

Iron Wills and Men of Leather The story of the Lewis & Clark Expedition By DAVID C. HINZE

Test Run to St. Charles, Missouri

On the afternoon of May 14, 1804 the keelboat and two small boats, called pirogues, sailed into the mile-wide mouth of the Missouri River. Clark commanded the men while Lewis completed the leaders' business in St. Louis.

After five months in camp the Corps of Discovery was finally underway. There were no dignitaries to witness the event, just a few neighbors of Camp Dubois. The expedition sailed only four miles upstream where they camped for the night at "Cold water creek," according to Clark's journal.

The flotilla's goal was the small village of St. Charles, one of the last outposts of civilization for the men, but it would take the inexperienced crews three days to cover the short distance on the cruise.

Problems surfaced immediately once the boats tried to navigate the flooded Missouri. The keelboat proved ungainly because it was improperly loaded and smashed into the logs floating down stream with its exposed bow.

One of the pirogues, or large canoes, did not have enough men onboard to keep up with the other two boats and the sailors were shuffled to remedy the problem.

Each day the Corps of men became more proficient. They sailed into St. Charles, a town of about 450 people and 100 houses. Clark wrote the locals were, "pore, polite and harmonious." Lewis differed with his friend and found them, "miserably pour, illiterate and when at home excessively lazy."

At 3:30 p.m. on May 21, a crowd of curious locals and distinguished visitors from St. Louis watched as the men cast off into the Missouri River. Clark's journal described their exodus, "(We) set out at half passed three o'clock under three cheers from the gentlemen on the bank and proceeded on."

The boats sat low in the water, heavily laden with 3,500 pounds of goods. On board, the men were decked out in their best dress uniforms of white pants, coal black boots, while a coat of blue and red with gold trim covered a white shirt. A tall blue hat sat on every head. As the cheering of the crowd died away the sailors must have wondered what the future held. Many of the men on the journey had been with the Missouri before and realized the dangers of the treacherous currents and the unpredictable natives.

Beyond St. Charles the men were effectively removed from civilization.

They would need to survive on their wits and intellect. There would be no help for their superiors, and as historian Stephan Ambrose points out there never had been a command like this in American history. The men expected to be gone two years, perhaps more. Considering the late hour, the small fleet sailed on three miles up stream where they camped for the first of many nights together.

Dave Hinze is a professional historian and tour guide. He leads tours and presents at conferences on Lewis & Clark, and other topics pertaining to early American history for the American History Education Association.

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The 'Illinois Valley News' will be closed Thanksgiving Day Happy Thanksgiving!

SUNDAY EVENING/LATE NIGHT TV schedule for November 30, 2003. Columns include time slots (6:00-5:30) and various program titles like 'Crocodile Dundee', 'The Sopranos', 'The X-Files', etc.

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