

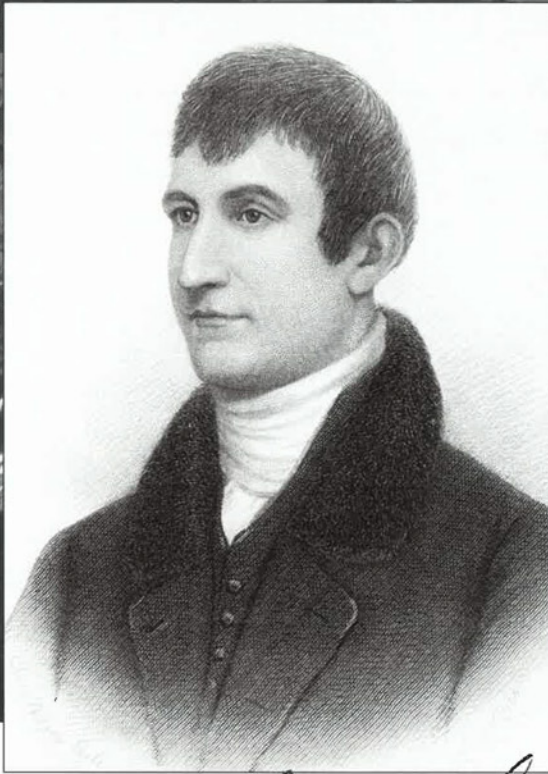
COLUMBIA

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INSIDE
Busting the
starvation myth
of Lewis and
Clark on the
Lolo Trail

WASHINGTON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



HA STAR

Lewis and Clark

Meriwether Lewis

THE TRAVERSE OF the Lolo or Nez Perce Trail through the Bitterroot Mountains is a hallowed story in the lore of Lewis and Clark. Perforce, this episode has been subject to considerable exaggeration via theatrical presentations and in print. That the trail was exacting and unusually difficult, there can be no doubt. But the journalists in the expedition writing about this crossing going west and again on the return, with the exception of one short segment, describe the care and control of the horses—not the physical safety of the party itself—as being the greatest risk. On September 15, 1805, William Clark reported that “Several horses Sliped and roled down Steep hills which hurt them very much.” One of these pack animals carried Clark’s portable desk. It is only during Meriwether Lewis’s journal entry for September 19 that we find a description of the road being “excessively dangerous” from which precipice “if either man or horse were precipitated they would inevitably be dashed in pieces.”

However, it is not the danger of the ride but the supply of food along this road that is the source of the Lolo legend.

Historians with their own narrative requirements for effective storytelling have inflated a temporary scarcity of game, one both anticipated in advance and recognized by the expedition as transitory, into the Bitterroot Mountains starvation myth. The hyperbole began with Elliott Coues, who suggested that the party had barely avoided freezing or starving to death in the mountains. “The situation was grave,” Coues averred. In modern times authors have used such expressions as the “starving time,” “near starvation,” “severest of threats to existence,” and “nearly starved” to describe a supposedly barely avoided demise of the expedition on the Lolo Trail.

It is true that provisions were in considerably shorter supply than the expedition had been accustomed to on the Missouri plains, which could only have exacerbated the perception of scarcity in the mountains, but those plains were already a month or more distant by the time the expedition hit the Lolo Trail. Though much is made of William Clark’s hunting vanguard once the party was well into the depths of the Bitterroots, riflemen were sent out in advance of the main party from the very first day upon leaving Travelers Rest. In

ALF RVED

on the Lolo Trail



William Clark

#2010.0.642, Washington State Historical Society

The rugged Bitterroot Mountains presented a formidable obstacle in the path of the Expedition for Northwestern Discovery. Legend has it that the corps nearly starved to death in crossing them.

fact, Clark said the practice was common during the entire course of the expedition.

Studied as an exception and in isolation, Lewis and Clark's travails in present-day northern Idaho appear quite dramatic. However, the circumstances the expedition found itself in during the traverse of the Lolo Trail, though straitened, were hardly unique in the history of western exploration. They certainly pale against the bona fide desperation that threatened recourse to cannibalism among the Astorians.

