EPISODE 101: MERIWETHER LEWIS: A COMPLEX CAPTAIN

Peter Coyote: Welcome to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition” from PRI, Public Radio International. I’m Peter Coyote. In this hour, we meet Meriwether Lewis, Captain of the Corps of Discovery.

James Ronda: He is our archetypical frontier hero, made and then unmade by his encounter with the American West and the people of the West.

Peter Coyote: Join me as we explore the life of Lewis after the day’s news.

Optional cutaway for News

Allison Frost: Welcome to this edition of the Latest Tidings, a special feature produced in cooperation with the National Intelligencer. In 1809, it’s been America’s Newspaper, for nearly a decade. I’m Allison Frost. This time we’re looking at the mysterious death of the famous explorer and Governor of the Louisiana Territory, Meriwether Lewis. Did he shoot himself or was he murdered on that fateful night in October of 1809? Governor Lewis and General William Clark led the Corps of Discovery on a death-defying exploration that took them to the western edge of the country and back again. But less than three years after their return, Meriwether Lewis has died, under what appear to be mysterious circumstances. He was 35. Joining us now to shed some light on the man and his death, is none other than General William Clark. Welcome, General. Thank you for being here.

William Clark: You’re welcome

Allison Frost: Who was Meriwether Lewis, General?

William Clark: He was a great man, a great thinker, an excellent statesman and leader. Above all, he was a noble man.

Allison Frost: When you first learned of his death, what was your reaction, General? Is it possible that such a great man took his own life?
William Clark: I do not want to believe it. But, it appears that the facts, as they have come out, do seem to point in that direction. It is true that he was not well when last we spoke. He was having trouble with his Governorship. He did not, it appears, have the full support of Secretary of War William Eustis. The Secretary thought Lewis was spending too much on the Indians and questioned his requests for certain allocations. Lewis, quite understandably, took great umbrage at this. Perhaps he should have brushed it off, but he could not, and in fact, told me that he felt Eustis had gone so far to impugn his very patriotism, his honor. I fear the weight of his mind may have indeed, overcome him.

Allison Frost: I wonder, General, would you describe your last meeting with Governor Lewis? Were there signs of trouble?

William Clark: Let’s see, I last saw him on August 25th. Meriwether set out to Philadelphia to write our book, but more particularly to explain some matter between him and the Government. This related to the financial issues I mentioned previously. I do not believe there was a more honest man in Louisiana nor one who had purer motives than Governor Lewis. If his mind had been at ease I should have parted cheerfully, but....

Allison Frost: Thank you General. What do you know of the details of his death?

William Clark: Well, I begged him not to go to Washington, but he insisted, he could not be moved. He and his traveling companions encountered some bad luck, some bad weather and apparently, Governor Lewis was out of sorts when arrived at the home of one John Grinder on the Natchez Trace. Mrs. Grinder provided a meal and bed. Sometime in the night she heard gunshots from the Governor’s room and some cry from him, but did nothing for two hours. When she and Meriwether’s servants finally entered his room, they found him wounded in the side and the head, bleeding on his buffalo robe. I am told his last words were, “I am no coward. But I am strong, so hard to die.” I do not know what to believe.

Allison Frost: Is there any letter or journal we have from Governor Lewis that could shed some light on this matter? The Latest Tidings has had unconfirmed reports that you in fact did receive such a letter. Is this true?

William Clark: There is no such letter in existence.

Allison Frost: Had you received any correspondence from the Governor that might shed light on his state of mind near the night in question?

William Clark: (curtly) I’m afraid I really must get back to my business, I’m so sorry I cannot be more informative. I trust you’ll forgive me.

Allison Frost: No, you’ve been most informative. Thank you, General William Clark, for being with us on the Latest Tidings.

William Clark: You’re welcome.

Allison Frost: And we cannot bring the Latest Tidings to a close without marking the passing of another great man: the composer Joseph Haydn. He died at age 77 in Vienna, Austria. More details from reporter, Rob Manning.
Rob Manning: Europe’s cultural elite gathered in Vienna to pay their respects to a man considered to be nothing less than a musical genius. All told, Haydn composed more than 100 symphonies, 19 operas, and scores of sonatas, trios and quartets. This oratorio, The Creation, was among his most acclaimed works. Haydn’s series of London concerts drew large and enthusiastic crowds. A devout Catholic, some of his last words were reportedly uttered trying to calm his servants as Napoleon’s cannons boomed around them. I’m Rob Manning.

Allison Frost: Finally, in business news, Mary Dixon Kies became the first woman to be granted a patent. It’s for a type of weaving. And engineer and inventor Robert Fulton secured a patent for the steamboat. And that concludes this edition of the Latest Tidings, I’m Allison Frost. Our program is produced in cooperation with the National Intelligencer. For nearly a decade, America’s Newspaper, since 1800.

[Program theme music]

Peter Coyote: We all know Meriwether Lewis: the man in buckskin, the intrepid explorer who went to the Pacific coast and back.

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, but he’s much more complicated than that. Despite having led what’s considered the most successful expedition in American history, Lewis often felt like a failure, and he took his own life just three years after his return from the Pacific Ocean.

