



editor@dailyastorian.com

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Publisher

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WRITER'S NOTEBOOK



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Lewis and Clark had a harrowing time at Dismal Nitch on the Washington state side of the Columbia River near Astoria.

A dismal memory along the river

One of America’s defining adventures was reaching its crescendo 214 years ago just now within sight of Astoria.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition’s sinewy, soggy men and woman with child paddled headlong into what might have been the torrential aftermath of a great Pacific typhoon battering itself out on this ancient shore.

With undisguised chagrin, Capt. William Clark reflected in his journal on Nov. 15, 1805, on surviving 11 straight days of rain without more than a two-hour intermission the whole time: “the most disagreeable time I have experienced . . . Confined on a tempest Coast wet, where I can neither get out to hunt, return to a better Situation, or proceed on.” Clark underlined the word “eleven” to emphasize the sheer misery of the experience.

They were embayed on a lee shore, as mariners throughout time have termed the perilous mishap of being pinned by the wind in an inescapable spot. The spot, in this case, is called Dismal Nitch at what would become the southern extremity of Washington state.

History has touched our region many times, but never with such melodrama as the anniversary we should shortly mark.

The explorers’ four months at the mouth of the Columbia River were largely ignored until the run-up to the 2004-06 bicentennial of this transcontinental research trek commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson.

Local historian Rex Ziak set out to do justice to the expedition’s time on and near the Columbia River estuary. Ziak’s seminal work — first published in The Astorian and the Chinook Observer — caught

the attention of Congressman Norm Dicks, who led the drive to add Washington sites to what became Lewis and Clark National Historical Park.

The rest of us nonhistorians learned about Dismal Nitch — the location east of the Astoria Bridge where the intrepid explorers might have met watery doom almost within sight of their goal, the Pacific Ocean.

“Emence waves & Swells” hammered onto the north shore by one of our region’s infamous sou’westers crushed one of the party’s dugout canoes against the rocks on the night of Nov. 13, 1805. A brief lull in the storm revealed what must have been Saddle Mountain swathed in snow to the south. Virtually without food, caught in the open and clothed only in soaking wet leather, the expedition could only hunker down and endure.

Robert Scott’s ill-fated return from the South Pole and Edward Whymper’s successful but deadly first ascent of the Matterhorn spring to mind as parallels.

Reflecting on how we may identify with the explorers, Jon Burpee, the park’s current superintendent, writes: “Of all the experiences that you can find here at the far end of the Lewis and Clark trail, I think that standing on the north shore of the Columbia, in a driving rain, helps you understand the challenges faced by the Corps of Discovery in November 1805. That south wind bites deep into well-dressed modern people. For the Corps, in clothing that was quickly rotting away in the extreme weather, this was a trying time. Standing along that shore, it is hard



STEVE FORRESTER



MATT WINTERS

to imagine a more dismal time in the Corps’ story. They were cold, wet, and miserable and not at all equipped to deal with the challenges.”

For a number of years, a group of us went to the suspected site of Dismal Nitch each early November. Led by local historian Jim Sayce, we read from the Lewis and Clark journals. In truth, there is more than one suspected Dismal Nitch main campsite — one identified by Ziak and another identified by Sayce. But this passionate controversy is one for academics and unlikely to ever be totally resolved.

For all who appreciate the astonishing audacity of the expedition, precisely where they sheltered isn’t as interesting as imagining the whole span of those desperate days and nights — the shivering and shouting, the forays up creeks to spear and shoot salmon, the interactions with native residents perfectly comfortable riding the waves.

The Corps of Discovery’s adventures on the north shore of the Columbia were far more momentous than what happened at Fort Clatsop. Burpee reflects: “What I find most interesting in this part of the journals is that William Clark’s words point to the fact that they truly were in a different land. On Nov. 11, 1805 after two unsuccessful attempts to continue in their canoes through the rough swells on the river, he was amazed at the ability of five Indians who very successfully navigated the river in a small canoe. He wrote, ‘Those Indians are Certainly the best Canoe navigaters I ever Saw.’

