EPISODE 108: UNSOLVED MYSTERIES OF LEWIS AND CLARK

Peter Coyote: Welcome to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition” from PRI, Public Radio International. I’m Peter Coyote. In this hour, the unsolved mysteries of the expedition.

Carolyn Gilman: There’s a sense that the truth is out there and that we can find out everything that we wonder about, that somehow there’s a document that’s going to answer every question we have about them and that’s just not true.

Peter Coyote: Join me as we try to answer 200-year-old questions 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 1808, it’s been America’s Newspaper for 8 years. I’m Allison Frost.

This time we’re looking at one of the tasks left unfinished by outgoing President Thomas Jefferson, who chose not to run for a third presidential term. Secretary of State James Madison handily defeated his Federalist opponent Charles Pinckney in the November election and will become the nation’s fourth President.

One of the President Jefferson’s chief concerns, especially in his second term was the Western Expedition led by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. So far, since the military party returned more than two years ago in the fall of 1806, the American people have learned little of this adventure, despite announcements that the findings of the mission would be published.

We caught up with President Jefferson in the halls of Congress, after his Annual Message was submitted in writing, as has become his custom. I asked him if he regretted sending the explorers since the journals have not been published. His answer left no room for interpretation.

Thomas Jefferson: The expedition of Messrs. Lewis and Clark, for exploring the river Missouri, and the best communication from that to the Pacific Ocean, has had all the success which could have been expected. They have traced the Missouri nearly to its source, descended the Columbia to the Pacific Ocean, ascertained with accuracy the geography of that interesting communication across our continent, learned the character of the country, of its commerce, and inhabitants; and it is but justice to say that Messrs. Lewis and Clark and their brave companions, have by this arduous service deserved well of their country.

Allison Frost: But, Mr. President, last year, the Philadelphia publishing house of C. & A. Conrad & Co. announced the forthcoming of two volumes, titled “Lewis and Clark’s Tour to the Pacific Ocean through the Interior of the...
Continental of North America.” These have not, in fact, been published. What makes you confident that Captain Lewis was the right man to put in charge?

Thomas Jefferson: His knowledge of the western country, of the army and all of its interests and relations. Also his passion for dazzling pursuits and his character. I could have no hesitation in confiding these enterprises to him.

Allison Frost: His character, Mr. President? How do you mean?

Thomas Jefferson: It is 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.

Allison Frost: And you are also confident that when Meriwether Lewis puts forth these volumes, we can be assured of their accuracy?

Thomas Jefferson: Indeed. His fidelity to truth is so scrupulous that whatever he should report will be as certain as if seen by ourselves.

Allison Frost: Finally, Mr. President, as you look back at the last few years, as you prepare to leave office, do you think the alleged treason of your one-time Vice President Aaron Burr took you away from other priorities?

Thomas Jefferson: Not at all. Our attention should unremittingly be fixed on the safety of our country. Surmises have been hazarded that this enterprise of Burr’s was to receive aid from certain foreign powers. But these surmises were without proof or probability. I assure you the advancement of the rights and interests of the citizenry has been the constant motive for every measure. . .and in their steady character unshaken by difficulties, in their love of liberty, obedience to law, and support of the public authorities, I see a sure guaranty of the permanence of our republic; and retiring from the charge of their affairs, I carry with me the consolation of a firm persuasion that Heaven has in store for our beloved country long ages to come of prosperity and happiness.

Allison Frost: President Thomas Jefferson speaking with the Latest Tidings as his second term in office comes to a close. In news from elsewhere in the world, Napoleon Bonaparte, the self-proclaimed Emperor of France continues his European expansion with the invasion of his one-time ally Spain. Emperor Napoleon put his brother Joseph on the country’s throne, after ousting Charles IV and his son Ferdinand VII. However, a Spanish uprising has driven Joseph out of Madrid and the Spanish are reportedly putting up a vicious fight against the French invaders. And that concludes this edition of the Latest Tidings. I’m Allison Frost. Our program is produced in cooperation with the National Intelligencer. For 8 years, it’s been American’s Newspaper, since 1800.

[Theme music up]

Peter Coyote: Lewis and Clark have been studied endlessly. Is there anything left that we don’t know about them by now?

Clay Jenkinson: Au contraire! There are still plenty of mysteries in this story. In fact, the more we explore Lewis and Clark, the more mysterious the story gets.
Peter Coyote: There are still important questions left to be answered about the Lewis and Clark Expedition and a number of deep mysteries at the heart of the story. In this show, we’ll explore some of them.

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 this story is Clay Jenkinson, humanities scholar-in-residence at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. What are the most intriguing mysteries about the expedition yet to be solved?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, there are dozens of little mysteries about the expedition, from where exactly they camped on any given night to the nature of the guns they were carrying. But there are really three large mysteries at the center of this story. First, why did Thomas Jefferson—the sponsor of the expedition, Meriwether Lewis’s mentor, and one of the most curious men who ever lived—seem to lose interest in the expedition after it returned? Second, what precisely was the fracture in Meriwether Lewis’s soul and why did he take his own life—if he did actually commit suicide—just three years after the expedition returned? And finally, who was Sacagawea, how did she call herself, what was her actual contribution to the success of the expedition? What became of her after Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis? That’s the subject of almost infinite historical speculation. Unfortunately, we do not have many facts.

