EPISODE 107: ENCOUNTERS OF THE EXPEDITION: LANDSCAPES, PEOPLE AND SELF

Peter Coyote: Welcome to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition” from PRI, Public Radio International. I’m Peter Coyote. In this hour, we explore encounters: encounters with the land, the people, language.

Courtney Yellowfat: [Speaks in Lakota] I am the Wolf Nation, standing visible.

Peter Coyote: Join me as we experience the encounters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition after the day’s news.

Allison Frost: Welcome to this edition of the Latest Tidings, a special feature produced in cooperation with the National Intelligencer. In 1806, it’s been America’s Newspaper for six years. I’m Allison Frost.

This time, we’re looking at the latest battle of the Corps of Discovery, a daring exploration of the Western territory, led by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Two Blackfeet Indians have met their deaths at the hands of Meriwether Lewis and his men. The party is well into the journey President Jefferson sent them on in May of 1804. They have faced harsh conditions and encountered many Indian tribes, but up until recently the party has avoided violent confrontation. We caught up with the Captain Lewis on a rare quiet evening after he was safely back at camp.

Captain Lewis, tell us what happened. Where did the battle occur and who besides yourself was involved?

Meriwether Lewis: Well, I had the Fields brothers, Joseph and Reuben, with me as we rode toward Rose River; Drouillard was further down the valley. I had intended to descend that stream to its confluence with the Marias River. I had scarcely ascended the hills before I discovered about a mile away an assemblage of 30 horses. With my spy glass I discovered several Indians on top of an eminence nearby. This was a very unpleasant sight, however I resolved to make the best of the situation and to approach them in a friendly manner. When the party approached, I counted eight of them but still supposed that there were others concealed as there were several other horses saddled. I thought it best to please them, so I gave one a medal, to a second a flag and to the third a handkerchief.

Allison Frost: But they didn’t like the gifts?
Meriwether Lewis: Oh no, they appeared well satisfied with them. With the assistance of Drouillard, I had much conversation with these people in the course of the evening, and they invited us to partake of their shelter.

Allison Frost: What happened next?

Meriwether Lewis: Well, I directed Reuben Fields to watch the movement of the Indians while I slept since I suspected they might attempt to steal our horses. I slept until the noise of the men and Indians awoke me a little after morning light. The Indians crowded around the fire and one of the Indians picked up Joseph Fields’ gun, which he had carelessly laid down.

Allison Frost: And then?

Meriwether Lewis: Joseph Fields called to his brother who instantly jumped up and pursued the Indian with him. Reuben Fields overtook one of the Indians after about 50 paces and wrested the gun from him. In doing so, he stabbed the Indian to the heart with his knife. The fellow ran about 15 steps and fell dead. I reached to seize my gun but found her gone, so I drew my pistol and ran at the Indian making off with it. He laid down the gun at my command. Drouillard asked if he might not kill the fellow who took his gun but I forbade that as the Indian did not appear to wish to kill us.

Allison Frost: Only to steal your horses?

Meriwether Lewis: This is what I thought. I now hollered to the men to fire on the Indians if they attempted to drive off our horses, and we pursued the main party who were driving horses up the river. I called to them that I would shoot them if they did not give me my horse. One jumped behind a rock and spoke to the other who turned around and stopped about 30 paces from me. I shot him through the belly.

Allison Frost: And he was killed?

Meriwether Lewis: Apparently, he died later, but at that moment, he fell to his knees and on his right elbow, from which position he fired at me.

Allison Frost: Were you hurt?

Meriwether Lewis: No, he overshot me. But being bare-headed, I felt the wind of his bullet very distinctly.

AF: What a chilling story!

Meriwether Lewis: Yes. I retook the flag we had given but left the medal about the neck of the dead man that they might be informed who we were. We immediately set out for the entrance of the Marias River in the hope of meeting with the rest of our party. We rode until about two o’clock in the morning, covering about 20 miles before we laid ourselves down to rest in the plain very much fatigued.

Allison Frost: That was Captain Meriwether Lewis, speaking with us about the Corps of Discovery’s deadly encounter with a group of Blackfeet Indians. Since we spoke to the Captain, the Latest Tidings has been able to talk (with the help of a sign interpreter) to one of the Indians the party encountered on that fateful night. A young Blackfeet Indian named Wolf Calf says he and his seven companions were not on the “war path,” but were in fact
on a mission to liberate horses. As for the expedition’s guns, says Wolf Calf, the Blackfeet needed them for defense against enemy tribes, which the explorers said they had made friends with and whom the Blackfeet expected would soon have those advanced American weapons. Further, the Indians say they meant Lewis and his men no harm, and Wolf Calf points out, they could have easily scalped the explorers in their sleep, if they had wanted to. In any event, this deadly conflict was the only one of its kind the Corps of Discovery has experienced since heading west from St. Charles more than two years ago.

And that concludes this edition of the Latest Tidings. I’m Allison Frost. Our program is produced in cooperation with the National Intelligencer. For 6 years, it’s been America’s Newspaper, since 1800.

[Theme Music under]

Peter Coyote: When we talk about encounters, I think of the more than 50 Indian tribes Lewis and Clark met.

