

Mr. Jefferson's expedition.

by Jerry Miller

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"Ocian in view! O! the joy."

In November of 1805, a small group of explorers reached the Pacific Ocean after a grueling trip of more than 4,000 miles. They were the first Americans ever to travel overland from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Coast.

There were 23 army privates and three sergeants in the group--all experienced frontiersmen. These men were the Corps of Discovery. They were led by two captains, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Clark brought along his servant, a black slave named York. There were also two interpreters, one a French Canadian fur trapper and the other a half-French, half-Shawnee Indian scout. With the French Canadian was his 16-year-old Shoshone Indian wife, Sacagawea, who carried their newborn baby. Captain Lewis's dog, Seaman, completed the group. These were the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Their trip was the fulfillment of a 20-year dream--not their own dream but Thomas Jefferson's. Shortly after the Revolutionary War ended, Jefferson had begun making plans to explore the West. At that time, the "far frontier" meant the area that is now Kentucky and Ohio. But Jefferson was already dreaming of the land beyond the Mississippi River.

In 1783, Jefferson wrote to George Rogers Clark. Clark was a famous frontiersman and a military hero of the Revolution. Jefferson asked Clark if he would lead an exploring party to the Pacific Ocean. General Clark thought the expedition was a good idea but said he would not go himself.

Jefferson refused to give up. In 1785, he helped the American explorer John Ledyard plan a one-man exploration of the West. In 1793, he planned an expedition to be led by the French scientist Andre Michaux. Unfortunately, neither expedition became more than a dream.

When he was elected president of the United States, Jefferson tried again. In 1803, the United States made a huge purchase: the Louisiana Territory, 800,000 square miles of land west of the Mississippi. Now it was time to find out just what the nation had bought. This time, Jefferson asked his secretary, Meriwether Lewis, to lead the expedition. Lewis then asked Jefferson to make William Clark a co-leader of the group. William Clark was the youngest brother of George Rogers Clark, the man Jefferson had asked to lead the same expedition 20 years

earlier.

President Jefferson made almost all the plans for the trip. He decided on the route the expedition would follow and what its goals would be. He decided that Lewis and Clark should make friends with the American Indians tribes and study their languages and customs. He asked them to find out if a fur trade could be started between these Indians and the United States. He asked them to discover if they could travel most of the way from the Mississippi to the Pacific by water. (This would make an easy trade route possible.) They were also asked to make maps and bring back drawings and descriptions of new animals and plants.

It was now up to Lewis and Clark to turn these plans into reality. They left the Mississippi River on May 14, 1804, reached the Pacific Ocean in November 1805, and returned to the Mississippi on September 23, 1806. They had spent two years, four months, and nine days traveling 8,000 miles through wilderness unknown to most Americans. They had met with angry grizzly bears and struggled through flash floods deep snows, and high mountains. They had also fulfilled almost all of Jefferson's hopes.

There were some disappointments. The most important was that no water route existed that would allow easy trade between the Mississippi and the Pacific. However, so much had been learned about the Indians, the plants, the animals, and the geography of the new land that the expedition had been an amazing success.

Lewis and Clark had fulfilled Jefferson's dream. They also started many other Americans dreaming--of moving farther west.