

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

Arrow Rock to the Fire Prairie

Every day as the Corps of Discovery continued their push up the Missouri River new challenges confronted the expedition. Huge portions of the riverbanks broke away and added their silt to the fast flowing river the excessive mud closed old channels and created new ones almost instantaneously.

Choosing the correct passage around an island was tricky work. On June 9, 1804 the captains stopped and explored the Prairie of Arrows, known by the Indians and French for the excellent arrowheads produced from the rocks in the area.

"Pierre a Fleche," as the French called it, would eventually become a key crossing point of the river, and a fort would rise on the high bluffs overlooking the Missouri River.

The next day problems bedeviled the men. The river was a tangle wooden snags from the large trees falling into the river during flood stage. The keelboat, 55 feet long, continually caught on the branches.

The keelboat would lurch sideways, leave a side and threaten to swamp everything overboard. The boatmen on the front of the craft jumped into the river, grabbed the bow towpole, and scrambled to the shoreline where sheer muscle power would right the vessel against the current.

Twice more the mast snapped as it crossed under low branches and the poles used to push the boat shattered as the sailors employed them to keep the keelboat away from the sharp rocks. Clark liked the way the boatmen responded to the emergencies and believed he could safely say, "with confidence that our party is not inferior to any that was ever on the water of the Mississippi."

The next day the captains met traders returning from Sioux territory. Their canoes were heavily loaded with furs, moccasins and bear grease.

The latter proved to be a great find. It could be used for cooking, mosquito repellent and caulk for the boats. The leaders persuaded one trader named Old Dorian to reverse course and travel with them because he knew how to speak the Sioux languages.

The Corps of Discovery entered the region known as the Fire Prairie in western Missouri. A terrible wind swept down on the flotilla and caused it to pause. While Lewis inspected the men's weapons Clark hunted on shore. He must have liked the landscape because two years after returning from the voyage he would supervise the building of Ft. Osage on the Fire Prairie. Five weeks had elapsed since their departure from St. Charles and the corps had covered 390 miles. The men were about to turn in a northerly direction and begin searching for Indian contacts.

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. For information about this series or one of AHEA's many history tours you can contact Hinze at 1-800-298-1861 or AHEA2004@yahoo.com

SUNDAY EVENING/LATE NIGHT TV schedule for Dec 28, 2003. Columns include time slots (6:00-5:30) and program titles like 'The Sopranos', 'Survivor', 'The Contender', etc.

MONDAY EVENING/LATE NIGHT

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TUESDAY EVENING/LATE NIGHT

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