John C. Frémont, during his 1842 expedition to South Pass, after venturing out from the depot at Fort Laramie, observed that his party was "on the threshold of danger." He told the men they had 10 days' worth of provisions, but even absent finding some game along the way, he reassured them "we had our horses and mules, which we could eat when other means of subsistence failed." Crossing the Sierra Nevada Mountains south of Lake Tahoe in February 1844, Frémont wandered in terrain and weather not unlike Lewis and Clark's experience in the Bitterroots, but for an even longer period—18 days. In that instance Fremont sought recourse to

horsemeat for the undernourished men. He even butchered his mascot, the dog Tlamath, an extreme measure that Lewis was fortunate to avoid.

FOR A PEOPLE of plenty like Americans, the difference between being hungry (feeling discomfort or weakness from want of food) and starving (to die or nearly so) may be indistinct. Historian Stephen Dow Beckham opines that Lewis, despite "nearly starving," conducted "a remarkable flurry of ornithology." Sensibly, a man who was actually starving would not take the time or be able to maintain sufficient focus to write a lot about birds. The explanation Beckham put forth—Lewis focused on natural history to stave off "despair and hunger" or was simply "rising to President Jefferson's expectations"—is unconvincing. If the latter was true, Lewis had chosen an odd time to be faithful to the charge of keeping a daily journal since gaps abounded heretofore and the largest was about to ensue. Rather than starvation, it was the relative uncertainty of where the next meal was coming from and anxiety over the delayed appearance of the Columbia plains that dispirited the

party's outlook. The Shoshones and Nez Perce had warned the captains about the supply of food in the mountains.

It wasn't until September 14, the fourth day of the mountainous trek, that there was even a hint of concern about food. Clark had anticipated the need for extra horses—not for drayage, but for food “as the last resort.” This day the party killed one of their colts “for the want of meat,” as contingency

For Clark and the hunters up ahead, relief came when they stumbled upon a stray horse. This animal was quickly butchered and eagerly eaten for breakfast, a meal “which we thought fine,” Clark averred.

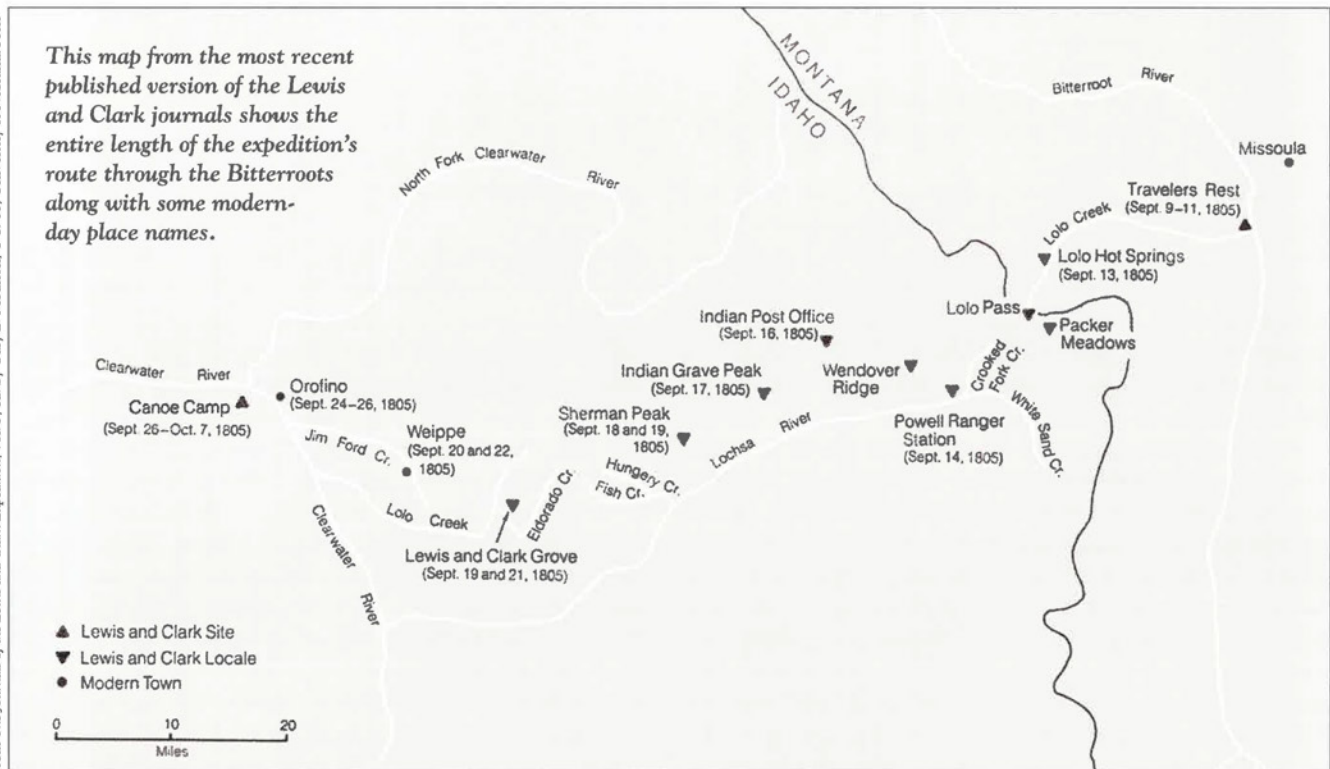
planning had anticipated. The remnant of that carcass also provided the main meal on the following day.

