

FOLLOWING IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS

Creating the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail

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In May 1961 conservationist and celebrated political cartoonist for the *Des Moines Register*, J. N. "Ding" Darling, proposed that the Missouri River be incorporated into "a national outdoor recreation and natural resources ribbon along the historic trail of Lewis and Clark." Gravely ill, Darling knew he would not live to see such a project carried out, but he secured banker and fellow conservationist Sherry Fisher's promise to initiate a campaign for it. Darling, who had briefly served President Franklin D. Roosevelt as chief of the Biological Survey, was famous for his syndicated editorial cartoons promoting wildlife sanctuaries and opposing dam construction, particularly on his beloved Missouri River, and had been a major founder of the National Wildlife Federation. Following his friend's death in February 1962, Sherry Fisher helped form the J. N. "Ding" Darling Foundation, which he steered toward creation of a Lewis and Clark trail corridor that would also provide habitat for wildlife. Encouraged by Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, representatives of the foundation, federal agencies, and the states through which the Lewis and Clark trail passed met in Portland, Oregon, in the fall of 1962 to discuss the Darling proposal.

Congress approved a trail plan in principle in 1963, and the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation began to study development along a ten-mile corridor for inclusion in a proposed nationwide system of scenic trails. On October 6, 1964, Public Law 88-630 was passed authorizing creation of a Lewis and Clark Trail Commission to promote public understanding of the expedition's historical significance and to review proposals for developing "desirable long-term conservation objectives" and recreation opportunities along its length. The commission was also authorized to advise government agencies in selecting and marking a "suitable connecting network of roads" along the route. Of its 27 members, 10 represented the states of Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon (in 1966 a member was added from Illinois); 8 were members of Congress—4 representatives and 4 senators; 5 represented the cabinet departments; and 4 were appointed by the Darling Foundation. Sherry Fisher chaired the commission for its full five-year existence. It met several times a year in various cities along the trail, such as St. Louis, Bismarck, Billings, and Portland.

Thus began an institutionalizing of the route taken by the Corps of Discovery between 1804 and 1806. Its official creation as a national trail reflects a mixture of public motives and attitudes toward history. Enthusiasts had never been satisfied with the degree to which the Lewis and Clark expedition was commemorated. Despite tribute paid Sacagawea and the explorers at the 1905 Portland Exposition and the numerous activities and ceremonies performed mostly in the Pacific Northwest during the sesquicentennial summer of 1955, the trail itself remained more alive as an imaginative construct based on the Reuben Thwaites edition of the *Journals* than it

did as geographical reality. As a linearly extended historical site or series of sites linked by a single mission, the trail had great commercial potential for tourism, and numerous attempts were made to associate its historical significance with highways, towns, and cities in 11 states.

The idea of naming a particular highway or highways after a historical or scenic theme went back to the 1920s when boosters publicized such vacation pathways as the "Custer Battlefield Highway" and the "Yellowstone Trail." The Lewis and Clark route appeared to be a natural for this treatment, and attempts were made, at least as far back as 1929, to establish a cross-country highway bearing their names. In 1948 the National Park Service proclaimed a "Lewis and Clark Tourway" along the Missouri River between St. Louis and Three Forks, Montana, and a 1956 campaign to create a Lewis and Clark "National Tourway" attempted to drum up public and congressional support for completing the final 30 miles of a highway along Idaho's Lochsa River. A marked trail with identified sites, however, presented special problems. For one thing, time and progress had obliterated much of that trail. Most of the water route on the Missouri and Columbia Rivers had become long lakes behind dams. Deep public concern in the 1960s regarding the loss of natural wonders and historically significant locations helps explain the context of urgency within which the commission was launched. It was, after all, the decade of the Wilderness Act (1964), the Land and Water Conservation Act (1965), and the Historic Preservation Act (1966). The two greatest challenges would be providing access and interpretation for the general public.