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, but that’s just the beginning. They had encounters with animals, with new ecosystems, with the limits of the English language, and in the end, encounters with themselves.

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.

Joining me as our guide to the encounters Lewis and Clark experienced is Clay Jenkinson, humanities scholar-in-residence at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. Clay, what do we mean when talk about an “encounter”?

Clay Jenkinson: Encounters—with land, people, language, and with self—are really at the heart of this great expedition. Lewis and Clark met more than 50 Indian tribes and had different sorts of encounters with each of them—some highly successful and some difficult. Encounters with landscapes—a range of ecosystems spread across an entire continent, some ecosystems that were entirely new to their imaginations and their experience. Encounters with the English language—Lewis particularly wrestled with trying to capture in prose some of the magnificent things that he discovered in the American West. And of course, as with all long journeys, encounters with self—self-doubt, one’s self-identity, one’s place in the larger scheme of the history of exploration and one’s ability to return to civilization after so important a set of experiences and adventures. The great expert on this subject is James Ronda of the University of Tulsa.

James Ronda: One of the best ways to begin to think about that American encounter, that American conversation, is to look at this emblematic journey...and it is emblematic because it is an encounter, an encounter that is rich in detail and complex, filled with confusion and misunderstanding and cooperation, friendship offered and friendship withheld, as complex and as intricate as any that one can find in any national history or individual life. So let me say it to you again, this is a human community moving through the lands and lives of other human communities.

Peter Coyote: Later in our program we’ll explore encounters with people, but let’s begin with Lewis and Clark’s encounters with the land. Clay, what were the expedition leaders expecting to find as they headed west?

Clay Jenkinson: The most important thing to remember is that Meriwether Lewis was a protégé of Thomas Jefferson. And Jefferson, although he never traveled into the West, had very strong opinions about how it ought to be developed and some strong preconceptions about what was there. For Jefferson, the interior of the continent was a kind of a garden of Eden, where family farmers would grow crops for subsistence and sell a little extra at the end of
the year to buy things from the marketplace. These farmers would be ideal citizens who were minding their own business, farming their fields modestly by day and perhaps reading Homer in the original Greek at night, and that their relations to government would be skeptical but benign, that there would be a diffusion of the best Enlightenment thinking and principles across the continent slowly and compactly and that somehow the West would redeem the American experiment again and again in the course of its history.

James Ronda: What Lewis and Clark discover is the diversity of Western environments. Jefferson thought about the West as having pretty much a single environment. What they discover is environmental regional diversity. That’s not what the President of the United States wanted to hear. ‘Mr. President, there is no Northwest Passage as you imagined it. We did not find native people who would be so eager to become junior partners in an American alliance. We sought simplicity and found complexity.’

The country is hilley and rugged and the earth of a lightish brown and but indifferent, some small cedar is scattered on the sides of the hils and in the hollars, some pine ridges is also to be seen on the north side.  
William Clark, May 12, 1805

The sides of these mountains present generally one barren surface of confused and broken masses of stone. Above these are white or brown and towards the base of a grey colour and so hard that when struck with a stell, yeald fire like flint.  
Meriwether Lewis, August 23, 1805

Peter Coyote: How unexpected were these discoveries for Lewis and Clark, Clay? Were they surprised by what they found?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, to a degree they were. They were surprised in some places by the lack of trees, for example, or the sheer height of the prairie grasses. To them, many of the ecosystems through which they passed were entirely new. Here’s Stephen Dow Beckham, history professor at Lewis & Clark College.

Stephen Dow Beckham: Once they began the ascent of the Missouri, they entered a totally new experience, certainly new for them. They came into the great steppe plain of the central part of North America that reaches from the Great Lakes or the Canadian Shield all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. There were new critters there: bison, grizzly bears, wolves, prairie dogs, and types of fish in the rivers that they had not previously encountered and there was a wholly different native American life way.

Once Lewis and Clark left the Great Falls of the Missouri they began to enter the forested slopes of the Rocky Mountains and they moved into an exceedingly rugged environment with a hunting-gathering life way for native peoples but sufficient elevation that it could freeze any night of the year. As they came down out of the Bitterroots, they entered another biotic province, the Columbia Plateau, the great interior of the Pacific Northwest. And then as they passed through the Columbia Gorge they entered yet another biotic province. The Northwest Coast rainforest environment had a different native American lifeway, it had different temperature and weather patterns, and it had, of course, very heavy vegetation. Each of these settings required some mental adjustment.

Peter Coyote: Lewis and Clark traversed such a variety of landscapes in the course of their journey. What challenges did they encounter along the way?

Clay Jenkinson: Physical challenges, of course—bodily injury, fatigue, hunger, the need to force thirty tons of equipment all the way across the landscape of the American West. Encounters with peoples whose languages
they did not speak and who did not speak English. But more importantly, they had encounters with what might be called the unexpected. There was a daily challenge every time they tried to take up the pen to describe something for the first time. This was a special burden on all of them, but it was Meriwether Lewis, the leader, who felt it most acutely when he reached the Great Falls of the Missouri River in today’s Montana:

> Between this abrupt extremity of the ledge of rocks and the perpendicular bluff the whole body of water passes with incredible swiftness...the remaining part of about 200 yards on my right formes the grandest sight I ever beheld....[F]rom the reflection of the sun on the spray or mist which arrises from these falls there is a beautiful rainbow produced which adds not a little to the beauty of this majestically grand senery....
> [Meriwether Lewis, June 13, 1805]

Clay Jenkinson: Lewis’s description goes on for pages, but the sheer beauty, the sublimity of the Great Falls left him feeling inadequate to his task.

