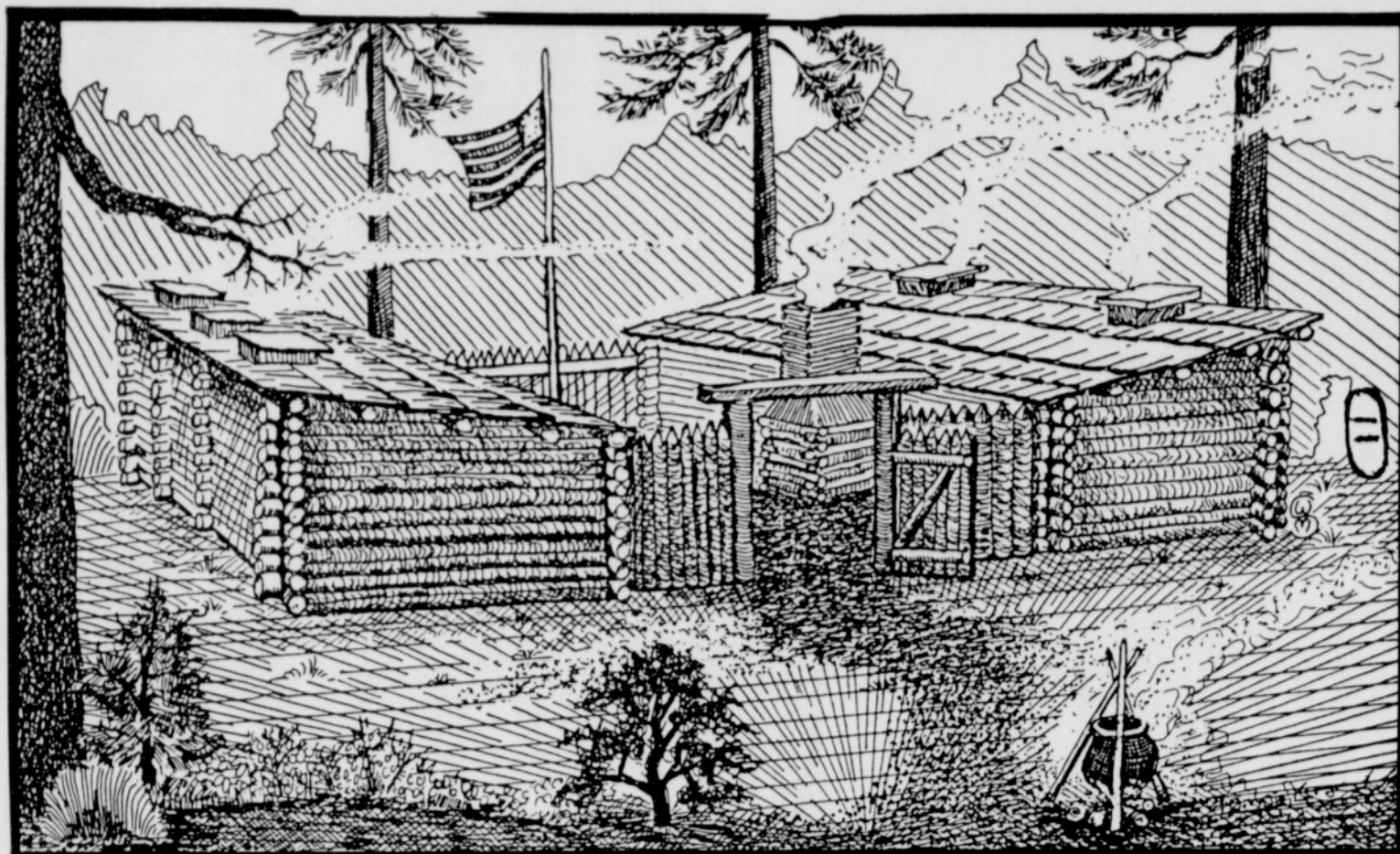




WILLIAM MICHAEL SCHUSTER (1989)

FORT CLATSOP

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

It might seem unfair, even impertinent to suggest it, but at first many suspected that one of the originals set fire to Fort Clatsop on October 3, only a few days before the 513th anniversary of Columbus Day and two fortnights prior to a large bicentennial commemoration of Lewis and Clark's arrival at the Pacific Ocean.

After all, for all the bicentennial hoopla about the 'Corps of Discovery', designed to generate cash on insipid trivia, we seem to overlook the perspectives and consequences of their transcontinental trek. We celebrate the sea-to-shining sea expansion of Manifest Destiny — but in the course of empire we beneficiaries of ancestors who took the land away from its original human inhabitants shrug off the genocidal crimes of our ambitious predecessors and instead tell ourselves that we are a great people who have pioneered and built a great nation, up to this moment perhaps the greatest in world history. But those we took it from have long memories.

The replica of Fort Clatsop — much more refined than its hastily constructed forbear — was for half a century an epic symbol of the nerve and determination of this land's conquerors to replicate not only European civilization but to impress upon what our ancestors considered a savage wilderness their own reformation of that civilization. Yet Fort Clatsop, in the far West a beacon for the onrush of irresistible American colonization of the continent, is obviously a symbol as well to the people we dispossessed and of all they have lost as cultures and civilizations in their own right.