The idea of following in the expedition's footsteps was not new. Over the preceding half century historical enthusiasts had followed the route described in the *Journals* and locating campsites and other significant places. Between 1899 and 1902 Olin D. Wheeler had traveled the trails, photographed the countryside through which they passed, and noted the impact of settlement. His two-volume book, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark*, must have whetted the appetites of many who longed to stand where the members of the Corps of Discovery had stood and see something of what they had seen. For example, Lewis R. Freeman described his 1928 solo trip by water down the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers in a National Geographic article and through description and photographs showed how the country had changed around the points of "historic interest." Much effort has since been expended to research and accurately locate the expedition's campsites.

Clearwater National Forest Supervisor Ralph Space spent many years in the 1950s and 1960s searching out sites in the vicinity of the Lolo Trail in Idaho. John J. Peebles contributed detailed studies of campsites and routes of the expedition in western Montana and Idaho that included maps combining United States Geological Survey and state survey charts and showing modern towns and other features in relation to the sites. Interest in precisely calculating and ascertaining Lewis and Clark sites continues today with the work of Steve Russell, who has collected maps and used a computer and global positioning system (GPS) equipment to pinpoint locations. The published results of such searches would be increasingly directed to automobile tourists.

Not until the 1920s, when federal aid to highway funding had made it possible for western states to build long-distance highways through the high plains and intermontane regions, could most tourists gain access to the Lewis and Clark route. Even the Lolo Trail, that portion of the expedition's route that passed through the rugged Bitterroot Mountains of northern Idaho, became open to automobile travel in 1932 when the Forest Service completed the Lolo

Motorway, 90-some miles of rough, narrow, and very isolated forest road. In 1953 writer Ralph Gray braved the route with his family in their "Woody" station wagon as they traced the Lewis and Clark trail across the country from Missouri to Oregon. In the sesquicentennial summer of 1955 Ralph Space "piloted" a Northwest Conservation League automobile caravan over the Lolo Motorway—an excursion from Pasco, Washington, to Fort Benton, Montana.

As interest in signing, interpreting, and designating a commemorative trail developed, proponents had to face the problem of access. Secondary state and federal highways provided intermittent access, although sometimes only to the vicinity of the trail sites. Much of their potential traffic had been diverted to new interstate superhighways being constructed as a result of the National Defense Highway Act of 1956. So part of the challenge would be to induce motorists to break the spell of the high-speed environment and exit to older two-lane roadways. The access problem was particularly acute along the Missouri River segments. Reservoirs backed up by Fort Peck, Garrison, and other Pick-Sloan dams on the Missouri River in Montana and the Dakotas had inundated many of the expedition's campsites. Hardy enthusiasts continued to follow the water route by canoe or power boat, but most travelers would be constrained to use their automobiles. Those access roads that had existed before construction of the Sakakawea Reservoir in North Dakota and the Oahe Reservoir in North and South Dakota respectively were underwater by the early 1960s.

About the same time Ding Darling was expressing his vision of a historical and recreational ribbon along the Missouri, the North Dakota State Highway Department was pondering a new reservoir perimeter road system. Little progress was made, however, until 1963 when the Lewis and Clark Trail Convention in Portland, Oregon, inspired the North Dakota delegation to press for combining the perimeter road and trail route projects. In January 1966 the North Dakota Outdoor Recreation Committee passed a resolution doing just that. Moreover, it would include an "environmental corridor" similar to what Ding Darling had envisioned, providing both wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities. In 1967 a plan reviewing the roles for numerous county, state, and federal agencies had been drawn up. Soon South Dakota followed suit by tying its 422-mile Oahe Reservoir perimeter road proposal to a Lewis and Clark Trail system, in cooperation with highway departments in North Dakota and Montana.

The national commission invested much discussion in the concept of a "continuous" Lewis and Clark Trail highway, and at its November 1968 meeting in Portland it called upon the secretary of transportation to seek congressional funds to expedite "the interstate planning and coordination" of such a highway. A few months later an article in the *Wall Street Journal* conveyed criticisms, such as those being levied by Congressman John Kyl of Iowa, that the commission had tried to "expand into the road building business" with "ambitions [that] were getting it off the track," and that it had succumbed to "crassly commercial tourist promotion." Sherry Fisher's response had been that a continuous road was needed because many parts of the trail were far from existing highways. "How in the hell," he is quoted in the article as asking, "is anybody going to enjoy these wilderness areas if you can't get people there so they can look?..."

