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Introduction

THE OFFICIAL OPENING of the national Lewis and Clark Bicentennial in January 2003 ushered in nearly four years of commemorative events and activities that dwarfed all earlier attempts to recognize the expedition's historical significance. The bicentennial celebration represented a variety of purposes with regard to public historical consciousness, including expressing patriotism, maintaining myths of national identity, educating family members through hands-on history, boosting tourism in communities along the expedition's routes, and so forth. For many, it provided an opportunity to enlighten Americans by making their understanding of the past broader and more inclusive.

What should the history of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's Corps of Discovery mean to us? The answers are varied, but it seems clear that we can no longer accept the white American

view of “progress” through conquest that characterized earlier writings and commemorations up until at least around 1975. Regarding Lewis and Clark as simply heroic icons not only glorifies conquest and dispossession but also distorts the nature of the expedition and obscures much else that is interesting in the history of the West. With the exception of Sacagawea, who provided numerous essential services but has been often miscast as the expedition’s guide, Native Americans have traditionally been given short shrift in this story. Lewis and Clark’s dependence for survival on the help of tribes such as the Mandan, Hidatsa, Lemhi Shoshone, Salish, Nez Perce, and Clatsop was integral to the entire journey, yet it did not fit into a Eurocentric heroic narrative. Since the 1970s, a more enlightened and realistic view has predominated among scholars and students of western expansion. That view was largely reflected in bicentennial efforts to publicize and interpret the history of the Corps of Discovery.

However, what for convenience I call the “standard model” of public attitudes toward the Lewis and Clark Expedition prevailed throughout much of the twentieth century and in some ways continues today. That model, epitomized in the phrase “our national epic of exploration,” extolled the frontier past as a glorious march toward “progress” and “civilization.” In 1966 Helen B. West, secretary of the Montana Lewis and Clark Trail Advisory Committee, reapplied the label “our national epic” to the expedition. Further, she used the terms “unique saga” and “allegory” and compared “this odyssey” to *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Nationalistic rhetoric of this type has more often than not shaped the means by which Lewis and Clark have been memorialized. As a putative American “epic,” the collective account of the journey was celebrated as a master narrative of Manifest Destiny and a great adventure tale.¹

In a commercial sense, these were the expedition’s strongest selling points. Pride in the national myth could be easily converted into economic gain. Much of the groundswell for a designated trail during the 1960s and 1970s came from boosters in towns along the routes, who sensed the potential for tourism. It is, in fact, almost impossible to separate such boosterism from the desire to honor national heroes in either the 1905 centennial or the 1955 sesquicentennial, although

the same is true of nearly all public representations of the American past. When it comes to tourism, history sells.

The fact that historical commemorations express public memory may seem obvious, but the term “memory” in this sense is open to numerous interpretations. French historian Pierre Nora, for example, distinguishes public memory from written history. History, according to Nora, is studied analysis and representation of the past based on an examination of factual evidence. Memory, on the other hand, entails imaginative and symbolic conceptions of the past and is subject to change according to present interests and circumstances. Public memory, according to Nora, is also tied more to places or “sites” that foster collective identity than it is to historical events. In other words, *where* something occurred is more mythically important than is an accurate account of what actually took place there.²

The distinction between scholarly history and public memory is not clear-cut, however. Few historians today would accept Nora’s stringent ideal of written history as simply objective analysis based on evidence. Present interests and circumstances appear to affect scholarly work as well. The French theorist’s connection between public memory and place, however, does apply particularly to popular attitudes toward the Lewis and Clark trail. Certainly, far more people have established a connection between themselves and the Lewis and Clark Expedition by visiting sites along the trail than by reading journals or interpretive narratives about the expedition. The physical environment and the expedition’s narrative are very closely related; visiting a Lewis and Clark site induces a common sense of historical meaning.

