

HISTORY COMMENTARY

Seneca Falls to Celilo Falls: Ruminations of a Traveling Historian

By David L. Nicandri

COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Winter 1999-2000: Vol. 13, No. 4

Four years ago at a national history conference, I attended a session on women's history and learned that a last-minute addition to the program was a national park ranger from Women's Rights National Historic Park in Seneca Falls, New York. This caught my fancy because Seneca Falls is my hometown. At the conclusion of the session I went to the head of the room to pick up some handouts and found a park guide. It is constructed in the template common to all National Park guides: the multiple fold, black banded headline, with white typeface; and on the inside were historic photos, interpretive text and the ubiquitous map.

When my son was younger we started a family tradition of visiting as many of the national parks in the West as our summer vacation schedule allowed, and so I had managed to collect quite a number of these brochures. But I was not ready for the psychological effect that opening this one had on me, for the map inside is of the neighborhood I grew up in! The neighborhood school was Elizabeth Cady Stanton Elementary (for some reason foreshortened to Cady Stanton in our youthful argot); my buddies and I used to play baseball in the vacant lot one house removed from the Stanton house on Washington Street. I lived around the corner on Bayard Street; and near the intersection of the two streets, across from the neighborhood grocery store, was the Amelia Bloomer house.

Because I am a historian, it is frequently imputed that growing up in the environs of such a historical town must have influenced me somehow. However, since not everyone who grows up in Seneca Falls becomes a historian, there must be other variables. It is nonetheless true that I have witnessed firsthand how the importance of a site is not static, how it becomes revealed over time; history, because its core value is moral in nature and not scientific, is far from immutable. There was, in the Seneca Falls I grew up in, a general cognizance that an important event, at that time worthy of a single line in the textbooks, had happened there. But the community focus was on the workaday world—a focus that comes all too easily to a blue collar, industrial town populated by a fair number of Italian immigrants, including my four grandparents and my mother.

In Seneca Falls' post-industrial age, history and cultural tourism—particularly related to the Women's rights movement—are the focus of the community and Seneca Falls' core identity as a place (notwithstanding the local conversation about whether the town was the inspiration for Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*). Not that Seneca Falls is now a better place—it's just different. The textbooks are different, too. There is more than one line about women's history in them now. What I find of interest in the so-called culture wars that overlaid the Enola Gay and textbook standards conflicts is how scholars in fields like biology, physics, medicine—even economics—are expected to routinely revise and upgrade their knowledge, but historians are

expected to stick to the first, or conventional, interpretation. I liken the past to a block of granite; it is what it is; but perspective and evidence direct the chisel and what is revealed by way of the final sculpture reflects the needs of the historian's context. And with these needs lies "the moral of the story."

One story for our time, it seems to me, is that of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery. The bicentennial of this great event is just around the corner (in terms of planning) and truly, with the success of Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage* and the Ken Burns/Dayton Duncan PBS documentary, it can be said to have already started.

I'm not a Lewis and Clark scholar, and I came to the office of president of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Council quite by accident. My involvement at the outset was purely a function of occupational necessity since Washington is a trail state. As director of the Washington State Historical Society I had to become active in the study of the expedition and the movement that would memorialize its bicentennial. Actually, my first love, speaking of historic trails, is the Oregon Trail. That interest came to me, in part, because my current hometown of Tumwater bills itself as the end of the Oregon Trail in Washington. The first party of American settlers on Puget Sound arrived in 1845 (three years before the Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls).

In any event, I always found the Oregon Trail story appealing as a historian; it was an epoch that I could identify with personally (unlike Lewis and Clark, initially) and again, unlike Lewis and Clark, it was a story for which I developed some actual scholarly expertise. I lectured on the topic frequently and, over time, I had traveled its entire length and photographed it extensively—on occasion, too much time and too extensively. Back in 1993, having exhausted the list of western parks to visit with my family, I took them on a car tour of the overland trail segment in Wyoming. I was particularly interested in seeing the famed ruts near Guernsey, Wyoming, which for years had fascinated me because of their shoulder-level depth. After I had been photographing the ruts extensively over several hour's time, my wife suggested that we move on. When I demurred on that point, saying I needed more time at the site, she suggested I roll in the dust and that way I could take it with me.

