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Leading Men

By Landon Y. Jones

They spent roughly a thousand days and nights together, from the rainy October morning they left the falls of the Ohio until they finally pulled their canoes out of the Mississippi three years later in St. Louis. They slept in impossibly close quarters, often sharing the same buffalo-skin teepee with an Indian woman, a French-Canadian interpreter and their baby. They, and several enlisted men, kept journals whose published throw weight equals 13 volumes, 30 lbs., 18 in. of bookshelf and approximately 1 million words. All that evidence notwithstanding, the more we learn about the two captains who gave their names to the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the more powerful becomes their pull on our imagination.

Historians traditionally distinguish them by contrasting their personalities--the brooding Meriwether Lewis played off against the genial William Clark--Jeremy Irons hitting the road with John Goodman. Gary Moulton, editor of the explorers' journals, says, "The differences existed, but they may have been exaggerated." In reality, the two men had far more in common. They were both Virginians. They were both Army officers, six-footers and experienced outdoorsmen, who first met eight years before the expedition when they were serving in Indian campaigns in the Ohio Valley. They shared with their friend Thomas Jefferson a passion for such Enlightenment sciences as ethnology, paleontology, zoology and botany.

They were both fearless spellers. Clark took "Looner" observations, ate slices of "Water millions," tracked "bearfooted Indians" and was proud to serve the "Untied States." Clark's spelling is more famously imaginative--he found 27 different ways to spell the word Sioux. (In fairness, even the best-educated Americans displayed erratic spelling until Noah Webster's dictionary standardized spelling two decades later.)

Older than Lewis by four years--they were 33 and 29 when the expedition began--Clark was the more experienced soldier and frontiersman. His five older brothers had fought in the American Revolution. One, General George Rogers Clark, had led raids that kept the lower Great Lakes region out of British hands. As an Army officer, William had trekked the Ohio Valley, leading troops at least once in a skirmish with Indians. "He is a youth of solid and promising parts, and as brave as Caesar," reported a family member.

But by 1803 George was sinking into alcoholism, and William had resigned his commission in part to help settle his brother's debts. The two were living together on a point of land overlooking the Ohio River just below Louisville when William received an astonishing letter from his old Army buddy.

For the previous two years, Lewis had been working in the White House as Jefferson's private secretary. Like Jefferson, Lewis had lost his father at an early age; now he was in daily contact with the President, who was practically a surrogate father to him. Lewis told Clark that Jefferson had placed him in charge of a mission to explore "the interior of the continent of North America, or that part of it bordering on the Missouri & Columbia Rivers." Moreover, Lewis wanted Clark to be his co-commander.

Jefferson had once discussed a similar mission with George Rogers Clark. But now, leaving George in his family's care, William accepted "cheerfully," and "with much pleasure"--just in time to prevent Lewis from signing up his backup choice, an Army lieutenant named Moses Hooke.

Lewis and Clark got along well from the start. When Clark's anticipated commission as a captain instead came through as second lieutenant--a misstep that still rankled years later--they never told their men and treated each other as equals--placing them among the few effective co-CEOs in organizational history.

They apportioned their operating responsibilities: Clark was the better boatman and navigator, Lewis the planner and natural historian, often walking ashore far ahead of the vessels being laboriously hauled against the Missouri's current. Clark clearly had the cooler head. He brokered the crucial early compromise that ended a staredown with the Teton Sioux. The more mercurial Lewis hurled a puppy into the face of an Indian who angered him, and killed a Blackfoot in the corps's only violent incident.

During their long winter at Fort Mandan, near today's Bismarck, N.D., Lewis and Clark encountered Charles McKenzie, a British trader who later wrote, "[Captain Lewis] could not make himself agreeable to us. He could speak fluently and learnedly on all subjects, but his inveterate disposition against the British stained, at least in our eyes, all his eloquence. [Clark] was equally well informed, but his conversation was always pleasant, for he seemed to dislike giving offense unnecessarily."

Nothing reveals the captains more than their treatment of Sacagawea. Lewis could be aloof, dismissing their interpreter's wife as "the Indian woman," observing that "if she has enough to eat and a few trinkets to wear I believe she would be perfectly content anywhere." But the less formal Clark nicknamed her "Janey" and treated her warmly. She repaid him with gifts, including "two Dozen white weazils tails" on Christmas Day 1805. At the expedition's end, Clark offered to educate her son Pomp, "a butifull promising Child."

