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The Vote: “Station Camp,” Washington

By Dayton Duncan

On November 2, 1805, the Corps of Discovery completed its descent through the last of the great cataracts of the mighty Columbia River—a harrowing series of waterfalls, gorges and rapids that had begun with Celilo Falls nine days before.

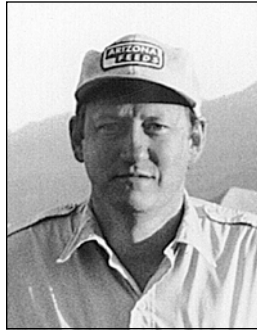
Early that morning the expedition’s dugout canoes were prepared for the final mile and a half of rapids. Hollowed out from Ponderosa pines only a month earlier when they were back with the Nez Perce, these dugouts were big and bulky, hardly designed for quick maneuvering in white water. Nevertheless, the expedition’s best boatmen put them onto the current and then steered madly as these floating tree trunks shot through the foaming chaos of water and rock. One of the canoes, Clark noted in his journal, struck a rock and split a little; three others took in water during the wild ride.

All in all, this final hazard, roughly four miles of boiling rapids and falls that William Clark called “the Great Shute,” was surmounted safely. Clark had taken the precaution to order most of the baggage removed from the canoes earlier in the day and portaged around the rapids. And for this job, he says, he “dispatched all the men who could not swim.” That’s a prudent commander for you—always getting the most out of his men, whatever their shortcomings. But it does beg a question about their recruitment back on the far side of the Mississippi nearly two years earlier. If you were about to set off on an expedition across the continent to find an all-water route to the sea, wouldn’t one of the top requirements be the ability to swim?

It must have been a great relief—for swimmers and nonswimmers alike—to load up the canoes below the final rapids and ease onto the broad Columbia. Relief, followed by excitement, because each mile they traveled now gave them new evidence that they were at last nearing the ocean.

They noticed a tidal rise of 9 inches on the river’s shore and, a day later, an 18-inch rise and fall. On November 3 they passed the point where Lieutenant William Broughton, sailing upriver from the sea during Vancouver’s expedition of 1792, had turned his ship around and headed back to the Pacific; they had finally emerged from a blank map to reach previously explored territory.

Better yet was news from the people Clark called “our Indian friends.” “Towards evening,” Joseph Whitehouse wrote in his journal, “we met several Indians in a canoe who were going up the River. They signed to us that in two sleeps we should see the ocean vessels and



white people.” According to Clark, that same day a large group of Indians in two canoes, coming upstream from the Columbia’s mouth, “informed us they saw 3 vessels below.”

Imagine the talk in camp that night. Three ships with white people only “two sleeps” away! To fully understand how electrifying that news must have been, consider what they had just been through. When they left Fort Mandan in North Dakota back in April, they had expected to find the fabled Northwest Passage, follow it through the single line of mountains conjectured on their maps, reach the ocean in late summer, and then head back east, perhaps return to Fort Mandan before winter. That was the theory.

Instead, they encountered one unexpected obstacle after another, time-consuming delay after time-consuming delay:

- ☞ A week deciding whether the Marias River was actually the Missouri.
- ☞ Nearly a month, instead of half a day, portaging around the Great Falls, which turned out to be five waterfalls instead of one.
- ☞ The agonizingly slow ascent of the Jefferson and Beaverhead rivers, taking them parallel to the mountains instead of through them.
- ☞ And then, at Lemhi Pass, the unexpected obstacle to trump all others—mountains, where mountains were not supposed to exist. No Northwest Passage. No short portage. Instead, weeks of stumbling through the Bitterroots—cold, wet, starving, and as close to lost as the Corps of Discovery ever found itself.

And let’s not forget what emotional toll was exacted each time their canoes picked up speed and headed toward the thunder of yet another Columbia River chute and cataract. Even the swimmers must have come to dread that sound.

But now came the promise of a reward for all that toil and trouble: three ships only “two sleeps” away—ships that could replenish their increasingly short supply of trade goods; ships that could provide them with news from home and, more importantly, take back news of their great achievement; ships that could provide them with the first whiskey they had tasted since they drained their last barrel on the Fourth of July at the Great Falls. All of that, only “two sleeps” away.