Banded by Washington State Route 401 and anchored by a rest area that hosts a national park interpretive display, the landscape of Lewis and Clark’s harrowing travails is only about 10 minutes from Astoria, but still can seem two centuries away on a stormy winter day.

As motorists and delivery trucks growl swiftly by on the shoreline highway, it doesn’t take too vivid an imagination to think of a time when traveling even a mile was out of the question. Although giant canoe-crushing drift logs are in short supply, it still is a lee shore, pounded by racing waves during winter storms charging in from the southwest. Going anywhere near the riverbank in such conditions remains a life-threatening chance.

Better to walk inland a little, exploring the narrow riverside meadows and forests where the expedition found what little protection there was. It is then, with the traffic noise muffled, that you can stand in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, Sacagawea, the African American slave York and the rest of a ragged band of heroes — what awesome examples of courage and tenacity.

We can and must mourn the devastating eventual losses the expedition signaled for our region’s Native Americans. But that profound tragedy was yet to unfold in that long-ago November, when explorers came seeking knowledge and friendship, not conquest.

Read the expedition’s journals at lew-isandclarkjournals.unl.edu/

Matt Winters is the editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer. Steve Forrester, the former editor and publisher of The Daily Astorian, is the president and CEO of EO Media Group.

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GUEST COLUMN

Remember Vietnam veterans with memorial

On Nov. 11, 1969, Operation Fulton Square in the Quang Tri Province was in full force with the assistance of the 1st Marine Division, 101st Airborne Division and the 5th Infantry Division. This was one of 20 operations active throughout Vietnam. There were over 500,000 United States military personnel assigned to the Vietnam War zone.

Yes, Veterans Day 50 years ago was very different than this year. While today we have troops assigned to operations in the Middle East, we must realize that in 1969, the Vietnam War was raging. Identified as the second most deadly year of the Vietnam era, 11,780 United States warriors were killed in action.

All totaled, over 58,000 of our troops died in Vietnam, including 710 from Oregon.

Those who survived the war and returned home were never welcomed or treated with respect or honor. Most of these dedicated soldiers never heard the words “thank you” or “welcome home.” As a result, when it came to Veterans Day in 1969 and subsequent years, most Vietnam veterans did not wish to participate. These warriors did their duty, served our country and were rebuked because of that unpopular war.

Former Oregon legislator and Vietnam veteran, Sal Esquivel, stated: “We were not supported in the field, we were not sup-



STEVE BATES



Molly Riley/AP Photo

A visitor touches a name on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

ported by our government, we were not supported by the people and many of us were treated poorly when we came home.”

When you look around our capital city of Salem, you can find memorials built to honor the veterans of every war and conflict with the exception of Operation Desert Storm and the Vietnam War. Once again, there is evidence of the poor treatment of our Vietnam veterans.

Oregon can do better. There are Oregonians who want everyone to remember our Vietnam veterans. A Vietnam War Memorial on the Oregon State Capitol grounds to the south of the World War II Memorial is proposed. Over the past two years, dozens of volunteers have attended meetings and performed research. The end result of these

efforts is a viable design.

The proposed memorial will remember the Oregonians who gave the ultimate sacrifice in Vietnam. It will honor the four Oregon families who lost two sons to that war. In addition to historic accounts of the Vietnam War, the design includes a memorial to the six Oregonians who died in Operation Desert Storm.

Just as Oregon saluted the Greatest Generation with a World War II Memorial, it is time for Oregon to do the same for the Vietnam veterans. Vietnam veterans are the sons and daughters of the Greatest Generation. Vietnam veterans went to war to serve as their fathers and mothers did. It is fitting that we would honor these two generations. With the completion of the Vietnam War Memorial, these two memorials will honor over 75% of Oregon’s war dead. But memorials do not just honor those who died. Memorials honor all who served.

Veterans Day is designated to honor our military veterans who are still with us.

The average age of our Vietnam veterans is now over 70. We are slowly losing our Vietnam veterans. To show our Vietnam veterans the esteem they deserve, a goal has been established to honor our Vietnam veterans with a memorial on the Capitol grounds by Veterans Day 2022.

Will you join this effort? Please learn more at vietnamwarmemorialfund.org

Steve Bates, who lives in Boring, is a life member of the Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America.