"Captain Lewis Arriving at the Great Falls of the Missouri—June 13, 1805"
36" x 60" oil on canvas

Lewis and Clark in Montana

The Corps of Discovery's amazing journey through Big Sky Country

By Dayton Duncan

Paintings by Charles Fritz

Composition of Lewis and Clark artifacts: Lewis's watch, Clark's watch fob compass, Lewis's telescope, and two of Clark's journals.
MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES

EDITOR'S NOTE: In April 1805, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and the Corps of Discovery entered what is today Montana. Over the next five months, they traveled up the Missouri and Jefferson rivers and along the Bitter-root Mountains, making some of the most significant discoveries of their epic adventure. The following year, the explorers returned through Montana on the way back to Washington, D.C., to report to the anxious president who commissioned their journey. Now, two hundred years later, the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial is underway. Over the next two years, *Montana Outdoors* will feature a series of articles commemorating the monumental journey and its significance to Montana's fish, wildlife, and parks.

NO PLACE CLAIMS MORE of the Lewis and Clark trail than Montana. In their epic expedition across the continent searching for the Northwest Passage on behalf of President Thomas Jefferson, the Corps of Discovery covered more miles within Montana than in any other state. Montana is where they saw more grizzly bears than other human beings; where they gorged themselves on buffalo meat (9 pounds a man per day) and where they ran out of whiskey; where they were battered to the ground by hailstones and wore out a pair of moccasins every two days crossing the rugged terrain; where they simultaneously sweltered in 90 degree heat and beheld their first snow in midsummer.

Montana constantly beguiled them with what Lewis called "seens of visionary inchantment." And it just as constantly challenged them with yawning distances, frustrating delays, and unexpected obstacles.

True, it wasn't the crossing and re-crossing of Montana that earned the Lewis and Clark Expedition its place in the nation's memory; it was the crossing and re-crossing of the entire West. But if it hadn't been for Montana, there'd be much less worth remembering.

At the Confluence of the Marias and the Missouri Rivers

Standing here now, where the Marias River joins the Missouri near the town of Loma, it's difficult to imagine that this spot presented Lewis and Clark with one of their severest tests—as both explorers and commanders. They had no Rand McNally Atlas to guide them through Montana's vastness, only some advice the Hidatsa Indians had given them the previous winter in North Dakota, lines drawn on a dirt floor with mounds of earth to show the terrain. And here, in early June, was a major fork they hadn't been told about. But which fork would lead them to the magnificent waterfalls the Hidatsas had described, and beyond that, to the Missouri's headwaters and the fabled Northwest Passage? Everyone realized that making the wrong choice might doom the expedition. Which one? Without map or native advice, they camped to ponder the dilemma. "Our cogitating faculties [have] been busily employed all day," Lewis noted in his journal.

The northern fork was muddy, just as the river had been all the way from St. Louis. Led by Pierre Cruzatte, the expedition's most experienced boatman, all the men concluded it must be the true Missouri. But Lewis and Clark thought otherwise. The southern fork, though wider, was shallower, clearer, swifter, with a rockier streambed—more like a mountain stream, they reasoned, and therefore the one to follow.

For a week they delayed here. Scouting parties probed up each fork, searching for any conclusive evidence that might settle the matter. Nothing. The men still preferred the northern fork, even after Lewis named it "Maria's River," for a cousin in Virginia. The two captains still preferred the southern fork, and on June 9 gave the order to take it.

Four days later, pushing ahead of the main party, Lewis surveyed "the grandest sight I ever beheld"—the mighty cataract of the Great Falls, proof that he and Clark had been right. The captains' "cogitating faculties" were never questioned again.

On the Missouri River Past the Great Falls

The delay at the Marias had been followed by another setback: Portaging around the Great Falls had consumed a month of exhausting labor, not the half-day the captains had originally planned. By July 16, the expedition was far behind schedule. Instead of nearing the Pacific as they had once hoped, the explorers were still on the seemingly endless Missouri, moving south past what is now the town of Cascade.