At what would prove to be the halfway point across the mountains, six to eight inches of snow compounded the difficulties of passing over the thickly timbered hillsides. The packs on the horses were constantly rubbing up against the low, snow-burdened limbs of the trees. Though the lore of Lewis and Clark trumpets these privations, they were far from an extraordinary occurrence in wilderness travel. In 1807 David Thompson, during his initial foray across the Rockies into Columbia Country, arrived at Kootenay Lake “extremely hungry & fatigued, so that we were hardly able to paddle.”

The next day Thompson's party happened upon a wild horse and made a meal of it. John C. Frémont, four decades after Lewis and Clark, wrote similarly about being forced off ridgelines by heavy snows. The Sierras' slopes “were steep, and slippery...and the tough evergreens of the mountains impeded our way, tore our skins, and exhausted our patience.” His men, like Lewis and Clark's earlier, also complained about their moccasins not being able to keep their feet dry and warm.

A cold and wet Lolo Trail prompted Clark to proceed ahead about six miles with another man to make a fire for the expected arrival of the larger party, a tactic Frémont also later employed. A second colt was killed for supper that night, “which we all Suped hartily on and thought it fine meat,” Clark reported. Encouragingly, Clark noted that he had seen four blacktail deer that day, but the snow continued through the next, necessitating the butchering of another colt for supper.

The legend of Lewis and Clark's “starving time” is grounded in the events of September 18-19, 1805, the eighth and ninth days of the eleven-day Lolo traverse. Exercising classic leadership skill, Clark ventured forward a second time, joining the hunters. The want of provisions, Clark later explained to Nicholas Biddle, combined with the rough going in the mountains, “dampened the Spirits of the party.” Clark's plan was to advance west to the open plains where prospects for finding game were considerably better. Lightened of the burden of conducting baggage across the peaks, Clark's small band of hunters on horseback made 32 miles on the 18th as opposed to the 14 miles the whole detachment had averaged per day



William Clark's journal entry of September 18-20, 1805, depicts the expedition's route traversing the last leg of the Lolo Trail.

for the previous week. Even Lewis's trailing unit made 18 miles the same day, still higher than average. Lewis said he was "determined to force my march."

Twenty miles into his ride Clark's strategy started to pay dividends. From an elevated vantage he secured "a view of an emence Plain and leavel Country to the SW. & West." These were the Camas and Nez Perce prairies near today's Grangeville, Idaho. That night Clark and his squad set up camp on a stream he called "Hungry Creek." Drouillard had shot at a deer but could not bag it. Accordingly, in this instance, and for truly the only time during the Bitterroot traverse, some subset of the expedition had nothing to eat. Had the situation merited it, Clark could have killed one of the hunters' horses. He did not because the targeted plains were in view. For this reason the stream the group camped on is not named "Starvation Creek."