In Nora’s view, memory consists of more than simply a popular view of history; it encompasses “remembrances, traditions, customs, habits, practices,” and similar phenomena—all aspects of what is known as cultural history. In speaking about his native France, Nora assumes a considerable degree of cultural homogeneity, but in the United States there are as many versions of memory as there are groups seeking to define themselves in terms of the past. When it comes to public rituals of commemoration, the question of “whose memory,” which often turns on ideological differences, becomes an issue that leads to a variety of representations.³

While Nora sees memory as a conception of the past that is free from nationalistic or official history, American public commemoration often transforms popular myths into national institutions. Historian John Bodnar, for example, argues that “public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.” Here, “vernacular” means local and grassroots, while “official” refers to acts by government or “cultural leaders.”⁴ Applying this concept to commemorations of Lewis and Clark, one might say that communities along the expedition’s route have developed their own, often mythical or stylized, versions of related events that occurred in their locales. Once an occasion—such as a centennial—calls for state or national recognition, governments step in to alter local expressions of the event and to establish a sanctioned version.

According to Bodnar, the official expression often co-opts and institutionalizes the vernacular to enlist it for symbols or functions that uphold loyalty to the nation-state. Like Nora, he emphasizes the practical flexibility of public memory, defining it as a “body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future.” Public memory’s main “focus,” according to Bodnar, “is not the past . . . but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both official and vernacular cultures.”⁵ I believe Bodnar is only partially correct. The “matters” he mentions undoubtedly condition the ways we explain the past to ourselves, but they do not completely account for the desire to make authentic, personally intimate contact with that past. Nonetheless, the shifting nature of public memory ensures changes in the ways that past is expressed, a case in point being the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Both the historical meaning of that event and the means for publicly acknowledging it have changed over time at local, state, and national levels.

Differences in the way the Lewis and Clark Expedition is commemorated today compared with its commemoration in the first half of the twentieth century spring from changes not only in attitudes toward history but also in the means of commemoration itself. Monuments and statues have largely given way to historical parks and interpretive centers. The biggest change, however, has been the shift in attention from Lewis, Clark, and Sacagawea as historical icons to

the network of routes the Corps of Discovery took from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean and back (plus, more recently, Meriwether Lewis's route down the Ohio River in 1803).

The growing veneration of the trail, in my view, merges with the development of a federally funded highway system that, in turn, spurred massive automobile tourism. Both scenic and historical landscapes across the country became more easily accessible and popular as destinations for vacation travel. By the late 1920s, community business leaders in the Pacific Northwest and Northern Plains states were hoping to cash in on the relationship between the new long-distance highways and the routes Lewis and Clark took. For tourists aware of the Lewis and Clark trail and the historical associations of the countryside they were passing through, the highway served as a surrogate for the trail. Auto tourists became a new type of explorer in a very broad sense, imaginatively—and now physically as well—reproducing the experience of the historic journey.

An emerging system of highways and the car culture it fostered were preconditions for a significant shift in the way Americans commemorated Lewis and Clark. Until the young states of Washington, Idaho, Montana, and the Dakotas had been sufficiently "settled" by Euro-Americans, consciousness of the Corps of Discovery's route as a significant aspect of the local and national historical heritage probably languished, at least until those states participated in Portland's 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition. Even then, a lack of transportation routes limited access to most of the sites; and rail tourism, by its nature, was confined to crossing the open spaces as quickly as possible to reach or return from national parks and other resort destinations. It was only when the 1955 sesquicentennial celebrations emphasized statues, monuments, pageants, and other traditional styles of commemoration that the Lewis and Clark story began to give way to an emphasis on the expedition's physical route, although the ingredients for this change had been simmering for half a century.

Highway and tourism history was interwoven with other historical developments in the twentieth century, including movements to preserve both the natural environment and historical heritage sites. Those preservation movements did not become the focus of wide public attention until the 1960s, however, by which time interest in

Lewis and Clark had been regenerated by the expedition's sesquicentennial. Its 150th anniversary—although commemorated mostly in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana—did much to overcome inertia regarding designation of a national historic route. Compared to preparations for the bicentennial, excitement about a designated route was rather mild and somewhat ad hoc, but interest generated by the 1955 celebration never subsided. Anxiety in the 1960s over degradation of the environment, destruction of wildlife, and loss of historical sites helped spur attempts to preserve Lewis and Clark's route and make it available for the public to appreciate and enjoy. In 1964 the U.S. Congress created the national Lewis and Clark Trail Commission to consider ways of carrying the plan forward.