On November 4, at a large Indian village where the men feasted on wapato, Clark noted “uriopian” goods everywhere he looked: guns, powder flasks, copper and brass trinkets, some tailored clothes. Farther down river, Sergeant John Ordway says, they met an Indian who “could talk & speak some words of English such as curseing and blackguard.”

On November 6, according to Clark, they met another English-speaking Indian. This man told them a “Mr. Haley” traded regularly with them at the river’s mouth not far away. That night the men recorded a tidal rise and fall of three feet.

By the following morning they must have been bursting to put their paddles in the water. The anticipation was as palpable as the morning fog, so thick they couldn't see across the river. But on they went, piloted through the dense mist by an Indian wearing a sailor's jacket. They stopped at another village, and once again, according to Whitehouse, Indians "made signs to us that there were vessels lying at the Mouth of this River."

"We proceeded on," Ordway wrote, and for the first time since the morning they had left Fort Mandan in April, that phrase had more expectancy than resigned perseverance embedded in it. At last the fog lifted—and the Corps of Discovery was treated to a breathtaking, heartstopping vista. For the first time in a long time, the western horizon offered them something other than a discouraging surprise.

"Ocian in view!" Clark wrote in his notebook, cracking open exclamatory points like champagne corks. "Ocian in view! O! The joy."

They encamped that evening opposite Pillar Rock. Though the journals make passing mention of dampness and difficulty finding a suitable place for the night, there's no mistaking the emotion of the day. "Great joy in camp," Clark wrote, "we are in view of the Ocian, this great Pacific Ocean which we [have] been so long anxious to see."

Those familiar with this story already know that Pillar Rock is hardly on the Pacific shore. It wasn't the ocean that Clark was so excitedly describing—it was Gray's Bay. I imagine that Clark himself quickly realized this. But after traveling more than 4,000 grueling miles up the entire length of the Missouri, across those tremendous mountains, and down the treacherous rapids of the Clearwater, Snake and Columbia—and given the anticipation that had been building steadily for five days—he can be forgiven for jumping the gun by a few miles.

Let's give him and the rest of the Corps of Discovery this moment of jubilation. Let them savor it: "Ocian in view! O! The joy." Let them bask in their joy. They earned it. There's another reason to give them that moment, because on the next day, November 8, they received their official early-winter welcome to the Pacific Northwest, and they realized once more that nothing ever came easily for the Corps of Discovery.

A typical November coastal storm engulfed them as they inched along the shore of Gray's Bay, restricting them to only eight miles that day. Some Indians bearing salmon for trade blithely passed them in their elegant canoes, but the swells rolling in from the ocean storm rocked the expedition's lumbering dugouts so badly that several men got seasick. So did Sacagawea, who had been longing like the rest of them to see what her people called "the Stinking Lake." Those dugouts, crucial as they were to the Corps of Discovery, turned out to be even more poorly suited for the rough waters here at the Columbia's mouth than they had been for the river's rapids.

The words "wet and disagreeable" appear in several journals that day, a phrase that would soon replace "we proceeded on" as the expedition's mantra. "We are all wet and disagreeable," Clark wrote, "and we are at a loss to . . . find out if any settlement is near the mouth of the river." The waves forced them to stop near Gray's Point, where they camped in the margin between the high and ebb tides.

In the night, the high tide overwhelmed them, and they scrambled to save the canoes and their baggage from destruction. Things only got worse the next day. It rained hard all morning, and as the wind picked up with the afternoon floodtide, huge driftwood logs—some of them 200 feet long and 7 feet in diameter—were loosened from

the shoreline and sent crashing and thrashing around the campsite, now inundated with water.

With "every man as wet as water could make them," Clark reported, "every exertion and the strictest attention by the party was scarcely sufficient to defend our canoes from being crushed to pieces."

Some of the men had been drinking the brackish water of the estuary, and it had a laxative effect on them like a dose of Rush's Thunderbolts. Patrick Gass tells us the only fresh water to be had was found in the rainwater collecting in the canoe bottoms. For obvious reasons, they did not "proceed on" that day; they camped again in the same spot, at a place Clark called "Dismal Point."

