THE STORY FROM INDIAN COUNTRY:
What We Learned from the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial

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IT IS HARD TO REMEMBER a world without bicentennials. An entire generation has now passed since Queen Elizabeth II helped turn history on its head by touring Britain's former American colonies to help celebrate the two hundredth birthday of the United States. In ensuing years, we have celebrated birthdays of the Statue of Liberty, the Columbus voyages, the U.S. Constitution, the D-day landings, the Wright brothers' first flight, and founding events in cities and states across the continent. These occasions shared a central aspect of the 1976 original: a common commitment to "happy history." Aimed initially at fostering public patriotism and increasing attendance at museums and historic sites, American bicentennials and anniversaries have generally stressed the strength and courage of historical actors and credited them with making possible the prosperity and happiness of the present.

But the celebrations have not always come off smoothly. In the 1980s, the strongest words of dissent came from American Indians who began warning Christopher Columbus's fans and advocates that native peoples were not interested in celebrating his 1492 voyage. Nervous officials quickly scotched the idea of a 1992 world's fair in the U.S., and Italian-American and Spanish officials were routinely embarrassed by native delegations appearing at their parades and press conferences. By the time the quincentennial year rolled around, chastened promoters had renamed the 1992 events a "commemoration" and learned to forego the term "discovery," in favor of the more accurate term "encounter."

Given this history, anyone considering the prospect of a three-year bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition a decade ago would not have been optimistic. If the popularizers who supervised previous celebrations took charge, it seemed we would be in for another celebration of a national "mission accomplished." At the same time, the story of the Corps of Discovery promised to bring out dissenters who would surely remind celebrants that European expansion came at the cost of dispossessing Native Americans and bullying Mexico into giving up die northern third of its young country. A "happy history" commemoration-and a "tragic history" response-promised to open one more battle in the ongoing exchange of ignorance, resentment, and misunderstanding that Native American anthropologist D'Arcy McNickle once called "the Indian war that never ends." ¹

But remarkably, the Lewis and Clark bicentennial seems to have come off with barely a hitch. While promoted by boosters seeking tourist dollars more than new insights and leavened by a raft of goofy souvenirs, the 2004-2006 bicentennial seemed to generate almost none of the heat or fire of earlier commemorations. In the summer of 2004, one group of eager Lewis and Clark reenactors was shocked when Alex White Plume and a group of Sioux protestors met them as they put ashore near Chamberlain, South Dakota, but that brief confrontation seemed notable primarily because of its rarity. "Lewis and Clark brought the death and destruction of our way of life," White Plume told the reenactors. But unlike the partisans of Colonel George A. Custer or the American Indian Movement activists who occupied Mount Rushmore, these travelers were in no mood to fight. "We're not Lewis and Clark," one of them replied. "We are a group of volunteers." ²

WHY THE APPARENT peace and quiet? Three reasons come to mind. First, the location of most commemorations in the West and the presence there of dozens of modern tribal governments representing the descendants of people who interacted personally with the explorers created a structural reality.
previous Lewis and Clark commemorations lacked. This event was anchored in Indian country, and the presence of Indian people could not be denied. Moreover, the region's native communities survived the past two centuries of dispossession as well as the previous few decades of confrontation and cultural revival in part because they had developed an ability to speak for themselves and defend their view of the past. They were ready to speak up and they insisted on being heard. The membership of the bicentennial groups organized to plan and coordinate bicentennial events reflected this new structure.

From 1976 on, Congress or other governmental agencies authorized commissions to lead each major historical commemoration. These commissions rarely commanded the resources to sponsor activities of their own, but they exercised control over the entire celebration by stamping some events with their approval and discouraging others. Over time, the most effective commissions developed an ability to set an overall tone for the proceedings. This time around the National Council of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial played this oversight role. Organized originally by leaders of a private group, the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, the council joined forces with the National Park Service and several historical societies during the 1990s and received the endorsement of Congress in 1997. A year later, the council completed a complex set of agreements with the federal departments with jurisdiction over public lands and programs along the explorers' route, including the departments of the Interior, Transportation, and Defense. This governmental spadework likely elevated the importance of consultation and consensus in the bicentennial planning process. The desire for consensus was also spurred on by the fact that several Native American leaders were founding members of the National Council, and one of them, former Nez Perce tribal chair Alien Pinkham, quickly organized a Circle of Tribal Advisors to provide additional input. The Circle began meeting annually in 2000.

