



INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK





AERIAL VIEW OF MISSOURI HEADWATERS STATE PARK BY CHUCK HANEY



Tracing Lewis and Clark

through Montana's State Parks

DURING THE SUMMERS of 1805 and 1806, the natural kaleidoscope of what is today Montana spread its ever-shifting, multi-hued frames before the men of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Moving through this region on their route to and from the Pacific Ocean, the Corps of Discovery came upon vast natural wonders, reached the source of the Missouri River, and met various tribes of Indians who contributed to the journey's success.

Modern-day travelers looking to retrace the explorers' steps need venture no further than Montana's state parks system. There,

At these historic state sites, visitors can see what the expedition members saw and learn what further adventures awaited them around the bend

By Ellen Baumler



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visitors can learn from interpretive specialists about the many hardships endured by the Corps, view river valleys and plains little changed from two centuries ago, and gain a richer understanding of the expedition's significance—both to the nation's westward expansion and the Indian people who populated the region for centuries before Lewis and Clark arrived.

Giant Springs State Park makes an excellent starting point for a 21st-century tour of Lewis and Clark's travel sites. Here, massive springs gush forth in a lush, oasis-like setting on the east bank of the Missouri River, just outside of Great Falls. Within a few miles of the springs are five waterfalls that delayed the expedition's journey (forcing an 18-mile portage) and for years afterwards defined the upstream navigational endpoint of the Missouri at Fort Benton. Today four of the falls are dammed, harnessed for hydroelectric power; only Crooked Falls remains similar to what the men of the expedition saw.

Giant Springs itself is also largely unchanged. Lewis and Clark were the first to record these freshwater springs, some of world's largest. They bubble forth as cold and clear today as they did on June 18, 1805, when William Clark came upon "...the largest fountain or Spring I ever Saw," which "...boils up from under the

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rocks near the edge of the river."

Meriwether Lewis, too, was amazed when he first visited the springs, noting in the expedition's journals that "the water of this fountain is extremely transparent and cold; nor is it impregnated with lime or any other extraneous matter."

Giant Springs produces so much water—156 million gallons each day—that the 58 feet from there to the Missouri is considered a river in itself (the North Fork Roe River, as it is called, has been recognized in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the shortest river in the world).

"That abundant output," says park manager Dan Smith, "is why it's not just called Big Springs but *Giant Springs*." The springs are so important and impressive they make up part of the Great Falls Portage National Historic Landmark.

The aquamarine waters that today enthrall visitors at the park could have been rain that fell when the Corps of Discovery passed through. Carbon dating, according to some experts, suggests that the spring water has been underground for 3,000 years before it emerges again to the light. Others scientists more cautiously say it takes just a century for the water to filter through underground fissures 600 feet deep in Madison limestone before reaching the surface.

The 830-acre Giant Springs State Park is home to mule deer, foxes, and coyotes, and it's a bird watcher's paradise besides. In what is now the Great Falls area, Lewis saw and recorded brown-headed cowbirds, com-

mon nighthawks, turtle doves, pigeons, sharp-tailed grouse, and long-billed curlews. It was in this vicinity that he first saw and described the yellow-breasted western meadowlark, which later became Montana's state bird.

According to Smith, a visitor can learn as much about the Lewis and Clark journey at this state park as anywhere else along the explorers' route. In addition to the famous springs and historic interpretive displays, the park has 9 miles of trails that likely follow portions of the actual paths taken by Lewis and Clark. Visitors will also want to stop by the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center, located within park property near the entrance. The center is packed with engaging interpretive displays that provide a memorable glimpse into the early 19th-century adventure.