But tantalizingly hopeful signs greeted them as well. The river seemed to be leading them into the mountains at last. Perhaps the Northwest Passage was just around the next bend. On the same day, they came across 40 small, vacant shelters made of willows, a recently abandoned camp of the Shoshones, the tribe whose horses they would need to cross the mountains. Lewis hurried ahead to find them.

Yet, in the midst of this building tension between impatience and excitement, the explorers also focused on more mundane matters. John Ordway mentions hiking back 4 miles to recover an axe he had forgotten at the last campsite. Patrick Gass notes the many islands in the stream and the dark rock in the mountains just ahead. Joseph Whitehouse records sighting large buffalo herds and covering 20 miles before stopping. Clark seems impressed by the profusion of shrubs and bushes—and manages to spell the word "berry" three different ways in the same sentence.

For Lewis, July 16 was bracketed by two notable moments. Breakfast, he writes, was "the first time I ate of the small guts of the buffaloe cooked over a blazing fire in the Indian stile without any preperation of washing or other clensing and found them very good." And when he made camp at the end of the day of scouting, he discovered to his dismay that his mosquito netting was back with the main party. That night the bugs ate him alive. "Of course suffered considerably," Lewis concludes his journal entry, "and promised in my wrath that I never will be guilty of a similar peice of negligence while on this voyage."

At the Three Forks of the Missouri

On July 27, the mighty river the Corps of Discovery had been following for 14 agonizing months branched into what Lewis called three "noble streams," all of them issuing from mountains in the dis-

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The paintings by Billings artist Charles Fritz are part of his current traveling exhibit and companion book, An Artist with the Corps of Discovery, *published by Farcountry Press.*

"Low Light at the Three Forks—July 28, 1805"
36" x 42" oil on canvas

William Clark's elkskin-bound field journal, closed.

DAVID SCHULTZ, 1997. MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES

tance and joining here to form the Missouri, near what is now the town of Three Forks.

Lewis considered it "an essential point in the geography of this western part of the Continent" and climbed a limestone outcropping to survey the region. Spread out before him, like a verdant bowl ringed by snow-capped ramparts, was a vast plain of green meadows ("one of the best winter pastures on earth," he predicted), watered by meandering ribbons of rivers that sparkled in the sun.

The captains named the southeastern fork the Gallatin, after Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, and the middle fork the Madison, for Secretary of State James Madison. The western stream—the one they hoped would lead them to the Northwest Passage—they named the Jefferson, "in honor of that illustrious personage Thomas Jefferson, the author of our enterprise."

The Three Forks was already an "essential point" in one expedition member's life. Five years earlier, the Lemhi Shoshones had been camped here when the Hidatsas attacked, killed a number of people, and carried off some captives, including young Sacagawea, who was now re-entering her homeland for the first time since her abduction. In the years following the expedition, this same spot would become equally essential to the fates of three other members. George Drouillard and John Potts, returning here as fur trappers, would be killed by the Blackfeet. John Colter, meanwhile, would narrowly escape a similar death by embarking on the 200-mile, barefoot-and-naked run that still ranks him as legendary among American mountain men.

Beaverhead Rock

Beyond the Three Forks, the Jefferson itself divided into smaller streams, each one swifter, shallower, and harder to ascend. The explorers had to wade in ice-cold water to drag and push their cumbersome dugouts against the current. Bruises, sprains, cramps, dislocated shoulders, and legions of unrelenting mosquitoes plagued the men as they struggled forward. "Men much fatigued" became a constant refrain in the journals. Compounding the misery was an undercurrent of despair: There was still no sign of the Shoshones and their horses. "If we do not find them," Lewis confided in his journal, "I fear the successful issue of our voyage will be very doubtful."