> After wrighting this imperfect discription I again viewed the falls and was so much disgusted with the imperfect idea which it conveyed of the scene that I determined to draw my pen across it and begin agin, but then reflected that I could not perhaps succeed better than penning the first impressions of the mind.
> Meriwether Lewis, June 13, 1805

James Ronda: I think that here Lewis is struggling with a way to find a language to describe a transcendent moment for him. And this is a multi-media experience. This is sight and sound. This is an extraordinary moment for him.

Dayton Duncan: He had been beggared with the power of description. He tried mightily, and I think very well, actually, to say what a beautiful sight this was of this great cataract coming over the rocks.

Peter Coyote: Lewis and Clark expert James Ronda, and Dayton Duncan, co-producer of Ken Burns’ documentary on Lewis and Clark.

Allegiances
By William Stafford

It is time for all the heroes to go home
if they have any, time for all of us common ones
to locate ourselves by the real things
we live by.

Far to the north, or indeed in any direction,
strange mountains and creatures have always lurked-
elves, goblins, trolls, and spiders: we
encounter them in dread and wonder.

But once we have tasted far streams, touched the gold,
found some limit beyond the waterfall,
a season changes, and we come back, changed
but safe, quiet, grateful.

Suppose an insane wind holds all the hills
while strange beliefs whine at the traveler’s ears,
we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love
where we are, sturdy for common things.

Peter Coyote: The poem “Allegiances” was written by William Stafford and read by his son, Kim Stafford who is the director of the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College.

Clay Jenkinson: That’s difficult—not from written accounts by Indians at the time—but there are oral stories that have been passed down and more frankly are resurfacing every day. And there’s an intriguing passage in a journal kept by a member of the British North West Company, Charles McKenzie, about Plains Indian responses to the men of the expedition.

“White people,” said they, “do not know how to live—they leave their homes in small parties; they risk their lives on great waters, and among strange nations.”

Charles McKenzie

Peter Coyote: James Ronda, who has done extensive research on the Lewis and Clark encounters, says that among other things Indians viewed the expedition members as curiosities.

James Ronda: In many ways, up the Missouri and across the mountains and down the sea to the Columbia, Lewis and Clark are a tourist attraction. Native American moms and dads bring their kids to look at the strangers who are here, and then they’re gone. Strangers who bring extraordinary objects, who don’t always know the rules about behavior and about what’s good manners—they’re tourists.

Peter Coyote: Stephen Dow Beckham and Dayton Duncan give us some insights into the encounters between tribes and the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Stephen Dow Beckham: There are encounters with more than fifty tribes that probably have had no Euro-American contact previously.

Garrison Keillor: Kickapoo...Oto...Missouri...Yankton Sioux...Teton Sioux...Arikara...Omaha...Mandan...Christaneo...Cree...Cheyenne...Assiniboine...Hidatsa...Shoshone...Flathead...Salish...Nez Perce....

Dayton Duncan: Differences between the tribes were greater than that of French and Germans, and Swedes and Englishmen, and yet somehow they were all trying in the ways that they could to reach some sort of accommodation—sometimes out of self-interest and sometimes just from the heart.

Garrison Keillor: Wanapam...Yakima...Walula...Umatilla....
Stephen Dow Beckham: There are encounters of communication dimension that were very difficult. So Lewis and Clark would clear off a piece of sand and take a stick and draw the course of a river and then try to ferret out the names of villages or peoples by sign language from their informants.

Garrison Keillor: Wishram...Skilloot...Cathlapotle...Wahkiakum...Cathlamet....

Stephen Dow Beckham: They were trying to gain a sense of who lives there and what is the lay of the land, but only through the most rudimentary forms of communication.

Garrison Keillor: Chinook...Clatsop...Chehalis...Tillamook...Multnomah...Shahala...Watlalah...Cashhook...Willacum...Klickitat...Clatskanie...Skeetswish...Blackfeet...Crow...Atsina...Cowlitz...Arapaho...Piegan...Osage...Gros Ventre.

Peter Coyote: There’s more on the encounters Lewis and Clark had with native people. Later, we’ll hear about efforts to preserve native languages as some of the last remaining speakers teach new generations.

Irene Seltice Lowly: It comes from the heart, the language does. You can say things in English that doesn’t sound like you mean it. When it’s said in Indian, it’s final.

Peter Coyote: More on that after a short break. But first let’s test your knowledge of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: which member of the expedition was inspired by a dream to name a creek in present-day Nebraska? The answer might surprise you.
I’m Peter Coyote. You’re listening to “Unfinished Journey” on PRI.