Peter Coyote: Most of us want some degree of certainty about a historical event of the magnitude of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. But Carolyn Gilman of the Missouri Historical Society says that when it comes to history, we’re going to have to learn to accept some degree of uncertainty.

Carolyn Gilman: There’s a sense that the truth is out there and that we can find out everything that we wonder about, that somehow there’s a document that’s going to answer every question we have about them and that’s just not true. Professional historians have a tolerance for mystery; have a tolerance for not knowing something and you have to have that because there isn’t enough evidence to answer every question.

Peter Coyote: So, let’s start with something that doesn’t seem like too much of a mystery: the journals themselves. Surely, these words of the President of the United States must have made a deep impression on Meriwether Lewis:

*Your observations are to be taken with great pains & accuracy to be entered distinctly & intelligibly for others as well as yourself, to comprehend all the elements necessary, with the aid of the usual tables to fix the latitude and longitude of the places at which they were taken and are to be rendered to the War Office, for the purpose of having the calculations made concurrently by proper persons within the United States. Several copies of these as well as of your other notes should be made at leisure times, & put into the care of the most trustworthy of your attendants, to guard by multiplying them against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed.*

*Thomas Jefferson, Letter of Instruction to Captain Meriwether Lewis.*
Peter Coyote: Jefferson was very insistent that the expedition members keep journals, no mystery there. Lewis, Clark, John Ordway, Patrick Gass, Joseph Whitehouse and even the ill-fated Charles Floyd, who died of natural causes only three months into the expedition, kept journals that have come down to us today. So, clay, where is our mystery about the journals?

Clay Jenkinson: First, there are conflicting accounts of just how many of the men were keeping journals. Robert Frazer kept one, we know, but Meriwether Lewis opposed its publication, and thereafter it disappeared. Where it is, we don’t know. What was in it, we’re not sure. Whether it even still exists, unclear. And there may have been others. Everybody knows that the two captains kept journals. But Lewis appears to have been silent more than half of the time, and his silence has really perplexed historians. Of the 28 months of the journey, Lewis was silent for 441 days. Clark missed just ten days, and summarized those on the eleventh. Reliable Sergeant John Ordway never missed a day at all. There are two mysteries here. One, when Lewis was keeping a journal, he was easily the best and most prolific journal keeper.

This morning I arose very early and as hungary as a wolf. I had eat nothing yesterday except one scant meal of the flour and berries except the dried cakes of berries which did not appear to satisfy my appetite as they appeared to do those of my Indian friends. I found on enquiry of McNeal that we had only about two pounds of flour remaining. this I directed him to divide into two equal parts and to cook the one half this morning in a kind of pudding with the burries as he had done yesterday and reserve the ballance for the evening. on this new fashioned pudding four of us breakfasted, giving a pretty good allowance also to the Chief who declared it the best thing he had taisted for a long time.

Meriwether Lewis, August 15, 1805

Peter Coyote: With that sort of talent, it makes his silence all the more puzzling.

John Logan Allen: Rather than trying to track his silences and interpret them, track the places where he’s writing and figure out why he’s writing where he is.

Peter Coyote: That’s John Logan Allen, professor of geography at the University of Wyoming.

John Logan Allen: He’s writing where he’s excited, when they set out from Mandan, with his little fleet, there’s this sense of excitement of the journey that lies ahead and the rewards that lie ahead. And all of this comes crashing down on him at Lemhi [Pass] and he so shuts down and then he gets excited again at the Pacific because of the abundance of the flora. He is a botanist, and so he’s excited by that and I think he has the realization that if he’s going to salvage something out of this journey it’s going to be the science and therefore this is a good place to pick up on that.

Peter Coyote: Lewis and Clark scholar James Ronda, of the University of Tulsa, says even if we could figure out why Lewis was silent, it still wouldn’t fill all the gaps in the journals. Here are some of the questions he’d still like to ask:

James Ronda: Captain Lewis, tell me a bit about your sense of the mission when you stood at Lemhi Pass. When you looked out to see those endless snow-covered mountains, what did you think, and were you angry? Tell me how you sorted out who was responsible for what with your friend, William Clark. Tell me about how important clothing was for you and about what happened when you no longer dressed as an officer but dressed as someone else. And how did you really feel when you had to lie to Cameahwait? You said that it ‘set uneasily with you’
when you had to lie to someone that you trusted, and in fact, someone that could have killed you in a moment, could have killed you and you lied to him. What do you think about that now?

Clay Jenkinson: After he returned in 1806, Lewis failed to write the three-volume report about the journey that Jefferson expected of him. Now understand that this was not optional; this was not an adventurer’s memoir. It was a necessary final report of the work of a military explorer who was an official representative of the United States government. Worse still, the first to publish was not Jefferson’s protégé, not an accomplished scientist, but an enlisted man, Patrick Gass, a largely self-educated man who was the expedition’s carpenter. He privately published his journal in 1807 much to Meriwether Lewis’s annoyance.

