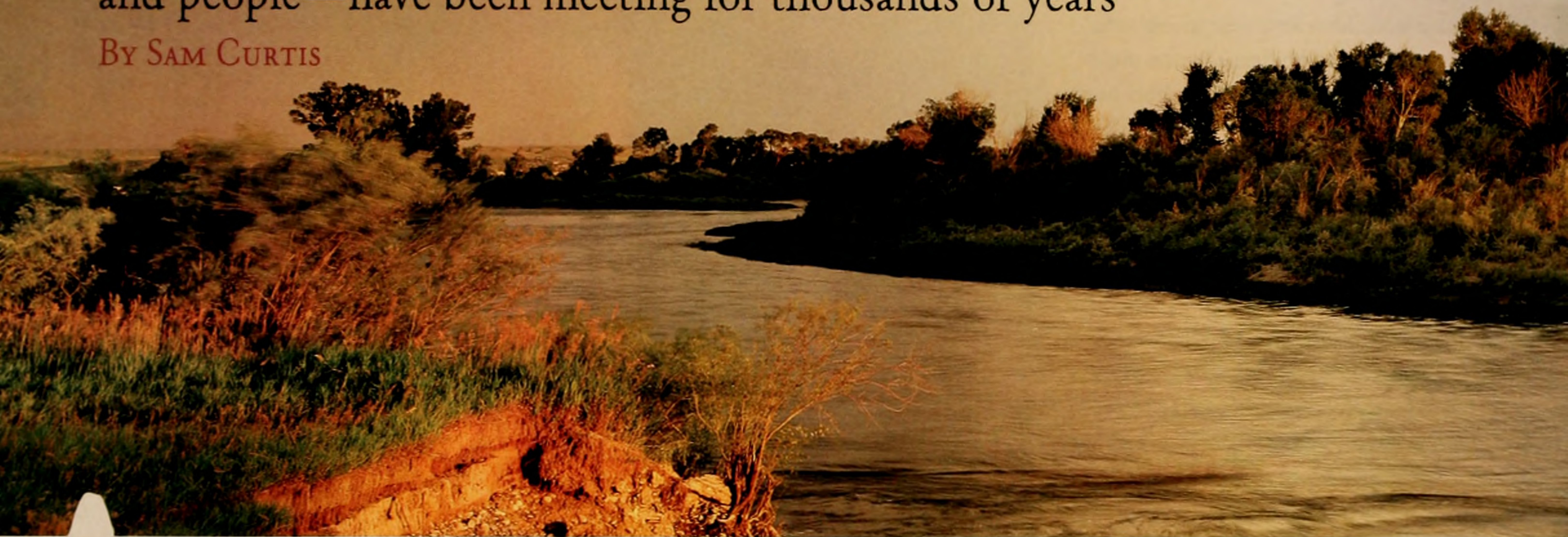


# CONFLUENCE OF CULTURES

At Missouri Headwaters State Park, visitors see where rivers—and people—have been meeting for thousands of years

BY SAM CURTIS



AS THE WIND SWIRLS Julie Kleine's hair across her face, I cinch my parka against a chill that swoops down from the surrounding peaks. It's a chilly autumn day at Missouri Headwaters State Park, located 45 miles west of Bozeman on I-94, and we've taken refuge in the new trail shelter and interpretive display at the park entrance. It's part of a \$400,000 improvement in preparation for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial.

Kleine, an award-winning Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) interpreter, and park manager Ray Heagney are here with two technicians to install a new audio presentation that will enhance visitors' understanding of the site's natural and human history. I've been invited to tag along.

Kleine tells me how the natural resources of this famous crossroads, historically known as the Three Forks, have attracted people for centuries. The cold can't subdue her exuberance for the history of this legendary meeting of three rivers.

"Albert Gallatin never came here, never saw this river," Kleine says with a smile, nodding at the Gallatin, named by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1805

for the treasury secretary. "The Crow referred to it as the Cherry, or Berry River, for all the wild fruit they found along its banks. And the Madison was called the Straight River because, from high ground around the confluence, it appears to flow straight out of the mountains."