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

In all your intercourse with the natives treat them in the most friendly & conciliatory manner which their own conduct will admit; allay all jealousies as to the object of your journey, satisfy them of its innocence, make them acquainted with the position, extent, character, peaceable and commercial dispositions of the United States, of our wish to be neighborly, friendly & useful to them, & of our dispositions to a commercial intercourse with them.

Thomas Jefferson, Letter of Instruction to Meriwether Lewis

Peter Coyote: Clay, why was Jefferson so interested in Lewis and Clark’s encounters with tribes?

Clay Jenkinson: Thomas Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment. He had been curious about the nature of American Indians from his earliest childhood. He studied their languages. He wanted to know about their cultures. He wanted to know what place they occupied in the chain of human existence and what they expressed about the history of North America. Jefferson was curious about almost everything, but particularly about the people Lewis and Clark would meet.

Peter Coyote: So tell me more about those human encounters. How did they work out?

Clay Jenkinson: On the whole, pretty well, but there were a few tense encounters. By far the most successful of all of the encounters of Lewis and Clark was with the Shoshone. Lewis and Clark were pragmatists. They knew they needed horses. That’s why they brought Sacagawea along with them, so that when they reached the Shoshone she
could negotiate for the horses they would need to cross the Rocky Mountains. That encounter worked out really well.

_We had not continued our rout more than a mile when we were so fortunate as to meet with three female savages...I took the elderly woman by the hand and raised her up repeated the word tab-ba-bone and strip up my shirt sleeve to sew her my skin; to prove to her the truth of the ascertainment that I was a white man for my face and hands which have been constantly exposed to the sun were quite as dark as their own. They appeared instantly reconciled and the men coming up I gave these women some beads a few mockerson awls some pewter looking-glasses and a little paint...I now painted their tawny cheeks with some vermilion which with this nation is emblematic of peace._

_Meriwether Lewis, August 13, 1805_

Peter Coyote: Clay, you mentioned some tense encounters. Did any of them turn violent?

Clay Jenkinson: On the return journey in 1806, Meriwether Lewis went with just three of his men into the heart of Blackfeet country in northern Montana. While there he had an encounter that he hadn’t expected with eight young Blackfeet men. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a bloody one. It’s one of the most dramatic incidents in the Lewis and Clark Expedition and I asked University of Montana history professor Harry Fritz to describe what happened.

Harry Fritz: He encounters about eight Blackfeet Indian boys on the banks of Two Medicine Creek. They meet rather unexpectedly and they can’t avoid each other. And Lewis talks to them and gives them some medals and has dinner with them, posts a guard. And then to hear Lewis tell it, he wakes up in the morning to sounds of a scuffle. The Indians, he said, are trying to make off with his party’s rifle and horses. There is a scuffle between Joseph Field, one of his men, and a Blackfeet Indian. Field pulls out a knife and stabs the Indian in the heart. Lewis chases two other Blackfeet over to a little gully, a ravine, shoots one of them in the stomach. We know from Blackfeet Indian sources that that boy also died. So, there are two Indian fatalities.

Peter Coyote: Communication had to be one of the underlying problems not just in that encounter with the Blackfeet but with all of the tribes.

Clay Jenkinson: That’s the problem. This is an inevitable and unavoidable issue. Lewis and Clark were discoverers. They were having first encounters with a range of peoples. Lewis himself only spoke English. The tribes did not speak any English and the interpreters that were go-betweens in this set of communications were highly imperfect men who sometimes didn’t understand either language very well. So the problem of communication is absolutely central to any misunderstandings that occurred during this expedition.

_Meriwether Lewis: We come on behalf of the Great Father to talk about peace and trade. [Same phrase repeated in several languages]_

Peter Coyote: That’s a sampling of just a few of the languages the expedition encountered on the journey.

Clay Jenkinson: And don’t forget sign language, which they also used.

Peter Coyote: Yes, but signing doesn’t come across very well on radio!
We feel much at a loss for the want of an interpreter the one we have can speek but little.
William Clark, September 25, 1804

Peter Coyote: Clark sounds concerned there.

Clay Jenkinson: That passage foreshadows one of the most difficult encounters the expedition ever had, with the Teton Sioux in today's South Dakota. The Sioux were a powerful nation and a key trading force in the region, and they clearly expected to be given more goods than the expedition was willing to hand over. Things did not go well. Weapons were drawn at one point. And although there was no bloodshed, there easily could have been. Clark named an island near the site of this encounter “Bad-humored Island.”

Peter Coyote: This was not a high point of the journey. A lack of preparation nearly led to disaster. What would have happened if the expedition had a better interpreter? Conventional wisdom suggests that things would have gone a lot better, but Elliot West, distinguished professor of history at the University of Arkansas, takes a different view.

Elliot West: Would the story have turned out differently if Lewis and Clark had taken along a Sioux interpreter? You bet it would have. Things would have gone a lot worse. The captains came away from their brush along the Missouri thinking the Sioux were saucy primitives, brave but unpredictable and violent, prone to duplicity and theft. The impression was unflattering, but we need to keep in mind that Lewis and Clark came into the country with the natural tendency to project onto everyone they met their own values and view of the world. Sure, they saw the Sioux as exotic and odd, as scalp-waving dog-eaters, yet they assumed such behavior was a relatively slight departure from a baseline of normality they thought was shared by everybody everywhere. They had no idea of just how far away the Sioux were in their views of the world and of proper behavior.