_I am very often applied to know when your work will begin to appear...I shall be very happy to receive from yourself information of your expectations on this subject. Every body is impatient for it._

*Thomas Jefferson, August 16, 1809*

Clay Jenkinson: Not only did Lewis fail to write the all-important book, but eventually he stopped corresponding with Jefferson altogether. That was truly unpardonable. Jefferson, for his part, had other things on his mind by now, as professor Andrew Burstein, of the University of Tulsa, explains.

Andrew Burstein: He was bogged down with a very intense political problem which was the Aaron Burr conspiracy in the West. So the return of Lewis and Clark, which was this ecstatic moment in Jefferson’s presidency occurred at the same time as Aaron Burr appeared to be interesting Western settlers in going an independent way, of actually separating from the United States of America.

Peter Coyote: Maybe Lewis should have hired a ghost writer.

Clay Jenkinson: Maybe he should have. In fact, we put that very question to Lewis & Clark College historian Stephen Dow Beckham.

Stephen Dow Beckham: If ever a prospective author developed writer’s block, it was Meriwether Lewis. There is no evidence that Lewis lifted his pen to craft a single word of a final report about the assignment and labors of the Corps of Discovery.

When Lewis returned to Washington, D.C., in December, 1806, he was a hero. He had co-led an expedition across North America, sojourned on the shores of the distant Pacific Ocean, and opened relations with more than fifty Indian tribes. He had collected dozens of plants new to science. He had recorded vocabularies of native Americans and descriptions of the land.

Lewis moved boldly. In the spring of 1807, he employed John Conrad, a Philadelphia printer, to issue a prospectus announcing his forthcoming report. Lewis projected a three-volume work, each to contain 400 to 500 pages. The first two volumes—his assignment—he planned to devote to an overview describing the expedition route and adventures. The third volume, to be penned by Dr. Benjamin Smith Barton, was to assess the scientific discoveries and include an appendix with 23 Indian vocabularies. Lewis’s publisher began taking orders; subscribers to the volumes prepaid their purchases.

The world was eager for the report that Lewis announced. The years 1775 to 1820 were a period of remarkable exploration, discovery, and publication about distant lands. Following his third voyage to the Pacific Ocean, editors drew in 1784 on the detailed journals of Captain James Cook to produce in three volumes—*A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*. Cook’s accounts told of exotic places—Easter Island, Tahiti, New Zealand, the Hawaiian Islands, and the great unknown—the mysterious Northwest Coast of North America.
In the decade prior to the Lewis and Clark Expedition, armchair travelers devoured the reports of Nathaniel Portlock, John Meares, Comte de Laperouse, George Vancouver and Alexander Mackenzie. Their accounts published between 1789 and 1803 described voyages by sea and by travels by land to the fog-shrouded shores of the North Pacific.

Captain Lewis needed help as a writer. He did not get it. The challenges he faced were immense. He was to write his narrative for his mentor, Thomas Jefferson. One of the most formidable intellects of his day, Jefferson clearly had high expectations. As a book writer, Lewis froze. He took up diversions: governing Upper Louisiana Territory, penning a report on Indian affairs, drinking too much alcohol, and spiraling downward in fits of melancholy and depression. Ultimately Lewis died—probably a suicide—in 1809. If Lewis could have hired a competent ghost writer, he might have dictated his narrative. Lewis could have used his resources from the expedition and the subscription to drive his project. Lewis should have done these things. The Lewis publication prospectus survives as a record of what could have happened. It is, in its own sad way, an epitaph to a writer who could not write.

Peter Coyote: We’re going to take a short break, but before we do, let’s test your knowledge of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The last remark about one of the expedition’s best-known members is occurs in connection with a mosquito infestation that plagued the party on July 15, 1806. Which member of the Corps of Discovery disappears from the record after that event? The answer is coming up later in the program.

Later, we’ll travel to Montana with an archeologist who’s trying to solve the mystery of the iron boat.

Ken Karsmizki: It isn’t as much about the iron boat. Intellectually it is about the iron boat, but emotionally or culturally it’s about being able to get right back to your roots.

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. You’re listening to “Unfinished Journey,” on PRI.

[Saw a flock of goats swimming the river this morning near to our camp. Captain Lewises dog Seamon took after them caught one in the river. Drowned & killed it and swam to shore with it. John Ordway, April 26, 1805]

[Saw a flock of goats swimming the river this morning near to our camp. Captain Lewises dog Seamon took after them caught one in the river. Drowned & killed it and swam to shore with it. John Ordway, April 26, 1805]
Peter Coyote: So, the dog was a hunter?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, indeed, though in one of the other encounters, a beaver got the better of him, and Meriwether Lewis had to use his knowledge of frontier medicine to save the dog. Seaman recovered quickly, however, and ten days later he may have saved several members of the expedition from harm.

Last night we were all alarmed by a large buffaloe bull, which swam over from the opposite shore and coming along side of the white perogue, climbed over it to land. He then alarmed ran up the bank in full speed directly towards the fires...When he came near the tent my dog saved us by causing him to change his course a second time.

Meriwether Lewis, May 29, 1805

Clay Jenkinson: What emerges from the journals is that Lewis took a great deal of interest in his dog’s safety and well-being. It may be that Lewis, who was a rather emotionally detached man, had a closer relationship with Seaman than he did with most human beings.

