



The challenge of the West beckons Lewis and Clark

By Melissa Rinehart, park ranger
Bonneville Lock and Dam

The members of the Corps of Discovery must have had a general feeling of anxiousness during the month of March 1805. There were many preparations for departing Fort Mandan, yet still the ice chunks rushed by in the Missouri River. Early in the month 16 men established a canoe-building camp, while others at the fort were busy twisting hides into ropes and making charcoal to forge tools for trading. All the while Capt. Clark continued to develop his maps.

The weather just did not cooperate with their plans for an early start. There were only a few days when the temperature reached more than 40 degrees. Large ice jams continued to fill the river, prohibiting their departure.

The cold weather did allow for continued relations and trading with the area tribes. They were able to entertain Hidatsa Chief Le Bourgne and offered him a medal and a U.S. flag, among other presents. The chief was known to be powerful and violent – and to favor the British. On March 9, Capt. Clark, according to his journal, spent time in the Mandan Village where he “smoked a pipe, the greatest mark of friendship and attention with the Chief.”

The Corps traded war axes for large quantities of corn, and on March 14 every man was hard at work shelling and grinding corn. Mandan and Hidatsa visitors

watched this process, fascinated by the metal corn mill. Neighboring tribes continued to visit for trading and were aware of the hurried preparations taking place in the fort.

The explorers continued to learn more about the day-to-day lives of area tribes. According to Clark’s journal, on March 6 the fort was “smokey all Day from the burning of

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The entrance of Fort Mandan must have been a welcome sight for Corps members who had to go hunting during the cold prairie winter.



For more than five months Fort Mandan was the site of considerable activity. During this time, preparations were made to head west to the Pacific Ocean.



The Corps'pondent is an unofficial offset publication authorized under provisions of AR 360-1, published monthly by the Public Affairs Office of the Portland District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Circulation 2000. The Corps'pondent is circulated to District employees, retirees, and persons who request it in writing. The views and opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Army.

Contributions, on computer disc or as hard copy, are welcome. If you have news tips, or suggestions for articles, call 503-808-4510, or address them to:

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Portland, Oregon 97208-2946
All manuscripts are subject to editing prior to publication.



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The Corps'pondent is printed on recycled paper.

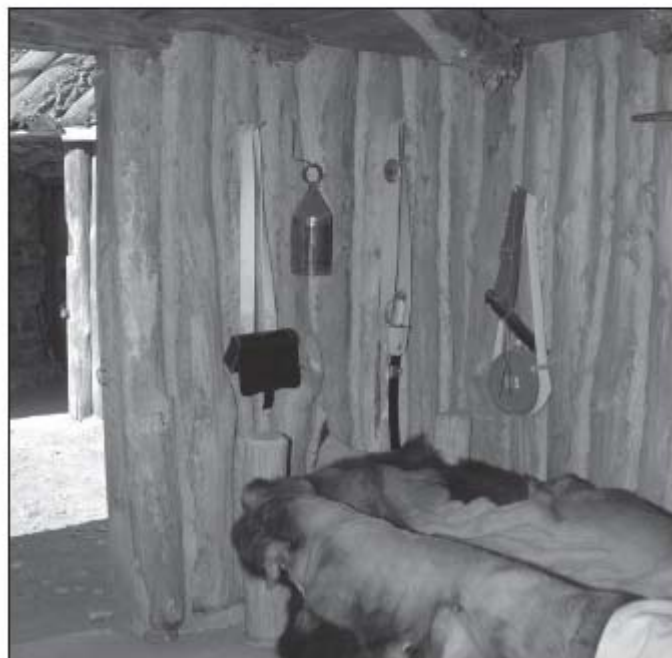


Editor's Note:

In the February issue of the *Corps'pondent* calendar, Sen. Joe McCarthy, not Eugene, started the “red scare” Feb. 9, 1950.

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Lewis and Clark stayed in quarters like these at Fort Mandan. The space included a writing desk and fireplace. The expedition leaders were as eager as their men to begin their journey to the Pacific in the spring.

Corps was replaced when he formally signed on as a civilian employee. The future of the journey could have been very different if Sacagawea had not been along as an ambassador and translator.

Each warm day continued to break up the ice and force it to flow down the river, which caused high spirits in those at the fort. They held dances almost every evening and most of the members were in good health. Although the men probably welcomed stopping for the winter, they were undoubtedly ready to continue their quest for the Pacific Ocean. Many challenges still lay ahead of them, but by now the team functioned well and was focused on its goal. It was a goal of such magnitude that the Corps of Discovery faced nearly insurmountable odds, but as is often the case, that only increased their anticipation for the next phase of their journey.

Photos courtesy Lewis & Clark Fort Mandan Foundation, <http://www.fortmandan.com>

the plains, which was set on fire by the Minnetarries for an early crop of Grass as an enticement for the buffalo to feed on [sic].”

The tribes also watched the ice-choked river for buffalo that had broken through and were floating down stream. Pulling ashore such a heavy, water-soaked beast must have been quite an accomplishment!

Mid-March is also when Charbonneau told the captains that he would only continue on the trek if he didn't have to share guard duty or do other labor, could have as big a share of the provisions as he wanted, and could resign and return home at any time. Not surprisingly, the captains told him these conditions were totally unacceptable. They assumed that the Hudson's Bay and North West trading companies wanted to sabotage their expedition and secure the Indian trade for themselves, and attributed Charbonneau's ultimatum to this.

Charbonneau, his wives and his family moved outside the fort. A few days later he sent his apologies for his foolishness.

The verbal agreement Charbonneau had with the