Would the captains have dealt with the Sioux differently—less respectfully—had an interpreter told them that the Sioux claimed to converse with coyotes and considered magpies their friendly protectors and classified people and bears as something like first cousins, fellow two-leggeds set apart from other animals? Would they have been crankier and more inclined to fight had they heard that their hosts thought they were ungrateful, ill-mannered bumpkins?

For their part the Sioux would not have liked what they heard. Lewis and Clark were visiting the Sioux pursuant to Jefferson's order to cultivate trade relations with all the Indians they met. The goal was a system of trade anchored in St. Louis and reaching up the Missouri and over to the Pacific, with profits flowing vigorously to American merchants. But there already was a system of trade. It ran from the Spanish in the southwest to the British in the northeast, and the Sioux on the Missouri River were its middlemen and kingpins. By hosting Lewis and Clark, the Sioux probably were hoping to bring the Americans into their system on their terms, and when the captains insisted on leaving and heading upstream to the Mandans, the Sioux’s economic underlings, Sioux leaders likely sensed a rebuff and a challenge to their position.

How much worse things might have been if an interpreter had turned up the flow of information into a detailed, candid exchange among the players. As Lewis and Clark made clear their president’s intentions and the roles they were assigning to Western tribes, the response would likely have been the Sioux equivalent of: “Say WHAT?!” What would have followed is anybody's guess, but it probably would not have been pretty.

But the intentions of each side were kept safely out of focus. The Sioux made a desultory move to keep the corps close; Lewis and Clark pushed back and got away. No big deal. Things never really heated up because, in that famous line from Cool Hand Luke, “What we got here is a failure to communicate.” And for Lewis and Clark, that was a very good thing!
Peter Coyote: How did the tribes view these encounters? Roberta Conner of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla explains how their traditions describe the encounter with Lewis and Clark.

Roberta Conner: When they’re in our country, Lewis and Clark are well beyond the boundaries of the United States, well beyond the boundaries of the Louisiana Purchase, and it’s our country. None but us there. Lewis and Clark were of enormous consequence, but at the moment they were peculiar, they were precarious, and they were strange. But our people had been greeting travelers for thousands of years and we had been great hosts to a host of people before them. So in that sense it was not unusual for us to welcome and be kind and hospitable, to take care of them indeed so that they could keep going and move on.

[Scratchy recording of women’s voices]

Peter Coyote: That’s Mrs. Holding Eagle, a Mandan, recorded onto wax cylinders about 100 years after Lewis and Clark by the ethnographer Frances Densmore. This copy is held by the State Historical Society of North Dakota-Densmore Collection.

Today, many of the Indian languages that Lewis and Clark encountered on their journey are in danger of dying out, part of a worldwide phenomenon. The United Nations estimates that half the world’s 6,000 languages will disappear in less than a century. One of the benefits of the bicentennial commemoration of the Lewis and Clark Expedition has been the increased attention to language preservation among many North American Indian tribes. As correspondent Elizabeth Wynne Johnson reports, tribes are trying to preserve their language by making sure the last speakers teach a new generation the words and stories of their ancestors.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: A 1991 recording captures the true pacing and pronunciation of the Coeur d’Alene language. [recording plays] That’s tribal language authority, Lawrence Nicodemus, and he’s reciting the Lord’s Prayer. Nicodemus died in 2004. The Coeur d’Alenes don’t have many native speakers left. Four, to be exact. Three of them are sitting at a table with me, and they’re all over the age of eighty.

Irene Seltice Lowly: I am 87 years old, and he’s younger than I am, I think. How old are you, Felix?

Felix Aripa: Well, I’ll be going on 82.

Irene Seltice Lowly: See? I am, I am the oldest. I think I’m older than you.

Lovenia: Yeah, I’m 85.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: For two hours each week, Irene, Felix and Lovenia get together and talk. They share stories, they laugh a lot and find a little time to discuss things like grammar and vocabulary, all under the watchful gaze of a video camera and a microphone. Today there are two microphones, if you count the one in my hand. The elders are creating a digital archive. It’s a key part of the Coeur d’Alene tribe’s effort to preserve and revitalize what’s left of its language. And not a moment too soon. Linguists estimate more than 90 percent of native languages in the Northwest are on the verge of extinction. Janne Underriner is director of the Northwest Indian Language Institute at the University of Oregon.

Janne Underriner: As we see the passing on of elders, we don’t have ten, fifteen years left anymore.
Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: That’s worrisome from a scholarly perspective, says Underriner, because language makes a unique contribution to human knowledge.

Janne Underriner: It offers us and it offers the greater world a window of seeing how another group of people think about the world and frame their world and relate to the world. And when languages go, we lose that insight.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: But when I put the question to the elders – why does it really matter if a language disappears? – it’s clear the loss is more personal. Felix Aripa grew up hearing it from his grandmother.

Felix Aripa: The way she spoke the Coeur d’Alene language it was just like music. It was just music to person’s ears, the way they pronounce the words, the up and down – that was just real, true music.