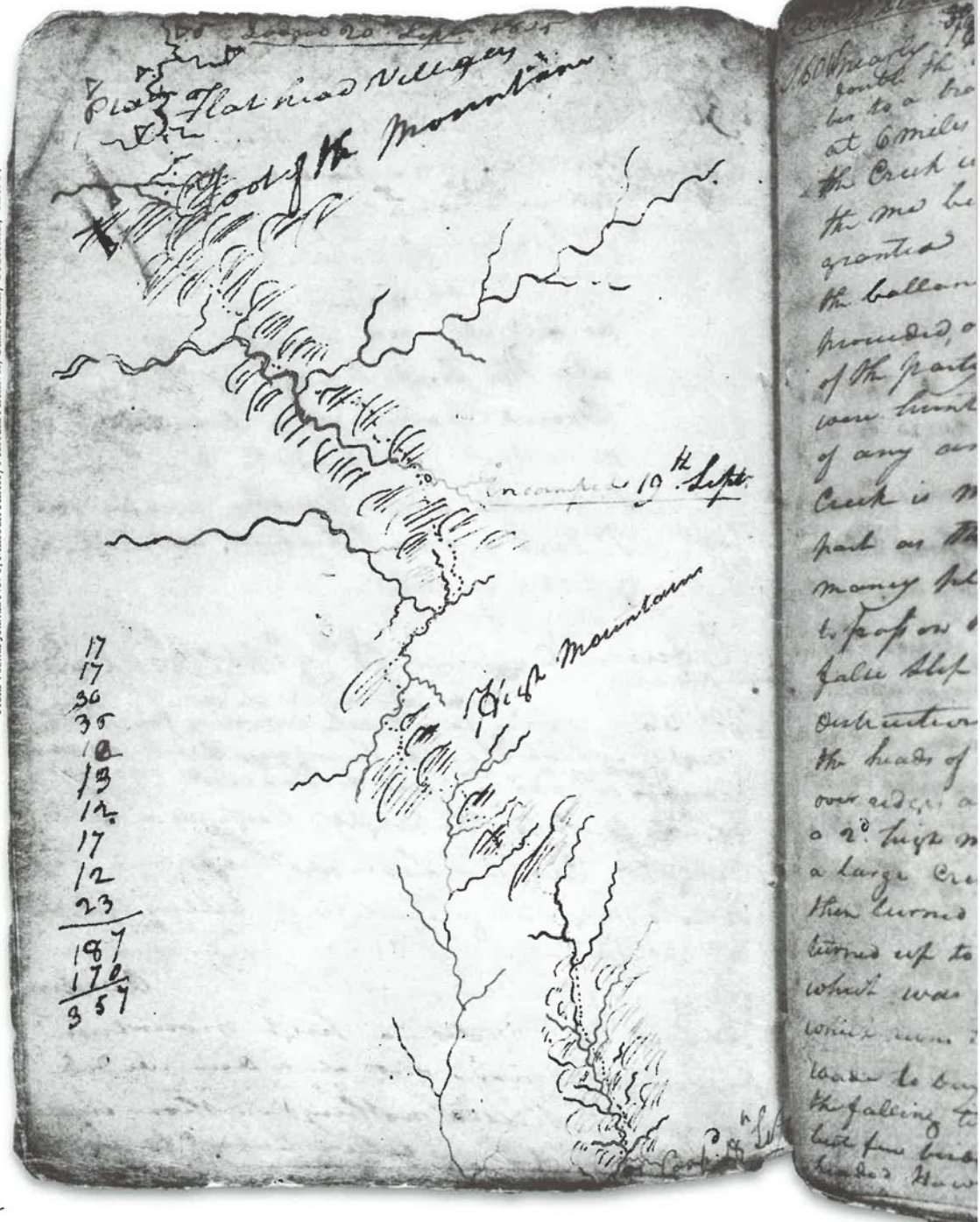
The core text for the starvation legend is the party's recourse to the "portable soupe." This substance formed the midday meal and supper on September 18. Although fairly described by Lewis as "skant proportion," the more pressing requirement that day was not meat but water. Though much is made in the Lewis and Clark lore regarding Lewis's short checklist of provisions then on hand—portable soup, bear's oil and "candles"—less noticed is the captain's pointed assertion that the party still had its guns and horses. Lewis nonetheless affirmed that the first of these resources was "but a poor dependance in our present situation," where all they could shoot at were a few pheasants, squirrels, and blue jays. That the horses remained as a last resort went unstated, but the situation did not call for their use.