I learned much in my Oregon Trail peregrinations. For example, the beauty of plains in Kansas and Nebraska, and the truth of Francis Parkman, the great narrative historian of the mid 19th century. Parkman was one of the first chroniclers of the Oregon Trail; he was actually out on the trail in the 1840s as the phenomenon of the great migration was taking place. In the foreword to his book on the trail, Parkman noted for his readers something that every historian needs to learn—that armchair and archival familiarity with a subject is not enough. You have to get out in the field to truly appreciate a site and a story. For example, in my Oregon Trail lectures I used to talk about how the first half of the trip was essentially uneventful, at least in respect to topographical difficulties of a vertical nature. Then, during one of my tours, I had the occasion to see and climb, with some exertion (via a paved path no less), to the top of "California Hill," the summit of the traverse from the South Platte to the North Platte Valley emigrant road. This I did in heat above 90 degrees, having driven to the site in an air-conditioned car. I then learned the truth of Parkman's axiom that to see the true depth of the historical story you have to visit the historical site.

This truism, of course, is what undergirds and motivates the cultural tourism market. There is no substitute for being where history happened. I still marvel, having now been there twice, how small and confined is Dallas's Dealey Plaza, compared to the expanded view of the place that I

learned distantly by way of photography and television. Similarly, when you stand at the South Pass of the Rockies on the Oregon Trail, with no hint of the 20th century in view, but only the wind, sky, clouds, sun and land, you almost expect to see the wagons coming over the crest of the divide.

And so it has been these past several years, in my real-life exposure to the Klondike Gold Rush Centennial Trail. I have led two expeditions of the Society's members north to Skagway, Whitehorse and Dawson City. One of the early chroniclers of that great saga was photographer Asahel Curtis, younger brother of the more famous Indian photographer, Edward Curtis. Young Asahel began his distinguished career as a documentary photographer during the Klondike Gold Rush; and over the next 40 years he created an oeuvre, 50,000 negatives and prints, that is a veritable encyclopedia of Washington state history and one of the Society's greatest assets. One of Curtis's signature slides is a distant view of Dawson City, including a scoop-like scar on the landscape that I presumed, again in my distant ignorance, was some form of legacy from the gold rush diggings.

In truth, what I had never seen in the archives but did see in person are the tailings from the dredging of Bonanza Creek and the Klondike River; that devastation, in its thoroughness, has to represent the pinnacle of industrial-scale devastation of the American landscape west and north of Butte, Montana. The scoop mark in Dawson, I learned from a local guide, is actually a natural formation—Moosehide Slide—and I now better appreciate the manner and meaning behind the way Curtis framed that feature in his photograph. Again, witness the value of what a good friend of mine once called "history on the hoof," as opposed to parlor room history or even classroom-style history.

The great lesson to me, of both the Oregon Trail and Klondike observances, is the importance of what I call interpretive infrastructure. In Oregon, for that trail's sesquicentennial, they had the great wisdom to create a sequence of high-caliber and equitably distanced visitor and interpretive centers. They even have a brochure and common signage that links them together. I could argue that Oregon's productive work in popularizing the state's trail segments has been too successful, at least in terms of planning Washington's part in observing the Lewis and Clark bicentennial. USA Today ran a special feature on the Lewis and Clark trail the weekend before the previously mentioned PBS documentary was scheduled to air. Upon close inspection, I noticed that the cartographer, when he or she got to the confluence of the Snake and Columbia rivers, ran the "trail" (which, like the Missouri, was a river passage) on the Oregon side of the river.

As I have since learned, most of the major Lewis and Clark camp sites along the Columbia, with the exception of the winter headquarters at what is now Astoria, were on the Washington side of the river. Clearly, then, the cartographer's association of the trail with Oregon is, in part, a function of the "brand name" association to "trails" that Oregon has established. It is so powerful a brand that it can and will run counter to historical accuracy unless we here in Washington build an interpretive infrastructure that has equally powerful stories to tell.

And the stories are there—at the beginning, middle, and end of the Lewis and Clark passage. The best-known of these stories, traditionally, is the help that Lewis and Clark secured from the Nez Perce Indians; and Washington's eastern gateway—Clarkston—is within the traditional homelands of the Nez Perce. I recently visited Weippe Prairie in Idaho, just at the foot of the Bitterroot Mountains of northern Idaho, with Allen Pinkham, a fellow member of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Council. Describing the scene from the roadside marker, with just a wry bit of

irony his voice, Allen said: "Here is where the Nez Perce discovered Lewis and Clark." And indeed, the aid that the Corps of Discovery received from the Nez Perce when they straggled out of the mountains is fully emblematic of a series of continuously helpful encounters that native peoples provided to these American heroes. To use a metaphor that our commercial age makes quite understandable, the Corps of Discovery was a true "joint venture" between Lewis and Clark and a host of Indian partners. And what is all the more and tragically profound is that few tribes of the many who have grievances against the federal government were less rewarded for their succor of Lewis and Clark than the Nez Perce, a tribe the explorers truly loved. And when the circumstances were reversed, when the settlers and the American government had the physical advantage over the Nez Perce, they pressed it every time.