[Theme music continues]

Peter Coyote: The Lewis and Clark Expedition left St. Charles, Missouri on May 14, 1804 and traveled 7,689 miles to the Pacific Ocean and back again. The trip took more than 28 months. The expedition was President Jefferson’s brainchild, commanded by his friend and protégé Meriwether Lewis and his old Army friend, William Clark. It is considered the most successful exploration in American history. We’re going to take a closer look at Captain Meriwether Lewis with Clay Jenkinson, humanities scholar-in-residence at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon—and author of “The Character of Meriwether Lewis.” Clay, give me a little background on Lewis.

Clay Jenkinson: Well, Peter, Lewis was born in 1774, Thomas Jefferson back in 1743, so Jefferson was technically old enough to be Lewis’s father. Lewis was born within sight of Monticello in Virginia. There was a fair amount of disruption in his childhood and his education was limited. In 1794, he joined the Army to put down what is known to history as the Whiskey Rebellion. When Jefferson was elected to the presidency in 1800, he invited Lewis to come live with him in the White House to serve as his personal secretary and aide-de-camp. Less than a decade later—in 1809—Meriwether Lewis was dead but the intervening years were filled with amazing, even heroic activity. Lewis spent two years living with President Jefferson, then went to the nation’s cultural capital, Philadelphia, to learn formal science from Jefferson’s intellectual friends Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Smith Barton, Andrew Ellicott and Robert Patterson.

Andrew Burstein: Jefferson grew up with a strong sense of how important a mentor could be in one’s life.

Peter Coyote: Thomas Jefferson was a collector of protégés. University of Tulsa historian Andrew Burstein says Jefferson benefited from mentors himself:

Andrew Burstein: Acquiring a mentor early in life was meaningful to him, and becoming a mentor and acquiring protégés was something that he carried on for his whole life, in and out of government. Meriwether Lewis was one
of a string of Jefferson protégés. His first protégé, in a sense, was James Madison whom he met shortly after writing the Declaration of Independence. James Monroe actually studied the law with then-Governor Jefferson in 1780 in the midst of the Revolution. And Meriwether Lewis was of a later generation. Lewis as his personal secretary in the President’s house, of course, played a very special role. They became close as Lewis was examining public documents, and Jefferson trusted him implicitly, which was why he immediately thought of him when conceiving the idea of a journey to the Pacific.

Peter Coyote: So, why did Jefferson choose Lewis to lead the expedition? Isn’t it true that Lewis had significant problems with alcohol and depression?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, it is true. And Jefferson was aware of those problems, but he was sure that Lewis had compensating virtues: courage and determination, a natural affinity for wilderness, highly refined observational skills. Seven years after Lewis’s suicide, Jefferson wrote a biographical sketch of Lewis that made it clear he still greatly admired his fallen protégé:

> Of courage undaunted; possessing a firmness and perseverance of purpose which nothing but impossibilities could divert from its direction; careful as a father of those committed to his charge, yet steady in the maintenance of order and discipline . . . Of sound understanding, and a fidelity to truth so scrupulous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if seen by ourselves. With all these qualifications, as if selected and implanted by nature in one body for this express purpose, I could have no hesitation in confiding the enterprise to him.
> Thomas Jefferson, 1813

Peter Coyote: That’s a high compliment—‘as if nature had formed Meriwether Lewis for the express purpose of exploring the American West.’ We know from the journals that Lewis took himself very seriously as an explorer.

> Our vessels consisted of six small canoes, and two large perogues. This little fleet altho’ not quite so respectable as those of Columbus or Captain Cook were still viewed by us with as much pleasure as those deservedly famed adventurers ever beheld theirs; and I dare say with quite as much anxiety for their safety and preservation. We were now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized man had never trodden.
> Meriwether Lewis, April 7, 1805

Peter Coyote: Clay, what else do we need to know to make sense of Meriwether Lewis?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, Peter, when Lewis was keeping a journal he was a wonderful writer—easily the best of the expedition’s six journal keepers. Lewis’s journals provide tantalizing glimpses into his complex personality: his rich sense of humor, his moments of self-doubt, his remarkable scientific curiosity, outbursts of anger, and his almost continual anxiety about the fate of the mission. Dayton Duncan is one of the nation’s leading experts on the expedition and he was the co-producer of the Ken Burns’ documentary on Lewis and Clark.

Dayton Duncan: Lewis never lost that North Star which was, ‘Here’s what our mission is, here’s what President Jefferson has sent us on, and I want to get that done. I want to make sure my men are safe, but we’re going to accomplish this mission.’
Clay Jenkinson: Stephen Dow Beckham is a history professor at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. He’s also the college’s lead expert on the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Stephen Dow Beckham: Lewis carried a very heavy mission burden. The letter of instruction from the President of the United States was addressed to him and he had a whole series of complex tasks that he had to accomplish and there were all sorts of ways that those tasks might be not completed. I think the most daunting aspect of all of the expectations of Meriwether Lewis was to craft the narrative that would follow the expedition. Imagine the weight of producing a manuscript and turning it over to Thomas Jefferson. That would be quite a challenge. It’s one thing to write your thesis or your dissertation and turn it over to your professor or a committee, but to turn it over to one of the leading intellectuals of the world, and the former President of the United States, who had also been president of the American Philosophical Society, is an assignment that must have caused Lewis considerable pause.

Peter Coyote: So, Meriwether Lewis was a deep and perplexing character.