High on the list of the tasks addressed were designating and marking highway routes and access and developing historical interpretations of important sites. However, these tasks were complicated because many of the expedition campsites along the Missouri River had been inundated by Pick-Sloan Project dams and reservoirs. The loss of much of what could be regarded as the authentic trail—individual sites and long segments of free-flowing rivers—created a gulf that would have to be bridged by interpretation and imagination. Following termination of the Lewis and Clark Trail Commission in 1969, state committees, private organizations, and several federal agencies cooperated to carry on the task. The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (Department of the Interior) completed a final report for including the Lewis and Clark trail in the National Trails network. The National Trails System Act of 1968 helped finance the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails and designated other hiking trails across the country. Eventually, the legislation was amended to include partially motorized "recreation" and "historic" routes. In 1978 Congress authorized the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail.

The subsequent institutionalizing of the various paths the Corps of Discovery took to the Pacific Coast and back in 1804–1806, though beyond the scope of this book, raises issues regarding authenticity and national memory. The route (or skein of routes) exists as a sort of historical replica and a heritage site that extends for thousands of miles. The trail had to be artificially reproduced because virtually no physical trace of it remains, and much of the original trail is cov-

ered by water today. Expedition structures, such as forts Mandan and Clatsop, have been reproduced and signs and interpretive centers provided to enhance understanding of the expedition for modern-day travelers, who, by tracing the trail in their automobiles, assume the role of explorers and participate in the trail's historic replication. Yet the interpretation of heritage sites in general has proven problematic because of public attitudes toward history and the authenticity of its artifacts and explanations. Tourists bring expectations of what must be true and respond to a variety of stereotypes. To appeal to those expectations—if not to the stereotypes as well—heritage site developers may sometimes feel compelled to artfully design the appearance of authenticity.

Although the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail is not free of such issues, its spatial extension and interrelationship with the landscape have a mitigating effect. The trail is largely an imaginative construct anyway, for much of the route represents little more than interpretation applied to landscape, largely in the form of official signage. This makes manifest certain aspects of the journals. The National Historic Trail also differs from most other heritage sites because of its long relationship to highways and personal exploration by automobile. Designated highways merge with the trail and often become equivalent to it, at least in the mind of the traveler.

In fact, highway tourism and the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail developed virtually in tandem. The first significant stirrings of public interest in Lewis and Clark, stimulated by the 1905 centennial celebration, nearly coincided with the start of a nationwide fascination with transcontinental automobile travel. Up to that time, Lewis and Clark had all but faded from public memory. The Lewis and Clark Expedition garnered relatively little public attention in the nineteenth century. The U.S. government allowed its fiftieth anniversary to pass unrecognized. Local communities, which might later have been expected to celebrate the Corps of Discovery's passage through their vicinities, were few and far between, even after construction of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern transcontinental railway lines. Cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky maintains that periodic historical commemorations did not become common in the United States until the late nineteenth century, although it

appears that events associated with the Revolutionary War and the nation's founding are major exceptions.⁶ In any case, Americans eventually began to commemorate important historical events and figures in quarter-century anniversaries or even more frequently. Thus, it may be significant that Lewis and Clark remained uncelebrated for 100 years following their expedition.

True, there was little or no scholarly interest in the West in general until Frederick Jackson Turner expounded his "frontier thesis" in the 1890s, claiming that westward movement explained American history. Still, Lewis and Clark's relatively low status compared with other individuals regarded as frontier heroes by white Americans in the nineteenth century is curious. During the aggressively expansionist 1840s and 1850s, when the phrase "Manifest Destiny" ruled the rhetoric of nationalism, frontiersmen and exploratory groups of every stripe achieved celebrity. During Andrew Jackson's presidency, for example, Davy Crockett, following the example of Daniel Boone, became a living legend and an even greater heroic icon following his death at the Alamo. Washington Irving's popular 1836 narrative *Astoria*, about the founding of Astor's trading post on the Columbia River, as well as his *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, indicate that the public was eager for accounts of the western and Rocky Mountain fur trade. Both Benjamin Bonneville and government explorer-surveyor John Charles Fremont, whose 1840s expedition journals fascinated the American reading public, left legacies of place names scattered across the West.