In any case, the commission resolved to designate newly paved reservoir perimeter roads in North and South Dakota as part of the trail. In 1969, responding to resolutions by both North Dakota and federal interagency groups, the North Dakota Highway Department numbered the new highways 1804 on the east bank and 1806 on the west to commemorate the years during

which the expedition passed up the Missouri and back down. Eventually, South Dakota adopted the same numbering system.

Marking the highways that were to be official segments paralleling the trail was one of the earliest matters to concern the commission, as well as various state agencies and groups involved. For uniformity and continuity, a standard logo had to be agreed upon. In 1964 the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation announced a contest and a \$500 prize for the best design, to be judged by the Darling Foundation. Although prizes were awarded, neither the winning insignia—depicting Sacagawea and her infant son—nor the runner-up would be adopted. Instead, all designated roadways would bear signs showing Lewis and Clark in silhouette, one holding a rifle and the other pointing, above the words "Lewis and Clark Trail."

Also to be worked out were means by which sites along the trail should be interpreted for travelers. South Dakota Historical Society Director Will Robinson pointed out that the minimal symbol markers would tell travelers that they were on part of the Lewis and Clark Trail, but they would not tell "what they did here and where did they do it...the real meat of the program." Helping tourists visualize events associated with particular places, such as the meeting with the Teton Sioux at the mouth of the Bad River or the first encounter with the Nez Perces in Idaho, might be, one federal official thought, "the most important and perhaps the most difficult aspect of the entire trail concept."

Interpretation in this case means establishing historical context and conveying portions of the narrative in as succinct and simple a manner as possible. It serves to authenticate locations—to zero in on fact and on the relation of fact to place. As Michael Kammen points out, the American public has come to suspect historical interpretation and to believe that "trustworthy history consists of true facts...accurately organized and presented. No more and no less." Authenticity is the desired effect, one that appears to confer most of the educational value upon which the appeal of tourism is based. Even duplicates or facsimiles, such as Forts Clatsop and Mandan, may please the public as much as if they had been the real thing, so long as they bear the imprimatur of authenticity. Of course, few traces of the Corps of Discovery remain upon the landscape, so replicas of lodging, salt cairns, and dugout canoes must fill the gap. Reconstructing the trail pretty much demands such an approach to history. That signs and other interpretive figurations alter the historical landscape and condition our perception of it, just as (in more subtle fashion) settlement and industry have, is beside the point if the entire trail is seen as a sort of imaginative replica.

By the time the commission issued its final report in October 1969, much had already been done at the federal, state, and local levels to interpret the trail and draw public attention to it through various activities, including canoeing and hiking expeditions. Four new national historic landmarks had been designated along the trail: Weippe Prairie, north of the Clearwater River in Idaho and the Great Falls Portage Route, Camp Disappointment, and Pompey's Pillar in Montana. The Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation and Forest Service developed camping and other visitor facilities and set out to install interpretive "devices," while local volunteer organizations initiated projects for establishing and developing additional sites. Legislation would be introduced to designate a stretch of the upper Missouri as a "Wild and Scenic River," and successful steps taken to rescue Beaverhead Rock in Montana from blasting, to name only a few initiatives.

The commission held 11 meetings and 3 public hearings over its five-year existence, gathering information, promoting public interest, coordinating efforts at all levels, issuing 56 resolutions and 3 reports, and approving a sign emblem to mark those highways designated as part of the system. Public and official consciousness had been raised about environmental issues, particularly with respect to clean water. But the process of creating a national historic trail had only begun.

