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THE LEWIS AND CLARK TRAIL ACROSS IDAHO

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Lewis and Clark led an expedition from St. Louis in 1804 to explore the headwaters of the Missouri, which through the Louisiana Purchase had just become part of the United States. Their purpose was to take boats as far as they could up the Missouri, and then to cross the Continental Divide to the Columbia. At that time, no white man had seen Idaho, which was in the unexplored southern Columbia interior that belonged to no one. (Or at least if anyone had seen Idaho, he did not bother to say much about it.) So, when four members of the expedition, including Meriwether Lewis, ascended the Continental Divide, August 12, 1805, and reached the region later known as Idaho, the story of the white man in Idaho began.

Lewis and Clark had expected to pack their gear across the divide between navigable waters of the Missouri and of the Columbia with little difficulty. In this they were disappointed. The mountains of Idaho turned out to be the major obstacle in their entire journey, and they were fortunate indeed to get through before early winter snow blocked their passage. Not long after he crossed into Idaho, Lewis succeeded in making contact with the Lemhi Shoshoni, who agreed to come with their horses to move the expedition's supplies across to Salmon River. When Lewis' detachment and the Shoshoni band got back to the main expedition, they discovered that Sacajawea, their Shoshoni interpreter who had been captured in 1800 by other Indians and taken east, was a member of that same Lemhi band, which now was led by her brother. While Lewis and the main expedition were hauling their equipment over the Continental Divide, Clark and a few men went ahead to see if the expedition could expect to build boats and float down the Salmon. He did not have to go too far into the canyon to tell that it was far rougher than any country he had ever seen--and the Indians assured him that he had seen nothing yet in the way of rugged canyons. So Lewis and Clark had to trade for Shoshoni horses and to go north 160 miles to the Lolo Trail over a route that an elderly Shoshoni guide led them. Then, when they reached Lolo Pass on September 13, 1805, they found that they had made a great unnecessary detour to the south in searching out the headwaters of the Missouri. But, at last they were on their way to the Columbia.

Early winter snow made the trip over the Lolo Trail a hard one. And lack of game reduced them to eating horses for subsistence part of the time. Eventually, though, Clark's advance party reached a Nez Perce village on Weippe prairie, September 20, and obtained three horse loads of salmon and roots to send back to the main expedition. Then, upon reaching the forks of the Clearwater below Orofino, the party made dugout canoes and floated down to Snake River, the Columbia, and finally to the Pacific before winter set in.

Returning across the Lolo Trail in the spring of 1806 proved to be difficult. After recovering the horses which they had left in care of the Nez Perce Indians for the winter, the impatient explorers had to camp for a month or more near Kamiah waiting for the snow to melt on the upper trail, and then they started off too soon. Finally, with essential help from Nez Perce guides, they managed to complete their eastbound trip across north Idaho. Although they reported that they had been able to get from the head of navigation on the Missouri to the head of navigation on the Columbia, and that a road could be built to connect the two, they had not found a very practical early route across Idaho--at least in comparison with other routes that soon were discovered. But they had established friendly contact with the Indians of north and south Idaho, and had prepared the way for the fur trade which was to bring white explorers to all parts of Idaho.

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