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, but he was also a very fine pure explorer. His scientific observations are amazingly accurate. Most of them stand up 200 years after he wrote them. One of my favorites is his description of the pronghorn antelope, in today’s South Dakota, on September 17, 1804:

I had this day an opportunity of witnessing the agility and superior fleetness of this animal which was to me really astonishing. I had pursued and twice surprised a small herd of seven,... I got within about 200 paces of them when they smelt me and fled... the antelopes which had disappeared in a steep revensne now appeared at the distance of about three miles on the side of a ridge which passed obliquely across me and extended about four miles. So soon had these antelopes gained the distance at which they had again appeared to my view I doubted at first that they were the same that I had just surprised, but my doubts soon vanished when I beheld the rapidity of their flight along the ridge before me it appeared rather the rapid flight of birds than the motion of quadrupeds. I think I can safely venture the assertion the speed of this animal is equal if not superior to that of the finest blooded courser.
Meriwether Lewis, September 17, 1804

Peter Coyote: That’s very beautiful. It’s a good example of how seriously he took Jefferson’s instructions to make scientific observations. But I take it that’s only one side of Lewis’s personality.

Clay Jenkinson: Meriwether Lewis is easily the most complicated figure of the expedition. He had, for example, a very rich sense of humor that occasionally finds expression in the journals. One instance of this is his description of Toussaint Charbonneau’s recipe for boudin blanc, a buffalo sausage. Charbonneau was a French trader and Sacagawea’s husband. After the expedition Lewis described him as a man of “no peculiar merit.” Charbonneau may have been a coward and something of a rascal but he was an accomplished—if somewhat grotesque—culinary artist:

[Meriwether Lewis:] About six feet of the lower extremity of the large gut...is the first morsel that the cook makes love to. This he holds fast at one end with the right hand while with the forefinger and thumb of the left he gently compresses it and discharges what he says is not good to eat, but of which in the squel we get a moderate portion...

Peter Coyote: “Not good to eat”? 
Clay Jenkinson: Well, remember, Peter, he’s squeezing out of the buffalo intestine some but not all of the undigest-
ed matter inside. What amuses Lewis is the understatement of Charbonneau saying that buffalo’s excrement is “not
good to eat.” Lewis goes on to list the ingredients of boudin blanc: filets, kidney suet, flour, a little salt and pepper.

[Meriwether Lewis:] Thus when the sides of the recepticle are skilfully exchanged the outer for the inner,
and all is completely filled with something good to eat, it is tyed at the other end, but not any cut off, for
that would make the pattern too scant; it is then baptised in the Missouri with two dips and a flirt, and
bobbed into the kettle; from whence after it be well boiled it is taken and fryed with bears oil until it be-
comes brown when it is ready to esswage the pangs of a keen appetite or such as travelers in the wilder-
ness are seldom at a loss for.

Meriwether Lewis, May 9, 1805

Peter Coyote: Bon appetit! Clearly, Lewis had a sense of humor and was an excellent scientist as well. Is it fair to
call him an American hero?

Clay Jenkinson: That depends on who you ask and how you look at it. Unquestionably, Meriwether Lewis was a
man of heroic energies with a great appetite for life and experience. But he was also sometimes beset by what Jef-
ferson later called “sensible depressions of mind.” On August 18, 1805, just after he found the source of the Mis-
ouri River and made successful contact with the Shoshone Indians, Lewis wrote a severely melancholic journal
meditation to commemorate his 31st birthday:

This day I completed my thirty-first year...and conceived that I had in all human probability now existed
about half the period which I am to remain in this sublunary world. I reflected that I had as yet done but
little, very little indeed, to further the happiness of the human race, or to advance the information of the
succeeding generation. I viewed with regret the many hours I have spent in indolence, and now soarily
feel the want of that information which those hours would have given me had they been judiciously ex-
pended. But since they are past and cannot be recalled, I dash from me the gloomy thought and resolved
in future, to redouble my exertions and at least indeavour to promote those two primary objects of human
existence, by giving them the aid of that portion of talents which nature and fortune have bestowed on me;
or in future, to live for mankind as I have heretofore lived for myself.

Meriwether Lewis, August 18, 1805

Dayton Duncan: Instead of thinking just about his men and his mission he could think about himself and his own
chance of glory and it crowded in on him on a very poignant birthday journal entry when he was just flailing him-
self for reasons we want to say, ‘Buck up! You’ve got so much done, don’t surrender to these dark thoughts.’ But
he did and I think part of it was that big buildup on the ascension of Lemhi Pass, the expectation to become the Co-
lumbus of the world and certainly of America and the profound disappointment he’d had to put in the background
while he dealt with survival. Now that the survival portion was taken care of that emotion that he hadn’t had time
to deal with caught back up with him in what to me is one of the most poignant journal entries of the whole expedi-
tion...He says ‘I have now lived roughly half my time here on this sublunary world.’ How wrong he turned out to
be. He was not halfway through his life. He was nearing the end. It’s a remarkable journal entry and it’s hard not to
read it and feel this impulse to reach across a couple of centuries and pat him on the shoulder, it’s going to be OK,
Meriwether, you’ll be all right.

Peter Coyote: Documentary producer Dayton Duncan. Clay, does that cover it? Is that what we need to know to
understand Meriwether Lewis?
Clay Jenkinson: I think so. I think those are remarkable insights. What this tells us is that Meriwether Lewis was not a happy-go-lucky explorer. He was a rich, complex and in some regards, troubled man. And as usual, I think the great Lewis and Clark scholar James Ronda provides the key insight.