Either captain could assume sole leadership in a pinch--and often did. When Clark was waylaid with a boil on his ankle and abrasions on his feet from dragging the boats up the shallow Beaverhead River, Lewis forged ahead to find the Shoshone and the horses they desperately needed to cross the mountains. But just a few weeks later, when the entire party was near starvation on the Lolo Trail, it was Clark's turn to strike out ahead to hunt for food. If there ever was tension between them along the way, it was not recorded. Each

captain consistently referred to the other as "my friend Capt. C." or "my worthy friend Capt. Lewis" and seemed to mean it. After he was accidentally shot in the backside by Pierre Cruzatte on a hunting trip, Lewis spent the next three weeks lying on his stomach in a canoe while Clark cleaned and dressed his wounds every day. The party trusted both leaders completely. Perplexed at the junction of the Missouri and Marias rivers, the men unanimously "pronounced the [north] fork to be the Missouri," Lewis noted. But when the captains overruled them (correctly), "They said very cheerfully that they were ready to follow us any where we thought proper to direct."

We know these details because Lewis and Clark kept perhaps the most complete journals in the history of human exploration. We can look over their shoulders as they and their party of 31 contend with hunger, disease, blizzards, broiling sun, boiling rapids, furious grizzly bears and unrelenting plagues of tormenting "musquetors." We know about the Indians who helped them, and we know that they had to eat dogs and horses to survive. We are in the canoe with Clark when he writes, "Ocian in view! O! the joy," straining to hear the waves breaking on the shore he had sought for so long.

Jefferson had given Lewis an unambiguous mission: to find "the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent." Judged by that yardstick, the captains had utterly failed. What Jefferson hoped would be a "practicable" water route had turned out to be a brutal portage across parts of Montana and Idaho that included some of the most rugged wilderness in North America. If nothing else, later traders and settlers, appalled by the expedition's experience, learned where not to go and found a friendlier route along the Platte River across Nebraska and over South Pass in Wyoming.

Rather than admit failure, Jefferson devised a solution any spinning politician would recognize: he changed objectives. The expedition, he advised Congress, "has had all the success which could have been expected." Its goal, he said, was actually the understanding "of numerous tribes of Indians hitherto unknown," not to mention examining the trunkloads of specimens of plants and animals that Lewis and Clark had collected along the way.

The last task of the voyage--publishing their account--fell to Lewis. He had kept the raw notes and journals he and Clark had painstakingly carried to the Pacific and back with the goal of editing them into final form. But beset by administrative battles in his new job as Governor of Louisiana Territory, frustrated in his romantic aspirations and sinking into a depression fueled by alcohol and possibly disease, Lewis developed one of history's monumental cases of writer's block. He never turned in a single line.

On Oct. 28, 1809, Clark read the shocking report in a Kentucky newspaper that Lewis had killed himself on the Natchez Trace, near Nashville, Tenn. "I fear O! I fear the waight of his mind has over come him," he wrote to his brother Jonathan. (The cause of Lewis' death is still hotly debated, though most historians believe it was suicide.) A month after Lewis' death, in a remarkable letter published in May in James Holmberg's *Dear Brother: Letters of William Clark to Jonathan Clark*, William wrote that, in his final delirium, Lewis would apparently conceive "that he herd me Comeing on, and Said that he was certain [I would] over take him, that I had herd of his Situation and would Come to his releaf."

In one sense, Clark did exactly that in taking over the project. After further delays, including the bankruptcy of the original publisher, the journals finally came out in a two-volume edition in 1814 that left out most of the expedition's significant scientific discoveries.

What it did include was a cartographic masterpiece: Clark's map of the West. For the first time the blank spaces on the continent had been filled in with generally accurate representations of mountain ranges and rivers. Prominently marked on Clark's map were the names of dozens of tribes that lived there, in bold type that continues to undermine the notion that the West was ever an unpopulated wilderness.

The press run was a paltry 1,417 copies. It sold poorly. Two years later, Clark still had not received his own copy. By that time the nation was beginning to forget about Lewis and Clark. Well-publicized explorations led by John Charles Fremont through the Rockies to California and John Wesley Powell down the Colorado River eventually eclipsed the Voyage of Discovery in the public's imaginings of the West. Yet publishing would revive their reputations. New editions of the journals were published in 1893 and 1904-05, bringing the saga to life a century after it happened.

When the men of the Corps of Discovery had arrived back in St. Louis in 1806, the residents "Huzzared three cheers." But they otherwise did not seem to know what to make of this crew or its achievement. Two nights later, they feted the captains at William Christy's inn. There they raised toasts to, among others, President Jefferson ("the polar star of discovery")...Christopher Columbus ("his hardihood, perseverance and merit")...and Agriculture and Industry ("The farmer is the best support of government"). But when the revelers got to the captains in the 18th and final toast, they seemed to be at a loss for words. Finally they settled for saluting "their perilous services [that] endear them to every American heart."

It has been that way ever since.

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