## THE FIRST NATION

Kleine is in no way disparaging the Corps of Discovery when she talks of these rivers' original names. Rather, she's putting perspective on the human timeline that occupies this terrain, 530 acres of which is maintained as a monumental though primitive park by FWP. People have been using this site, also a National Historic Landmark, for thousands of years. Kleine gestures toward a prehistoric mine in the low foothills on the west side of the Missouri, a river born where three smaller rivers mix and collide. Ancestors of the Bannock, Salish, Shoshone, Crow, and Blackfeet tribes traveled here to dig chert from the mine and chip the hard stone into tools and weapons. Evidence at the mine dates human use back almost 11,000 years.

Edible berries, abundant fish and game,

and the thirst-quenching and navigable rivers were also valuable resources that made the Three Forks, which the Salish Indians called the Place of Many Rivers, a popular gathering spot known to Native Americans as far away as the Hidatsa, who lived near today's Bismarck, North Dakota. "Indians



MONTANA FWP

**HIGH ON HISTORY** Above: State park interpreter Julie Kleine stands on Lewis Rock (now private property) where, in 1805, Captain Lewis looked nervously at the Rocky Mountains. Right: a visitor ponders the tumble once taken by bison at the nearby Madison Buffalo Jump.





BRENT PHELPS

also came to this area because of the Madison Buffalo Jump (also part of the FWP parks system),” says Kleine, pointing to the southeast where, 7 miles away, Indians once ran bison off an abrupt bluff to obtain meat, hides, and bones. “The jump was used for about 4,000 years,” she says. “The last peo-



MONTANA FWP

ple to run buffalo off those cliffs were the Shoshone, in about 1700.” It was another 100 years before Lewis and Clark passed through the area.

For all its riches in natural resources, the Missouri headwaters was used by Native Americans only at certain times of the year. And despite the area’s importance to Indians, none were present when Captain William Clark arrived at the headwaters on July 25, 1805, two days before Captain Meriwether Lewis. A few days earlier, Lewis had written in his journal: “The Indian woman [Sacagawea] recognizes the country and assures us that this is the river on which her relations live, and that the three forks are at no great distance.”

Lewis and Clark were particularly keen on finding Sacagawea’s tribe, the Shoshone, who they hoped would provide horses to help them cross the Continental Divide.

“As they go through Montana, the Corps of Discovery sees signs of Indians everywhere,” Kleine tells me as we hike along Lewis Rock, a high bluff on private property (where we’ve received permission to enter) rising above the park’s picnic area. Here,

Lewis first looked down on the headwaters of the Missouri, the confluence of three rivers he and Clark agreed to name the Gallatin, the Madison (after the secretary of state) and the Jefferson (after the president, who sponsored the expedition). “In eastern Montana, Lewis and Clark see a huge Sun Dance lodge with tepee rings. They see wickiups [domed shelters] all along the riverbanks. They get to the Three Forks and the prairie has been burned, and they see smoke in the distance. They know thousands of people are living here and using the Missouri as their main waterway through this country. But they haven’t come in contact with a single person for the whole distance of what is now Montana. So by this time they’re getting very anxious. They’re saying, ‘When are we going to run into somebody? We need to find the Shoshone.’”

Lewis and Clark had good reason to be concerned. The headwaters marked the point beyond which they had no knowledge of the terrain. Hoping to find a water route across the country, they knew only that rivers on the west side of the Continental Divide flowed to the Pacific Ocean. They





LEWIS AND CLARK AT THREE FORKS, E.S. PAXSON, 1912  
COURTESY MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



KEVIN BROOKE

**A GATHERING** In this 1912 rendition, Lewis and Clark stand at the Missouri headwaters with Sacagawea and other members of the expedition. Now a state park, the headwaters has changed little since when the explorers arrived two centuries ago.

thought the Rocky Mountains would be similar to the Appalachian Mountains in the eastern United States. With those mountains in mind, they hoped that perhaps a half-day's portage over the Rockies would put them on a navigable waterway to the Columbia River, which they knew began somewhere on the west side of the Rockies and flowed to the Pacific.

But after looking at the sea of mountains from where Heagney, Kleine, and I now stood, Lewis had grave forebodings of what was to come. With his usual disregard for spelling, he wrote in his journal on July 27, 1805: "We are now several hundred miles within the bosom of this wild and mountainous country...without any information with respect to the country not knowing how far these mountains continue, or wher to direct our course to pass them to advantage or intercept a navigable branch of the Columbia."