James Ronda: Meriwether Lewis seems to embody for me the Eastern elite intellectual with all of his ideological trappings and concerns and passions and illusions, geographic, racial and otherwise, coming to confront whatever it is that the American frontier is and was. But he is also a hero, a hero who is deeply, tragically flawed.

Peter Coyote: It’s time to test your knowledge of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Here’s our question: where did Lewis spend the last night of his life? Stay with us to find out the answer when we explore Lewis’ final journey. Coming up next, Lewis’ enchanted day in the wilderness.

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. You’re listening to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition,” on PRI.

Clay Jenkinson: That day, June 14, 1805, proved to be Meriwether Lewis’s most significant encounter with the American sublime. He considered the great falls of Montana to be the most beautiful place in North America, with the possible exception of Niagara. On that day he was to encounter things that simply overwhelmed his scientific rationalism, things that can only be understood as mystical. And it’s absolutely important to remember that Meriwether Lewis was all alone that day.

Peter Coyote: According to the journal entry, Lewis killed a buffalo, intending to camp out alone for the night. Then, he experienced the first of three near-death encounters:
Meriwether Lewis: A large white, or rather brown bear, had perceived and crept on me within 20 steps before I discovered him; in the first moment I drew up my gun to shoot, but at the same instant recollected that she was not loaded and that he was too near for me to hope to perform this operation before he reached me, as he was then briskly advancing on me; it was an open level plain, not a bush within miles nor a tree within less than three hundred yards of me...the idea struck me to get into the water to such depth that I could stand and he would be obliged to swim, and that I could in that situation defend myself with my espontoon; accordingly I ran haastily into the water about waist deep, and faced about and presented the point of my espontoon, at this instant he arrived at the edge of the water within about 20 feet of me; the moment I put myself in this attitude of defence he suddenly wheeled about as if frightened, declined the combat on such unequal grounds, and retreated with quite as great precipitation as he had just before pursued me.

Peter Coyote: So much for near-death experience number one! Clay, what happened next?

Clay Jenkinson: A little while later, Lewis saw what he thought was some kind of panther crouched near its burrow. He fired at it, and apparently scared it away. And just after that, he courted disaster by standing stock still while three buffalo bulls charged at him over the open plains!

Peter Coyote: What a day!

Clay Jenkinson: Lewis was coming to terms with the magic that is Montana. On another occasion he spoke in Montana of what he called “scenes of visionary enchantment.”

It now seemed to me that all the beasts of the neighborhood had made a league to destroy me, or that some fortune was disposed to amuse herself at my expense... I then continued my rout home passed the buffaloe which I had killed, but did not think it prudent to remain all night at this place which really from the succession of curious adventures wore the impression on my mind of enchantment; at sometimes for a moment I thought it might be a dream, but the prickly pears which pierced my feet very severely once in a while, particularly after it grew dark, convinced me that I was really awake.

Meriwether Lewis, June 14, 1805

Clay Jenkinson: A day alone in the wilderness, where he confronted beauty and death and nature. James Ronda says one of the things that distinguishes Lewis from Clark is that Lewis was a loner. But it is undeniable that some of the greatest passages in the journals come when Meriwether Lewis is all alone. Lewis and Clark were quite different men and they had quite different strengths and weaknesses. What I think that everyone agrees upon is that from an expedition point of view, things went best when they worked together.

Dayton Duncan: Anybody who’s lived long enough has probably had friendships that were unlikely friendships. And you’re not exactly sure what it was that made it tick, but it did. There was a resonance between the two of them that augmented, you know, they were like tuning forks. Sometimes they’re going in opposite directions so nothing happens and other tuning forks, they get going and it makes the sound stronger and clearer. They were tuning forks that worked together.

Carolyn Gilman: The funny thing is that, to me, Clark was much more of the rational, 18th-century Enlightenment man, and Lewis was a man of the next century. He was much more of a romantic. So, I really think of Lewis as an
early 19th-century person and Clark as a late 18th-century person and the intersection of the two is fascinating to watch.

Stephen Dow Beckham: Meriwether Lewis was a bit condescending toward others, not only Native Americans, but other members of his party. He was, I think, a man who was aloof. He had one kindred spirit in the expedition, William Clark.

Elliot West: And part of our fascination with them is the way in which those two personalities interact with each other, and interact with the wilderness as they approach it. The melancholy Lewis and the gregarious Clark. Again, part of the appeal is, I think, together they form kind of the perfect hero.

Peter Coyote: We heard from Dayton Duncan, Carolyn Gilman of the Missouri Historical Society, Stephen Dow Beckham and University of Arkansas Professor Elliot West. Lewis’s most important friendship may have been with William Clark, but unlike Clark, Lewis never found a wife. During the journey, he at least hints at romance in one journal entry where he names a river after one “Maria Wood.”

The whole of my party to a man except myself were fully peswaided that this river was the Missouri, but being fully of opinion that it was neither the main stream or that which it would be advisable for us to take, I determined to give it a name and in honour of Miss Maria Wood, called it Maria’s River. It is true that the hue of the waters of this turbulent and troubled stream but illy comport with the pure, celestial virtues and amiable qualifications of that lovely fair one...

Meriwether Lewis, June 8, 1805

Peter Coyote: Who was “that lovely fair one”?