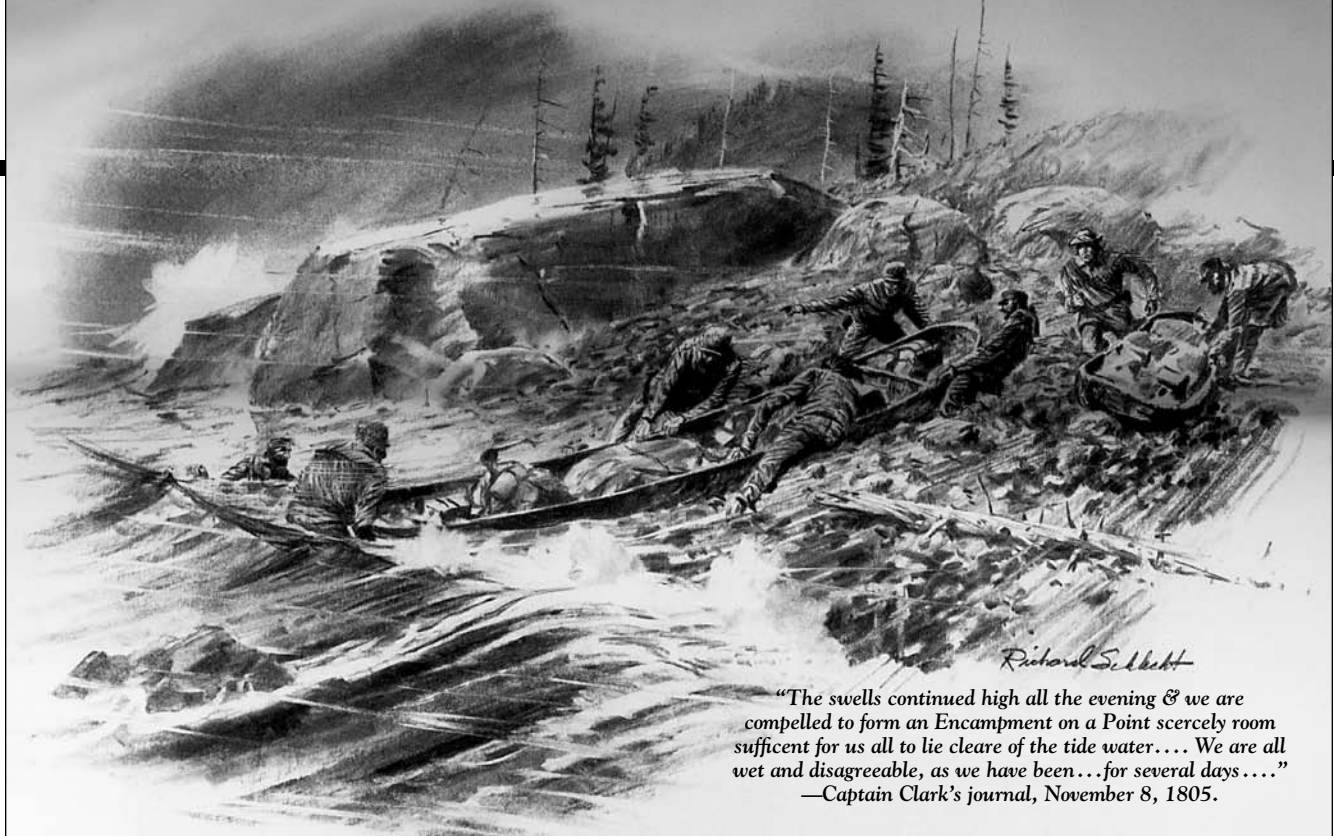
But they were, to borrow a phrase, "undaunted." "Notwithstanding the disagreeable time of the party for several days past," Clark wrote that night of his crew, "they are all chearfull and full of anxiety to see further into the ocian." They had been through violent storms before out on the Great Plains, and they must have assumed that this one would pass just as those had. They couldn't have been more wrong. On the morning of November 10, the storm still raged. During a lull they loaded their dugouts and left Dismal Point, hoping to round Point Ellice and reach the coast. But as they approached the point, the wind and waves returned, forcing them to do the one thing the Corps of Discovery hated more than anything else: retreat and give back two hard-earned miles.

