them Know of the Change of Government, The wishes of our Government to Cultivate friendship with them, the Objects of our journey and to present them with a flag and Some Small presents.” The captains sent George Drouillard and Pierre Cruzatte west to the Oto village on the Platte, but they found it empty and returned.

The party encountered a Missouria man hunting elk on July 28, and sent him back to the Oto-Missouria camp with Drouillard and La Liberte to arrange for a council. The captains selected a campsite a few miles upriver on the west bank in an area they called “Councile Bluff,” near the present site of Fort Calhoun, Nebraska, and Fort Atkinson State Historical Park, and raised their 17-star flag.

There, they opened the Expedition’s first diplomatic parley, meeting with members of the Oto-Missouria people – two small tribes who had banded together only about four years before.

At sunset on Thursday, August 2, 1804, Lewis and Clark greeted several tribal leaders and a French trader named Fairfong. The captains gave them some tobacco and some roasted meat for dinner and invited them to a council the following day. The Indians reciprocated with a gift of watermelons. The
Sergeant Nathaniel Pryor described the Yankton Sioux tipis to Clark, who wrote: “the Sceouex Camps are handson of a Conic form Covered with Buffalo Roabs Painted different Colours and all Compact & hand Somly arranged, covered all around an orpen part in the Center for the fire with Buffalow roabs each Lodg has a place for Cooking detached…” Pryor might have been the first U.S. citizen to see the classic Plains Indian tipi.

captains stayed up late that evening drafting their speech for the morning.

The council opened at midmorning. Lewis and Clark used a mixture of ceremony, diplomacy, promises of trade, and gifts to temper their message of American sovereignty under the Great Father, and to sell the idea of sending a delegation to visit Washington. Clark wrote that they had “Delivered a Speech & made [six] chief[s] gave a few preasents and, a Smoke a Dram, Some Powder & Ball[,]” The speech informed “thos Children of ours of the Change which had taken place, the wishes of our government to Cultivate friendship & good understanding, the method of have good advice & Some Directions.”

It was important to identify Indian representatives who could speak for the majority of a tribe. Clark sent some presents, along with a medal and a flag, to a high-ranking Oto who was not at the council, and lesser gifts to those attending. Each of them agreed to adhere to the captains’ message whereupon Clark gave them 50 musket balls, a canister of powder, and a dram of whiskey.
"After Capt Lewis's shooting the airgun a few shots (which astonished those natives) we set out," Clark wrote in his journal.

The captains had accomplished their objectives — to announce American sovereignty, provide samples of American trading wares, and establish a friendly relationship with the Otos and Missourias. Handing out medals engraved with Jefferson's likeness, passing out American flags and certificates of friendship, exchanging gifts, a "magic show" including magnifying glass, compass, airgun, and a military show of force all became part of the program Lewis and Clark used in other councils along the way.

The councils with the Otos and Missourias were important, but the captains could not make contact with the Omahas. That tribe had suffered a terrible calamity when smallpox swept through its village around 1800, killing Omaha Chief Washunga Saha (Blackbird) and perhaps half of the tribe.

On August 11, the Corps visited the grave of this dynamic and feared Indian
leader who had gained power through a combination of effective leadership and
the occasional use of arsenic on detractors and rivals. Blackbird was buried in a
large mound on a 300-foot-high bluff overlooking the Missouri near present
Macy, Nebraska, (see page 34) but the legend that he was buried upright and
astride his horse appears to lack credence. The detail of men visiting the grave
found a pole on top of the mound holding strings of scalps the chief had taken,
and Lewis and Clark added a white flag with a red, white, and blue border to also
wave over the chief’s grave. A few days later the Expedition passed Ton won tonga,
the main Omaha village, which was deserted because the tribe was away hunting.