From Great Falls, a visitor can follow the same route the Corps took up the Missouri. Interstate 15 parallels the river for 50 miles before veering off at the canyon Lewis dubbed the "Gates of the Mountains." Farther upstream from that site, on July 21, Lewis and most of the men paddled their eight heavily laden dugout canoes into what is now Townsend Valley, south of Helena. Both Lewis and Sergeant Patrick Gass noted in their journals the stunning crimson bluffs outside present-day Townsend. As the party continued south, Clark mapped the area and later penned a name for a group of islands, calling them "Yorks 8 Islands" after his



CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM



PHIL FARNES



PAUL F. UPDIKE

WATER PARKS Corps members made their journey mostly by water, an element visitors will find in abundance at many state sites commemorating the expedition. Far and above left: Visitors at Giant Springs State Park can see the same pristine waters that so impressed Captains Clark and Lewis. At York's Islands (left), an angler fishes where Corps members paddled as they made their way upstream to what is today Missouri Headwaters State Park (above).

in the geography of this western part of the Continent.” He and Clark agreed to name the three rivers the Jefferson, the Gallatin, and the Madison, after President Thomas Jefferson, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, and Secretary of State James Madison.

The Corps made several other less spectacular finds at the Missouri headwaters. Lewis noted a new kind of black gooseberry, needle and thread grass, and globe cactus. Captain Clark commented on the great quantity and variety of mountain currants and other berries. Sandhill cranes live in the wet meadows along the rivers, and the Corps captured a live specimen while camped there.

Though the captains gave the three rivers their English names, the waters had long been named by the Crow Indians, and the Salish already called the area “The Place of Many Rivers.” Dyani Bingham, who is of Blackfeet, Assiniboine, and Metis Indian descent, points out that much of what the expedition “discovered” had in fact been long known to Native Americans along the route.

“It was a voyage of discovery only for expedition members and Americans back East,” says Bingham, coordinator for the Montana Tribal Tourism Alliance. “But for the people already living here, Lewis and

Clark didn’t find anything new at all.”

Archeological research has shown that Indians had been visiting the headwaters area for hundreds—perhaps thousands—of years before the expedition arrived. They made tools from stone quarried from an ancient site a short distance downstream from the three forks of the Missouri. Pacific shells and exotic obsidian found in the area indicate early prehistoric trade over a surprisingly wide geographic area. Familiar to generations of Crow, Blackfeet, Salish, Nez Perce, Shoshone, and other tribes, the three forks area was an ancient meeting place for Indian hunting parties and also for early European trappers. Its strategic location made the area highly contested and a place of enduring conflict.

It was there, five years before the expedition arrived, that a Hidatsa raiding party came upon Sacagawea’s people, killed a number of them, and took the rest prisoner—including the young woman who later acted as an interpreter for the Corps.

The site has further significance. After the expedition, Corps members John Colter and John Potts returned to the headwaters area to trap beaver. A band of Blackfeet attacked the pair in retaliation for a previous skirmish in which Colter sided with the Crows against the Blackfeet. They killed Potts outright but allowed Colter a chance, though slim, to survive. They stripped him naked, took his weapons, and gave him a 200-yard head start. Colter’s five-mile run to safety that began at the headwaters is one of Montana’s best-known stories.

Missouri Headwaters State Park was established in 1947 to protect the site where these and other historic episodes took place. The park is part of a larger designated National Historic Landmark, significant for its strategic location, long history to Indians, and importance in the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

The 560-acre state park comprises the lowlands where the rivers join. It offers picnic sites, a small campground, and hiking trails but is otherwise undeveloped, providing a sense of what conditions were like when the expedition camped here July 27–30, 1805.

To help visitors understand the site’s significance, FWP has provided interpretive signs, an on-site interpretive specialist, and

slave (who was also a childhood companion and gun-carrying, full-fledged member of the expedition).

Troy Helmick, of the Crimson Bluffs Chapter of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, says that Clark’s cartography uncannily matches modern-day maps. “It’s remarkable how he could have drawn it just having passed by there,” Helmick notes. Visitors can view what are now called York’s Islands at an FWP fishing access site off U.S. Highway 287 south of Townsend.