Irene Seltice Lowly: It comes from the heart, the language does. You can say things in English that doesn’t sound like you mean it. When it’s said in Indian, it’s final.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: Irene Seltice Lowly also learned the language from her elders. But she didn’t teach it to her sons – a decision she now regrets.

Irene Seltice Lowly: I’m not ashamed of the language. It’s just that it’s a little bit late to make up for what I failed to do for my children in learning the language because they said that, why should they learn now, when I didn’t bother to teach them when they were small.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: In a classroom at the local high school, I join a handful of teenagers and adults folded into little desks. This is Coeur d’Alene 101. Laura Stensgar-Mokri is here so she can pass the language on to her children.

Laura Stensgar-Mokri: Learning basic things like ‘Good morning’ [repeated in native language], ‘Good evening’ [repeated in native language], counting in numbers [repeated in native language]. Just using the words in each day, every day.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: Most of the students still struggle with pronouns and verbs. But they already get that language conveys what’s most important in the culture, like in a simple introduction. I asked each student to begin by saying their name and where they’re from. Janine Sayler explained why that just isn’t the way they talk.

Janine Sayler: If you didn’t live here and you came and people didn’t know who you were, you would introduce yourself and say, ‘My grandmother is so-and-so, or my grandfather.’ You even say my maternal grandmother or my paternal grandfather. That’s how people know who you are. If you just come and say ‘I’m somebody and I live someplace else,’ we still don’t know who you are. But if you say who your family is, then we know where you came from and a little bit of your history.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: Beyond the cultural norms, the Coeur d’Alene language is just plain hard. To my unfamiliar ear, all the clicking consonants and glottal stops can sound kind of harsh. Apparently, Lewis and Clark thought the same thing. They ran into a group of natives speaking Salish, the same linguistic family as the Coeur d’Alenes, on a riverbank back two hundred years ago. Expedition member John Ordway pronounced the language “troublesome.”
John Ordway: These natives have the Strages language of any we have ever yet Seen. They appear to us though they had an Impediment in their Speech or brogue on their tongue.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: I went to Ray Brinkman, the director of the Coeur d’Alene language program, to better understand this process of encountering and documenting language.

Ray Brinkman: Coeur d’Alene has lots of consonants in the back of the throat which are very hard for English speakers to distinguish. And there’s no question that if Lewis and Clark heard guttural sounds, that’s exactly what they were hearing – lots of sounds made in the back of the throat. [demonstrates]

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: That spot in the back of the throat where, in English, we make a “k” and that’s about it – the Coeur d’Alene’s make nine different consonant sounds. I’m surprised to learn that Brinkman, a self-described “white guy from Montana,” is one of the people who can distinguish those sounds. He’s dedicated himself to the task of keeping the Coeur D’Alene language alive.

Ray Brinkman: We couldn’t have a closet full of tape recordings that are excellent and call that the language preserved. We need to revitalize it, truly get people to use it, to coin their own sentences, not merely to repeat what they’ve heard, and start using it in creative and interesting ways.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: So, for example, the elders get together and they record themselves. How do they even describe what they’re doing? We’re recording this right now, how would we describe what we’re doing?

Ray Brinkman: With humor, generally. The language has the resources to evolve. So the Coeur d’Alenes had the elements within the language to make a word for “car.” What they chose to do was say [in native language], which means “It looks like it has wrinkled feet,” referring to the tire tracks in the mud.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: And so, making a mechanical recording of something, what would that be?

Ray Brinkman: Uh, that’s a good question. See, this is where I rely on my elders. [laughs] We discuss these kinds of things.

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: The Coeur d’Alene elders I spoke to say their efforts are about more than keeping the language alive for scholarly or even cultural reasons. Felix Aripa says one day, he’ll meet his ancestors and he wants to be able to talk to them.

Felix Aripa: Up above, maybe I’m going to be talking the Coeur d’Alene language when I see them up in the Heavens, you know. [Starts speaking in Coeur d’Alene, then translates: “I thank you. I’ve been preparing this for a long time.”]

Elizabeth Wynne Johnson: I’m Elizabeth Wynne Johnson on the Coeur d’Alene reservation in North Idaho.

Poem read in Lakota: “I am the Wolf Nation standing visible. Grandfather, hear me.”

Peter Coyote: That’s Courtney Yellowfat, of the Lakota tribe on the Standing Rock Reservation. The recording was provided by Makoché Studios in Bismarck, North Dakota.

Beyond land, language and people, the members of the expedition also encountered themselves.
Carolyn Gilman: Lewis writes that he feels metamorphosed into a complete Indian. Those are not accidental words.

Peter Coyote: Coming up next, what we learn about ourselves from encounters. I’m Peter Coyote. You’re listening to “Unfinished Journey,” on Public Radio International.

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

Peter Coyote: So far, we’ve talked about encounters with the land, encounters with people, encounters with language. That brings us to a discussion of encounters that are perhaps the most mysterious and difficult to explain. Here’s James Ronda:

James Ronda: And the real question, I think, for Lewis and for Clark and the others who make that journey is what did they learn about themselves? Did they gain a richer and deeper sense of their own strength, but also their own frailty? Did they learn the limits of what they could do as human beings? Did they learn the limits of imagination? We don’t ask those questions very often about them.