The other end of the trail, in Pacific County, Washington, is now also better known because of the so-called election site. By November 1805 the party had finally made it to the presumed end of the trail—to within view of the Pacific Ocean. In late November a fierce storm blew in from the southwest, endangering the party. The wave action smashed the canoes; their leathers rotted; game was scarce. The expedition was at another critical juncture.

We know from Ambrose and others that Lewis and Clark had an ample supply of leadership skills that probably would have served the Corps well at this point. But instead of simply determining what to do, the captains did a remarkable thing: they polled each member of the party for the purpose of assessing their recommendations as to where and how to pass the winter. The options were to stay, cross over to what is now the Oregon side, or return upstream to the more protected regions near present-day Vancouver or Wishram. Every member of the party participated in this tally or election, including York (Clark's slave), who voted 60 years before manumission, and Sacagawea, who voted 150 years before Indians or women could participate in elections. Actually, the fact that anyone other than the captains could "vote" in such a circumstance was remarkable because at that time electors had to own property, and it is likely that only Clark and Lewis fit in that category.

This election site is now a nondescript, underdeveloped, unpaved wayside turnout about one mile west of the Astoria-to-Megler bridge landing. It is not merely an important Lewis and Clark site, it is one of the most important sites of any kind in the nation since its history embodies our greatest cultural tradition: the principle of self-government. For that reason, I have developed a fondness for referring to this site at McGowan, Washington, as the "Independence Hall of the American West." (Maybe I should begin calling it the "Seneca Falls of the West.")

But the part of the trail in Washington that has been on my mind of late is the middle passage, the quick downstream traverse of the Columbia River rapids. During my Lewis and Clark travels I have had occasion to see many stretches of the Missouri River. It is a very appealing river, my favorite section being the bluffs near Atchison, Kansas, the hometown of Amelia Earhart. But what has mystified me since the first airing of the Burns/Duncan documentary is why in their treatment of the story the Columbia River fared so poorly in comparison with the Missouri. Why, for example, did the Great Falls of the Missouri loom so large in the expedition's imagination when the Great Falls of the Columbia (at Celilo)—arguably a more imposing cascade and rapids—barely made mention by comparison?

The answer hit me in a conversation with the consultants who are working with the Society, State Tourism, Department of Transportation, and other agencies to develop an interpretive plan for the trail in Washington. While trying to assess what was unique to our state in the Lewis and Clark story, I mentioned what I thought was a distinguishing characteristic: because it was a

downstream leg, Lewis and Clark took comparatively little time to make the passage. Thus, in writing their journals, Lewis and Clark, struggling upstream on the Missouri as little as a few miles a day, had plenty of time to study and absorb the landscape into their consciousness. While they spent the better part of two years on the Missouri, they spent four weeks on the Columbia. They were at Great Falls for a month; they were at Celilo Falls for two days.

Earlier this decade the Washington State Historical Society created a public history unit known as the Center for Columbia River History (CCRH) in Vancouver, Washington. CCRH was formed largely in recognition of the fact that the Columbia River is the least well-known great river in America. Far lesser rivers loom larger in the public's mind: the Hudson or the Colorado, to say nothing of the Potomac. The reason for this, I have now concluded, is that, unlike the Missouri which was imprinted on the nation's imagination by Lewis and Clark, the Columbia labored to the sea in comparative anonymity until Woody Guthrie discovered it; but by then it was too late. Which is why, in my view, when it came time for the development of the Missouri and Columbia in this century, at least a game attempt was made to preserve the Great Falls in Montana, whereas the falls at Celilo were buried seemingly without anyone other than the tribes giving it a second thought.

Stephen Ambrose, when asked about the popular reaction to his book, *Undaunted Courage*, says that the most commonly expressed desire of his readers is the wish that they could see the West the way Lewis and Clark saw it. I hold no brief on the question raging in this region about whether the Snake River dams should be breached, but if I could have a dream fulfilled for the bicentennial it would be that the waters behind The Dalles dam be drawn down for the bicentennial so that the cultural and aesthetic memory of Celilo could be rekindled. Not only for Indian people's sake, but for everyone's.

David Nicandri is director of the Washington State Historical Society. This commentary is adopted from remarks given at the Western States Tourism Council's Conference in Tacoma in the fall of 1998.