

Meriwether (historical novel 1801-1809) by David Nevin (2004)

Meriwether Lewis & William Clark lead an expedition up the Missouri River across the continental divide (Rocky Mtns), Down the Columbia River & back. Lewis grew up as a neighbor of Thomas Jefferson & they both had a dream of exploring the west. When Jefferson became president, he brought Lewis in as a messenger to see if he could handle pressure. Jefferson would drop a thought into your head only to become clear after some thinking. Trade is what made a nation strong and they wanted to find the Northwest Passage. Maybe your whole life set you on a path for this. Lewis fought depression, but he would will himself out of it. Lewis was a natural outdoorsman & leader. It took years of preparation, but when Napoleon sold the Louisiana Purchase, they had to move quick. Lewis learned from doctors, scientists, botanists, engineers, etc to prepare further for the trip. Jefferson approved a joint leadership, but the war dept would not. Lewis treated Clark as an equal. The fall of 1803 Lewis brought a keelboat down the Mississippi River from Pittsburgh to meet Clark in Indiana, then up the Missouri to St Louis for the winter & get supplies and men (all had to enlist in the army). The real journey began in May 1804. Some extra soldiers went as far as Mandan to help out before returning. They built a fort to stay the first winter near the Mandan Indian village in North Dakota. They headed out again in April 1805.

The Sioux Indians tried to make them pay a heavy tax to use the river, but backed down when Lewis & Clark were ready to fight. Lewis could imagine a great city rising in this garden spot where the Kansas River met the Missouri River (Kansa City, KS). They asked a French trapper who married an Indian named Sacagawea to come with them on the trip. Not concerned with the risk, they were drawn to the challenge of the unknown & knew this would be the highlight of their lives. They came to one fork before the great falls that they followed the one with clear water since the other was muddy and must have come from a prairie. There were five falls in the Missouri that had to be portaged (get out & carry supplies on land) for 18-miles.

They were in Yellowstone country (& Montana) and meat was plentiful. They found the prairie dogs, buffalo & grizzly bears amazing. The grizzlies did not kill easily. Sacagawea wanted to get back to see her people (Shoshone Indians). The expedition wanted to buy horses from them to get over the Rockies. But horses are valuable to Indians, especially in the fall for the buffalo hunt. But Sacagawea persuaded the chief to let them have some.

The Rockies were amazing from a distance, but much bigger than expected. There was no food this high up and the men and horses were starving. They hit an early snow storm & were relieved that it didn't last long, but it made them aware how vulnerable they were on the mountains. The day they actually hit the continental divide was a landmark. Clark went ahead to lower elevation with some hunters to find game. It wasn't until October 1805 before they were going down the Snake River & later the Columbia River and reached the Pacific Ocean to camp for the winter.

The spring of 1806 they headed home. The Indians on the high desert of eastern Oregon were a nuisance (always trying to steal things). It was hard for anyone to survive out there. The Nez Perce Indians on the west side of the Rockies were helpful. The Blackhawk Indians were on the attack, but they made it through without an incident. Sept 1806, they return to St. Louis. One man died of a ruptured appendix on the trip, otherwise they all survived. The men received double pay & 320-acres; the leaders got 1600-acres. Lewis was named governor of Louisiana & Clark Indian agent of the west. But Lewis was overcome with depression and committed suicide at the age 35. Clark lived to be 68. People grow the most during a challenge. One thing we can control is our destiny.