They unloaded their canoes, waited for the low tide, loaded up again, and tried once more to round Point Ellice. Furious waves defeated them again, forced them into another begrudging retreat to find a spot to camp for the night. This one was even worse than the previous campsite. They stowed their baggage on high rocks but searched in vain for an adequate place to sleep. "Here we scarcely had room to lie between the rocks and water," Patrick Gass wrote, "but we made shift to do it among some drift wood that had been beat up by the tide."

Whitehouse wrote that during the day they could watch porpoises, sea otters, ducks and sea gulls in great abundance, but all they had to eat that night was pounded fish purchased farther up the river. Their hopes—like the tides—had risen and fallen twice during the day. Adding to the indignity, the point that had turned them back now blocked any view toward the ocean they had been "so long anxious to see." Today we call it Point Ellice. On Clark's map it appears as Point Distress.

The storm pinned them there for four days. Without tents, they tied blankets and mats to poles in an effort to protect themselves from the rain as they huddled on the driftwood. But each high tide forced them to temporarily abandon even this makeshift camp and cower in the rocky crevices until the water receded. More misery. The steady rain saturated the soil on the steep slopes above them, and small stones began sliding off onto them. More misery. At three in the morning on the 12th, the storm sent sheets of lightning and hail against the exposed crew. There was a short period of clearing light at dawn. Then an ominous black cloud rolled in from the southwest and, as Clark wrote, "the heavens became darkened." Then followed more hard rain and wind, and waves that were the highest yet.

In the midst of the gale some Cathlamets paddled up, stopped briefly to sell the hungry explorers 13 sockeye salmon, and then, as if the huge swells were nothing out of the ordinary, they paddled on downstream and out of sight. The men watched them depart, envying both their seaworthy canoe and their nimble skill in such rough waters. "They are on their way to trade those fish with white people," Clark noted, "which they make signs live below, round a point."



“The swells continued high all the evening & we are compelled to form an Encampment on a Point scarcely room sufficient for us all to lie clear of the tide water.... We are all wet and disagreeable, as we have been...for several days....”
—Captain Clark’s journal, November 8, 1805.

Richard Schickel/NCS Image Collection

The captains then dispatched three men to attempt another passing of Point Distress—to see if they could find those white men, or at least a better bay for a decent campsite. The point defeated them once more. They tried again the next day. This time Colter, Willard and Shannon made it around Point Distress and disappeared. Back at camp there was nothing to eat again but pounded fish. Whitehouse wrote that his buffalo robes were falling apart. Ordway reported that the storm continued raging. Gass summarized it as “another disagreeable rainy day.”

Something about this situation seems to have brought out the best in William Clark’s journal writing. Meriwether Lewis was in the midst of one of his long gaps in record-keeping—more than three months in this case—but Clark rose to the literary occasion.

From the moment he wrote “O! The joy,” his journal entries seem to be more descriptive than usual and filled with empathy for the plight of his men, reflecting what must have been going on in both captains’ minds. On the 12th he wrote:

It would be distressing to a feeling person to see our situation at this time, all wet and cold with our bedding &c also wet, in a cove scarcely large enough to contain us, our baggage in a small holler about 1/2 a mile from us, and canoes at the mercy of the waves & drift wood.... Our party has been wet for 8 days and is truly disagreeable, their robes & leather clothes are rotten from being continually wet, and they are not in a situation to get others, and we are not in a situation to restore them.

By November 14 his concern had deepened. The robes and half of the few clothes the men still had were now rotted away. He could see snow on the high mountaintops to the south. “If we have cold weather before we can kill & dress skins for clothing” he wrote, “the bulk of the party will suffer very much.” Earlier he had called their situation disagreeable. Now, he said, “Our situation is dangerous.”

That afternoon, Colter arrived back in camp by land with his report from the scouting mission. The news was discouraging: No sign of white men. But, said Colter, if they could manage to get beyond Point Distress, there was a sandy beach for a better encampment.

Lewis decided to set off on foot with four men to scout farther up the coast for trading vessels. Clark was to lead the rest of the party on one more attempt to round the point.