It might be remembered that when the American ship *Columbia Rediviva* entered the river that has since borne its name for 213 years, a culture that dwelled on both shores for maybe two millennia at that instant began to become extinct. The history we celebrate is our own cultural epic — that which we supplanted has generally been ignored as insufficient, not worth popular study until recently, a few generations removed from their obliteration as hemispheric monarchs. We know little of their history, assorted myths and a few bones to fill in the vast gaps of time in broadly general rather than individual narrative.

The Pacific Northwest has been a last small corner for Western exploration, with the exception of the poles and Antarctica. The present tenants of the Columbia River inherit a legacy of raw exploitation and waste. The riches once so abundant have been despoiled, virtually all used up in a dozen generations. The great wild river has been tamed with dams, drained by irrigation and polluted as well as irradiated. The massive forests on both sides of its banks have been logged and supplanted with cities and farms. The millions of salmon, so numerous our antecedents claimed they could cross on their backs have dwindled to only an endangered few.

The European exploitation of the Pacific Northwest — Russians, English, Spanish, and Americans newly freed from *invidious Albion* — is a microcosm of the immense forces of emigration and conquest set loose 300 years earlier when Columbus bumped into the Western hemisphere on his way to India. Some celebrate, others bitterly denounce the intrusion of Europe upon the American continents and half a millennium of conquest, epidemic and cultural genocide. The ancient cultures of pre-Columbian civilizations disappeared under the onslaught of invaders who were oblivious of them. Europeans poured into the newly "discovered" half of the world as if it were an empty plain and overran the native cultures as if they were not there or not worth consideration (as well as annihilating a large number of native flora and fauna which continues).

The fire that burned Fort Clatsop seems to have been the result of carelessness rather than arson. Yet we should remember in our rush to replicate a revered half-century old replica, the price of our memorial triumph — and also think especially about current uses of our Manifest Destiny, about whether we any longer deserve our manifest claim to greatness.

LEWIS & CLARK

Meriwether Lewis was brilliant. He was an able leader who prepared and launched the expedition. He proved to be a gifted amateur physician, an excellent student of nature who advanced scientific knowledge, an inventive and resourceful field officer, an honest and observant journalist, and a fine navigator, and in addition to all that, he understood what he had seen and achieved and was able to put his discoveries in perspective.

Yet something wasn't right. There was his moodiness, his occasional harshness toward his men, his underlying distaste for other people, his condescension toward the tribes he met along the way, extreme even by the racist standards of the day. There was also, as Clay Straus Jenkinson described in a piercing monograph, a strange and twisted quality in his relationships with women (who correctly perceived trouble and rebuffed his advances).

As long as the stable and level-headed William Clark was on hand to provide ballast, the expedition proceeded without catastrophe, but whenever Lewis was commanding alone, he was prone to trouble, as when he fell into a deadly confrontation with the Blackfeet. My instinct is that if Clark had been sole commander of the expedition, it would have succeeded, whereas if Lewis had commanded alone, it would have met with disaster.

Lewis' underlying imbalance swiftly surfaced after his return. He was unable to edit and publish the expedition journals. His long-delayed governorship of Upper Louisiana was marked by acrimony, deteriorating health, and questionable judgment. In that period he speculated foolishly, fell into debt, made enemies, alienated his superiors in Washington, and dug his own grave. Dr. Reimert Thorolf Ravenholt has brilliantly argued that Lewis contracted syphilis during his early contact with the Shoshones in 1805 (when he was apart from Clark) and that this disease rapidly bloomed into a full-blown neurosyphilis that was ruining Lewis' judgment and stability and would ultimately destroy his reputation when he could no longer conceal it.

Whatever the case, Lewis' life was a disaster after his return from the West, and his tragic decline ruined what should have been the triumph of his career. He was a man of genius and natural courage, who deserves our esteem. But he also merits a tender understanding of his failure.

~RICHARD S. WHEELER

Richard Wheeler is the author of *Eclipse: A Novel of Lewis & Clark* and *An Obituary for Major Reno*. He wrote this for American Heritage magazine.



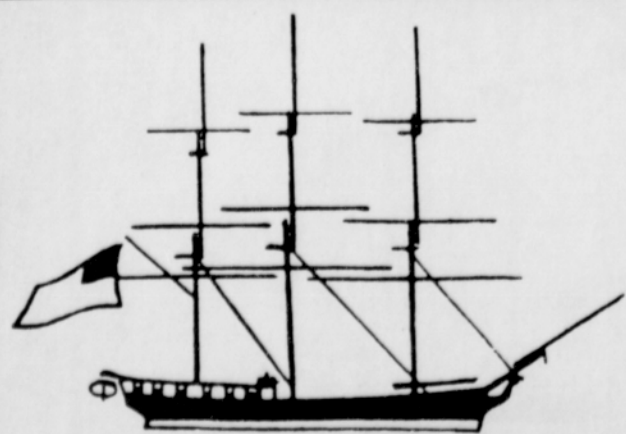
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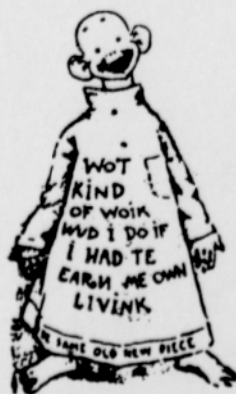
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