Only a few weeks later, after finding the Shoshone and obtaining horses, the Lewis and Clark Expedition slogged west for 11 miserable days through what Corps of Discovery member Patrick Gass described as "the most terrible mountains I ever

beheld." Deep snow, cold temperatures, high peaks, dense forests, and little food stalled the expedition in the Bitterroots. The Corps persevered, eventually finding the west-running Clearwater River, but the dream of a Northwest Passage, the much-desired water route to the Pacific, did not survive that grueling mountain crossing.



MATT LONG  
BARBARA THOMAS

Perched on Lewis Rock, looking west to the foreboding Rockies, I can now understand something of what Lewis must have felt as he stood here two centuries ago. This site, I realize, has huge historical significance.

Heagney must be reading my thoughts, because he says, "FWP is talking with people at the Holcim cement plant, the present landowner, about ways of getting 25 acres of Lewis Rock included in the park. It would be wonderful for visitors to be able to stand here and read from Lewis's journal and see exactly what he described spread out in front of them."

Heagney has also been working with the National Park Service's Rivers and Trails Preservation Program to figure out a way to put a trail up the side of Lewis Rock or set up a scheduled van ride to take visitors to the top. And he's been meeting with the city of Three Forks and Gallatin County to develop a 5-mile walking trail. Scheduled to be completed by the end of 2004, the trail will connect the park to the city of Three Forks, which runs a museum of local history.

### THE TRAPPERS

One legendary episode of that history is Colter's Run. When returning to St. Louis in 1806, Clark again passed through the Missouri headwaters area (Lewis went north to explore the Marias River). Expedition member John Colter, eyeing the abundant beaver at the Three Forks, vowed to return. "The Blackfeet didn't welcome him," Kleine tells me, "but Colter was willing to take that risk." And what a risk.

Two years later, in the fall of 1808, Colter returned to the Three Forks with trapper (and former Corps of Discovery member) John Potts with the hope of striking it rich in beaver pelts. Instead, they met up with several hundred Blackfeet, who attacked the pair in retaliation for Colter siding with their traditional Indian enemies in a previous battle. After refusing to come to shore, Potts

**SEPARATE CIRCLES** The shape of a pioneer's wagon wheel at the state park is reflected in a traditional Indian headdress. There was little overlap between the two cultures at the Three Forks, however. By the time whites began settling the Missouri headwaters, in the late 1860s, local Indian communities had disappeared, devastated by smallpox.

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was shot. When he returned fire, killing a Blackfoot man, he was killed. The Indians then grabbed Colter, took his weapons, and stripped him naked. After giving the trapper a 200-yard head start, the Indians set off in pursuit. Colter ran for what he thought was his life, and into legend. Seven days and 300 miles later, he arrived, bloodied and exhausted, at a fort on the confluence of the Yellowstone and Bighorn rivers. (The Blackfoot version of the story has it that Colter was allowed to escape, so that the trapper would send a message to other whites wanting to invade Blackfoot territory that they were not welcome.)

By now, you'd think Colter would have had enough of the Three Forks. Yet he returned a few months later to retrieve the traps he'd left behind. And, once again, the Blackfoot forced the trapper to hightail it back to the fort.

Colter tried his luck at the headwaters one last time in the spring of 1810, when he guided a party of trappers to the Three Forks, where they built a log fort out of cottonwoods. After traveling up the Jefferson to trap beaver with some members of the party, Colter returned to find that a band of Gros Ventre Indians had killed five of his fellow trappers near the fort, including George Drouillard, a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Perhaps believing the tragedy was divine retribution for continually tempting fate, Colter reportedly blurted: "If God will only forgive me this time and let me off I will leave the country the day after tomorrow and be damned if I ever come into it again."

Though Colter kept his word, other trappers were lured to the fur-rich headwaters. And they continued to be attacked by Indians defending their territory. Then, in 1837, a smallpox epidemic broke out in the area. When Major Alexander Culbertson came upriver from Fort McKenzie to the Three Forks that year, he discovered a village containing the bodies of several hundred Indians who had died from the disease. By 1840, an estimated 17,000 Plains Indians

**ORIGINAL RESIDENTS** In addition to a rich diversity of human use, the headwaters has long been home to a multitude of wildlife species. Sandhill cranes and other water birds in particular are attracted to the area's lush, wet meadows and braided streams.

