

The Corps of Discovery in American and Oregon History

By William L. Lang

Anniversary commemorations of important events in our nation's past predictably generate great interest. Centennial and bicentennial commemorations attract even greater public interest, because the passage of time often enhances events and makes them truly larger than life. Historians discover more information, fill in more details, and craft a range of interpretations. Time also provides more reasons for commemoration, because change itself appears to demand a backward look, a recounting of what transpired that has made such a difference. As the name implies, commemoration means recalling our collective memory, which requires thinking about the past and asking questions that prompt rethinking. Commemorations are complex reflections, because they are self-conscious in perspective. To commemorate, in some ways, is to be intensely curious about yesterday, while focusing most intensely on the present. Turning our attention to a singular event in the past is an act as fully vested in the present as any other exercise. For that and other reasons, commemorations are only as productive as they are intelligent and purposeful. How we approach the history and what questions we pose, in other words, make all the difference.

The Lewis and Clark Bicentennial is about one of the nation's great adventures, an expansive story that spans the continent, that covers events in hundreds of localities, and offers incidents of great human drama. The exploration of the American West by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and their entourage, which came to life in 1803 and covered thousands of miles from 1804 to 1806, has become an important episode in American history. This reputation demands that commemoration rests on a purpose and poses questions to match the event. The questions, however, depend on who asks them. Who we are, where we live, what we believe, and what has happened to our communities since Lewis and Clark traveled here make a difference. Our perspective can direct attention and shape questions, and so there is no denying that the Lewis and Clark story can mean different things today to people and communities along the exploration route. There are many perspectives and many possible meanings. The critical perspectives, however, are historical: understanding the events of two centuries ago; recognizing the changes in our appraisals of the Expedition over the years; reflecting on the great changes that have taken place in the interim; and identifying the purpose commemorating the Lewis and Clark Expedition has for our times.

Understanding historical context is critical to commemorations. The Lewis and Clark Expedition took place during the early years of our nation's history, just over twenty years after the United States gained independence from Great Britain. The purposes of the Expedition were largely political and economic. The expeditionary force took its orders from President Thomas Jefferson, acting as a military detachment. Jefferson's ambition extended well beyond the physical achievements of the Expedition. He anticipated the incorporation of the American West into the nation's political and economic life and the eventual inclusion of Native Americans in the republic. He also expected the captains' scientific documentation to aid development of American technology and learning. He hoped that trade and other economic benefits would result. Jefferson understood the Lewis and Clark Expedition as contributory to change.

A century later, when Oregonians reflected on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the changes Jefferson imagined seemed meager in comparison to what had taken place since 1806. In 1905, Portland boosters directed regional and national attention to the Lewis and Clark Expedition by mounting a world's fair—"The Lewis and Clark Centennial and American Pacific Exposition and Oriental Fair"—to promote the city, the state, and the region, especially the commercial potential of the area. The centennial had feeble connections to the actual exploration that brought Lewis and Clark down the Columbia River a century before, except that the purposes of both had commercial meaning. Nonetheless, several topics connect the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition to the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

The heart of the Centennial Exposition was regional promotion. Regionalism, however, is meaningless without nationalism, and it was that idea that attracted Portland promoters. In 1905, the Pacific Northwest stood outside the national mainstream and longed for inclusion and identity.

Trumpeting the region's future, especially its potential contribution to national strength, became a central theme in the fair. Expectant nationalism found expression in 1805, when the far coast of North America was well beyond United States territory and the subject of competing claims by other nations. America's claim on the region rested weakly on mariner Robert Gray's brief stay at the mouth of the Columbia River in 1792, but Lewis and Clark's months-long residence at Fort Clatsop near present-day Astoria seemingly added to the nation's legal interest. More important, perhaps, the great Expedition arguably announced America's desire for the Northwest, even though it would be four decades before a treaty with Great Britain settled the issue and attached the Oregon Country to the nation.

American nationalism has always revealed benevolent and malevolent sides of the national character. Thomas Jefferson had achieved a coup in 1803 by purchasing an enormous region from France, the Louisiana Purchase territory that stretched from the Mississippi River west to the Rockies in the northern latitudes. He envisioned a day when Americans would reside on the Pacific Rim. His nationalism had strong colorations of imperialism, and imperial themes run through the 1905 Centennial Exposition in Portland. By 1905, the Lewis and Clark Exposition promoters lived on the Pacific shore and cast their eyes across the ocean, their focus on economic policies that benefited national and imperial designs. The trade connections that Jefferson had instructed Lewis and Clark to pursue in 1805—a commercial route that would link the Mississippi River valley to the Pacific—seemed to be extended by the 1905 Exposition promoters' desire to reach across the Pacific. In 1805 and 1905, nationalistic development based on economic expansion heralded a nation with larger ambitions and the energy to achieve them.

When Lewis and Clark traveled through the Oregon Country, they focused as much on the Native population as they did on the region's resources. When nations expand, it is nearly always at the expense of other populations. The captains offered the promise of inclusion and great economic and political benefits to Indian tribes they encountered, never pausing to question whether the new world they promised might be more destructive than constructive or more unwelcome than welcome by indigenous people. By 1905, Indians in the Columbia River Basin had lost their land and suffered devastating social and economic changes. At the Centennial Exposition, they shared space with exhibits about populations far distant from the Northwest, which continued a century-long pattern of putting them at the margins. The Exposition championed the dominance and ambitions of a successful non-Indian social and economic order in the Northwest.

The new face of the Northwest that shone so brightly and hopefully in 1905 could not have been imagined in 1805, when Lewis and Clark suffered through a wet winter season at Fort Clatsop. The starkest comparatives between 1805 and 1905 were visible all along the Columbia and its major tributaries in the region. Logging, mining, farming, manufacturing, and commercial activities had remade the landscape and even changed the rivers. On the Columbia, the salmon canning industry had already pushed fishing to its natural limits, and many feared the end of the once uncountable runs of chinook salmon. On the Willamette, ships tied up at Portland's thriving dockside and loaded grain from the interior that had reached the city in railcars, running on tracks that connected small farming towns in Oregon and Washington to the metropolis. The 1905 Exposition celebrated these changes and fed ambitions for more development and more change.

Celebrating historic events and commemorating them are not the same. The celebrations evident in 1905 had scant appreciation for many consequences of the changes wrought in the Northwest since Lewis and Clark traded with the Clatsop and Chinook people at the mouth of the great river. Commemorating the bicentennial of the great exploration may well call for more sobering viewpoints. The world in the twenty-first century may be even more different from a century ago than the twentieth was from Jefferson's generation. Comparisons of this sort invite exaggeration, but there is no denying how massively the Columbia River has been altered and how profound the impacts of global economic change have been on lives in the Northwest. The Lewis and Clark Expedition has been characterized as an American epic, a story that incorporates a panorama of American images, ideals, and ambitions. Epic narratives are characteristically expansive and unwieldy. They resist sound-bite descriptions. Instead they beckon us to ask questions and reflect on the historical messages embedded in their plots and characters. The bicentennial is occasion to look at three chapters in the larger American epic, one in 1805, a second in 1905, and our own in 2005.

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