In the waning months of its authorized existence, the commission became the focus of controversy over whether to extend that existence, since guidance and a high public profile were necessary to maintain momentum for the project. Members at a Portland meeting in early 1969 voted to recommend national legislation that would, in effect, make the commission permanent. But objections quickly followed from different quarters. *Life* magazine called on all federal commissions to hang it up. Representative John Kyl of Iowa, who had authored the bill creating the Lewis and Clark Commission, opposed on principle giving indefinite life to temporary commissions. Kyl's suggestion that it be replaced by a private organization was echoed by North Dakota Commissioner, John Greenslit, who also served as coordinator of the North Dakota State Outdoor Recreation Agency. He acknowledged that "a new organization is needed with state initiative," since Congress appeared unlikely to renew the commission. Congress rejected a bill to extend its life for five more years, and the Lewis and Clark Commission was disbanded in October 1969.

It now appeared that any additional work commemorating the route of the Corps of Discovery would be left up to organizations and commissions within the individual states or to initiatives within the Department of the Interior. In South Dakota, for example, the Great Lakes of South Dakota Association assumed responsibility for improvements in the early 1970s, sponsoring, among other things, a Lewis and Clark Historical Canoe Trail between Picktown, South Dakota, and Sioux City, Iowa. County committees had been established in Missouri and Iowa. In many other of the 11 states concerned, governors appointed state committees to pick up the slack, but some sort of umbrella organization that could continue to coordinate efforts and keep the idea of a national historic trail in the public eye was clearly needed.

One of the final recommendations made by the national commission had been that "one or more groups should be organized to further the broad program" it had developed. In 1970 a nonprofit organization, the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Inc., was formed to do just that. A mimeographed publication *The Lewis and Clark Journal*, edited by G. Edward "Gus" Budde of the Lewis and Clark Trail Committee of Missouri, appeared quarterly during the early 1970s, reporting on meetings, legislative efforts, issues related to historic sites, trail development news, and projects being supported by the Heritage Foundation. Budde, who is described in a newspaper article as being "one of the last of the old-time publicity men," had "personally retraced" the trail from Wood River to Fort Clatsop eight times. In the winter of 1974-75 the first issue of *We Proceeded On*, the official publication of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, reported on the organization's sixth annual meeting held the preceding August at Seaside, Oregon, and noted that the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation was ready to submit legislation to Congress that would establish historic as well as scenic trails.

By 1975 the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian Trail had been designated while numerous candidates besides the Lewis and Clark route were being studied, including the Mormon, Santa Fe, Continental Divide, Natchez Trace, Oregon, and Alaska Gold Rush trails. It was becoming

apparent that large segments of the Lewis and Clark Trail did not qualify as "a land-based national and scenic trail," according the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. Very little of it held potential for, say, bicycling or hiking. However, a "historic" trail alternative soon came into being that would permit a different concept of national trail.

The National Historic Trail and Travelway category provided for extended routes (hundreds of miles), parts of which would be intended for foot or non-motorized travel, travel along or on waterways, or motorized travel along marked public highways and roads. They would be sufficiently documented for their national historic interest and be marked by interpretive sites that would "provide the user with the intangible elements of historic feeling and association."

In a 1975 preliminary report, the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation recommended that, while the entire 3,700-mile route be designated, development be restricted to 135 miles of land and 2,010 miles of water within 21 "selected federally administered and complementing state and locally administered components." The effort was to be coordinated by the Department of the Interior and an advisory council made up of representatives from governing agencies as well as the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation and other private trail organizations.

The final study report was completed in April 1977, and the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail officially came into existence on November 10, 1978. For more than 20 years efforts have continued to carry out the general recommendations of the National Lewis and Clark Commission. The National Park Service holds overall responsibility for the historic trail, but development and management of sites have largely been carried out by other agencies and organizations. By the summer of 1998 there were four major interpretive centers along the route: in addition to the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and Arch in St. Louis and the Fort Clatsop National Monument in Oregon, new facilities had opened near Washburn, North Dakota, and in Great Falls, Montana. Preparations for the 200th anniversary of the expedition are being spearheaded by a volunteer National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Council, founded by the Trail Heritage Foundation. Just as the work of the commission in the 1960s both reflected and molded public attitudes toward this historical enterprise, so will the bicentennial commemoration, particularly as it is manifested in the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail.

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