In addition to this national organization, most of the states containing Lewis and Clark sites within their borders organized their own bicentennial commissions. These groups also had significant Native American membership and took steps to include local tribal leaders in their planning for 2004-2006 (whether the tribes were relevant to the expedition or not). The Montana commission became perhaps the most active of these groups. The statute that established its twelve-member governing body mandated at least three Native American members from Montana tribes. The Montana group adopted an elaborate strategic plan in 1998 that included among its major goals, the creation of programs that "show sensitivity to all cultural perspectives." 

To demonstrate its commitment to these "cultural perspectives," the Montana commission and the University of Montana organized a national conference, "A Confluence of Cultures: Native Americans and the Expedition of Lewis and Clark," in May 2003. Noting that "any complete commemoration of the bicentennial must feature the perspectives of both the people native to the North American continent and President Jefferson's explorers," the conference sponsors drew several hundred participants for three days of lectures, panel discussions, and performances. The event not only provided a platform for a great many Native Americans who might not otherwise have been heard, but it offered organizers of local bicentennial events a well-timed trade fair of speakers, exhibitors, and performers who could be tapped for future events.

Second, because most major commemorative committees included representatives from tribal communities, Indian leaders had an incentive to organize local events that would appeal to a significant nonnative audience. The bicentennial provided an outlet for tribal entrepreneurs and educators who wanted to share their community's history and culture. While groups in many communities wanted nothing to do with the bicentennial, the anniversary came at a time of rising interest in heritage tourism and appealed to tribal administrators in a number of rapidly developing community institutions, including tribal colleges, tribal museums, and tourist bureaus. At the center of these community celebrations were ten "signature events" commemorating high points of the expedition. These events represented the National Council's effort to sponsor major gatherings that would bring together many of its key members.
Aimed at the general public, each of these activities offered a different group of local leaders an opportunity to explore the complex motives for-and reactions to-the expedition. While native people participated in all ten events, Indian communities sponsored three of them and two others focused primarily on Native American participation in the expedition.\(^4\)

Finally-and surprisingly-the bicentennial revealed that despite the many conflicts that punctuated relations between Indians and non-Indians over the previous three decades, the general public in the West-as well as in other parts of the country-was ready for a more nuanced view of American history. Of course, sales of Stephen Ambrose's simplistic and celebratory (but riveting) Undaunted Courage continued to generate envy among historians, but the turnout for bicentennial conferences and signature events suggested that average Americans welcomed other views as well.\(^5\) It is impossible at this early date to understand completely either the origins or the scale of this public curiosity, but it is nevertheless one of the most heartening aspects of the bicentennial.

One can only speculate about the origins of this new curiosity. With more than twenty years of the New Western History and the New Indian History behind us, it is likely that thousands of high school and middle school history teachers are now presenting multifaceted views of American and regional history to their students. Public confrontations involving historic sites or historians with controversial views often obscure the fact that the "products" of history classrooms-teachers, museum educators, librarians and their many supporters in local historical societies, Boy Scout troops, and service clubs-are steadily finding their way into communities. Textbooks, popular histories, and other publications also reflect this shift in tone. And for every highly publicized confrontation involving Native Americans and whites, there have likely been at least an equal number of situations resolved by negotiation, adaptation, and compromise. None of this renders conflict unimportant, but it does offer a reminder that shifts in public attitude or cultural climate don't occur in simple steps.

It is impossible to know how large the potential audience for new views of the past might be, but whatever its exact size and motivation, it is undeniable that bicentennial events drew many of these historical moderates. Their presence contributed a refreshing and unexpected dimension to the Lewis and Clark commemoration. Personally, I had several opportunities to speak at public events all along the Lewis and Clark trail during the bicentennial. I can report that the hostile questions and fearful stares that greeted me at similar venues twenty years ago seem to have been replaced by an interest in hearing new stories and new voices. The anniversary events seem to have reached an audience ready to hear its nuanced message. It will be interesting in the years to come for organizers to look back and determine whether these impressions were accurate or the product of wishful thinking.

THE BICENTENNIAL OFFERED historical lessons as well as cultural ones. In addition to the planning and broad participation, the bicentennial taught at least four new lessons about the expedition. Many of these lessons were not new to well-informed readers, but they were each "new" in that they complicated and undermined a "happy history" version of events.