Not even the rising issues of slavery and sectional conflict in the 1850s completely diverted public attention away from western conquest. Hotly debated questions about the spread of slavery into newly acquired territories were at the core of these issues. Captain John Mullan, who built the Mullan Trail across the Bitterroot and Rocky mountains, clearly regarded Lewis and Clark as forerunners of what Anglo-Americans at the time regarded as "civilization." For Mullan, their fame had been memorialized primarily by white settlement. "Here with you," he told the Historical Society of the Rocky Mountains in 1861, "[Lewis and Clark's] monument is to be found, industrious people, who have built towns & cities where there was the wilderness, & their epitaphs are found engraved upon the hearts

& affections of an appreciating people, who are ever willing to pay homage & respect to the very mention of the names of Lewis & Clark." But Mullan castigated the U.S. government for its failure to "maintain the claim . . . established by the explorations" and to publish the complete journals produced by the expedition.⁷

The unavailability of the original journals kept by Clark, Lewis, and four other members of the expedition may help explain why the Corps of Discovery faded in the public imagination during the nineteenth century. After the 1814 Nicholas Biddle/Paul Allen edition, which sold relatively few copies, no legitimate narrative of the journey appeared until Elliott Coues's account in 1893.⁸ Coues was a retired U.S. Army surgeon who had developed an interest in the Lewis and Clark Expedition while serving in Dakota Territory in the 1870s. His later reputation as an expert ornithologist and lexicographer earned Coues a commission to produce an expanded reissue of the Biddle-Allen text, *The History of the Expedition under the Commands of Captains Lewis and Clark*. Coues examined as many original sources as he could locate, including the original manuscripts of the journals held at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. The result of Coues's labors was a vastly expanded version rather than simply a "reissue" of the Biddle-Allen book, which in addition to new sources and material contained a great deal of commentary and annotation.⁹

Still, Coues's version was not entirely an original edition of the journals themselves. Such a work did not appear until Reuben Gold Thwaites of the Wisconsin State Historical Society edited a set of the journals that was published in 1904.¹⁰ According to historian Paul Russell Cutright, the first "book of consequence *written about the Expedition*" was Olin D. Wheeler's two-volume *Trail of Lewis and Clark*, also published in 1904.¹¹ Historian Donald Jackson observed that since the two explorers do not share the frontier mythical space occupied by such figures as Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, books constitute "the real source of public knowledge about the expedition."¹²

The mythical fame to which Jackson refers would seem to stem more from oral folk tales than from journals and other published writings. Moreover, a number of conditions may help account for

the mythical status of Boone and Crockett. For example, Daniel Boone epitomized what Americans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries regarded as a frontier “hero,” and he apparently served as the model for James Fenimore Cooper’s main character in the *Leatherstocking* novels. Davy Crockett died (by legend, heroically) in defense of the Alamo, an almost mythical event in itself. But even earlier he had achieved fame as expert rifleman, Indian fighter, and congressman. Both Crockett and Boone fit the national ethos of individualism associated with the frontier better than did Lewis and Clark, whose exploits were based on cooperation and teamwork. And, as indicated, journals and books constituted the basis for their revival in the public memory during the twentieth century.

Twentieth-century publications of original portions of the journals by editors such as Thwaites, Milo M. Quaife, Ernest Staples Osgood, and Donald Jackson, as well as Bernard DeVoto’s popular condensation, largely account for expanding interest in the expedition.¹³ During the nineteenth century, however, disillusionment and lack of interest obscured history. The Corps of Discovery’s accomplishments had begun to be overshadowed by other events when Biddle’s history of them finally appeared. The expedition’s scientific observations remained virtually unknown for eighty years, and the path Lewis and Clark blazed fell quickly out of favor. Soon after the explorers’ views of the Pacific Northwest had been distorted to promote settlement in Oregon country, Lewis and Clark, as geographer and historian John L. Allen puts it, “receded into the American memory” until the Thwaites edition of the journals and the centennial celebration brought them to the fore. According to Allen, Oregon settlement booster Hall Jackson Kelley ignored the generally negative comments the explorers had made about their surroundings at Fort Clatsop in the winter of 1805–1806 and used Biddle’s book “to paint a glowing, rosy picture of the Oregon Country.”¹⁴

A merging of what Allen calls “literate elite” and “folk” images of Lewis and Clark in the twentieth century may help explain the subsequent rediscovery and commemoration of the expedition. The “folk image,” according to Allen, has tended to focus on “the explicit purpose of exploring and evaluating the newly acquired lands,” essentially the viewpoint expressed by Captain Mullan.¹⁵ Once the

