

Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Inc.
Memories of Past President's Tenure
Gary Leppart-Sixth President

The growth of the LCTHF over the years has been simply amazing to me. Although I have not been as closely involved with the Foundation during the past thirty years or so as I probably should have been, I have monitored the events shaping the organization and have stayed in touch with a number of active members. (I do have a complete set of WPOs). What I find most amazing along with organizational growth, are the financial resources now available to pursue the good works for which the Foundation has always been known.

During my tenure as the sixth president, the official publication of the Foundation, "We Proceeded On," came into being. I take absolutely no credit towards the realization of this major step towards the direction that no doubt contributed greatly towards the future success of the organization. The individuals whom I believe deserve most of the credit for this accomplishment and much of the early organizational work were E.G. "Frenchy" Chuinard, Bob Lange and Irving Anderson. These three Oregonians were the spark plugs that helped bring the Foundation into existence and could always be counted on to keep things moving in the right direction. What I do remember vividly are our discussions back then concerning how we were going to be able to find the financial resources to keep the publication going. I am certain that discussion has not occurred in many years.

During the years when I was most active, there seemed to me at least, to be more direct involvement by employees of state government in the Foundation. This was particularly

true of participation by representatives of the state historical societies and recreation/park agencies. I believe this resulted in more state employees serving on the board of directors and eventual Foundation presidents during the first decade. Perhaps I am a little biased in my thinking since I was a state employee at this time, but I believe this is a correct assertion. The organization was quite small during the early 1970s and all members and their backgrounds were undoubtedly more visible than present day.

I was Director of what was then called the North Dakota State Outdoor Recreation Agency which was combined with the North Dakota State Park Service during the year I was president. For a time, I held a dual directorship of both agencies before legislative action combined the two staffs and their functions. Frankly, I was more than a little busy in those days and I know that was reflected in my tenure as president. I am not making excuses, but I would characterize my presidency as just “holding down the fort”. Other individuals did the actual work of the organization, primarily the three gentlemen from Oregon I have already mentioned and several others. If I have any regrets, it is that I was not more closely involved in some of the hands on work of the fledgling organization.

Another regret is that I did not have a full appreciation or understanding of the magnitude of what was being accomplished during those early years. I also regret not fully appreciating the scholarly accomplishments of some of our most active members during a time when I had many opportunities to visit with them. The passage of time has a way of bringing out those factors, albeit sometimes a bit late.

I believe the first foundation meeting I attended was in 1969, in St. Louis, Missouri. I believe that this was an organizational or founding meeting. There may have been one other meeting prior to the one I attended. I do remember that Dr. Chuinard was in charge of much of the agenda and I recall him saying that our work had barely begun. That statement certainly was prophetic. I believe he was referring to the congressionally mandated Lewis and Clark Trail Committee that had recently completed their work, made their recommendations and was no longer in existence.

The annual meetings that followed the St. Louis meeting were a joy to attend. There were a number of great speakers and many history-minded folks to meet and visit with. I particularly remember Irving Anderson relating to his work on the Charbonneau family, the spelling of Sacagawea's name (which is still debated) and the place of her eventual demise and burial. I was very familiar with the Fort Manuel site near the North Dakota/South Dakota border and I was particularly interested in Irving's research regarding the site. I also vividly recall some of Donald Jackson's presentations.

The Knife River Indian villages in North Dakota were privately owned in the early 1970s although Governor Arthur A. Link had appointed a state level committee to work towards the eventual acquisition of the village sites by the National Park Service. I was honored to serve on that committee and recall one somewhat hostile meeting I attended along with another committee member with one of the landowners. I raise this subject because I remember that during our annual meeting of 1974-1975, we stopped the buses carrying meeting participants on a county road some distance from the village sites so that

individuals could leave the bus and take photos of the Knife/Missouri River confluence area. We would not have been able to drive onto the properties containing the archaeological sites that year. The lands containing the Knife River villages were later acquired by the federal government and are now part of the complement of sites managed by the National Park Service in North Dakota. Jack Neckels, who was a National Park Service employee and native North Dakotan was on a two year assignment with the state under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA). I credit Jack for much of the background work that led to the designation of the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site. Jack later became Superintendent of Grand Teton National Park.

The field trips that were part of the annual meetings were always a meeting highlight. It was during the trips to the field that participants could really get to know one another and visit about subjects of mutual interest. There was always a small cadre of local experts and professionals who could help explain the historical significance of various sites. Many, if not most, of the out-of-state visitors were well versed in Lewis and Clark and Native American sites that were located in North Dakota. However, many of these individuals had never seen the actual sites and being there on the ground was particularly thrilling for them.

Annual meeting locations were determined by the officers of the national organization after reviewing proposals by various states. In North Dakota, the annual meeting program was determined by a statewide Lewis and Clark Trail Committee comprised of

state and local representatives, in conjunction with the officers of the national organization.

If I had one recommendation to make for future Foundation involvement, it would be to become engaged in discussions with the conservation districts that border the waterway routes of Lewis and Clark in the various states. Recently, a combination of conservation districts in Montana organized a trash cleanup effort on the Yellowstone River from the northern border of Yellowstone National Park to the Yellowstone confluence with the Missouri River near the North Dakota-Montana border. According to a recent Billings Gazette article, that effort is to continue into at least next year. I can see the National Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Inc., as a participant in similar efforts, either as a hands-on participant or by providing financial support for the cleanup work or both. Many of our treasured rivers have been trashed for far too long. Hopefully, the Montana effort will spread to other regions.

I believe the Foundation is on the right path today and should continue to be the keeper of the story, the repository for scholarly materials relating to the Lewis and Clark Trail and guardian or overseer of Trail resources for future generations. The membership of the Foundation today is certainly more diverse than what existed in the 1970s, as might be expected. Interest in the Lewis and Clark Expedition and peripheral historical aspects will continue to expand as long as the Foundation continues to publish and make known to the membership and general public, its vast reservoir of historical resources.

Perhaps with the passage of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial and the anticipation that led up to the many multi-year events, some members may experience a let down feeling regarding future Foundation projects or achievements. I would reiterate what “Frenchy” Chuinard said so many years ago, “Our work has barely begun”.