Peter Coyote: So, the big question: what happened to Seaman? I know that members of the expedition ate dog....

Landon Jones: I think it’s plausible that Seaman got left behind after the Blackfoot fight, and that Lewis’s strange unemotional behavior sometimes just wouldn’t let him go there with the grief, and he just couldn’t bring himself to say what had happened.

Clay Jenkinson: That was Clark biographer Landon Jones. One thing seems certain. The expedition did not, as many school children fear, eat the dog. The men were very fond of Seaman. Even though he was technically owned by Meriwether Lewis, some of the men called him “our dog.” Lewis’s last entry about Seaman was on July 15, 1806, in Montana, where he describes an infestation of mosquitoes so fierce that Seaman howled through the night, and that’s where we lose him. By the way, that’s the answer to the quiz question that came up earlier in the program.

Peter Coyote: What do you think happened?

Clay Jenkinson: Given the way that the journals actually work, if the dog had died, we would almost certainly know about it. The journals don’t notice everything that happens on any given day, but dramatic things almost certainly get written up. The best sense we have is that the dog made the entire journey, but that the diarists, particularly Lewis, were so busy by now that they just never again mentioned Seaman. In fact, there is a tradition that the dog lived longer than his troubled master and actually lingered about Lewis’s grave in Tennessee after 1809. We just don’t know. It’s a mystery.

Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog
(Lord Byron)

Near this spot are deposited the remains of one who
possessed Beauty without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,
Courage without Ferocity,
and all the Virtues of Man,
without his Vices.
This Praise, which would be unmeaning
Flattery if inscribed over human
ashes is but a just tribute to the Memory
of Boatswain a Dog.

Peter Coyote: Another of the expedition’s enduring mysteries revolves around something else Lewis brought along. He had a collapsible iron boat frame specially made at the armory at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia before the trip began.

Clay Jenkinson: Lewis called it “the experiment.” The idea was that the metal framework could be reassembled on the other side of the mountains or at a big portage. With great pride and ceremony, Lewis had the boat frame put back together at the Great Falls. A squad of hunters was sent out to kill more than thirty elk and a couple of buffalo to provide the skins that would cover the frame. At first, Lewis said, it floated “like a perfect cork in the water.” But after a career of less than an hour, the experiment sank to the bottom of the Missouri River.

Peter Coyote: According to the journals, Lewis decided to bury it or cache the frame, and as far as we know, it was never recovered. Lewis and Clark archeologist and historian Ken Karzmiski, who has overseen digs near the Great Falls in Montana, thinks the remains of the boat are still buried near there, and he took Clay Jenkinson to see the site for himself.

Clay Jenkinson: Our trip to Montana was punctuated by rain, intermittent but unrelenting at every point on our journey through the Great Falls region. Karzmiski has seen every kind of weather out here and remains unfazed by wind and water in his quest for scraps of hard evidence along the Lewis and Clark trail…

Ken Karzmiski: Let’s take a left up here…

Clay Jenkinson: We’re driving to the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center in Great Falls so that I can see a replica of the iron boat before we head out to the place where Ken thinks it might be buried.

Ken Karzmiski: Stephen Ambrose was a scholar-in-residence with National Geographic and they got in touch with him and asked, ‘What about the iron boat?’ And what he said is, ‘That’s the holy grail of the expedition.’

Clay Jenkinson: You’re searching for the holy grail!

Ken Karzmiski: Yeah.

Clay Jenkinson: The late Stephen Ambrose, the author of “Undaunted Courage,” which is certainly one of the most widely read of the Lewis and Clark histories, may have thought that the iron boat was the holy grail, but Ken Karzmiski is not convinced. For him, two huge archeological mysteries remain: the whereabouts of the two sites where the Corps of Discovery wintered, Fort Mandan in present-day North Dakota and Fort Clatsop out on the Oregon coast.

Ken Karzmiski: The thing about finding the winter camp is that they would be so rich in terms of archeological evidence. You see people in confined spaces. You’d have multiple latrines that you ought to be able to radiate out from a fort structure and find those latrines. Once you get the latrines you’re going to see all kinds of disease and diet kinds of information.
Clay Jenkinson: Great—the search for the “lost latrine.” I’m happy that our quest is for the iron boat. Ken Karzmiski has done important work trying to ascertain the original sites for Fort Mandan and Fort Clatsop but he is also one of the most avid hunters after the iron boat and that is our quest.

Ken Karzmiski: I think the iron boat is really important obviously because I’ve been looking for it.

Clay Jenkinson: Here outside the interpretive center at Great Falls, you can see the Missouri River sweeping by. The rain has let up a bit as we step outside to see the long replica of the iron frame. We have a pretty good idea what the frame should look like because Lewis described it well in his journals.

Ken Karzmiski: You can begin to get that shape by essentially doing the same thing that Lewis did. Just take a string and suspend it, take a push pin and put a push pin into a cork board and then four feet, ten inches away, I think is what it was, you push it in with another push pin. And then the shape of that string is the shape of the hull of the canoe and by using that width and depth, what you can do is you can calculate the total length of the rib as if it was one piece.

Clay Jenkinson: If the re-creation we are looking at now is in any way accurate, the original hull design was pretty impractical.