Soon after leaving the islands, the Corps of Discovery reached the three rivers that join to form the Missouri River, one of the goals set forth by President Thomas Jefferson (the primary goal was to find the Northwest Passage that would link, by water, the East Coast to the West). On July 27, 1805, Meriwether Lewis climbed a limestone cliff overlooking the sweeping plains and meadows ringed by lofty mountains. There, at what is today Missouri Headwaters State Park, he looked down on what he later described as “an essential point



W. STEVE SHERMAN

FAMILIAR FACE Beaverhead Rock State Park, near Twin Bridges, commemorates and conserves the landmark that Sacagawea recognized as part of her home territory.

audio recordings that tell the stories of Indians, settlers, and Corps members who lived there or traveled through the area.

The Indian perspective is one that park manager Ray Heagney urges visitors to acknowledge and understand. "This site is a tapestry of Native American cultures," he says. "Over hundreds of years, dozens of tribes and bands camped here, hunted here, and fought here."

Heagney says learning about Lewis and Clark's historic visit to the headwaters can spark interest among park visitors into other historic travels. "There are plenty of spirits at Headwaters," he says. "And what you can learn from Lewis and Clark is that there is much more to the story."

From the Missouri River headwaters, the Corps carried on south up the Jefferson to the Beaverhead River, where another state park is today located. On August 8, 1805, Sacagawea recognized her home by the landmark Beaverhead Rock, and the Corps hoped to soon meet members of her tribe. Visitors driving along Highway 41 between Twin Bridges and Dillon can't miss this natural rock formation (now Beaverhead Rock State Park), which looks like the head of a swimming beaver.

A few days later, Clark climbed a high hill nearby, took compass readings, and sketched a map of the Beaverhead Valley. That point, at what is today Clark's Lookout State Park, is one of the few places visitors can be certain they are standing exactly where a member of the Corps once stood.

From here, the expedition crossed the Continental Divide at Lemhi Pass and then headed to the Bitterroot River, which flows north near the Montana-Idaho border.

Travelers today can drive along roughly the same route, which passes through some of Montana's most scenic mountains and valleys, and within a few hours arrive at one of the rare sites where there is evidence of the expedition's stay.

Though Lewis sent many animals, plants, and other specimens to Jefferson during the journey, and the Corps returned with a variety of items, expedition members left surprisingly little evidence of their travels on the trail. One exception is at Travelers' Rest State Park, 15 miles south of Missoula. Here, archeologists have recently made discoveries that appear to verify the location of one expedition campsite used by the Corps both to and from the Pacific Ocean.

