

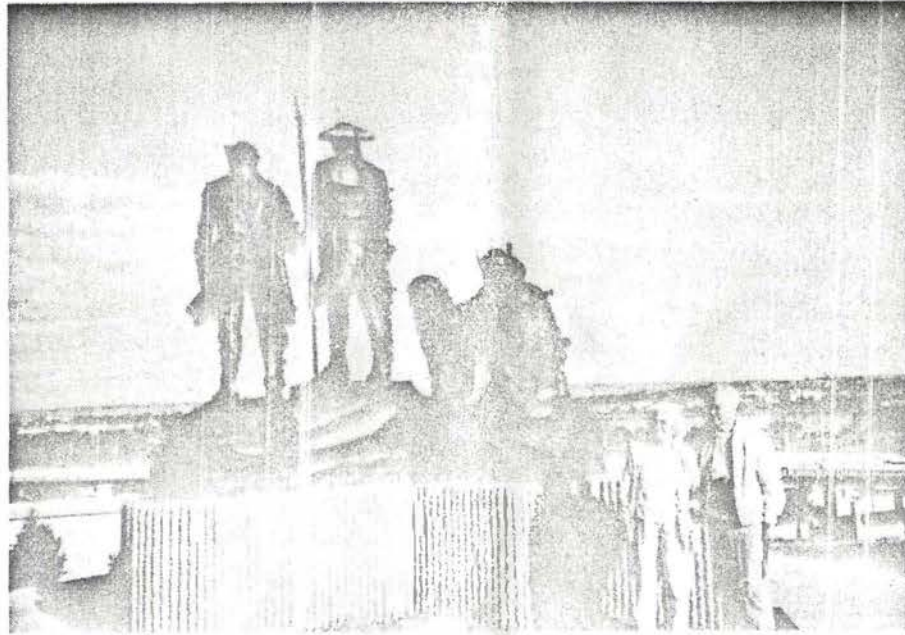
Lewis & Clark

The Voyage of Discovery

by Wesley and Elizabeth Walls

We stood in a special area in Great Falls, Montana where 184 years earlier Lewis and Clark and some thirty other members of their party made a heroic portage of sixteen miles around the great falls of the Missouri River. With a copy of the Journal of Lewis and Clark in hand we were able to reenact in our minds the activities of these men as they endured rain, hail, rattlesnakes, prickly pear cactus, grizzly bears and masses of roaming buffalo.

We recognized that we were beginning a new era of travel for us in our RV. Seventeen years ago my wife, Elizabeth, and I began RVing in a new 1973, 22' Winnebago Indian. We are now on our fourth RV, a 1987, 30' Pace Arrow and have travelled over most of Alaska, Canada and the Lower 48. In our travels, we have followed the usual books for



A lovely morning—Wednesday, Sept. 20, 1989—Wesley and Elizabeth pose before the Lewis and Clark monument with the Missouri River in the background at Great Falls, Montana.

guidance on interesting things to do and see, but we have now selected Western Trails as our travel theme and will explore the Lewis and Clark, Oregon and Santa Fe Trails.

Preparation for retracing the Lewis and Clark trail began by reading the eight volume set by Nicholas Biddle and a three volume set by Elliott Coues. We then secured a copy of the one

volume work by Bernard DeVoto which is excellent for carrying along. It enables you to follow the route almost mile by mile. We decided to divide the trail into four segments for our explorations—St. Louis to Fort Mandan (Bismark, North Dakota), Fort Mandan to Great Falls, Montana, Great Falls to Lewiston, Idaho and Lewiston to the coast. In September 1989, we retraced the route from Great Falls to Lewiston and in June 1990 from Fort Mandan to Great Falls. Exploration of the remaining segments are in the planning stage.

Captain Lewis was the first White Man to view the Great Falls of the Missouri in June, 1805. While in Ft. Mandan the previous winter, was informed by Indians living in the area, about the existence of the falls. They had ranged as far west as the Rockies in their hunting and raiding parties,

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PINNACLE and WINDJAMMER

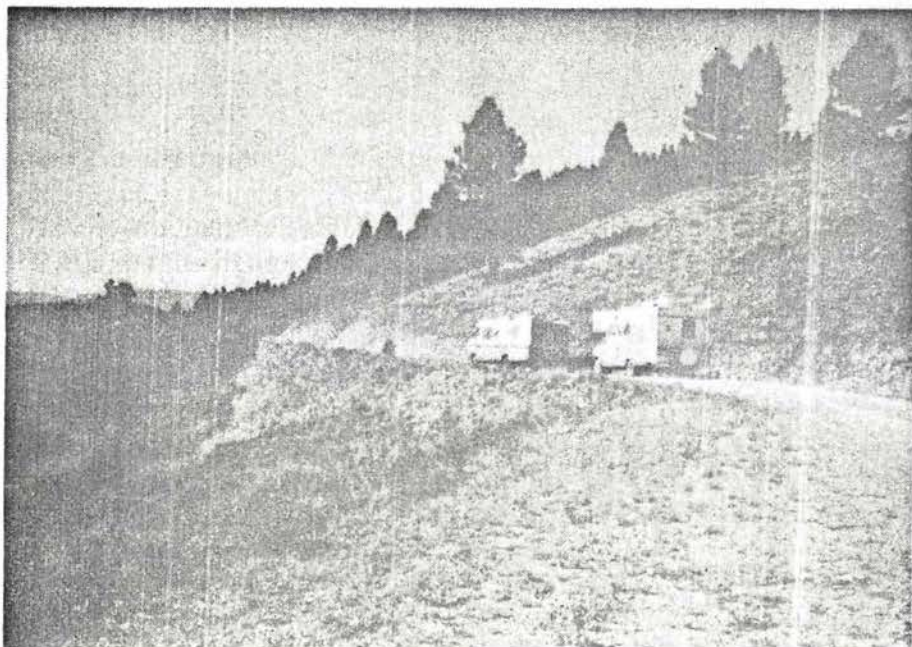
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and with this information Lewis prepared a rough draft of a map which was remarkably accurate as far west as the east edge of the Rockies but not beyond. When Lewis arrived at the falls he was overwhelmed by their beauty and expressed his awe in beautiful prose. The city of Great Falls has maintained a well kept drive along

the river through the city and we followed it closely in our RV.

