

## **When Cultures Collide**

### **By Phil Scriver**

The bicentennial of the Corps of Discovery's journey across the continent has been eagerly anticipated by Lewis and Clark buffs. Those people who have learned about the expedition are anxious to share their knowledge with, as well as learn from, others who are also interested in the expedition. It seems as though these people can never get enough immersion in the story they have become so fascinated with; no detail is so small as to be unimportant; no location that can be related in any way is insignificant.

As the vision for the bicentennial started to develop many of the Lewis and Clark buffs had dreams of meeting new people and seeing new places or revisiting distant places and renewing old acquaintances. But above all the bicentennial was to be a time for people who shared a common interest to gather in a variety of locations to talk with others about their passion. It was also to be a time to tell the world more about this wonderfully successful exploring journey that has become an essential part of our national character.

But somehow during the ten years of planning that preceded the beginning of the bicentennial things changed. When the formal ceremonies at Monticello that officially started the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial were held January 18, 2003 representatives from many Indian tribes were a part of the proceedings. It wasn't a time to solely venerate the Corps of Discovery.

This gathering talked about Jefferson, planning the expedition and natives that inhabited the lands the expedition would travel through. As the crest of the bicentennial wave works its way down the Ohio before spilling into the Missouri and Columbia on its way to the Pacific, planners are taking a much different look at what constitutes an appropriate and complete tribute to what the Corps of Discovery did two hundred years ago.

The simple, although exciting, details of an unparalleled adventure story are not enough to satisfy a national curiosity that wants to find out what is creating this stir of historic interest. Yes, these stories are important and need to be told, but there must be more. We hear questions like, "why did they go" and "what were the results of their journey." These kinds of questions make the bicentennial planners go beyond the words written by the journal keepers and the letter writers that give the details of the "adventure story."

Planners are now realizing that an historical act does not happen in a vacuum. To understand the significance of that historical act, the entire era must be understood. The politics of the time, the scientific community, educational efforts and thinking, the arts and literature being created, economics, and other explorations all must be examined since these were driving forces that helped to shape the journey. Add to that list the fact that they must be examined and understood from the point of view of each of the players; English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, those who lived in the area that formed the American frontier. The list is almost endless.

Once some understanding has been developed of how and why the expedition was assembled and sent on the journey, we must be equally as diligent in searching to answer questions concerning the results obtained and the consequences of having sent these explorers across the continent. The search to find the results gets very complex. In addition to the players listed above we must add the many native groups that lived in the area traversed by the expedition. Each group needs to be considered separately. In a sense the entire question of settlement of the west comes up for discussion, just as does the questions of settlement of the lands east of the Mississippi. The more research that is done the more remains to be done. This

statement has been used to prove how large an impact the Lewis and Clark expedition had on the United States.

We must perform the research and analyze the results using that era's standards instead of today's standards of morality and acceptability, and we must keep our biases from coloring our work. A prime example comes to mind to illustrate what not to do. One writer comments that Toussiant Charbonneau struck Sacajawea and was duly chastised by Captain Clark. The author then refers to "the wife-beating Charbonneau."

Since a large part of our research must be from sources other than the journal keepers own words, how do we determine what other sources are valid and which ones are biased like the above illustration? Can the author's credentials alone be used? Does thirty years of news reporting or possession of an advanced degree in an appropriate discipline or heritage automatically validate the source? I think not. To illustrate consider a great college football player who was drafted very high by the pros, but never did very well in the NFL. It's not the credentials that play the game, instead it is that person and how well he uses his credentials—or abilities that matters. The researcher must take great care in maintaining a breadth of information and not take something for truth or fact that has only one source.

Another pitfall to be very wary of is the well founded historian who postulates a theory but states it as fact. He may be correct in his deductions, but he has erred by not properly labeling his conclusion as theory. Most historical records simply do not record all the facts. Consequently opinions and theories get added to fill in the gaps. Although these may very well be correct, if they can't be authenticated in the historical record they can not be maintained as facts. The researcher should diligently seek other sources who have reached the same conclusion or competing conclusions independently before deciding to accept the conclusion or theory. Credentials alone do not validate sources. In his multi-volume history, *The Winning of the West*, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote, "the men who settled the western wilderness were the men who won Louisiana; for it was surrendered by France merely because it was impossible to hold it against the American advance." Shortly after that was written President Woodrow Wilson wrote in his book, *History of the American People*, that the Louisiana Purchase was "the product of the doings of the diplomats." To decide which President was correct we must go beyond their credentials.

If the researcher is diligent in the quest for historic fact, a substantial body of work will be assembled. This part of research is what most people who have done research are familiar with, but it is more difficult than it appears. Interestingly, if all perspectives are considered the facts will be in conflict at certain times, if for no other reason than the phenomenon if several people witness an event, each one will describe it differently even though they are all trying their best to be objective, complete and accurate. When the facts are all assembled they need to be carefully labeled so it is known where they came from. Resolution of differences of fact should be accomplished by comprehension of why the facts vary. Sometimes adding several facts together is needed to get the correct result. Sometimes eliminating part of the fact is needed for agreement. Certain statements that were initially considered facts may require being moved out of that category and more properly categorized as theory. A sound understanding of vocabulary of the people of the era being considered is essential at this point so the writings of the era are properly interpreted. Colloquialisms have created controversy for many historical issues by being misunderstood by those reading them. Judicious inspection of facts will usually result in reconciling the conflicts.

The researcher can never, with certainty, say he has all the facts. He can only record where he got all of the facts he has and be ready to accept additional facts even if doing so means re-accomplishing conflict assessment and resolution then modifying theories and assumptions derived from the initial set of facts.

The body of facts assembled relative to an issue will set the tone and limits for any future use made of the set of facts. Consequently the greatest care must be used when assembling the facts so that all possible perspectives are included and that the conflicts are resolved in such a way that true facts are not eliminated or they are not unduly colored. When this point is reached the next and more important phase is at hand. How is this vast body of facts going to be used?

The Lewis and Clark Bicentennial started out to be a multi year immersion in the expedition's journey. Lewis and Clark buffs intended to visit locations along the expedition's trail, retell the story and show how the Corps of Discovery lived, worked, ate and what clothes they wore and equipment they used. Their bicentennial was limited in scope, appealing to those who were already interested in the story and hoping the site tours, talks and demonstrations would kindle interest in others. At that early point the bicentennial could be compared to the researcher gathering facts from part of the required sources. As the bicentennial planning continued, it grew to include other possible fact sources.

Collectively the bicentennial planning effort still needs to more fully explore fact sources then resolve fact conflicts and determine how these facts will be used. A tremendous opportunity is at hand for creating a legacy of this "essential part of our national character" by understanding and explaining why the expedition made its journey and the results of the journey. The final step on the bicentennial trail would be to figure out how the knowledge gained about this era can be used to improve today's society. That would be "a dream come true" for those who study history.