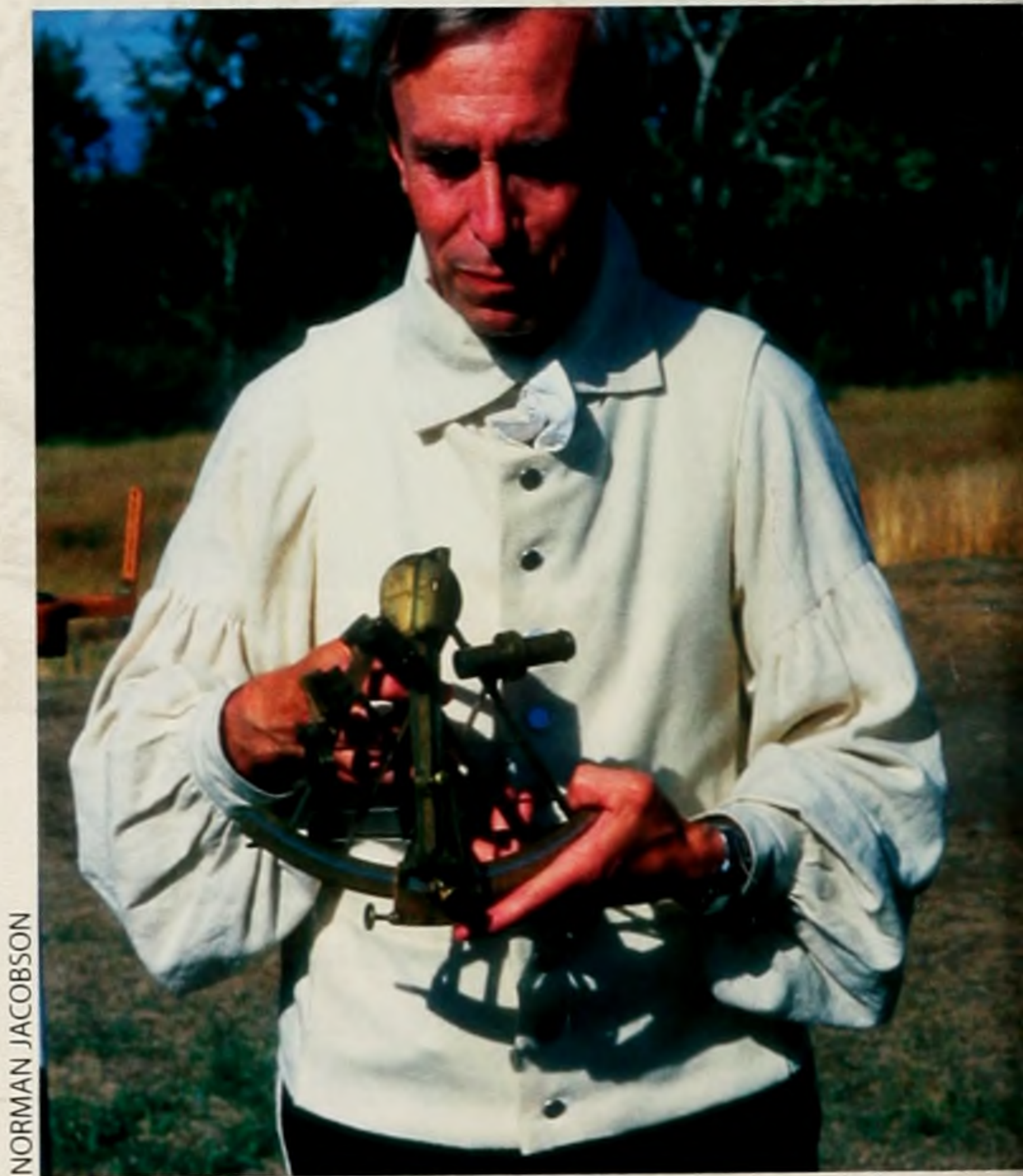
"Lewis and Clark's discoveries were remarkable," says Ken Soderberg, an FWP Parks Division official in Helena, "but it's also remarkable what archeologists have discovered about the Lewis and Clark journey, especially at Travelers' Rest."

Soderberg explains that scientists have used a combination of archeology, modern technology, and old-fashioned sleuthing to find out where the expedition camped before heading over Lolo Pass and entering what is now Idaho.