First, the West in 1804 was an Indian country. When the Corps of Discovery moved up the Missouri River, the Americans did not pass through a wilderness inhabited by Indians. Instead, they entered a land filled with well-ordered communities. While not a country in the European sense, the region the Americans traversed two centuries ago was bound together by common values and customs. These communities made their living through a combination of farming, fishing, and hunting techniques developed to take advantage of the specific and varied environments in which they lived. They shared a deep respect for the Earth's creators, a keen sense of the environment and its products, a social ethic based on generosity and gift giving, a conviction that men and women contribute equally to the common good, and an appreciation of the importance of interdependence within a vast network of trade and diplomatic relationships.
In 1800, the Native American communities in the Indian country spreading across the Missouri and Columbia river drainages were prosperous and thriving. They knew how best to take advantage of the abundant natural resources around them and they traded for what they could not produce themselves. They used highly developed social structures to educate their children, care for their elderly, and prevent and resolve community conflicts. As Frederick Baker, an elder at Fort Berthold, commented, they didn't need schools, police, jails, and social workers, they had "a brilliant plan for living."

Webs of trade, alliance, and competition linked every corner of the Indian country. Horses first brought to the Americas by the Spanish were bred and traded from the Columbia Plateau to the Missouri River. Steel tools and glass beads from Europe came up the Missouri and the Columbia and south from Lake Winnipeg, passing on to trading partners in more remote areas. Other groups jostled for space: Sioux bands moved west, Arikaras moved north, Shoshones moved south, and farming and trading villages along the Missouri and Columbia struggled to maintain their independence and their standing in the marketplace. This was not a land without conflict. All groups sought allies to help them avoid rivals. But no single power dominated the region; it was governed instead by overlapping networks of trade, travel, and diplomacy.

Second, the bicentennial taught that Indians were essential to the success of the U.S. expedition. Most of the people Lewis and Clark encountered on their journey were allies: suppliers, protectors, guides, and advisors. The expedition would have failed if the Americans had tried to manage alone. It is clear from expedition journals as well as from an analysis of several specific encounters that Indians provided vital assistance and saved the Americans from certain death several times on the two-year trip. Here are brief examples:

The Corps spent the winter of 1804-1805 near the Mandan and Hidatsa settlements on the upper Missouri. They did not bring food with them for the winter. They traded metal tools for corn from these farming tribes. Had they been cut off from those tribes’ granaries, they would likely not have survived the winter or would have faced the renewal of their journey in the spring in a dramatically weakened state. 6

By the fall of 1805, the Americans had traveled to the headwaters of the Missouri on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains. When they reached Lemhi Pass in what is now southern Idaho, they saw before them not a valley leading to the sea, but dozens of new mountain ranges. Their Shoshone guide, Toby, told them of a trail running west, but they were unsure of its location and of their ability to overcome this barrier with their worn-out horses. That moment of despair was saved by the arrival of a Salish hunting party. Clark reported buying eleven "elegant" horses from the Salish in exchange for seven of the group's ponies and "a few articles of merchandise." Sergeant John Ordway noted that they now had "40 good pack horses." He added that the Salish were "the likeliest and honestest Indians" encountered on the journey. The Salish horses enabled them to cross the Lolo Trail. 7

Although the Corps received fresh directions and new mounts from the Salish, the following weeks were marked by disappearing trails, diminishing food supplies, and worsening weather. On September 17, Clark and a few men set out to search for food. Three days later his small group suddenly found themselves in "level pine country." They had arrived at Weippe Prairie, a camas-root digging site visited each fall by Nez Perces and other Indians. Clark saw three young boys and gave them presents. Soon a man came to greet them and take them to a "large spacious lodge," where, Clark reported, "great numbers of women gathered around me with much apparent signs of fear." They were served "buffalo meat, dried salmon, berries, and roots in different states." Luckily, the expedition had encountered another group interested in forging alliances with strangers. Nez Perce leaders welcomed the cold and starving Americans, helped them with the construction of canoes, refilled their food stores, and guided them downriver to the Columbia. 8
Other examples of the Americans being drawn into supportive native networks fueled by generosity and the ethic of reciprocity abound. Despite the captains' complaints, the coastal Salish communities helped them through the coming winter. The following spring the Nez Perces hosted them as they waited for the Bitterroot passes to open and accompanied them over the mountains. And the following fall, the Mandans and Hidatsas once again offered the Americans a supply base and a cadre of steady allies.

Historians can debate how significant a role each of these examples played in the expedition's success, but there can be no doubt that the explorers did not see themselves as solitary heroes. They talked their way west, negotiating past tough adversaries like the Sioux, gathering knowledge from allies like the Mandans, and eagerly seeking the help of Shoshone, Salish, Chinook, and Nez Perce leaders. It was collaboration that brought them success.