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had succumbed to smallpox, a deadly disease imported from Europe for which they had no immunity.

## THE SETTLERS

During this same time, the European demand for fur had begun to abate, and with it the influx of trappers. For the next 20 years, there was little activity in the Three Forks area. Then, in the early 1860s, gold was discovered in southwestern Montana. As Kleine, Heagney, and I descend Lewis Rock and begin hiking along the park's Gallatin River Trail, the park interpreter explains that after the discovery, a group of prospectors decided the headwaters would be the perfect place to build a supply town to outfit people headed to the goldfields, 100 miles to the southwest.

"The first Gallatin City was started over there in 1862," Kleine says, pointing across the river, "and then it moved over here two years later to where we're walking. Gallatin City was the first county seat and had the first school in the county. It had a race-track, a county fair, and a flour mill. But when the railroad was put through 3 miles away in 1883, that was the end of the city. In those days, if you weren't on a rail line, you weren't anywhere."

We walk down the trail to the site of the Gallatin City Hotel, a hand-hewn log building that, to my amazement, is still standing. It was the center of the city's social life, and overnight guests "sometimes complained of not being able to sleep because of the ruckus," reads an interpretive sign at the site.

Later, I walk the park's Pictograph Trail and peer at a human figure drawn in red, by some ancient artist, on the wall of a rock alcove. I hike the Confluence Trail and watch the waters of the Madison and Jefferson coil together, combining two

**MORE THAN THE CORPS** Though recognizing the importance of the headwaters to the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the state park wants visitors to know that the site was also important to native people. Indians used the site for thousands of years before the Corps of Discovery arrived.

now-famous blue-ribbon trout waters. A bald eagle banks above the cottonwoods, and double-crested cormorants fly past. As I think about the park's diverse layers of importance—as a wildlife haven, Indian cultural crossroads, Lewis and Clark destination, fur trapping mecca, and gold mine supply town—Kleine points out that the limestone rocks around us contain fossilized seashells, a reminder of the area's original history as an ocean floor.

As I offer my thanks and goodbyes, Kleine says, "There are so many different stories. I never get tired of talking about this place."

Adds Heagney, "People who come to Missouri Headwaters State Park can hear those stories from Julie, or they can grab one of our interpretive pamphlets, hike our trails, and make their stay a journey of self discovery. Either way, like Lewis and Clark, you've got to get out of your canoe and take a good look around." 🐾



KEVIN BROOKE

## Primitive Park

So that visitors can get a sense of what conditions here were like hundreds of years ago, Missouri Headwaters does not offer some of the amenities people associate with parks.

**Open:** All year. Camping May 1 to Sept. 30.

**Hours:** Dawn to dusk.

**Location:** 4 miles northeast of Three Forks. Take Highway 205 to Highway 286.

**Amenities:** 20 camping sites, picnic tables, fire rings, vault toilets, drinking water, picnic areas. No hookups, phone, concessions, gas, or firewood, and you must pack out your own trash.

**Boat ramp:** Yes.

**Information:** (406) 994-6934, fwp.state.mt.us.

**Seasonal caretaker and camp host:** Yes.

**Special attractions:** Interpretive displays, historical speakers, wildlife viewing (including 90-plus bird species), hiking, and fishing.

## FREE SUMMER PROGRAMS

Each summer, Missouri Headwaters State Park invites experts to give presentations on local history. The park paid tribute to the area's long history of Indian use in 2003 during a series of guest presentations titled "A Tapestry of Native American Culture in Montana." Prominent American Indians from various tribes presented different perspectives on the importance of the Three

Forks to their cultures. This past summer (2004), the speaker series featured various perspectives of the West in the early 1800s.

"When we first started the series a few years ago, we only got a few people each night," says Ray Heagney, park manager. "Now, we may get well over 100 people. Speakers stay after their presentations to talk informally with park visitors by the fire, and we provide free marshmallows for roasting. It makes for a great evening."



DAVE SHARPE

A Native American elder speaks of the park's rich Indian history.