For Clark and the hunters up ahead relief came early on the 19th when they stumbled upon a stray horse. This animal

was quickly butchered and eagerly eaten for breakfast, a meal "which we thought fine," Clark averred. The bulk of the carcass was "hung up" for Lewis's trailing unit.

On September 19 Lewis and the larger detachment came into view of the same prairie Clark had sighted on the 18th, to the former's "inexpressable joy." Old Toby, the expedition's Shoshone guide, had told Lewis that beyond the plain lay "the Columbia river." By this the Shoshone guide meant what we know today as the Clearwater or Snake rivers, but the more important point is that the end of their travail was already in sight the day after the captains split their forces because of a dampened mood. The prairie was merely a day away, Toby said, and its appearance, Lewis stated, "greatly

From Voorhis Journal No. 6; Missouri History Museum Archives, Clark Family Collection, #26914



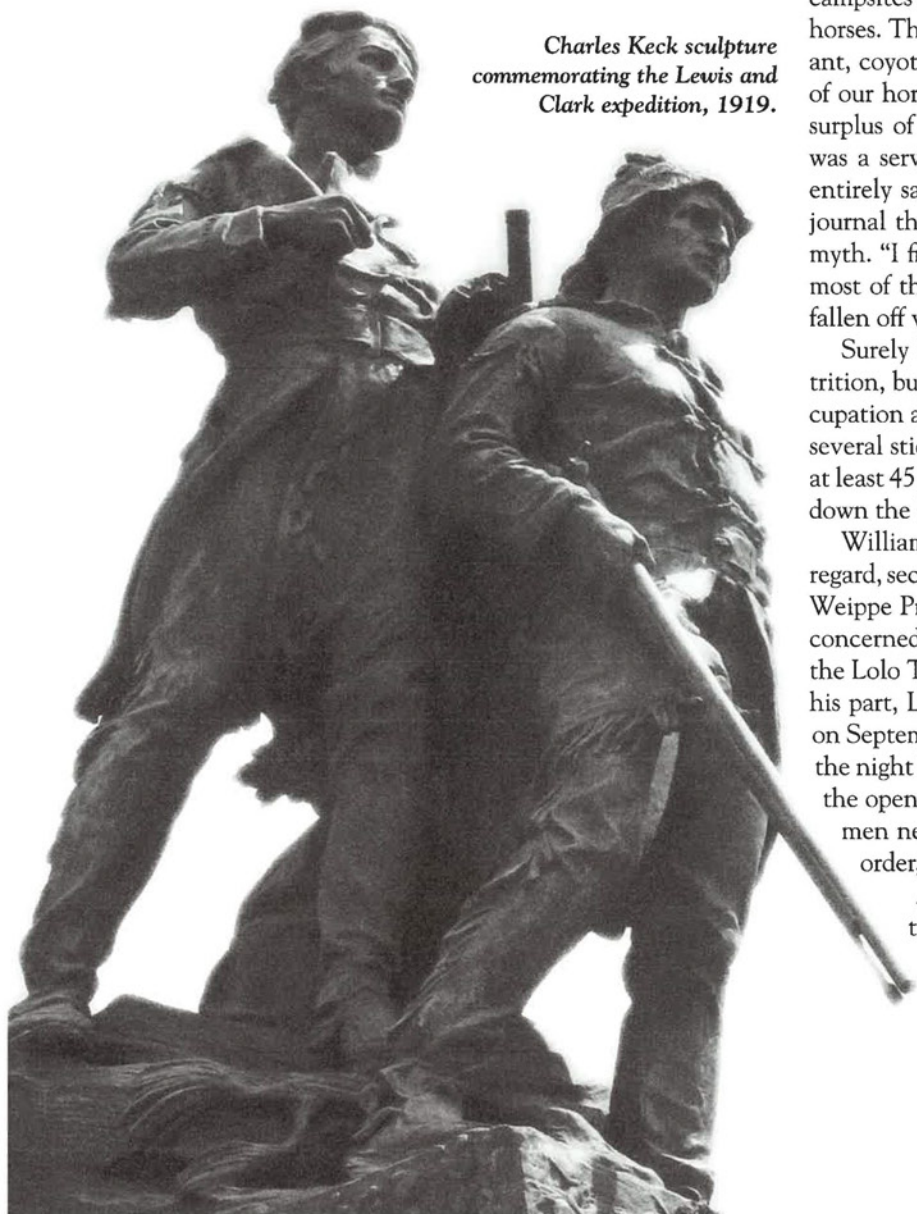
revived the spirits of the party already reduced and much weakened for the want of food." For this day the portable soup again had to suffice.