The Omahas were away, but the captains met with another Oto and Missouria
delegation that had arrived, hoping to make peace with the Omahas. These Otos
told them of a hill that was always hot on the south bank of the river in present
Dixon County, Nebraska. At the site on August 24, Clark recounted that the bluff
appeared to have been recently on fire and felt “too hot for a man to bear his
hand in the earth at any depth.” Settlers later named it the Ionia volcano, although
scientists later found that the heat was caused by oxidation of shales within the
bluff. The river has since carried the site away.

Nearby, on the other side of the river some distance from the north bank, stood
a high, conical hill near present Vermillion, South Dakota. The Indians called this
hill Spirit Mound, believing it to be occupied by 18-inch devils in human form.
Despite the nearly 90-degree heat on August 25, the captains and nine men set out
to verify the veracity of the legend. Seaman, Lewis’s dog, collapsed along the way
and Lewis labored mightily as well, recently weakened from a near poisoning.
When the party ascended the summit, they were rewarded for their nine-mile hike
with the spectacular view of the region, but saw no little devils.

Near the mouth of the James River on August 27, three Yankton Sioux
approached the party. The captains sent Sergeant Nathaniel Pryor, and Pierre
Dorion, Sr., a French boatman, and a trader who had lived among the Yanktons,
to invite the chiefs to council. The Corps waited at the base of Calumet Bluff in
present Cedar County, Nebraska, just below the spot where Gavins Point Dam
now spans the Missouri.

Prophetic Words about the Teton Sioux

Late the next day, Sergeant Pryor, his companions and about 75 Yanktons
appeared on the far bank of the river. Clark recorded Pryor’s description of the
Sioux lodges and village. He wrote “the scesouex Camps are hanson of a Conic
form Covered with Buffalow Roabs Painted different Colours and all Compact &
hand Somly arranged.” Pryor was probably the first U.S. citizen to see and
describe the classic Plains Indian tipi and camp.

The Yanktons crossed the river the next day, and the council began about noon.
The meeting followed what would become the standard protocol – tobacco
smoking, meals, gift exchanges, speeches about American trade and intertribal
peace, and a military drill and magic show.

Yankton sub-chief Half Moon delivered a prophetic speech about his Teton
Sioux kinsmen upstream. The Yanktons opened their ears to the captains’ words
of peace, he said, but “I fear those nations above will not open their ears, and you
cannot I fear open them.”

Later, the captains set the prairie on fire to signal nearby tribes to come to
council but to no avail. As with the Omahas, the captains were unable to contact
the Poncas, relatives of the Omahas who also had been decimated by smallpox.
The Poncas lived in the vicinity of the Niobrara River, but they, too, were away
hunting bison on the Plains.

As the Expedition reached the Niobrara River’s confluence with the Missouri on
September 4, the men noticed a changing landscape. The Expedition was pressing
westward onto the dry high plains. Sagebrush (Artemisia frigida Willdenow),
rabbit brush (Bigelowia douglasii Gray), and shortgrass prairie were becoming the
The Missouri River Was an Adversary

The Expedition spent two months in what is now the state of Missouri learning what the Missouri River was all about. It was about sandbanks falling in on them, constant battles against strong and shifting currents and eddies, and tree limbs and entire trees charging at them on that swift current. And there was the constant, grueling labor against the river’s five-mile-per-hour current, either pulling the keelboat and pirogues with long ropes (cordelling), using the long setting poles, or in some instances wading alongside and pushing.

In the region above the Big Nemaha River, especially near Nebraska’s Indian Cave State Park, the Expedition ran into really wild storms. These were violent, quick-moving, summer storms that hit hard with driving rain and high winds before moving on. Getting through all that was difficult.