Ken Karzmiski: The other thing is that if you think of suspending that string, and that’s the way Lewis describes it, what you have is something that’s very round and that’s not very stable, either. What you’re looking for is something that has more of a flat bottom. So this is just by design is not stable since it is, as he describes it, semi-cylindrical.

Clay Jenkinson: Imagine going down the Columbia with all that you have in the world to survive and starting to roll….

Ken Karzmiski: It definitely is a fantasy that shouldn’t have become a reality (laughs)

Clay Jenkinson: The replica we’re looking at now may be historically accurate, but it is of little use from an archeological point of view. Karzmiski certainly doesn’t expect to find the boat fully assembled buried somewhere in Montana.

Clay Jenkinson: Imagine Lewis saying that! ‘Men, I want you to dig a very, very long cache hole.’

Ken Karzmiski: The thing is, if you don’t think about that, you come up with some scenarios that are so absurd…

Clay Jenkinson: The expedition spent about a month here in the Great Falls region and they established two camps, one above the falls and one below. In between, there was an 18-and-a-quarter mile portage over some of the most difficult terrain in the Great Plains of Montana. The boat was almost certainly assembled at the upper portage camp. We actually began our day at the lower portage camp, and there I asked Ken just how a boat cache would be constructed.

Ken Karzmiski: They’re going to put all of their stuff in it. They’re going to actually put twigs, leaves and so forth. The purpose of that is a sponge to soak up any moisture so it doesn’t go into their equipment. Then they’re going to start putting stuff on it, and then they put skins on it, and then they throw dirt back in to fill it up until you
Clay Jenkinson: We know from expedition’s journals that the Corps of Discovery actually unearthed the original cache with the iron boat in it on the return trip. Meriwether Lewis remarked that the boat was surprisingly intact. Some scholars believe that the Corps may have sold off those scraps of iron to Indians or to Toussaint Charbonneau. Others think that the boat simply may have washed away over the course of time. Karzmiski, however, believes it’s still buried out here…somewhere.

At long last, we’re closing in on the holy grail itself, the site where Karzmiski believes the boat still lies. This is how you spend your summers?

Ken Karzmiski: (Laughs)

Clay Jenkinson: In a rather undistinguished residential neighborhood of Great Falls, cars are whizzing by behind us and of course, it has started to rain again. So we pull a tarp up over our heads and read from a sign recently installed here by a local Lewis and Clark group featuring and praising Ken Karzmiski’s work.

Ken Karzmiski: (reading) Is the boat still here? Some scholars believe it is. Archeologist Ken Karzmiski, executive director of the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center and Museum, thinks that Lewis and Clark and his crew may have buried it here a second time in 1806.

Clay Jenkinson: Cool! Here you are looking at a sign about your work. That’s got to be something! Karzmiski launched the investigation here in 1998 using the magnetometer… (conversation fades)

Whether the iron boat is buried here or not, this is a very significant historic site, and I’m alarmed to see so much development activity in the neighborhood.

What possible reason could they have for coming in and laying down rubble and so on? We’re in a historic camp site here.

Ken Karzmiski: We’re seeing the same kind of problem down at Virginia and that with the battlefields that are getting paved over and so forth. Now we’re within a matter of a few feet above the river and that’s the point of the island.

Clay Jenkinson: They landed here?

Ken Karzmiski: Yes. (fades)

Clay Jenkinson: Karzmiski believes the boat is located here on private land, and in spite of my squeamishness, he assures me he has permission from the owner to scope it out. On earlier expeditions, Karzmiski combed this area with the help of high tech equipment provided by NASA and the Defense Department hoping that the iron boat would simply reveal itself. So far, no.

Ken Karzmiski: They said that they cleared willows out to make the camp; we’re probably ten feet away from the trees.

Clay Jenkinson: Anyone listening to this, if they had heard this whole day, would say, ‘What a couple of losers, the endless discussion of texts and satellite maps and the Defense Department and conjecture and this junk,’ and it’s
really about a very, very, very tiny thing. What do you say to that?

Ken Karzmiski: Yeah, yeah it is. If eliminate the journals and you eliminate the maps and you eliminate the plant specimens, you don't have much left of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Two hundred years ago, 33 people made over 600 camps, and if we’re lucky we’ve found one of them. It isn’t as much about the iron boat—intellectually, it is about the iron boat—but emotionally or culturally, it’s about being able to get right back to your roots. Because what we can do, if nothing else, is we can look out from here and we can imagine what that landscape looked like.

Clay Jenkinson: From today, my sense is that the bicentennial is damaging more than it is revealing, archeologically speaking.

Ken Karzmiski: I think that that is the danger and we’re realizing that danger.

Clay Jenkinson: At the tricentennial, do you think they will display the iron boat?

Ken Karzmiski: Uhhhh, maybe.

Clay Jenkinson: Do you think you will live to see the iron boat?

Ken Karzmiski: I hope so.

Clay Jenkinson: Do you think you will find the iron boat?

Ken Karzmiski: If somebody is going to, it’s going to be me.

Clay Jenkinson: As with all grail quests, this one ends inconclusively. The search continues. From the Great Falls of Montana, I’m Clay Jenkinson.

