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Keep It Flying

Lewis and Clark

The Great American Odyssey

A Condensed Story of the Historic Expedition of 1804-6
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(Continued from last week)

Great Falls of the Missouri
The Indians had told Lewis and Clark that many days' journey to west they would come upon great falls and rapids, where the water dashed madly over rocky cliffs, where it was impossible for boats to pass. Captain Lewis and four of the men went ahead of the main party and, on June 13, came upon the spot the Indian had described. Here for a distance of nearly twenty miles, the Missouri plunges over spectacular falls and rapids, taking in that distance, a total drop of over four hundred feet. The great falls themselves have a drop of over eighty feet.

The sight of this mighty work of nature was an inspiring one to the captain and his men, and assured them that they were on the real Missouri. Names were given to the various falls as they came to them. The first and mightiest was called the Great Falls; then came Crooked Falls, Rainbow, Colter and Black Eagle. Just below the latter falls was a small island. Here stood a cottonwood tree on which a black eagle had built its nest. Disturbed by its unwitting guests, the eagle spread its wings and flew over the party as on a trip of inspection. Finally satisfying itself that the group meant no harm, the eagle returned to its nest and settled its ruffled feathers. Near this spot is the present city of Great Falls, Montana.

Continuing his march, Captain Lewis came upon a river flowing from the west, called by the Indians the Medicine (Sun) river. Beyond were the White Bear Islands, where camp was made. Here they had several lively encounters with the grizzly bears which inhabited the islands, and resented any encroachment on their domain.

Captain Clark soon arrived with the main party and preparations were made to portage around the falls and rapids. The portage, covering eighteen miles, took two weeks to accomplish. Out of a cottonwood tree they made wheels for a wagon on which to haul their boats and supplies. A portion of their goods were "cached" at the mouth of Portage (Belt Mountain) creek to lighten their burdens and create a reserve for the return trip, if they were lucky enough to return.

Lewis and Clark had brought from the United States the iron frame of a boat, which they now put together and covered with skins of elk and buffalo. But, when the boat was launched, it leaked so badly it had to be abandoned. Two canoes were made from cottonwood trees to take its place. The portage was slow and laborious. The men's feet were cut by sharp rocks and prickly pear, and they had to keep a sharp lookout for rattlesnakes.

During the portage, Captain Clark, Charbonneau, Sacajawea and little Baptiste were caught in a ravine during a cloudburst which threatened to engulf them. Clark, at imminent risk of his own, saved the lives of the Indian woman and her papoose.

In this wild district, far from the refining influence of civilization, they observed Fourth of July. A great feast was prepared of the tenderest parts of elk and buffalo meat. The last of the whisky was drunk in a toast to President Jefferson. The flag was flown from a tall pole and saluted with a volley from their rifles. Cruzate tuned up his precious fiddle and the old hills echoed to the strains of the lively melodies he played. The men sang and danced and made merry, for there was no telling what the morrow might bring forth. This was the first Fourth of July celebration ever staged in present Montana.

As soon as all was ready, the party pressed on. On July 15, they discovered a river flowing in from the south which they named Smith's river, for Robert Smith, secretary of the Navy. Three days later a tributary from the north was named Dearborn river, in honor of Henry Dearborn, secretary of War. Leaving the Dearborn, Clark and three companions struck across country hoping to encounter some Indian tribe and secure horses for their trip across the mountains.

Lewis, with the main party, proceeded up the river and on July 19, reached that great conformation of nature which they named Gates of the Rocky Mountains. The rocky walls of the canyon stand twelve hundred feet in height and extend for six miles along the Missouri, which is here one hundred and fifty yards wide. The "gates" are about seventy-five miles south of Great Falls and twenty miles northeast of Helena, the capital city of Montana.

Three Forks of the Missouri
The boats kept up their daily, toilsome task of battling the current of the Missouri. The journals of the party recorded the high winds which they encountered and of the swarms of mosquitoes which infested them day and night. Game was becoming scarcer the closer they got to the mountains and the problem of providing food for so many persons was becoming a serious problem.

On Thursday, July 25, Captain Clark and his land party arrived at the three forks of the Missouri. Their feet were in bad condition, being pricked by the spines of the prickly pear which grew in great profusion. Captain Lewis and his river party arrived at the forks on July 27. Lewis and Clark soon attached names to the three streams which converged at this point. The south-west fork was named the Jefferson, in honor of President Jefferson; the middle branch was called the Madison, for James Madison, secretary of State; and south-east branch was named Gallatin, for Albert Gallatin, secretary of the Treasury. At the forks is located the present town of Three Forks, Montana.

Sacajawea recognized this spot as the place where she was captured by the Minatarees five years before. After a brief survey Lewis and Clark decided that the Jefferson was the stream for them to follow. The famous landmark, known as the Beaverhead, was reached on August 7. It is located a few miles south of the present Twin Bridges. Sacajawea told the captains this was the summer retreat of the Shoshones. From here, the river to the present Armistead is known as the Beaverhead. Another formation south of Dillon, also known as the Beaverhead, bears a stronger resemblance to a beaver than the one farther north. This was a fine beaver country and, in later years, was a favorite trapping ground.

It being imperative that some village of the Shoshones be reached in order to secure horses to continue the journey, Captain Lewis and three of the men went ahead to try to contact the Indians. The headquarters of the Missouri were reached on August 12. McNeal straddled the stream, waved his arms and thanked God that he had lived to see the day when he could bestride the great Missouri. Lewis but smiled at his youthful indulgence and they hurried on. Soon they stood on the backbone of the continent. Behind them lay the sources of the winding Missouri, ahead lay the Oregon, the Great River of the West.

Descending the western slope of the mountains, Lewis and his men drank from the Lemhi, one of the farflung tributaries of the Columbia. The following day Lewis came upon two Shoshone women, who guided him to the Shoshone camp, here he received in a friendly manner. Captain Lewis smoked the pipe of peace with the Indians, distributed small presents among the chiefs, and explained to them as best he could that his mission was a friendly one. He told the Indians that a large party of white men was on the other side of the mountains and soon would be with them. He set out with Cameahwait, chief of the Shoshones, and a number of his warriors to meet Captain Clark, who was laboring up the current of the Jefferson with his boats.

Captain Clark followed the river to the site of the present Armistead, Montana, where he turned to the west and, on August 17, met Captain Lewis and the Indians at Shoshone Cove, a beautiful little mountain valley, on the present Horse Prairie creek. It was a happy meeting and an important one, for upon the success they had in securing horses depended the result of the expedition. (To be continued)

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The Low Down From Hickory Grove

My lecture today is on "backbone" Not backbone like grandpa used to nibble—backbone of pork where the mouthfuls of tenderloin lurked. That kind of backbone is extinct. That delectable food—along with the bacon and ham—went out the window when "Planning for the Farmer" via swivel chair, came in—when experience and common sense were put in the ash can.

It is backbone and determination in men I have in mind today. If I was to hunt up a name for the times we been going through, it would be the "era of being pushed around—and not pushing back." I am on this subject on account of the speech I just heard coming from Wichita, in Kansas. The fellow said it is time to fight back, and protect our right to work at the job of our choice—and without paying tribute and dues. And it is costing the gent plenty for pushing back—it has already cost him his radio job. The speaker was Mr. deMille, the moving picture fellow. He is warning our slumbering nation that we can lose our freedom by being docile. Like Paul Revere warned the folks there around Boston, this here Cecil B. deMille is ridin' even wider. Yours with the low down, JO SERRA

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