The river was very wide, much wider than it is today. Channelization now confines the Missouri to a single deep channel. The old, natural river often shifted. The Expedition sometimes had problems with sandbars, on which they often stopped at the end of the day in the middle of the river. On one occasion, the river literally washed a sandbar out from under them in the middle of the night and they were lucky to get to shore. This natural river meandered like a living organism, and it did its own thing. With its meandering, constantly turning left, then right, it was like a snake maneuvering through the grass. The Expedition often had to travel great distances to make a little progress. The most famous example was the Great Bend in central South Dakota, where it was about 22 to 25 miles by water, but a man could get to the same point by walking just 700 meters. Just above Blackbird Hill, the river ran almost 19 miles, a long and difficult day’s travel by boat, to get to where a man could walk in 970 paces (see map on page 35).

The river also caused many health problems. The men were drinking muddy, rolling water from the river, and as a result, were constantly battling dysentery. They also had to battle wets and boils under their arms and in their armpits and infected scratches and cuts, the result of being in the river to pull the keelboat and pirogues. Meriwether Lewis, with his rudimentary doctoring skills learned in Philadelphia, used elm bark and corn meal as disinfectants to clean out the boils.

To the men of the Expedition, the Missouri was not just a conduit to get from place to place, but also an adversary. They had tremendous admiration for it, but the river really gave them a lot of problems at times. They had to struggle 1,600 miles through the lower and the middle portions of the Missouri to reach Mandan villages.

-- Hal Stearns
norm. Soon, they encountered intriguing animals such as fleet-of-foot goats with keen eyesight (pronghorns) and barking squirrels that burrowed in the prairie (prairie dogs).

As summer faded into fall, the captains may have reflected on the past two months, filled with charting the river, collecting animal and plant specimens and dealing with the party’s health problems. They had achieved some success in their councils with the Otos and Yanktons, missed contact with the Omahas and Poncas, and become apprehensive about meeting the powerful Missouri River middlemen, the Teton Sioux.

They had to wonder what awaited them upstream. Would Half Moon’s speech prove prophetic, and would the captains regret leaving Pierre Dorion with the Yanktons when he might have helped them in their dealings with the Tetons? Would the Sioux allow them to continue upstream or demand all of their trading goods as a toll, or force them to turn back, or even wipe them out? Would any Indian leaders be willing to travel to see the president? And if they gained safe passage from the Sioux, would they arrive at the Mandan villages before winter blizzards blasted the Plains? Would the animal that the Indians feared, the grizzly bear, pose a threat to this well-armed flotilla? Before they closed their eyes that night, some of the party may have wondered if they would ever see their friend, George Shannon, again.

A Question of Rifles

When Captain Lewis visited Harpers Ferry Armory in 1803 he acquired many supplies for the Expedition, including 15 rifles. For many years, these rifles were assumed to be the 1803 rifles produced at Harpers Ferry. However, more recent research indicates differently.

The Secretary of War did not order the 1803 rifle to be produced until after Lewis left the arsenal. The rifles that he took were built under contract for the U.S. Army in 1792 and 1794. Pennsylvania gunsmiths produced these weapons. They were .49-caliber with a 42-inch barrel. These rifles also featured a patch-box with a push-button release.

More than 300 of these weapons were stored at Harpers Ferry when Lewis arrived in April of 1803.

To prepare the weapons for use by the Corps of Discovery, the barrels were shortened to between 33 and 36 inches and swivels were added to make it possible to carry them with a leather sling. Moreover, the Armory, which had produced the original locks, fitted the rifles with new locks and provided both replacement locks and spare lock parts for each rifle.

The converted contract rifles were similar in appearance to the M1803 rifle. It might be argued that the contract rifles were the initial design used to develop the M1803.

But, it was more than six months after Lewis had left Harpers Ferry in April 1803 before the first complete M1803 was finished.

—Steven Alle, Director, Frontier Army Museum, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
Yankton Sioux chief Wahktageli was about 60 years old when Karl Bodmer made this portrait in May 1833. Around his neck hung a large silver peace medal "from the President of the United States." Lewis and Clark were the first to distribute such peace medals to the Yankton Sioux. The Corps held successful councils with the Yankton Indians in August 1804.