To follow the Missouri River above Great Falls was remarkably easy since there is a well-maintained road which runs near the river for over forty miles. Sixty miles up the river (South) is a remarkable scene in which the broad Missouri is confined to a narrow passage between mountains "100 to 150 yards wide" according to Lewis. The scene is made all the more dramatic



Meeting traffic! A beautiful sky about noon.



Recreational vehicles just below Lemhi Pass.

because the cliffs rise some 1,500 feet on each side of the river. Lewis wrote on July 18, 1805, "from the singular appearance of this place I called it the gates of the rocky mountains." We left the highway 15 miles north of Helena and went approximately one mile to a marina where we took an excursion boat through the "Gates of the Mountains." tours leave the dock at least twice daily. The boat captain is well versed in Lewis and Clark lore and gives an excellent commentary.

We travelled road No. 287 south from Helena and after approximately fifty miles arrived at Three Forks. Here the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin Rivers meet to form the Missouri and we were then in an area rich in history. A fort and trading post was established at Three Forks within four years of the visit by Lewis and Clark but the Indians contested the White Man's presence

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and the post was deserted by 1810. John Colter and the Lewis and Clark party returned to trap beaver. Colter and a companion by the name of Potts were captured by the Indians. Potts was shot and Colter was given a sporting chance to live. He was stripped naked, including barefoot and given a 100 yard headstart. If he could out run the fastest Indian he could live. Colter sprinted directly through the prickly pear cactus and rough terrain, outran the Indians and turned up seven days later at an eastern outpost. His exploit became legend.

Secondary roads enable the RVer to explore this area thoroughly and there is an RV park at the Headwaters National Monument for overnight stops. We took an interesting side trip nearby to the Madison River Buffalo Jump, but the seven miles off the highway and the seven miles return trip rivaled the Alaska Highway in its earlier days so far as roughness was concerned.

From Three Forks we went far-



Elizabeth tries a drink of spring water at Sacajawea's camp.

ther south on roads 324, 55 and 41, following first the Jefferson then the Beaverhead rivers and eventually turned west to go up Horse Prairie Creek toward the Continental Divide. Along these roads we identified where Sacajawea was captured in 1800 and where she pointed out "Beaverhead Rock" a landmark for all Indians in the area.

But, now comes a challenge for the modern RV traveller. As you

turn west just south of Dillon, Montana, you are headed toward the Continental Divide at Lemhi Pass. We ascended on Montana 324 and descended on Idaho 13. This area is simultaneously the most difficult for a 30' RV, but the most exhilarating for the Lewis and Clark enthusiast. This is a twenty-four miles stretch of road from the valley of the Beaverhead on the east side of the divide into the valley on the west. The road is passable only in good, dry weather and the western descent includes a 12 degree (my estimate) grade. But this is the area where the party reached the ultimate source of the Missouri River system and it is a small spring known as Sacajawea Spring and is located about 200 yards from Lemhi Pass. Just over the pass and in the valley of the Lemhi River is where Lewis made contact with the Shoshone Indians and was able to secure horses to cross the Bitterroot Mountains. Lewis and Clark were aided in their bartering because Sacajawea recognized the chief, Cameahwait, as her brother. If you cross Lemhi pass (7,360 feet) in an RV it is an experience you will not forget.

The route turns north at the small town of Tendoy, Idaho and we followed road No. 28 and then No. 93. We passed the Salmon River which Lewis explored and found impassable either by water or by river bank. As the party proceeded north they became lost and again passed over the Continental Divide back into Montana near the present day town of Sula. A bitter winter was already starting September 14, 1805. We travelled this area a week later in 1989 and the weather was perfect and remained so for six weeks, but the winter of 1805-06 was horrendous.

When we arrived eight miles south of Missoula, Montana we were in the little town of Lolo. Here the party established camp and rested at a place they designated as Travellers Rest. A cairn now marks the spot. They turned west to go over the Indian Lolo Trail and entered the cold and dreary mountains. We travelled west on Highway No. 12 and at some places knew we were on the exact spot that Lewis and Clark camped. A notable example is the Lolo Hot Spring, a tourist attraction with a well maintained hot water swimming pool. Here the party was warm for a few hours—a respite from the cold winter weather. Lewis remarked, "I have been as wet and as cold in every part of my body as ever I was in my life." Later the party reached the Clearwater River, built seven dugout canoes and floated down to the Snake River and then to the Columbia, but with hardships at every turn.

The daily high adventure experienced by the Lewis and Clark expedition surpassed most modern adventure stories. With a reliable RV, the handy DeVoto copy of the Lewis and Clark Journal and a willingness to search out the byroads which do exist we were able to relive a segment of the Voyage of Discovery.

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