

Readers' Guide

- Using a highlighter pen or sticky tabs highlight places in the article where you notice factors that would enter into your decision about where to spend the winter if you had been part of Jefferson's Corps of Discovery.
- Notice details about how the decision was made and make note of them as well.
- Lastly, note any lingering questions you may have after reading the article.

Democracy at Station Camp

Adapted from "The Vote: 'Station Camp,' Washington" by Dayton Duncan

It must have been a great relief—for swimmers and non-swimmers 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.

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

They encamped that evening opposite Pillar Rock, and 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.

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.

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.

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.

From the journals it seems clear that everyone assumed this was as far as they would go. They could hear the surf, according to Whitehouse, and Gass noted that in the distance they could see "waves, like small mountains"—waves, I might add, that had just crossed the widest stretch of the Pacific between Asia and North America. Barring some discovery by Lewis (maybe he would return with news of a trading post or ship), there apparently was no talk of wintering on the coast.

Gass noted: "We are now at the end of our voyage, which has been completely accomplished according to the intention of the Expedition, the object of which was to discover a passage by the way of the Missouri and Columbia rivers to the Pacific Ocean; notwithstanding the difficulties, privations and dangers, which we had to encounter, endure and surmount."

Remember, their mission had been to reach the ocean, not remain there. And their original plan had been to touch the sea, turn around, and get as far back east as possible. Clark himself had noted in his journal on the way downriver that the mouth of the Sandy River would

make a good wintering spot. . But now he asked if anyone else wanted to hike to the ocean shore with him—perhaps to make one last attempt at spotting a ship, perhaps simply to satisfy himself by reaching the continent's edge, where the horizon is filled only by water.

Only 11 said yes, they wanted to come—and two of those, the Field brothers, had just returned from the coast with Lewis.

But Clark and 11 others set off on November 18. Over the course of two and a half days they went past the place the Indians had told them the trading ships often anchored, shot down a California condor whose wingspan they measured at 9 feet and whose head would eventually be displayed in Peale's museum in Philadelphia, climbed the headlands of Cape Disappointment, hiked along the sandy shore of Long Beach, and turned back to Station Camp.

Back at Station Camp, both before and after Clark's return, a steady stream of Indians—Chinooks and occasional Clatsops from across the river—came to trade and visit. From those visits, several things were becoming clearer.

First, if they wanted success in trading, the explorers needed more blue beads than they had brought along. Sacagawea had to sacrifice a belt of blue beads to purchase a robe of two sea otter pelts desired by the captains. By implication, they could not hope to purchase a winter's worth of food with what few trade goods they had left; they would need to hunt to survive.

Second, although the rain had let up a little, this was obviously a place where blue skies were the exception, not the rule. Several of the men noted the extraordinary hats the natives made of white cedar and bear grass—"very handsomely wrought and waterproof," according to Gass—and one explorer purchased one in exchange for an old razor. By implication, people don't make finely wrought waterproof hats in places where it doesn't rain a lot.

Third, the traffic of trading vessels was certainly both common and heavy here. In addition to all the previous evidence, one Indian woman was seen with the name J. Bowmon tattooed on her left arm. . .

The men's journals suggest that the consensus to head back east had hardened. "The wind blew so violent today," Gass wrote on November 21, "and the waves ran so high, that we could not set out on our return which it is our intention to do as soon as the weather and water will permit."

The storm worsened on the 22nd. The wind blew "with violence," according to Clark, throwing the river out of its bank in waves that once again overwhelmed the camp and split one of the canoes.

...the morning of November 24 dawned clear and cold, with a white frost on the ground. The

men were eager to push toward the rising sun. But the captains delayed them-first to send out hunters; then to air out their sodden clothes and bedding in the rare sunlight; then to take astronomical observations to fix this spot as precisely as they could on Clark's map. Come evening, after some Chinooks stopped by for a smoke and some trading, the Corps of Discovery was still there.

Then occurred what to me was the most powerfully meaningful single moment of an Expedition filled with powerful, meaningful moments. This moment was beyond meaningful-it was transcendent. The captains gathered the party together and, in a move that broke with all the rules of military command and protocol, announced that everyone would participate in the decision of what to do next.

There is much we simply don't know about this magnificent moment. Why, for instance, did the captains call for a vote in the first place? As military captains they simply could have issued an order. But in this case they didn't. Why?