William Clark and the hunters made it out of the woods on September 20, the tenth day since leaving Travelers Rest.

When William Clark returned to Weippe Prairie he "found Capt Lewis & the party Encamped, much fatigued, & hungry, much rejoiced to find something to eat of which They appeared to partake plentifully."

Around noon this vanguard element of the Expedition for Northwestern Discovery stumbled unexpectedly into a camp of Nez Perce Indians on Weippe Prairie. After Clark quickly distributed presents to allay fears, the Nez Perce conducted the explorers to a lodge where they were fed buffalo meat, dried salmon, and some "berries & roots in different States"

Charles Keck sculpture commemorating the Lewis and Clark expedition, 1919.



and bread made from camas root. Of this meal, Clark wrote, the party ate "heartily." For Clark and his squad the issue of sustenance was over, but they knew Lewis still needed help, and for that reason the hunters were sent out. Meanwhile, Clark began the process of learning about the geography of this new region.

Lewis initially gave every appearance of not being overly concerned about the state of provender on September 20 because this was the day of his aforementioned ornithological foray. In short order Lewis's detachment came upon the carcass of the stray horse that Clark had left for them. They "made a hearty meal on our horse beef much to the comfort of our hungry stomachs." At camp that night there was but little grass for the pack horses, "however we obtained as much as served our culinary purposes and supped on our beef." It is easy to see in this state of provision how Lewis could afford to make botanical and other scientific observations. The expedition members may have been hungry but they were hardly close to starvation.

On September 21 Lewis found one of Clark's earlier campsites and a glade where at last there was forage for the horses. They fixed a meal for themselves consisting of pheasant, coyote, crayfish from a nearby creek, and "the ballance of our horse beef," meaning that there had been a nominal surplus of provisions from the previous day. Although this was a serviceable diet under the circumstances, it was not entirely satisfactory, causing Lewis to enter a passage in his journal that has been seized upon to sustain the starvation myth. "I find myself growing weak for the want of food and most of the men complain of a similar deficiency and have fallen off very much."

Surely Lewis and the others were facing the want of nutrition, but it was not his sole, if indeed his principal, preoccupation as reflected in a corresponding journal entry. "I saw several sticks today large enough to form elegant perogues of at least 45 feet in length," he wrote. The long-delayed voyage down the Columbia beckoned.

William Clark was also beginning to make plans in this regard, securing from the headman of the Nez Perce village on Weippe Prairie "a Chart of the river & nations below." Still concerned for Lewis, Clark dispatched Reubin Field back up the Lolo Trail with a "horse load of roots & 3 Sammon." For his part, Lewis was determined to get out of the mountains on September 22, having ordered the picketing of the horses the night before to allow a quick start on "a forced march" to the open prairie ahead. Despite well-laid plans, "one of the men neglected to comply," pleading ignorance of Lewis's order, which held back the departure until almost noon.