Peter Coyote: The greatest mystery surrounding Meriwether Lewis is his death. He died of self-inflicted gunshot wounds on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee in October of 1809. Clay, what was his state of mind when he took his own life?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, Peter, that’s the mystery of mysteries. We can’t know, of course. Lewis was frustrated with the federal government by now. He was deeply in debt. He was unable to write his report and he was wrestling with a serious alcohol problem. It’s impossible to say which of those factors, if any, was the one that finally pushed him over the edge.

Peter Coyote: Stephen Dow Beckham of Lewis & Clark College says he has no doubt that Lewis committed suicide. He is not one of the small number of murder theorists. But the factors that contributed to Lewis’s suicide are still a mystery to him.

Stephen Dow Beckham: How did you die? How did you die and why did you die on the Natchez Trace? Because it’s such a poignant sad end to a rather noble and intriguing life.

[Kim Stafford:]
At the Meriwether Lewis Grave on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee, 11 September 2005
Your epic journey comes to this: a warm, still day, a flag at half mast, and the stone plinth hewn to remember your promise and your end that October night in 1809. The Blackfoot tried to kill you, but only you had the skill to get that done-caught in scandal, desperate to be good, your final report to the president due too long ago. A few stones from the hearth of the Grinder cabin have been preserved to view, cicadas yammer in the oak, tulip, and locust trees, and all around your monument I find the field of palm-sized blocks to mark the graves of pioneers Ollie, Frieda, Rosa, Beulah, Harlan, Zada, Infant, and Unknown. Your job for the president, he said: “to contribute to the mass of information which it is interesting for this administration to acquire.”

How can a mass of information inform a proper life? How can your journal, the most profound rough draft in American history, ever be complete? The epic task remains: not to cross, but to understand this land. Not to catalog but to integrate and sustain this Eden. Not to discover, but to engage our people. Buffalo who first opened this trace through the mountains, Choctaw and Chickasaw people who traded its use away, help us. Farther on along the Trace, soybean rows begin to yellow and the brown stalks of field corn to rattle dry.

Clay Jenkinson: That was the poet Kim Stafford, who is also the director of the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

Peter Coyote: Clay, some of these mysteries are weighty questions indeed, but there must be a whole list of things that don’t get as much attention as Lewis’s death, the fate of the iron boat and other mysteries we’ve already discussed.

Clay Jenkinson: Well, Peter, here’s a list of just a few of the things we don’t know. First of all there are hundreds, even thousands, of textual puzzles in the journals, the result of the creative spelling of the diarists, particularly Clark, and also Clark’s very difficult to decipher handwriting. Most of these don’t really affect the meaning of the narrative, but in a few cases they do. They’re known as “cruxes.” Then, who was the Mandan man who was going to accompany Lewis and Clark to Montana, and why did he turn back after just two days in April, 1805? Did the expedition carry a “captain’s” supply of alcohol? More specifically, why was the slave York carrying whiskey in a canteen at the Great Falls? Who was Mr. Fairfong? He was apparently a French trader in residence with the Oto and Missouri Indians when the expedition encountered them on August 2, 1804. He supplied geographical information to the captains, but he has never been identified. What precisely were the mutinous expressions that got John Newman court-martialed and then discharged from the Corps of Discovery? Was he a lone malcontent, or was there a more widespread mutiny in the works that the captains were able to nip in the bud?
What killed Charles Floyd? Was it a ruptured appendix, a massive intestinal failure, or was it something completely different? Medical opinions vary, but since no autopsy was conducted, we just don’t know. What did Clark mean when he wrote in his journal on August 3, 1804: “we had Some rough Conversation with G. Dr. [Drouillard]- about boys”? It sounds ominous. Who is the woman Clark called the “the Celebrated M.F.,” after whom he named the Marth’s River in Montana on April 29, 1805? And for that matter, who exactly is the Maria Wood after whom Meriwether Lewis named the Marias River, also in Montana?

Peter Coyote: Clay, Thank you.

Clay Jenkinson: Hey, I’m just getting warmed up.

Peter Coyote: Coming up, why the mysteries of the Lewis and Clark Expedition keep luring us back.

James Ronda: One of the marvelous things about this story is that over and over again, own every river, up every trail, around every bend, there is something that is strange and that makes us grow.

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 (Shenandoah)]

Peter Coyote: The Lewis and Clark Expedition is the most famous journey in American history. Every aspect of the expedition is endlessly studied. Yet we know very little about most of the men who participated in the mission. Even the famous Sacagawea has become such a legendary figure that it’s hard to untangle even the basic details of her life: where she was born, where she died, just what she contributed to the expedition. The best and most reliable sources are the few snapshots we have from the journals of the expedition.

About five o’clock this evening one of the wives of Charbono was delivered of a fine boy. it is worthy of remark that this was the first child which this woman had born and as is common in such cases her labour was tedious and the pain violent; ....

Meriwether Lewis, February 11, 1805

As Soon as they Saw the Squaw wife of the interpreters they pointed to her and informed those who continued yet in the Same position I found them, they immediately all came out and appeared to assume new life, the sight of This Indian woman, wife to one of our interprs. Confirmed those people of our friendly intentions....