Clay Jenkinson: We’re not sure, but we know two things: Meriwether Lewis never married and the river is still named the Marias.

Am now a perfect widower with respect to love... I feel all that restlessness, that inquietude, that certain indiscernible something common to old bachelors, which I cannot avoid thinking my dear fellow, proceeds, from that void in our hearts which might, or ought to be better filled. Whence it comes I know not, but certain it is, that I never felt less like a hero than at the present moment.

Meriwether Lewis, [Letter to Mahlon Dickerson], November 3, 1807

Clay Jenkinson: Lewis courted a number of women after the expedition returned in 1806. He wrote that despondent message to a friend after one of many romantic rejections.

Peter Coyote: It’s hard to believe that the man who stood up to bears and other wild beasts, who successfully reached the West Coast and was the protégé of a president couldn’t find a wife.

Clay Jenkinson: Well, peter, we don’t really know very much about Lewis’ romantic life. In fact, in recent years, some scholars have raised the question of Lewis’ sexual orientation. These are imponderables. What we do know is Lewis said he was in search of a wife. If he were alive today, of course he could use modern technology to find a partner. Perhaps this is what his singles ad would have sounded like. You be the judge:
I’m a Single, White Male. A Captain in the U.S. Army who knows, heck, even shares wine, with the president. You might remember me from my famous expedition. My exploring days are over now, but I don’t intend to be a fusty, rusty musty old bachelor forever. No, I’m hunting a wife the way I once tracked buffalo on the Great Plains. By the way, speaking of buffalo, when I slept at the White House I covered the floor where I lay with buffalo skins. I wear bearskin robes, too. I’d shoot a bear for you, and then we could sleep in unbearable ecstasy. Oh, I’m too naughty!

Also, I’m a Leo—yes, a Lion—powerful, stubborn, a born leader who roamed to the Pacific. Which brings me to why the lucky Mrs. Lewis-to-be should respond quickly. My Great Map of the West is about to go to print, and I’d love to name a river after you. I did it for an old girlfriend—Maria—and I’d do it for you. How many men can promise you that, hmmm?

Speaking of ex’s—I mean friends—if you want to know more about me, write my friend William Clark. He shoots straight, runs rapids and once wrote a sensitive poem to me about gutting a mule deer. A real man’s man. Excuse me, I don’t mean a man’s man. He was just one of thirty guys on a trip. It’s not like we shared a tent...Okay, we did share a tent but look...forget Clark—I’m trying to...without crying.

But this is about me, Meriwether Lewis. To love me is to love boats, especially the boat I commanded. She needs some repairs, but I won’t rest until she’s fixed. We could take her on our honeymoon on that river named after you. Picture it: You. Me—a Leo. Buffalo and bearskin robes. Boudin blanc. Mmmmm.

Accompany me on a journey that will make up for my squandered past. Open my heart to life’s possibilities while I pay off a few debts. Then imagine: you, me, the boat, and oh, we’ll be bringing my 150-pound Newfoundland dog along. We’ll call it the Lewis and Lewis and Lewis Expedition, my sweet.

Peter Coyote: A comic satire from Portland writer Bob Balmer.

OK, we’ve had some fun at the expense of poor Meriwether... romance clearly wasn’t his forte. And we know he struggled with severe bouts of depression—more on that later. But Clay, in spite of that, how much of the Corps of Discovery’s success can we attribute to him?

Clay Jenkinson: It would be hard to overstate his achievement, beginning with the truly brilliant planning and provisioning of the expedition; his outstanding field descriptions of new plant and animal species; negotiating with American Indian tribes and taking down their vocabularies and ethnographic data; taking careful celestial observations in his attempt to determine latitude and longitude of key places on the landscape; his ability to describe things so accurately, as Jefferson put it, that it was as if you had seen them yourself; and, of course, holding the whole enterprise together through almost unbelievable challenges. All Lewis and Clark scholars marvel at Meriwether Lewis’s capacities.

John Logan Allen: His journals from Fort Clatsop are lengthy, extensive journals in which he does some of the most sophisticated, and really some of the best in a scientific sense, botanizing that he’s done on the entire expedition.

Dayton Duncan: Lewis is a great writer. When he describes something, you know it, you’ve been there. Although sometimes he tends to sort of swing for the fences, play to the crowd a little bit; he can get a little flowery sometimes. And his descriptions of a plant or an animal are very precise, very good. And he sometimes can give you a feel for how he’s feeling and therefore by projection, how everybody else is feeling.

Peter Coyote: We’ve just heard the distinguished Lewis and Clark geographer John Logan Allen and Dayton Duncan.
Clay Jenkinson: But as James Ronda tells us, this expedition across the continent was Lewis’ moment and afterwards nothing would ever be quite so satisfying.

James Ronda: For Meriwether Lewis there was one great journey, a journey that in many ways it seems to me undid him. What’s left? Others will make the journey. It was my journey. I owned it, I possessed it, it was mine, it’s my tour. How can I give that up? He is our archetypical frontier hero, made and then unmade by his encounter with the American West and the people of the West.

Peter Coyote: Coming up next--heading into the unknown is difficult, but something else may be worse.

[Victoria Murden:] The hardest part of a trip for me, by far, if I’m out for more than a month, is coming home.

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. You're listening to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition,” on PRI.