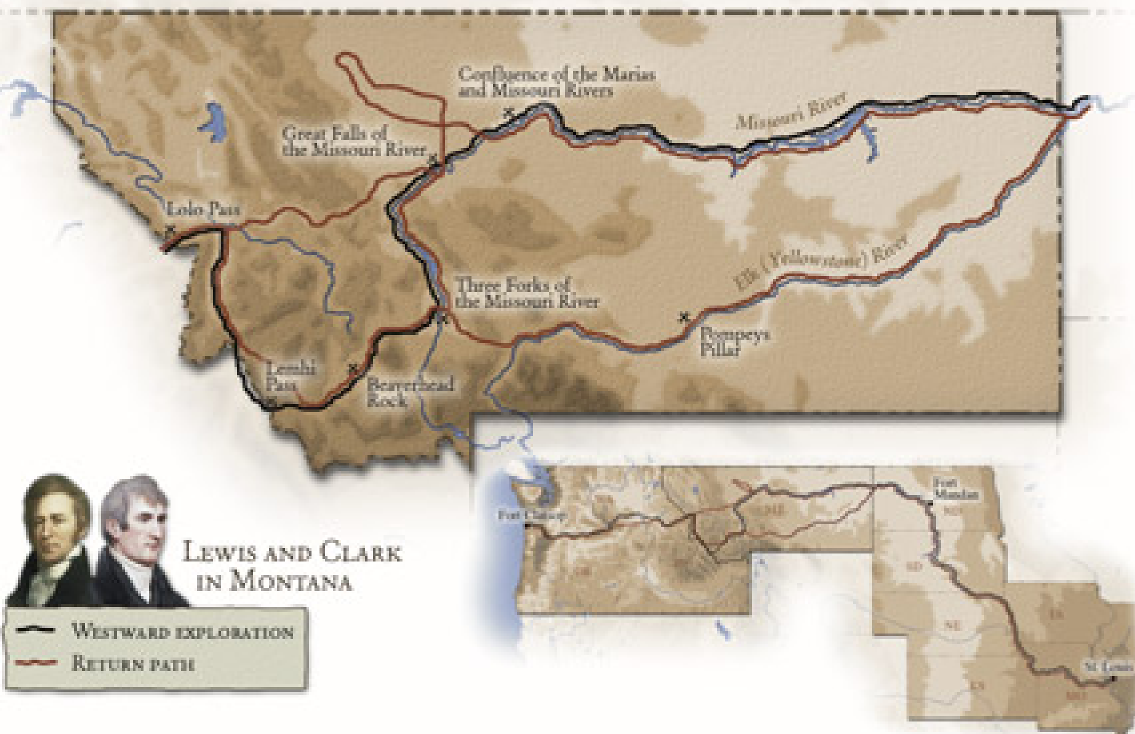
Then, on August 9, just north of modern-day Dillon, Sacagawea pointed to an outcropping ahead that seemed to emerge from the swampy meadows and nose its way upstream. Beaverhead Rock, she said the Shoshones called it; they were nearing the headwaters of the Missouri and her people's homeland. The news briefly revived the lagging spirits of the tired men.

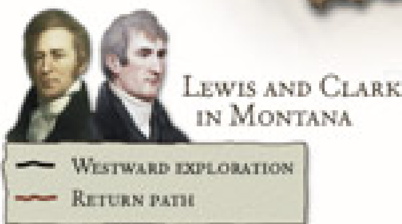
Lewis decided it was time for action. That evening, he wrote in his journal, "I determined to proceed [ahead] tomorrow with a small party to the source of this river and pass the mountains to the Columbia." Regardless of the risk or the time it might take, he promised himself, he was going to find the Northwest Passage and the Indians to help the expedition cross it. Early the next morning Lewis wrote out instructions for Clark, in case he never returned. Immediately after breakfast, he slung his pack on his back and set off on foot with three men, leaving Beaverhead Rock and his other comrades behind.

The Corps of Discovery entered what is today Montana on April 25, 1805. Expedition members traveled up the Missouri, portaging around the Great Falls, to the Three Forks. From there they headed up the Jefferson to the Beaverhead, crossed Lemhi Pass into today's Idaho, returned to Montana and traveled down the Bitterroot, then crossed into Idaho again at Lolo Pass before reaching the Columbia and, finally, the Pacific Ocean.