Peter Coyote: Clay, how were members of the expedition changed by this journey? And who changed the most?

Clay Jenkinson: Undoubtedly everybody was changed in some way by this journey. How could it have been otherwise? Unfortunately, the Corps of Discovery dispersed after the expedition ended and not much was written at the time about the individual lives of expedition members. We have evidence that York, Clark’s slave, asserted himself after the journey and even asked for his freedom. Undoubtedly Sacagawea’s life was changed by her contact with the expedition, particularly with William Clark, who educated and eventually adopted her son, Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau. In one of the last descriptions we have of her she’s wearing a white calico dress. Apparently she adopted at least the clothing style of white America. But the person who underwent the greatest change was undoubtedly Meriwether Lewis. Here is a key moment during his encounter with Shoshone Indians in today’s Idaho.

We now dismounted and the chief with much ceremony put tippets about our necks such as they themselves wear I readily perceived that this was to disguise us...to give them further confidence I put my cocked hat with feather on the chief and my over shirt being of the Indian form my hair deshivled and skin well browed with the sun I wanted no further addition to make me a complete Indian in appearance the men followed my example and we were soon completely metamorphosed.

Meriwether Lewis, August 16, 1805

Carolyn Gilman: I do believe that that was one moment when he made a true connection with the Shoshone. It was partly a personal connection with Cameahwait. To me, the fact that they exchanged clothes, that’s a remarkably intimate gesture. Lewis writes that he feels metamorphosed into a complete Indian. Those are not accidental words. I think that there was something very profound and meaningful going on there.

William Lang: It shows him in a base, underlying level, his ability—the best of Lewis in some respects—to reach out and be confident in his relationship with Indian people.
Peter Coyote: Those are the comments of Carolyn Gilman of the Missouri Historical Society and Portland State University history professor William Lang.

Clay Jenkinson: Fully three years after his return, Meriwether Lewis was still sleeping on the floor on animal robes, unable to adjust to the idea of sleeping in a proper bed. Lewis committed suicide on October 11, 1809. So it seems that while everybody on the journey had encounters with the self, Lewis’s were particularly intense. Once again, here’s Roberta Conner of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla.

Roberta Conner: He and York might both have fared better had they stayed in the West had they had the opportunity to become, under free will, who they might desire to be, rather than carry the umbrage that went with their Eastern lives. That was an enormous burden to which there could be no fascination in return. Nothing could equal what they had been through and the changes they accomplished in their own personal sense of self during the expedition.

Peter Coyote: What about William Clark? Is there evidence that he experienced a metamorphosis because of his encounters on this journey?

Clay Jenkinson: There are just a couple of intriguing small pieces of evidence. Here’s one about cartography, about the way Clark named features of the western landscape.

A creek comes in above the bluffs...this creek I call Roloje (a name given me last night in my sleep)
William Clark, August 22, 1804

Peter Coyote: Aha, so that’s the answer to our quiz question! It was William Clark who named a creek based on a dream. Apparently, that is Aowa Creek which flows into the Missouri River near the town of Ponca, Nebraska today. But that dream sequence doesn’t sound like the practical frontiersman most of us are familiar with.

Clay Jenkinson: No, not at all. It’s particularly surprising coming from William Clark who was far and away the more pragmatic of the two captains. Even the words he uses here—“given me last night in my sleep”—sound more like the language of mythology than mapmaking. Had Clark picked something up from his encounters with native people? We don’t know. What is certain is that he had second thoughts about this journal passage. The editor of the journals, Gary Moulton, indicates that Clark later crossed out the words giving the source of the name of this river and even cut short his mention of it. Clark is something of a mystery in this respect. We asked novelist Brian Hall and biographer Landon Jones to reflect on how William Clark was affected by his journey into the west:

Brian Hall: By the time we see him in the [18]30’s, he’s got one son named Lewis, he’s got one son named Jefferson, he’s got two sons that are nicknamed Pomp—the original one and the later one—and he’s sitting out in his country seat. And you get this sense that he has tried to recreate for himself under his own control a small empire of the important people in his life.

Landon Jones: Clark built slowly in his life the Indian treaty room in St. Louis where he met with the tribes, started to fill up slowly with “objects of curiosity,” as they thought at first. So there would be Indian artifacts, weapons, headdresses. But then also fossils and minerals. And there was something in Clark—and his brothers had this, too—he wanted to preserve Indian culture. The Indians are doomed—this was their view—the Indians are doomed, so therefore it is our duty to preserve the remnants of this once-flourishing culture.
Peter Coyote: Journeys that require strength of mind and body, that challenge us, can also change us and reveal things we might not have known about ourselves. Victoria Murden is an explorer and a sportswoman who has challenged herself under some of the most difficult circumstances. She rowed across the Atlantic Ocean solo—twice. After putting herself to the ultimate test of self reliance, she decided to marry the man who was waiting for her on shore:

Victoria Murden: If I could have written the Jefferson letter that debates between the head and the heart, I would have written it right before the second row and the head would have won. And throughout the second row, all the things that happened my first row repeated themselves. The difference was, I was in love. And my heart was winning out as I rowed back. And I recognized, for myself anyway, that enlightenment is not found in the library—sorry, for those bookish folks. For me, it’s not found in the library, that it is a matter of heart, and all the library books inform that. But if your heart is closed, you can’t know that happiness, that ‘enlightenment.’ But you have to be open to the pain and you have to be open to the joy of it. And that’s what I discovered.