After a short two and a half miles of travel down the trail, Lewis's detachment met Field on his way up the mountain with food. Lewis wrote: "I ordered the party to halt for the purpose of taking some refreshment. I divided the fish, roots and berries,



"Portable Soupe"

THE LEWIS AND CLARK expedition's portable soup has its modern-day equivalent in the bouillon cube. Commonly made by boiling meat broth down to a gummy paste that was then baked until dried, portable soup was an expedition staple believed to have value as an antiscorbutic. Pictured here is a 200-year-old block of British Royal Navy portable soup. Captain James Cook stocked it on his sea voyages. In 1803, while gathering provisions for the expedition, Meriwether Lewis purchased almost 200 pounds of the stuff from François Baillet in Philadelphia. When combined with hot water, meat, vegetables, and spices, it made a passable meal.

and was happy to find a sufficiency to satisfy compleatly all our appetites." One meal was all it took. After another seven and a half miles Lewis, too, was out of the woods, arriving at the Nez Perce village on Weippe Prairie around dusk. Contemplating his deliverance, Lewis composed one of his most memorable passages.

The pleasure I now felt in having triumphed over the rocky Mountains and decending once more to a level and fertile country where there was every rational hope of finding a comfortable subsistence for myself and party can be more readily conceived than expressed, nor was the flattering prospect of the final success of the expedition less pleasing.

Two sentences later the westering voice of Meriwether Lewis turns silent.

When William Clark returned to Weippe Prairie after an initial reconnaissance of the Clearwater River, he "found

Capt Lewis & the party Encamped, much fatigued, & hungry, much rejoiced to find something to eate of which They appeared to partake plentifully." Here we find the origin of the corollary to the starvation myth—that the Nez Perce Indians saved the expedition.

The Nez Perce were unquestionably hospitable to the Expedition for Northwestern Discovery, both upon their first emergence from the wilderness in the fall of 1805 and during an even more cordial stay in the spring of 1806. However, one of the foundational elements of Clay Jenkinson's lore of Lewis and Clark typology—that "the expedition would not have survived without the help of American Indians"—is assuredly grounded in the food provided by the Nez Perce in September 1805. That assertion, Jenkinson states, is "hard to establish," and its durability and serviceability has more to do with modern cultural politics—"solidarity with Indian communities through which Lewis and Clark passed"—than reality.

In any event, according to Clark, the party looked "much reduced in flesh as well as Strength," wording that suggests the men had lost weight and their endurance was sapped. Clark learned that the horse he had hung up was well placed for it was found "at a time they were in great want" and that Reubin Field's mission was also deemed to have been well calculated for positive effect.

The Lolo traverse had indeed been difficult, but it is important to keep it in perspective. The expedition always knew where it was going, they were always on the move, always had recourse to some degree of nourishment, and no one was ever close to expiring for want of food. If anything, the expedition members' physical condition worsened *after* they emerged from the mountains. As William Clark noted at Canoe Camp, many of the men were so debilitated that they were unable to work on constructing the craft intended for their float down the Columbia. The men, Clark reported at that juncture, were still "complaining of their diat."

On September 30, a week after exiting the mountains, Joseph Whitehouse noted, "the party in general are So weak and feeble that we git along Slow with the canoes." Indeed, in a scene reminiscent of the mountain passage just concluded, Clark and the hunters went out on the hills looking for game and returned with "nothing excep a Small Prarie wolf" (coyote). Whitehouse reported "the party are So weak working without any kind of meat, that we concluded to kill a horse... and we eat the meat with good Stomacks as iver we did fat beef in the States." It was not until October 6, 1805, on the eve of starting their descent by canoe down the Clearwater River, that the Expedition for Northwestern Discovery was again fully healthy, "fit to do their duty" or in "high spirits."

David L. Nicandri is executive director of the Washington State Historical Society, chief editor of COLUMBIA, and author of a new book, River of Promise: Lewis and Clark on the Columbia (Dakota Institute Press), from which this article is excerpted.

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COVER: "Crossing the Bitterroots," by Gerry Metz. Former interpretations of the expedition journals gave rise to the idea that the Corps of Discovery very nearly starved to death while crossing the rugged Bitterroot Mountains in September 1805. A new interpretation of the Lewis and Clark journals examines the weaknesses inherent in that point of view. See related story beginning on page 20. (Courtesy Gerry Metz)