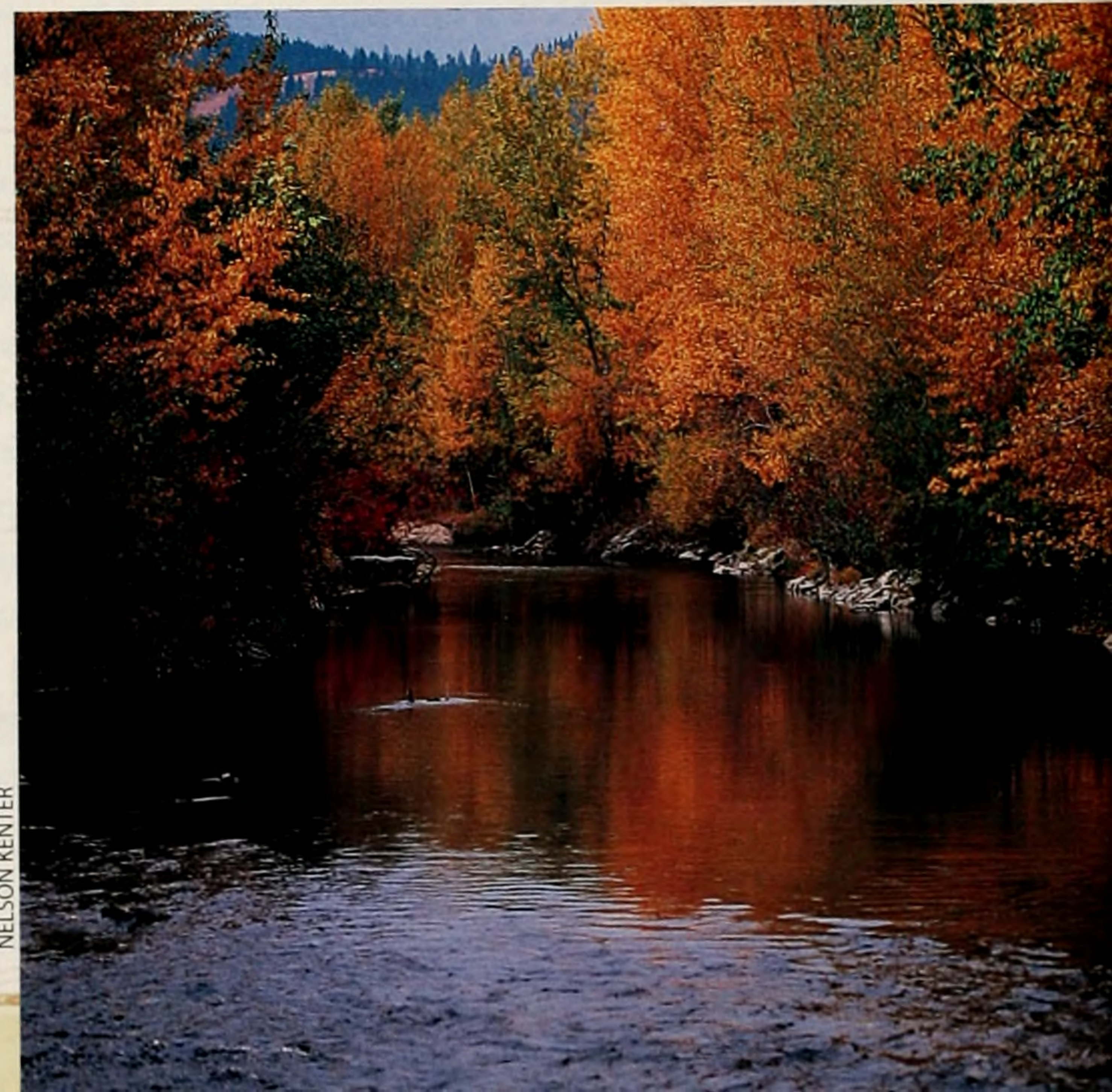
In 2002, archeologists studied Lewis's journals and the expedition's mili-

tary procedures manual to find the location of the campsite. The manual contains diagrams of standard campsite "floor plans," which they compared to those uncovered at the site. That's how they were able to figure out where various party members camped, cooked, and even built a latrine.

Further confirming the site's historic authenticity, archeologists found molten lead deposits they traced back to a foundry in Kentucky in operation at the time of the expedition. They also uncovered a single trade bead similar to one noted in expedition records, and they found a



NORMAN JACOBSON



NELSON KENTER

clothing button from the early 1800s.

The scatological evidence uncovered at the site was especially intriguing to scientists. Using a vapor mercury analyzer, they were able to detect significant levels of mercury, an element that does not decompose, at a latrine uncovered at the site. The men of the Corps were known to have taken mercury-laden pills for various physical infirmities. The strong purgative produced immediate, long-lasting diarrhea. The expedition's journals mention that three men were ill while the Corps camped at Travelers' Rest on the return in 1806.

The combined evidence is enough to lead some Lewis and Clark historians to conclude that this new site, and not the previously designated National Historic Landmark site a few miles to the north, was where the expedition actually camped.