Peter Coyote: James Ronda says that, in some ways, the most important things we take with us on any journey are packed long before we hit the road:

James Ronda: Every journey begins in the country of the mind with a set of complex expectations. The most important journeys we make are the journeys that we make at home and before we go on the road. This is that tension between the home and the road, and the home is where the journeys begin—it’s where they are fashioned and imagined.

Peter Coyote: But Roberta Conner says in the native tradition a journey is not always necessary for the kinds of self-encounters Lewis and Clark experienced:

Roberta Conner: If you need something in your life, go back to the ways of your people. Figure out who your people are because all people were tribal at one point in time. So, if you’re Irish, or Scottish, or English, or your ancestors are German, go back to your own tribal teachings and your own tribal practices and seek that because going back to our roots works for our people, but going back to your own roots should work for all people.

Peter Coyote: How much do you let in? Is there a balance that we strike in any encounter? What do Lewis and Clark teach us about how much we take with us wherever we go? We asked our guide to this story, Lewis and Clark humanities scholar-in-residence Clay Jenkinson for his final thoughts.

Clay Jenkinson: When they began, they could not know what they would encounter. From St. Charles, Missouri to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages, a distance of 1600 river miles, they were passing through a lightly familiar country. That is, a handful of other white men had been there first. But when Lewis and Clark left Fort Mandan in today’s North Dakota on April 7, 1805, they were literally walking off the map of the known world. Now I don’t like to drive even through country I know really well without a roadmap in hand. I don’t think most of us could even imagine venturing beyond the boundary of the known world. Who knows what inspires certain people to walk off the map? Lewis wrote that finding the source of the Missouri River was “one of those grand objects upon which my mind had been unalterably fixed for many years.” He was, as Jefferson acknowledged, a natural in the wilderness. His town skills, however, left much to be desired. What is it that Lewis was seeking in terra incognita? Escape? Fame? An encounter with the sublime? A more authentic self? Well, we’re not quite sure.
For many of the men of the expedition, the desired encounters were with comely Indian women or a leg up in the coming fur trade or the bounty of land that would be their reward if they returned successfully. Not so, Meriwether Lewis. The encounters that seem to have gotten deepest under his skin were in Montana as far from white people as it was possible to be in North America in 1805. One involved a magical day alone at the Great Falls of the Missouri, which he had just discovered, when even the rationalist Lewis was tempted to believe that the natural world was alive with consciousness and even a kind of playfulness. He was so completely present that day and things were so elemental that he actually wondered if he might be dreaming his experience. Another was his historic encounter with the Shoshone nation August 13, 1805. Lewis believed he was the first white man in the history of the world to meet a Shoshone. He was the chosen one. He represented the white race. He represented civilization. He was the one who had discovered a people who had lived out their entire destiny untouched by European culture. And he was alone, basically unarmed, highly vulnerable and with limited communication tools. He had been reduced to what Shakespeare calls “unaccommodated man” and everything now depended upon his strength, courage and resourcefulness. That must have been a very heady moment.

By definition, an encounter is a short-lived thing after which we return to normal life. An explorer is a professional encounter-seeker. He is looking for something new, and whether he admits it or not, he is almost always looking for trouble. The archetype of the explorer is Homer’s Odysseus, the man who was never at a loss but whose insatiable curiosity periodically got the better of his good sense. He encountered one-eyed monsters, seductive witches, magical herbs, and, of course, the Sirens. That’s the world of mythology. In the real world, the great explorers return marked or scarred by their encounters. This is an ancient theme in Western culture, from the Fisher King with his wounded thigh to Harry Potter in our time.

At a key moment in his journey, as far from the Palladian world of Monticello as it was possible to be, and stripped of all of the veneers of civilization, Lewis announced that he had become “completely metamorphosed.” In short, he had become a white Indian. It is not clear whether this transformation exhilarated Lewis, or appalled him, or both. But we do know that it left a permanent mark on his soul. When he had his portrait painted by a French master after the expedition, Lewis insisted upon being depicted in the Shoshone Indian robe that had completed his metamorphosis.

To come home too marked by the experience, like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, is to become a nuisance and a public bore. But to come back entirely unmarked, untransformed, unscathed, as William Clark apparently did, is somehow to have missed the essence of the journey.

The great Oregon essayist Barry Lopez asked, “How far can you go out and still come back?” That’s the gamble of the hero who seeks encounters. Meriwether Lewis came back. Well, a part of him anyway.

For the Unfinished Journey, I’m Clay Jenkinson.

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. This program was produced by Lewis & Clark College and Oregon Public Broadcasting. 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 nationwide 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. To learn more about this series visit opb.org and click on the “Guide to Lewis and Clark.”