On the return voyage, the expedition split into two groups at Montana. Clark led his men up the Bitterroot River, past Three Forks to the Yellowstone (then called the Elk), while Lewis traveled up the Blackfoot River, over the Continental Divide, up the Marias, then back to the Missouri. The two friends reunited on August 12, 1806, near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone.

MONTANA OUTDOORS





"Sunset on Lemhi Pass—August 12, 1805"
6" x 12" oil on board

On Lemhi Pass

No one knows precisely when the myth of a Northwest Passage was born: the great dream of an easy water route to the Orient and its riches. Columbus was pursuing it when he bumped into North America. Spanish conquistadors combing the Southwest brought along the makings of sail and mast, convinced they might find it in the deserts. French voyageurs hoped to discover it over each horizon. On behalf of Great Britain, Alexander Mackenzie crossed Canada twice in a vain search for it.

But we do know exactly where and when the dream of the passage was dealt its death blow. It was here, at Lemhi Pass, southwest of Dillon on the Montana–Idaho border, on August 12, 1805.

Lewis's desperate search for the Shoshones had led him and his three men along a small creek toward a gentle rise to the west. Hugh McNeal paused briefly to straddle the stream with his feet and "thanked his god," Lewis wrote, that he had "lived to bestride the heretofore deemed endless Missouri." They stopped again to drink from a small spring—"the most distant fountain" of the Missouri, according to Lewis—and then hurriedly ascended to the ridgeline of the Continental Divide. No American citizen had ever been there before.

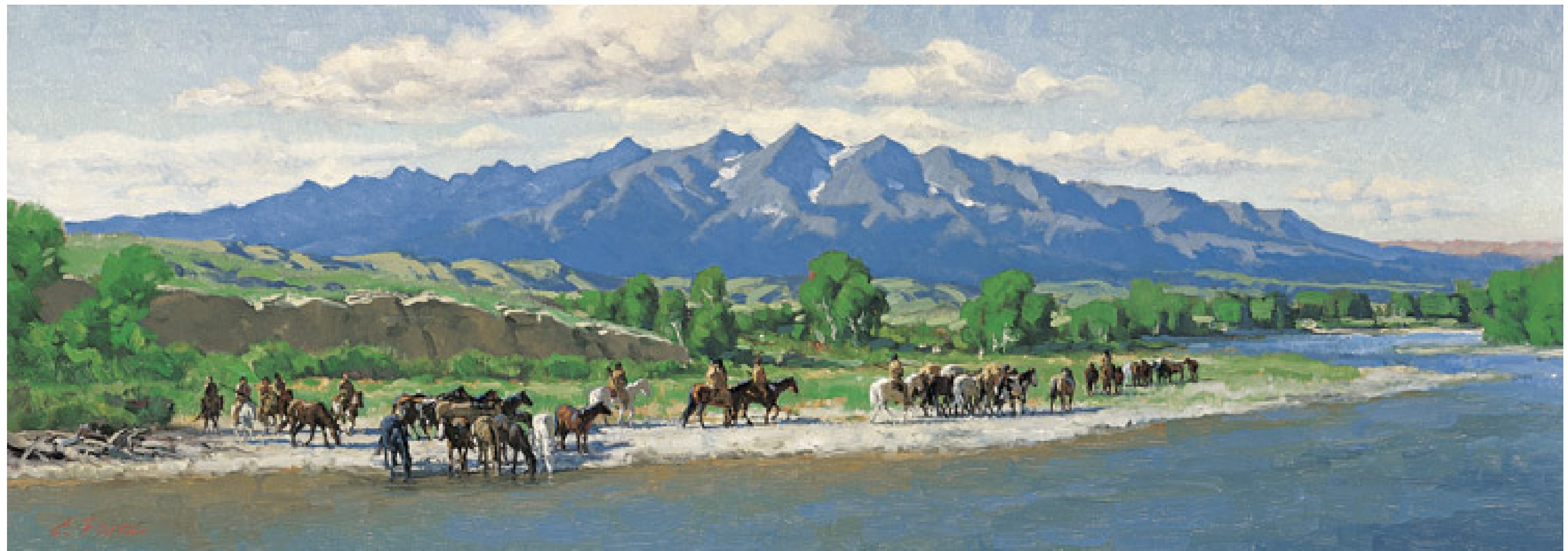
All of geography and science had prepared Lewis to expect to see a vast plain on the other side with another big river flowing through it, just a short portage connecting the Missouri with the Columbia, the Atlantic with the Pacific. What he saw instead were more mountains: "immence ranges of high mountains still to the West of us, with their tops partially covered with snow."