Lewis and Clark Centennial had generated popular writings, this image was over-layered by romanticism and the ingredients of legend, particularly in the case of Sacagawea. But knowledge of the expedition often stops there. In general, according to Zelinsky, American explorers "may have been duly honored by historians, but only casually noted by the general public."¹⁶ Only recently have Lewis and Clark achieved a "heroic apotheosis." Yet a series of questions posed to college freshman in survey courses over several decades in the second half of the twentieth century, designed to determine the extent of their "historical memory," revealed only slight recognition of why Lewis and Clark are historically significant. In the students' responses, Lewis and Clark were usually fused as a single unit or even as one individual. Sometimes they were referred to as "Lewis N. Clark."¹⁷ What Allen calls the "literate elite" image, on the other hand, focuses on the expedition's scientific purposes and, as Donald Jackson stated, the "personalities involved," including those of the enlisted men.¹⁸

The journals became central to developing the elite image, and they made the specific path of the expedition central as well. Allen notes that the "merging and melding" of the "literate elite" with the "folk" image has resulted in the publication and popularity of "an unprecedented number of popular works which, by and large, have presented the expedition in a light more similar to that of the elite image than did earlier popular histories." Regardless of whether one accepts Allen's categories, it seems clear that a more scholarly or serious approach to the history of the expedition in the late twentieth century tempered the traditional romantic views based on a myth of the West and centered commemorative attention on the trail itself.¹⁹

The emerging emphasis on designating the Lewis and Clark trail contrasts sharply with earlier attitudes toward the expedition. When the National Historic Trail was created in 1978, eleven states claimed portions of it. But most of those geographic regions were not settled by Euro-Americans until the last three decades of the nineteenth century, which helps explain the previous lack of local interest in the history of the expedition. Accounts in popular magazines occasionally transported the reader to regions through which the explorers had traveled at the beginning of the century, but few attempts seem to have been made to memorialize the route or events associated with

it. Early examples included journalist E. W. Carpenter, writing for *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* in the late 1860s, who was greatly impressed by the “Citadel Rocks” downstream from Fort Benton on the Missouri River. These are actually the White Rocks Meriwether Lewis lavishly described in May 1805. Carpenter called them “the most beautiful scenery in Montana,” although his description appears to have been based on Lewis’s description rather than on personal observation, since low water had forced him and his party to cover the last 250 miles to Fort Benton by land through a “desert of dry mud hills” and “badlands” with no redeeming qualities. He agreed with Lewis’s assessment of the beauty of the Great Falls but again quoted nearly all of the explorer’s passage from the journals. Regarding the rest of the Corps of Discovery’s route up the Missouri River from St. Louis, Carpenter admitted a total lack of interest and referred the reader to the daily journal accounts.²⁰

In another article from 1869, C. M. Scammon discussed a trip to Astoria, Oregon. He managed to describe Cape Disappointment, Chinook Point, Baker’s Bay, and other landmarks now associated strongly with the expedition’s arrival and sojourn at the mouth of the Columbia River during the winter of 1805–1806 with barely a mention of Lewis and Clark, and then only as a reference to the river bearing their names.²¹ In the context of the times, however, that is not surprising. Scammon’s readers were probably more interested in the nature of the small community that had developed around the old Astoria trading post and in commercial and transportation possibilities there. Virtually no one set out to follow and describe any of these places with the purpose of commemorating the expedition, at least not before the 1890s.

In a sampling of mid–nineteenth-century magazines available on-line that contain the names Lewis and Clark, none does more than refer to the expedition in passing. One reference in *Debow’s Review* in 1843 mentions Lewis and Clark’s “celebrated but ill-conducted expedition across the continent” in a discussion of the Rocky Mountains. Lewis and Clark are briefly alluded to in two other articles in *Debow’s Review*, in 1856 and 1857, respectively. One article is about the Mississippi River, and one is about climate in the western regions. Otherwise, nineteenth-century periodical literature tends to mention

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Lewis and Clark only in reviews of the Biddle and Coues editions of the journals.²²

Elliott Coues's expanded and annotated account, although it drew heavily on the original journals, was insufficient to ignite general interest in the Corps of Discovery. As might be expected, however, the 100th anniversary of the expedition did so—but to a degree that may seem rather tepid today. The centennial celebration was mainly confined to Portland's 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, and even there the expedition received relatively scant attention.