William Clark, October 19, 1805

One of the natives here had a robe of sea-otter skins, of the finest fur I ever saw; which the Commanding Officers wanted very much, and offered two blankets for it, which the owner refused, and said he would not take five. He wanted beads of a blue colour, of which we had none, but some that were on a belt belonging to our interpreter’s squaw; so they gave him the belt for the skins.

Patrick Gass, November 21, 1805
The last evening Shabono and his Indian woman was very impatient to be permitted to go with me, and was there fore indulged; She observed that she had traveled a long way with us to See the great waters, and that now that monstrous fish was also to be Seen, She thought it very hard that she Could not be permitted to See either (She had never yet been to the Ocean).

William Clark, January 6, 1806

Peter Coyote: William Clark’s slave, York, is another mystery. As a black man, he sparked curiosity among some of the Indian tribes the expedition encountered:

The Indians much astonished at my black servant, who made himself more terrifying in their view than I wished him to do as I am told telling them that before I caught him he was wild & lived upon people, young children was very good eating.

William Clark, October 10, 1804

Peter Coyote: Hassan Davis, a York re-enactor, has studied what is known about York, and has tried to imagine his inner life.

Hassan Davis: My name is York. Just York. It is the name that my daddy carried before me. I was born a slave. No—I was born to be the slave and the property of another man. That is the shame that my daddy carried before me. But I have seen a world few white men might ever dream of. And now, here, I ask you to hear the things that I have seen so that when I am gone from here, my name, my voice, my story does not die with me.

Peter Coyote: York and Sacagawea played a role in one of the most intriguing recorded incidents of the journey, what has come to be known as “the vote.”

At night, the party were consulted by the commanding officers as to the place most proper for winter quarters, and the most of them were of the opinion that it would be best, in the first place, to go over to the south side of the river, and ascertain whether good hunting ground could be found there. Should that be the case, it would be a more eligible place than higher up the river, on account of getting salt, as that is a very scarce article with us.

Patrick Gass, November 24, 1805

Peter Coyote: This event has become so emblematic of the American values represented by the Corps of Discovery, that school children travel to the Pacific coast to re-enact “the vote.” Correspondent Colin Fogarty traveled with them one year to see for himself what lessons children learn from this historic moment.

Colin Fogarty: After more than a year of arduous travel, Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and their Corps of Discovery were overjoyed to finally reach the Pacific Ocean in November, 1805. But the weather made them miserable as they camped on the north shore of the Columbia River, at what is known as Station Camp in what is now Washington state. They needed a place to spend the winter. Lewis and Clark put the decision up for a vote.

In the warmth of a nearby Lewis and Clark interpretive center, Craig Rockwell, playing the part of William Clark, simplified the choice for about one hundred school children: stay on the north shore, cross the river to the south side to what is now Oregon or go back up the river a bit.

Craig Rockwell: And I’m going to call out individual names of the members of the Corps of the Discovery from here today. And you are going to stand where you are and shout out your decision. Kiana Yasunaka.
Kiana Yasunaka: I’d like to stay here.

Craig Rockwell: Stay on the north shore. Megan Clark, a family member, of course.

Megan Clark: Stay here.

Craig Rockwell: Stay on the north shore.

Colin Fogarty: The actual expedition chose to build a fort on the south side of the Columbia River in what is now Oregon. Most of these children who are from Washington thought otherwise. They wanted to stay on the Washington side. Ten-year-old Armondo Cordera was in the ‘play it safe’ crowd.

Armondo Cordera: I’m probably vote to stay here.

Colin Fogarty: How come?

Armondo Cordera: Probably ‘cause I like it here and I wouldn’t know that much people in Oregon.

Colin Fogarty: Katelind Eggy, on the other hand, was willing to try something new.

Katelind Eggy: Because it’s more mysterious, because there are a lot more things that you’re not used to.

Colin Fogarty: Organizers of this event later clarified that no one in the Corps of Discovery actually wanted to stay put, since the weather was so bad. The vote is also significant for who participated. For the first time in American history, a woman’s vote counted. And so did that of a slave. Filmmaker Ron Craig is the producer of a documentary about York, who was the property of William Clark.

Ron Craig: It was so significant that we had not only this African American York, a slave, but also Sacagawea who actually voted because it was something that if they took those individuals on the council as far as asking them what their opinion was, that meant the value of their presence on the expedition was very significant.

Colin Fogarty: Organizers of this re-enactment included a most modern innovation on the 200-year-old Station Camp vote: they allowed children nationwide to vote on line on where Lewis and Clark should camp. The web vote was overwhelmingly in favor of crossing to the Oregon side of the Columbia, exactly as the Corps of Discovery did. I’m Colin Fogarty in Ilwaco, Washington.

Peter Coyote: So, Lewis and Clark consulted with the members of the expedition. Was this democracy in action?

Clay Jenkinson: Good question. We don’t really know. In his journal entry for that day, Clark recorded the opinion of members of the group, including Clark’s slave, York, and Sacagawea, who declared that she wanted to winter where there was a supply of ground potatoes. But whether this can really be called a vote and whether Lewis and Clark were really letting the majority rule is still a hotly debated question amongst historians. I asked Dayton Duncan and Jim Ronda to reflect.
Dayton Duncan: By including everybody, they took a risk that the men would say the wrong thing, but I think they trusted that the group making its decision would make the right decision. Now I like to think that that is what democracy is. It’s risky, but it also sometimes at least bonds the people together in that this is our decision. When you make it as our decision it is a stronger decision. As I say that’s the risk of democracy but it’s also its greatest strength.