[Program Break: Aaron Meyer/Bill Lamb-Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition Soundtrack (Interlude)]

Our repast of this day tho’ better than that of Christmass, consisted principally in the anticipation of the 1st day of January 1807, when in the bosom of our friends we hope to participate in the mirth and hilarity of the day and when with the zest given by the recollection of the present, we shall completely, both mentally and corporally, enjoy the repast which the hand of civilization has prepared for us.

Meriwether Lewis, January 1, 1806

Peter Coyote: Lewis expected to spend his next New Year’s in Thomas Jefferson’s White House. And in fact, he reached Washington, D.C. on December 28th, 1806, after fulfilling President Jefferson’s instructions with great success. Clay, was the mission over at this point?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, Lewis got his New Year’s reception at the White House in 1807 and he was a suddenly a national hero. But there was one significant responsibility yet to fulfill and that was to write a book about his travels. From Jefferson’s point of view, the expedition wasn’t really finished until a book was written about Lewis’s discoveries, and for some reason or other, Lewis simply couldn’t write it.

Peter Coyote: This enduring puzzle has engaged scholars like James Holmberg at the Filson Historical Society in Louisville and Harry Fritz, a history professor at the University of Montana.

James Holmberg: This could have been one of the great travel and scientific accounts of all time. If he had done it, done it right, done it to the level of Cook and Vancouver and Bartram and some of the others, my goodness, this would have been magnificent. And instead he puts it off, and he puts it off, and he drinks, and he procrastinates some more.

And why this happened, we all kind of scratch our heads because he should have been able to do that.

Harry Fritz: He had, I think you’ll agree, the biggest case of writer’s block in American history and he just sat there in St Louis watching other people go up his river, as you’ve pointed out, and falling into a bigger and bigger funk and despair in the three years he had left for his life.
Clay Jenkinson: Lewis was never again fully comfortable with what he had called the “hand of civilization” after his experience in the wilderness. Like many other explorers, including contemporary ones from the American space program, Lewis had difficulty picking up the threads of his life after his return from the Pacific. To learn more about these re-entry issues, I interviewed a woman named Victoria Murden, who not only rowed solo across the Atlantic Ocean, but climbed Mount McKinley and skied to the South Pole.

Victoria Murden: The hardest part of a trip for me, by far, if I’m out for more than a month, is coming home. The point where the agendas of civilization and the activities of civilization just seem utterly absurd. I remember going from a rowboat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, completely alone—within twenty-four hours I was in New York City and it’s a shopping mall on steroids. And the most frightening part of the trip, by far, was that I had to go to Saks Fifth Avenue to get a haircut. There was a friend with me and I was like a horse at a barn fire, “Nooo! You can’t get me through that door!”

Clay Jenkinson: Is it partly that one day you’re doing something and it’s all focus and the next day it’s the incredible variety of stimulation—it’s twenty-seven deodorants in every store.

Victoria Murden: Right. It’s constant motion and very little focus, and what focus you get seems to be in directions of futility.

Clay Jenkinson: Lewis somehow felt that there was something that was indescribable, and that that was not only a frustration, but that was in a sense a source of pride. But what is inexpressible? What just can never be written about?

Victoria Murden: For myself there’s a scene that I have never written and not even attempted to write. And, it was...on my first solo journey—it was unsuccessful—I rowed 3,000 miles and was hit by a hurricane and capsized fifteen times in the course of the hurricane, two of the capsizes were end-over-end. And I have written that story. A few days after the storm, I set off a distress beacon to be rescued. The second trip I was going the easy way across the Atlantic from the coast of Africa to the Caribbean, Columbus’s route, and another hurricane forms. The night the hurricane arrived I go out on deck and I see these waves that look like shark’s teeth; they’re not waves I have ever seen before, and I am furious with God. I’m just beside myself, shrieking at God, “How dare you?! I’ve rowed another 3,000 miles, Guadeloupe’s 400 miles away, how could you slap me with another hurricane?!?” I have a scientific bent that recognizes that that was ridiculous, that the hurricane had absolutely nothing to do with me, I just was in the wrong place at the wrong time, again! There’s this sublime moment, this epiphany that this has nothing to do with God. This has to do with a failure I had in childhood for which I have not forgiven myself, and that all this striving, all this having to be bigger and stronger and faster than everybody else has to do with that one failure and what I need to do is forgive myself and get on with life. That description isn’t even close to what happened that night and I haven’t written it.

Peter Coyote: Solo adventurer and athlete Victoria Murden in conversation with Clay Jenkinson.

Dear Brother... when at Shelbyville today I saw in a Frankfort paper called the Arguss a report published which gives me much concern, it says that Governor Lewis killed himself...on his way between the Chick-saw Bluffs and Nashville. I fear this report has too much truth, though hope it may have no foundation... I fear, o! I fear the weight of his mind has overcome him, what will be the consequence?
William Clark, October 28, 1809
Peter Coyote: Meriwether Lewis died of gunshot wounds on October 11, 1809, on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee. He was 35 years old. Earlier in the program, we asked where Lewis spent the last night of his life. And the answer is a crude inn called Grinder’s Stand, about 70 miles from Nashville. There were no eyewitnesses to the shots that killed him. Most historians believe Lewis committed suicide. Certainly President Jefferson thought so, as he wrote four years later in a biographical sketch of Lewis:

> About 3-o’clock in the night he did the deed which plunged his friends into affliction and deprived his country of one of her most valued citizens.
> Thomas Jefferson, August 18, 1813

Dayton Duncan: I don’t like the thought of him alone there on the Natchez Trace, killing himself. But, I believe he did, most firmly. And I believe that the lesson we can learn from that is not to be ashamed or disgraced by it…And I believe that Meriwether Lewis is a hero. But I believe he was human and if we say well, he had this flaw and therefore he can’t be a hero because only perfect people can be heroes, nobody can be a hero because nobody’s perfect.