If the view seems pleasantly scenic today, put yourself in Lewis's moccasins. Those mountains—where mountains weren't supposed to exist—meant he would have some unwelcome news to report to

Shipmaster's-type telescope with collapsible brass and wood-and-leather sections, made by William Cary, London, ca. 1802, owned by Meriwether Lewis.

DAVID SCHULTZ, MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS

President Jefferson about the Northwest Passage. Even worse, in order to deliver that unhappy report, he would have to cross those mountains twice—going west and returning east. Patrick Gass described them best. They were, he wrote simply, "the most terrible mountains I ever beheld."



"Captain Clark Descending Elk River" 10" x 28" oil on board

Lewis on the Marias River

In order to explore more of the Louisiana Territory on the return trip from the Pacific, the captains divided their party when they returned to Montana in July 1806. Lewis took three men up the Blackfoot River and over the divide to reconnoiter the upper reaches of the Marias River, presumably the northern boundary of the new Louisiana Territory. On July 26, 1806, as the group made their way along Two Medicine Creek, south of modern-day Cut Bank, they unexpectedly encountered eight Blackfeet warriors.

Both sides warily approached each other. Lewis offered some handkerchiefs, flags, and a peace medal (with Jefferson's likeness embossed on one side, two hands shaking in friendship on the other). Communicating through sign language, the two groups finally decided to camp together near the river.

At dawn on July 27, Lewis was awakened by the sounds of a struggle. The Indians had been caught trying to steal the explorers' guns and horses, and in the ensuing hand-to-hand fighting one of the Blackfeet was stabbed to death. A second warrior was shot by Lewis. It was the only time the Corps of Discovery fired its guns in anger.

As the six other Blackfeet galloped north to alert their tribe, Lewis and his men prepared to flee south, toward the Missouri and the safety of the canoes. Before he departed, Lewis reclaimed his flag, but on one of the dead warriors he purposefully left the peace medal "that they might be informed who we were." A portent, perhaps, of the future.

Captain Clark's elkskin-bound journal, open to undated entry of December 1805. Clark Family Collection. William Clark Papers.

CARY HORTON, MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES

Clark at Pompy's Tower on the Yellowstone

While Lewis explored the Marias, Clark's group crossed what is now Bozeman Pass and headed down the Yellowstone River, which local Indians called the Elk, in two dugouts. Once again, the Great Plains astonished the expedition members. Grasshoppers had "destroyed every sprig of grass for miles," Clark noted. A buffalo herd forced them to stop for hours while the animals crossed the river in front of the canoes. Elk were so abundant that one day the crew traveled 73 miles and noted "we have not been out of sight of them."

On July 25, 1806, east of present-day Billings, they reached a solitary sandstone formation overlooking the Yellowstone. Clark clambered to its top for a dramatic view downriver and then pondered what to name this remarkable landmark. Over the previous year and a half, the captain had grown increasingly fond of Sacagawea's infant son, Jean Baptiste, the "little dancing boy" whom he nicknamed Pomp. In the child's honor, the big rock was christened Pompy's Tower (now Pompeys Pillar) and a nearby stream, Baptiste Creek.

And near some Indian pictographs, Clark inscribed his own name and the date in the soft stone of the outcropping. It's still there, preserving the tender memory of a rugged explorer and his fatherly affection for a little Indian boy—the only physical evidence the Corps of Discovery left on the landscape that survives to this day.

"Pompy's Tower—July 25, 1806" 30" x 36" oil on canvas