James Ronda: I remember actually saying in “Lewis and Clark Among the Indians” so many years ago that there was a vote, and I said that arrogantly, I said it without much consideration. I see it now as doing what Lewis and Clark had done before, getting the views of everyone involved and then they would make the decision. This is not a vote.

Clay Jenkinson: We’ll never know whether what happened on November 24, 1805 was a binding vote, a non-binding plebiscite, a canvassing of opinion, or a shrewd piece of personnel management. But whatever took place that day has proved to be one of the most important moments in the development of Lewis and Clark mythology.

James Ronda: We don’t have to say that this is a vote and this is a kind of extension of American democracy to the Pacific Northwest, the most important thing since the Declaration of Independence, we don’t need that kind of hyperventilated rhetoric in order to understand the significance of asking them to record their thoughts.

Peter Coyote: We have little idea what Indian people thought about this small band of travelers coming through their territory, beyond what we can glean from journal passages about their reception by various tribes and tribal leaders. The journals describe everything from friendly gatherings with Indian people to tense encounters. Unfortunately, we do not know what the Indians of America thought or felt or wondered about in their own words. Roberta Conner, director of Tamástslikt Cultural Institute, owned and operated by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, describes her tribe’s perspective on the Lewis and Clark Expedition’s visit to their land:

Roberta Conner: Our oral histories tell us that there were many prophecies about how our lives would change. That night was the announcement of the fulfillment of the prophecy that a new or strange people would come and our lives would be changed and we would have to endure very difficult times to survive and that there would be a time when we would be strong again. The announcement of the fulfillment of that prophecy puts our people on notice that the trade goods that we had before they came and the trade goods that we have when they leave are important material cultural items to us but we are put on notice then and there that the prophecy has been fulfilled.

Peter Coyote: James Ronda, author of “Lewis and Clark Among the Indians,” says the bicentennial offers all of us a chance to open our ears to new voices that have not been heard in this story before.

James Ronda: One of the marvelous things about this story is that over and over again, down every river, up every trail, around every bend, there is something that is strange and that makes us grow. History doesn’t answer. It asks. It inquires. It inquires about mystery because in mystery is true knowledge.

Peter Coyote: Finally, we turn to our own guide, Clay Jenkinson, for some final thoughts about living with the mysteries of the Lewis and Clark Expedition some two hundred years after its conclusion.

Clay Jenkinson: More has been written about the Lewis and Clark Expedition than about almost any other event in American history. In the minds of some, we have studied it ad nauseam. And yet, two hundred years after the
fact, certain mysteries abide. Just what were Meriwether Lewis’s demons? If Lewis committed suicide, why did he do so? Truth be told, nobody really knows the answer to these questions and so we speculate endlessly.

What kind of woman was Sacagawea? How much did she understand about the mission of Lewis and Clark? Was she glad to be on the trip? Did she enjoy having her child with her? What became of her after the expedition? Where, when and how did she die? What did she look like? How do you pronounce her name? How did she pronounce her name? Truth told, nobody really knows the answers to these questions either. But that doesn’t stop us from trying.

What happened to the dog? This is, in fact, the number one-asked question by children. Answer: we don’t know. We can’t know.

Why did Thomas Jefferson give so little attention to the expedition after it returned? We don’t know. And this is the short list of Lewis and Clark mysteries.

Let’s pretend for a minute that we could snap our fingers and know for certain the answer to each of these questions. Would we be happier, or would it merely drain the energy out of the Lewis and Clark story? Maybe mystery is the fuel that keeps historians at their desks. Maybe the Lewis and Clark Expedition occupies so central a place in American mythology precisely because it is not pat. There are mysteries that cannot be resolved and those mysteries open windows of the imagination and that permits all of us to ponder the deeper meanings of America in a way that a simpler, more predictable story would preclude. It takes a certain maturity to accept the fact that there are some really important things that we can never know.

History is like a jigsaw puzzle in which most of the pieces are missing and unrecoverable. We reconstruct the past as best we can with the fragments that are available to us. What really went on in all those missing spaces is unknowable. We fill in the gaps with our imaginations. But if we are honest, we admit that we are filling in the gaps.

But history is even more complicated than that. The puzzle, as it turns out, has no one solution. Even if we could re-assemble every puzzle piece and fit them together into a coherent picture, that completed picture represents only one way of seeing what happened. It is as if we could scramble that puzzle and start over again with the exact same pieces and this time produce a different coherent picture of the past from the same raw materials. Sacagawea looks one way if you are examining her through an Anglo-European lens. She looks quite different if you put on a Lemhi Shoshone lens instead. Or a Hidatsa lens. There is no single story. There are only stories, built on fragments over a bedrock of mystery. It’s frustrating but it’s also marvelously exhilarating and it’s the fuel, maybe even the Muse, of the historical process. It’s the mysteries that make us keep coming back for more. 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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