Peter Coyote: That’s Dayton Duncan. We can’t go back in time, but we can go back to the place where he died. Today, Grinder’s Stand, where Lewis is buried, doesn’t draw tourists like the expedition campsites on the route to the Pacific Ocean. But we sent correspondent Tanya Ott to see what she could learn there.

Tanya Ott: I grew up in Florida, so the explorers I knew well were Hernando de Soto, Cabeza de Vaca and Pedro Menendez de Aviles. When I got the assignment for this story, here’s what I knew about Meriwether Lewis. He and William Clark set out on a spectacular adventure in the early 1800’s, mapping uncharted territory from the Midwest to the Pacific Ocean. Oh yeah, and they took along the Indian woman Sacajawea. So I had a lot to learn and when I mentioned to my mother the many days I was spending in library and scouring the Net, she dropped a bombshell.

Mom: “Did you know you’re actually related to him? His father was your seventh great-grandmother’s brother.”

Tanya Ott: It’s a stretch, but it did fire me up to find out more about where Meriwether Lewis died. Which, it turns out, occurred just a few hours from my home in Alabama. So, I got in the car and drove over to the Natchez Trace Visitors Center in Tupelo, Mississippi.

> [sound of videotape at visitors center]

Ernie Price: “The Natchez Trace has always lent itself to folklore – a lot of bandits and robbers and thieves – some of which is based on truth and some of it is just larger than life. But that’s part of it and it’s always been a source of good writing – historical and fiction.”

Tanya Ott: But, says interpretive specialist Ernie Price, one of the biggest events on the Trace is the death of Meriwether Lewis just south of Nashville in 1809. Lewis ended up on the trace after setting out by land to travel to Washington, D.C.
Ernie Price: “You would have expected him to go all the way by water. And it was a little unorthodox to go over-land. There has been lots of speculations as to maybe why he did that.”

Tanya Ott: There were growing tensions with the British on the high seas. Some historians speculate that Lewis was afraid of losing important documents – including unpublished notes from the Corps of Discovery – if he took the traditional route through the Gulf of Mexico, around the tip of Florida and back up the Atlantic Coast. Whatever the reason, Lewis traveled to Memphis, picked up Major John Neelly, a Cherokee Indian agent, and started back up the Trace towards D.C.

Ernie Price: “When Neelly and Lewis are traveling up the trace, as often happened with Trace travelers, the horses got loose. And so Neelly goes out to round up the horses. The horses don’t go that far. But you can lose a half a day or so easily tracking down a wayward horse. Well, what happens is now Lewis is traveling on ahead, alone, and even the servants are behind. So when Lewis actually comes to Grinder’s Stand, he actually arrives alone. Not with any servants, he’s ahead of them, and not with Neelly. So, as it turns out that night there would be no witnesses to the shots being fired.”

Tanya Ott: Now at the site where Grinder’s Stand stood, there’s no trace of the violence that took place that night, just a simple memorial. You’d think that the burial site of a major historic figure might be a natural tourist draw for nearby Hohenwald, Tennessee. But it’s not and the region hasn’t seen a big boom even during this bicentennial of the expedition. Maybe that’s because it’s such an understated place, rightly reflecting a tragic moment. And while some in economically-depressed Hohenwald believe the Lewis gravesite could become a bigger tourist attraction with the right marketing, many are pinning their hopes on a more cheerful cultural attraction: the nearby Swiss Gingerbread Village.

Barbara Coats: “We’ve been here about ten months. (Tanya Ott: And how’s it going?) Great! Fantastic! We’re getting all kinds of tourists.”

Barbara Coats manages the Village... a collection of small wood shacks, built by the local Mennonites and stocked full of handicrafts, homemade jellies, quilts and other goodies that harken back to an earlier time.

Barbara Coats: “We’re getting all kinds of local people. And it’s just taken really good.”

Tanya Ott: Coats’ enthusiasm is infectious, as she takes me on a tour of the Haus of Stitches, the Doll Haus, and the Discount Avon Haus... that’s H-A-U-S in honor of the German and Swiss immigrants who settled Hohenwald back in the mid-1800s.

Barbara Coats: “My boss, the one that owns this place, she sent a letter to Dolly Parton and sent snapshots and everything of our village and hopefully we might be able to get her to come down here and take a look, you know – that’d be nice!”

Tanya Ott: The big rumor round these parts is that Dolly is looking to expand her theme park empire to central Tennessee. Folks in Hohenwald have started a letter writing campaign and Meriwether Lewis’s gravesite figures into the marketing plan, but I find it hard to juxtapose Lewis’ quiet, somber gravesite with a Hollywood-type theme park....
It’s a quiet place. The day I visit, I spend a half hour alone, walking the grounds, the only one on site. There are a few other graves, but Lewis’s is the one that stands out.