That night, I think, was one of the low points for the Corps of Discovery. Patrick Gass wrote that this weather was “the most disagreeable I had ever seen.” That’s a telling statement from someone who had gone through a North Dakota winter of 45 degrees below zero and howling winds; blistering hot days in Montana punctuated by hail storms that had knocked men to the ground and the constant presence of mosquitoes that made every day a slow torture; and then snow squalls in the Bitterroot Mountains where some of the men had walked with rags wrapped around their feet. But the storm at Point Distress, according to Gass, was worse than all that—“the most disagreeable I had ever seen.”

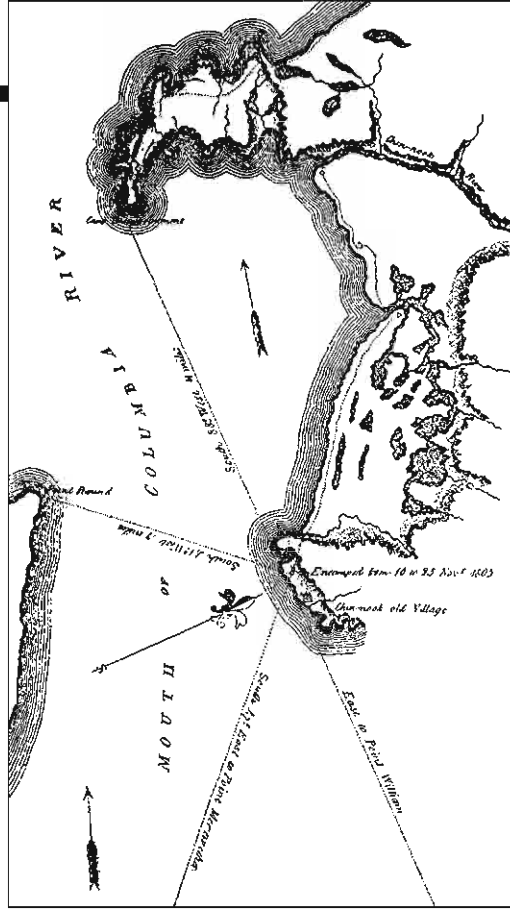
Anyone who’s done any camping knows how miserable it can be during a rainstorm. Hot weather can be uncomfortable; cold weather and snow can be uncomfortable—even dangerous. And yet there can be an exhilaration about meeting the challenge of those extremes. Rain, on the other hand, is dispiriting even with the best of camping equipment to keep you moderately dry. Imagine camping in the rain without tents. Imagine that rain going on day after day, night after night, for two weeks, rotting your clothes away.

Gass’s statement tells us as much about psychology as the weather. It tells us the expedition’s state of mind. Clark shows us even more. This was, he wrote, “the most disagreeable time I have experienced, confined on a temp[estuous] coast, wet, where I can neither get out to hunt, return to a better situation, or proceed on.” Unable to “proceed on”—can you imagine a worse feeling for the Corps of Discovery?

On November 15 everyone was itching to move. The wind stopped them once more, but during a brief pause in the afternoon they were finally able to round Point Distress, go past an empty Chinook village of 36 houses, and reach what came to be called Station Camp. George Shannon joined them from his scouting mission with five Indians. The only white men he had seen were Lewis and his party, heading on their own reconnaissance.

The high tide and big waves convinced Clark to set up camp. There was no use in trying to go any farther, he noted. From here they could survey the entire mouth of the Columbia. He called this bay Haley's Bay, after the man they had heard so much about but never met. Station Camp would be their home for ten days. "Here we formed a comfortable camp," Gass wrote, "and remained in full view of the ocean, at this time more raging than pacific."

Their first full day, the 16th, got off to a good start. The weather cleared enough for them to put out articles to dry, and the hunters were dispatched. They returned with two deer, a crane and two ducks. York, Clark's slave, added to the larder with two geese and eight brants he had shot. That night's meal must have seemed like a feast.



Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

This map from the first published version of the Lewis and Clark journals shows the mouth of the Columbia River. The north/south directional arrow points to the location of Station Camp. The land protuberance below "Chin-nook old Village" is Point Distress.