

Lewis and Clark in Clatskanie

In 1805 and 1806, the great explorers' Corps of Discovery stopped in the Clatskanie area



By Deborah Steele Hazen

On the "cold wet morning" of Nov. 6, 1805, Captain Meriwether Lewis, Captain William Clark and their Corps of Discovery reached the Clatskanie area in their trek down the Columbia River.

A year and a half after leaving St. Louis, they were desperate to reach their destination, the Pacific Ocean. According to the two captains' journals, they were "wet and disagreeable," troubled with fleas "which colect in our blankets at every old village we encamp at," and unable to successfully hunt for fresh meat because "our hunters could not get through red wood, green bryors, a kind of Burch, alder, red holley," as well as maples, nettles, rushes and willows that grew thickly along the river's edge.

Anyone who has browsed through the journals of Lewis and Clark and other members of the Corps who kept accounts of the journey, will notice that their spelling was creative and inconsistent. It wasn't because they were ignorant. The spelling of the English language, and, in particular, American English, was not standardized until the dictionary, lexicon and grammar books published by their contemporary, Noah Webster, became widely used and circulated.

As the explorers passed north of what is now the town of Clatskanie, they observed the "high and

"rugid" hills on the north side of the river, and named the island on the south side, Fanny's Island, in honor of Clark's younger sister Frances. That island was later re-named Crims Island. It was used for agricultural purposes for years and is now a wildlife refuge.

Lewis and Clark also remarked on the "handsom & extensive bottom" - the low-lying plain on the south side of the Columbia just downstream from the west end of Fanny's Island. They named it "Fanny's Bottom."

Perhaps, at this point in their journey they were running out of better names for geographic landmarks, but 210 years ago, the term "bottom" referred to low-lying land, not a portion of the human anatomy, and "Fanny" was a common nickname for the female name "Frances," not a slang term for that same human body part.

A reading of the journals of Lewis and Clark indicate that the night of Nov. 6, 1805 was spent on a small rocky shore on what is now the Washington side of the river, near the upriver end of the large island they called "Sturgeon Island." We know it as Puget Island - the name it had been given in 1792 by Lieutenant Broughton of the British Captain George Vancouver's party when he explored the Columbia River. He named the island after another officer under Vancouver's command - Lieutenant Puget.

The location of the Lewis and Clark campsite for Nov. 6, 1805 would be roughly across the river from the present-day Jones Beach recreation area northwest of Clatskanie and near County Line Park on the Washington side.

The next morning, Nov. 7, 1805, the Corps of Discovery proceeded down the north side of Puget Island in a thick fog, and met two canoes of Native Americans, the "War-ki-a-cums," related to the Chinook nation, who gave their name to present-day Wahkiakum County, Wash. The Lewis and Clark party went with the Wahkiakums to their village "behind a cluster of Marshey Islands, on a narrow channel of the river through which we passed to the village of 4 Houses, they gave us to eate Some fish, and Sold us, fish, Wap pa to roots three dogs and 2 otter skins for which we gave fish hooks principally of which they were verry fond."

That day, Captain Clark calculated that the Corps of Discovery traveled 34 miles in their canoes down the Columbia before making camp. They could hear the roaring "made by the waves brakeing on the rockey Shores," and falsely assumed they were within "view of the Ocian," when, in fact, the expanse of water they were seeing in the distance was the broadening of the Columbia and Young's Bay near present-day Astoria.

The Corps of Discovery - consisting of 36 men, the Native American woman Sacajawea, her baby Jean Baptiste, and Captain Lewis' Newfoundland dog Seaman - spent the next eight days battling November storms in the Lower Columbia, including six days at the mouth of Megler Creek on the Washington shore, an area Clark dubbed "dismal nitch."

Moving farther towards the ocean, they spent another 10 days at Station Camp just west of Point Ellice on the Washington side. It was there that the entire party - including Sacajawea and Clark's slave York - took a vote to decide whether to spend the winter there or move to the Oregon side. Oregon won. The Corps journeyed across the Columbia, into Young's Bay and constructed Fort Clatsop, where they spent the winter.

On their return trip east the next spring, the Lewis and Clark expedition camped the night of Tuesday, March 25, 1806, on the south side of the Columbia near Clatskanie. "Clark described the campsite that night: "the shore being a swamp for several miles back; at length late in the evening opposite to the place we had camped on the 6th of Nov. last; we found the entrance of a small creek which offered us a safe harbour from the winds and Encamped." That "small creek" is now the mouth of the Clatskanie River, much enlarged after dredging and diking in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The camp site is located at the eastern end of Wallace Slough, where Point Adams Road turns west and becomes River Front Road.

Near their campsite a party of "Cathlahmahs" had "established a temporary residence for the purpose of fishing and taking seal. They had about 12 sturgeon and some seal. They gave us some of the flesh of the seal which I found a great improvement to the poor Elk," Clark reported. Clearly, the seals and sea lions were following the fish upriver 210 years ago as they are today, but without the protection of the Marine Mammal Act.

The next morning, the Corps of Discovery encountered more "Cathlahmahs" and Wahkiakums, bought fish, the wapato root that had become a staple of their diet in the Lower Columbia region, and two dogs - also a welcome dietary change from elk. Later the Corps' hunters killed three eagles and a large goose.

After a mid-day feast of fish, dog, eagle, goose and wapato, the Corps continued upriver, before stopping again at Fanny's Bottom. "I walked on shore through an elegant bottom on the south side opposite to Fannys Island. This bottom we also call Fannys bottom it is extensive and an open level plain except near the river bank which is high dry rich white oak land. I saw some deer & Elk at a distance in the Prairie."

That prairie is now the Port Westward industrial park.

Did Lewis and Clark wonder what would become of the "handsome and extensive" plain? The goals of their expedition included finding a route to the Pacific, claiming it for the United States, laying the groundwork for the doctrine of "manifest destiny" - the expansion and settlement of the entire continent.

Would they have approved of the "swamp" being drained and used for farmland? What would have been their reaction to the role "Fanny's Bottom" played as the Beaver Army ammunition depot during World War II and the Korean War? Would they approve now of its use to create jobs for the current citizens of the Lower Columbia, and tax revenues to support local schools, fire protection, law enforcement, libraries and parks?

Considering the hardships the Corps of Discovery endured on their journey to blaze the trail of the American West, they might well have envied the quality of life now enjoyed by the descendants of those who followed in their footsteps, and applaud the efforts to find a balance between human prosperity and the preservation of the natural environment.