It’s a very peaceful location. I’m standing on a big expanse of grass circular with oak trees overhead. The monument sits in the middle, stacked stone, about ten feet tall, with an additional half-shaft protruding from the top. At the foot of the monument, there’s an American flag and someone has placed silk flowers, red, white and blue flowers in a red basket.

I’m eventually joined by a couple who pull up in their car.

Chuck Cisco: “I’m Chuck Cisco, from New Market, Alabama.”

Tanya Ott: Cisco and his wife Rhonda aren’t run-of-the-mill tourists who just happened on this place. They have traveled several hours just to see the Lewis Monument, and they’ve done a lot of thinking about what this place means.

Chuck Cisco: “It’s pretty awesome. The pioneer cemetery and the monument is very fitting of what people would expect someone of his caliber to have. It’s an awesome place.”

Rhonda Cisco: “It is a beautiful, beautiful part of history that everybody needs to bring their family and share with them because this is our heritage. This is the heritage of the South and I think it’s something that we should cherish.”

Tanya Ott: Maybe something would be lost here, though, if this place was overrun by people seeking yet another “been there, done that” photo for the vacation album. Maybe part of our heritage... my heritage, if Lewis was truly one of my ancestors... is better preserved as a quiet spot for those want to contemplate the tragedy of Lewis’ life, as well as the glory. On the Natchez Trace, I’m Tanya Ott.

Peter Coyote: Questions never answered... a book never written... the tragic end of a man proclaimed a hero in his own lifetime... but a man who never was quite able to return from the mission that put his name forever in the history books. To close, we ask Clay Jenkinson for his final thoughts on the life and death of Meriwether Lewis.

Clay Jenkinson: The part of Lewis’s suicide that troubles us most is the possibility that his tragedy somehow calls into question the expedition he so admirably led, or calls into question the project of the American people to explore, conquer, and domesticate the interior of the continent. If Lewis’s suicide somehow casts a shadow over the American experiment or at least over Jefferson’s dreams, what is it that we are expected to learn from puzzling over the demons and the fractures that led him to take his own life? It seems clear that Lewis embodies something at the core of the American Western experience. But what do his troubled life and premature death signify?

Something was broken in the soul of Meriwether Lewis. President Jefferson believed it was broken before the journey. When they learned that Lewis had taken his own life, both Jefferson and Clark were shocked but not particularly surprised. That tells us a lot. They did not doubt the suicide. Those who wish to locate Lewis’s disintegration as an eleventh hour nervous breakdown—no more or less than the result of tensions relating to his governorship—have not read the journals with much care.

The environmental essayist Barry Lopez has asked, “How far can you venture out, and still successfully come back?”

It seems clear that Lewis went too far. Nobody doubts that he had re-entry issues. And yet, William Clark made the same immense journey, ventured out-geographically at least-just as far, and he had no difficulty returning to civilized life. Partly for that reason, the bicentennial has been William Clark’s time. He’s the normal one, with
both feet planted firmly on the ground, while Lewis had the habit of spinning out of control. Clark is the nice one, while Lewis is increasingly seen as edgy, detached, and capable of nastiness. And Clark liked Sacagawea. That, during the bicentennial, seems to be the ultimate test of character on the Lewis and Clark trail. And yet it would be a profound mistake to let Clark displace Meriwether Lewis for very long.

It was, after all, Lewis who planned the expedition, and the planning and provisioning of not one but two crossings of the American continent was a work of real genius. It is easy to take that for granted, but the immense success of the expedition owes more to the advance planning than to any other factor.

It was Lewis who knew President Jefferson intimately, and who came to embody Jefferson’s great vision. That’s what makes the Lewis and Clark Expedition so high-minded, so much more admirable in every way than the other American exploration missions of the time. The expedition was Jefferson’s baby and Lewis was Jefferson’s protégé.

And finally, it was Lewis who really let the American West percolate into his innermost soul. If you’ve been listening carefully over the past hour to the journal passages written by Lewis, you will agree, I think, that they have a beauty and a lyricism, a mindfulness and a presence that no other writer of the expedition can reach. He was a man with an astonishing capacity to turn the American continent into English prose.

Is there any one fully alive who ventures alone into the outback of the American West, and goes silent long enough to drink it all in, who does not feel that uncanny magnificence that is solely and uniquely available in America? The 17th century philosopher John Locke said, ‘In the beginning, all the world was America.’

Meriwether Lewis put himself alone into the heart of the heart of that America, and it shook his being right to the core. He experienced what Hamlet calls “thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls,” and then he struggled to put them on paper. In some essential way he speaks for everyone who has ever ventured out into Montana or Oregon or Dakota with an open spirit.

On his way back after the great enchanted day of June 14, 1805, Lewis actually thought he might be dreaming... until he stepped on the prickly pears of the Great Falls region.

Meriwether Lewis’s greatness is that he invites us to go out and dream for ourselves.

For the Unfinished Journey, I’m Clay Jenkinson.

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. This program was produced by Oregon Public Broadcasting and Lewis & Clark College. The producer is Eve Epstein, audio engineer Steven Kray, associate producer Sherry Manning. Original music composed and conducted by Aaron Meyer and Bill Lamb. The executive producers are Clay Jenkinson and Morgan Holm. Major funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding was provided by the National Park Service and the Jonsson Family Foundation. Support for this program also comes from this station and Public Radio International stations and is made possible in part by the PRI program fund whose contributors include the Ford Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

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