Personally, I think that while the rest of the party was firmly set on moving upriver, Lewis and Clark had begun to question whether that was the best option. We only know their thinking from the reasons Clark recorded in his vote tally, but it's fair to assume the captains had been talking it over in the few days since Clark's return to camp from his excursion to Long Beach.

If game could be found on the other side of the river-and everyone understood that without game to hunt, no place would support them for the winter-Lewis now wanted to stay as close to the ocean as possible. It held out the possibility of seeing a ship by springtime, he said, and it provided the opportunity to make salt for their food. Besides, he argued, going upriver and wintering closer to the Rocky Mountains would not speed their return home: they would still have to wait for the snows to melt before attempting any crossing next year.

Salt was not a consideration for Clark; he was indifferent to its uses and considered saltwater, in his words, "evil in as much as it is not helthy." But he, too, now preferred wintering near the coast if, as the Clatsops promised, enough elk could be found in the neighborhood. The chance of getting resupplied by a ship with trade goods was worth waiting for, he thought.

The other advantage in Clark's mind was the prospect of a milder climate closer to the sea. The Indians claimed that winters here brought little snow, he noted, and the unusually warm November had convinced him they might be right. "If this should be the case," he wrote, always concerned for the welfare of his men, "it will most certainly be the best situation of our naked party dressed as they are altogether in leather."

And so, perhaps more out of the tactics of leadership than pure democratic principles, the captains called for a vote. This was a stunning-and surprising-act of leadership. I'm sure the captains had already decided what they hoped the outcome would be. But there was no guarantee. They were betting that, left to their own devices and allowed to hear the arguments, the group could be trusted to make the correct decision; and they knew that, regardless of the

outcome, the very act of inclusion strengthens the result. That, my friends, is the gamble—and the promise—of democracy.

But how was the vote taken? What was the scene around the campfire on the night of November 24, 1805? Were there speeches by the captains, questions and counter-arguments from the men? Was there a show of hands, a standing division, a ballot, a roll call answered in turn by each person's voiced opinion? When York's vote was solicited, did anyone grumble or sulk that a black man—a slave—had just been accorded as much authority as anyone else?

Were any eyebrows raised when Sacagawea—an Indian and a woman—had her opinion recorded? Why wasn't her husband's? Was it an oversight or a deliberate omission, some sort of decision that the Charbonneau family should have a single vote; and that Sacagawea's was the one that should count?

Were York and Sacagawea and the men surprised to be asked their opinion in the first place? Or by this point in their long journey did it seem matter-of-fact, the natural result of a process that had steadily bound them together with each mile and each surmounted obstacle, a process that most certainly had not stripped them of their individuality but had steadily forced them to see their survival and their success in terms of community, rather than individually?

We don't know. The journals don't tell us. What we do know is the result of the tally, dutifully set down in Clark's journal. When the vote was concluded, only Joseph Shields still wanted to leave immediately and winter upstream at the Sandy River. All the others were willing to cross the Columbia to what is now Oregon and investigate whether elk and a suitable site for a fort and a place to make salt could be found. If not, then they would "proceed on" upriver.

In that case, seven of them—including Clark—were in favor of going all the way to The Dalles for the winter. Nine—including all three sergeants and Lewis—favored the Sandy River as the back-up option. Thirteen had no preference, as long as it was upriver. Sacagawea's concern was that, wherever they wintered, there be plenty of wapato.

The journals also tell us something else—something as important as the decision itself, perhaps even more important: They tell us the enlisted men's perception of what had just happened. Listen carefully to their words.

Patrick Gass: "At night the party were consulted by the commanding officers, as to the place most proper for winter quarters."

Joseph Whitehouse: "In the evening our officers had the whole party assembled in order to consult which place would be the best for us to take up our winter quarters at."

John Ordway: "Our officers conclude with the opinion of the party to cross the river and look

out a place for winter quarters."

It's worth noting that each of them found the event important enough to mention—and therefore it's safe to say that they were speaking on behalf of all the others who weren't keeping journals. But also consider the words they chose. The captains had "consulted" with them, and then concluded with their opinion. The decision had been made by "us" not "them."

Whatever had prompted the captains to use this extraordinary method, it had worked. The decision was the one the captains themselves, I believe, would have ordered. But the process itself had created an even stronger bond within the Expedition; 33 individuals merging into a single Corps of Discovery. That's leadership of the highest order. And that's democracy at its best.

Duncan, Dayton. "The Vote: 'Station Camp,' Washington." Columbia Magazine 22 December 2004. 22 December 2004 <<http://www.washingtonhistory.org/wshm/lewisandclark/vote.htm>>.