The third historical lesson the bicentennial taught was that for many Indian communities, the journey marked the starting point of a relationship with the United States. The biggest gap in understanding between natives and nonnatives with regard to the expedition is that white people often see the journey as an isolated, distant event while Indians inevitably see it as the prelude to a program of conquest.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition was not an isolated scientific reconnaissance; it was instead the opening gambit in an American campaign to establish sovereignty over the western half of the continent. Implicit in that campaign was a desire to incorporate native peoples into the web of American power. President Jefferson wanted to gain access to the lucrative fur trade and to bolster his country's claim to the Missouri drainage by putting "boots on the ground" and forming alliances with the tribal leaders not already pledged to Britain or Spain.

Academic historians can argue logically that Lewis and Clark could not foresee the future, but for modern Indian leaders, the link from the Corps of Discovery to the larger process of dispossession that unfolded over the remainder of the nineteenth century is clear. At first, of course, despite its impact on the fur trade and contribution to the arms race then underway among tribes, the expedition did little to expand the official American presence in the Indian country. After all, the Corps of Discovery failed to find an easy route to the Pacific and few people wanted to follow their difficult path. But the expedition brought the vast western landscape into the consciousness of American leaders and described and documented a vast new territory that seemed ready for national expansion.

West of the Missouri River that expansion began gradually, but the pace of change increased as the century progressed. A profitable fur trade encouraged outposts and new settlements. After 1850, gold rushes in California, Montana, and Oregon built those remote settlements into towns. Over time, open land attracted settlers. The coming of the railroads completed the transformation of the region: the first railroad to link Chicago to the Mississippi opened in 1854 and the first transcontinental route began operation in 1869. By century's end, Americans had a new name for the Indian country. They now called it "the West." This process was not a peaceful one; rather it was punctuated by displacement, violence, and military conflict. Bringing Indian people and their stories into the process of remembering the Lewis and Clark Expedition made the journey's aftermath an inescapable part of the commemoration.

Finally, as a consequence of bringing Indian people more fully into the story and by making native participation a routine element in the commemoration, the bicentennial taught the public one further lesson: the Indian country traversed by the explorers is not an imaginary creation but is rather a permanent part of the American landscape. Today, Native Americans living in the lands visited by the Corps of Discovery belong to two nations. They are American citizens working in their communities, paying taxes, sending their young people to serve in the military, and speaking out on public issues. But these people also belong to sovereign Indian nations that view their homelands as part of a country that
demands a different kind of loyalty and service. Modern tribes exercise many governmental powers. Through the efforts of Native American leaders, reforms within the federal government, and civil rights struggles in many western communities, Native Americans have won recognition for their legal and constitutional rights. Across the West, Indians vote, hold office, and participate in every aspect of community life. Indian people are proud to live in the United States, but they are also determined to sustain the values and practices of their ancestors.

BECAUSE THEY specialize in critical thinking, historians are usually more comfortable with criticism than they are with praise. Popular culture only deepens this tendency. We seem at times to live in a nation in which everything is for sale and where public figures of all kinds are inevitably sucked into a black hole of hucksterism and spin. This context makes the commemoration of the Lewis and Clark bicentennial all the more remarkable. It was a small, largely regional event, but it demonstrated that collaboration between groups with differing points of view is possible and that this collaboration can produce an atmosphere in which history can be viewed as a conversation rather than a sermon. This linkage between collaboration and new ideas is the central lesson of the bicentennial. Giving everyone their say and building bridges between groups not only contributes to social peace, but it creates an atmosphere in which people are prepared to listen to one another and consider alternative points of view. The history of the United States is complicated; it is filled with conflict, violence, and tragedy as well as with noble dreams, understanding, and comedy. In the past, celebrations of historical events have missed that fact. In the wake of the Lewis and Clark commemorations, it seems that the public can learn about a complex event. But that occurred only after Americans stopped repeating old truisms and began listening to one other.

1. D’Arcy McNickle. They Came Here First: The Epic of the American Indian. (New York, 1973)


3. See the group’s web site, www.montanalewisandclark.org, for the complete text of the strategic plan.

4. For a listing of the ten “signature events,” see http://www.nps.gov/lecl/CorpsII/events.htm (Ed note: The events list is no longer available, but the web site http://nps.gov/lecl still contains much information.)


6. The case for these examples is generally made in James Ronda’s classic Lewis and Clark Among the Indians. (Lincoln, Nebr., 1984)


8. William Clark, September 20, 1805, entry, ibid., 5:207.