Travelers' Rest State Park is one of the most historically significant but least developed of Montana's state parks. Visitors today will find a picnic site, information kiosk, and hiking path, but little else is different from when the Corps passed through. People often ask park manager

REST OF THE STORY An interpreter at Travelers' Rest State Park demonstrates how Lewis and Clark may have used a sextant to find their way by the stars. Camp equipment replicas at the park (below right) provide a sense of what life in the Corps must have been like. Lolo Creek (below left) is little changed today from when expedition members passed it after leaving Travelers' Rest into what is now Idaho.



DEA VOGEL

Loren Flynn when an interpretive center will be built at Travelers' Rest.

"It's already built," he answers. "The land itself tells the story."

Flynn is executive director of the Travelers' Rest Preservation and Heritage Association, which manages the park. Like other state park managers across Montana, he's careful not to let Lewis and Clark's expedition overshadow the much longer Native American history, especially that of the Salish people, who consider the area their ancestral homelands.

According to Dr. Stan Wilmoth, state archeologist of the Montana Historical Society's State Historic Preservation Office, Travelers' Rest is significant as a "celebrated pause by the expedition, where archeology has identified its footprint." But, he adds, "in a broader sense, it is a natural and cultural landscape whose importance reaches from time immemorial to the present day."

After leaving Travelers' Rest on September 11, expedition members faced many additional hardships, almost starving in the snow-covered Bitterroot Mountains as they continued their journey west. The following spring, after spending the winter on the Oregon coast at the mouth of the Columbia River, they would come this way again, eager to return home and report what they had found on their extraordinary 3,700-mile journey.

During the next few years, in commemoration of the expedition's bicentennial, many people hope to see for themselves what Lewis and Clark witnessed two centuries before. Montana state parks estab-

lished at important Corps of Discovery sites provide just such an opportunity for discovery. There visitors can see Montana much as the explorers did. And they will learn why these heroic adventurers continue to, in the words of the late historian, author, and Helena resident Stephen Ambrose, "provide us with a sense of national unity that transcends time, and distance, and place, and brings us together from coast to coast." 🐾

Along the way

Several other FWP-managed sites near the route outlined here can further enhance a visitor's Lewis and Clark experience.

On May 25, 1805, along the Judith River, Meriwether Lewis came upon "the remains of a vast many mangled carcasses of Buffalo which had been driven over a precipice" and wrote of the buffalo jump in detail. Though there is no state park at that particular site, Ulm Pishkun State Park, a few miles west of Great Falls, contains a new interpretive center that explains the importance of buffalo jumps, called "pishkuns," to American Indians.

Another way to gain insight into the expedition is to fish, canoe, or hike along the same rivers members did. FWP Parks Division manages dozens of fishing access sites along the Missouri, Yellowstone, Jefferson, Beaverhead, Big Hole, Bitterroot, and other rivers traveled by Corps members.

For 10,000 years the Blackfoot River, known to the Nez Perce as "The River of the Road to Buffalo," served as a corridor between the Great Plains and the lands west of the Continental Divide. Lewis took note that beaver were abundant there and traveled through the valley on his return voyage. Along this lovely river are 17 fishing access sites

where the scenery is as magnificent as what the captain beheld on his journey east.

For a sense of what the expedition's Yellowstone River return trip was like, stop by Pirogue Island State Park, near Miles City. Covered by tall cottonwoods that may have been saplings when the Corps passed by, the island is home to eagles, waterfowl, and deer, and it provides river views unspoiled by modern structures.

No story on Lewis and Clark and Montana's state parks would be complete without mention of Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park, near Three Forks. Because the hardy explorers spent so much time in the state, many places bear their names—including some they never visited, such as this underground state park. The caverns were first reported in 1903, when prospector D. A. Morrison saw an eagle fly into a hole in the hillside. Named after the explorers because the entrance overlooks the Lewis and Clark Trail along the Jefferson River, the natural cathedral-like caverns are larger than any in the Northwest.

LEWIS AND CLARK CAVERNS BY CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

