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“Local explorers relive Lewis & Clark’s journey through west”

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SANFORD — To the left, a herd of buffalo thundered across the hillside. Across the river, elk lunched on the underbrush.

Ahead were hunger, hardship and uncertainty, but explorer William Clark

recorded every detail of the scene, on orders from then-president Thomas Jefferson.

Two hundred years later, former Sanford resident Robert Cline stood in the same spot along the Yellowstone River, reading from Clark’s journal and looking around in awe.

“Just sitting here thinking about it starts to put my hair on end—I was exactly where those men stood 200 years ago,” Cline said. “Aside from going to the moon, that was probably the most exciting adventure anyone has ever been on.”

Clark and colleague Meriwether Lewis were the leaders of the “Corps of Discovery” — now better known as the Lewis and Clark expedition — ordered by then-president Thomas Jefferson to explore the uncharted West in search of the Northwest Passage in 1803. After a dangerous three years and many narrow escapes, the explorers made it to the Pacific Ocean with the help of Shoshone translator and guide Sacagawea, returning to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1806.

Cline, who recently moved to Burlington after 45 years in Sanford, has traveled two-thirds of the explorers’ westward journey, along with current Lee County resident John Lipscomb. As dedicated members of the award-winning Carolina Chapter of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, the two men travel west as often as possible to retrace the journey that opened up the American West.

The men travel by foot, horseback, car or canoe. Along the way, they stop at each of the explorers’ campsites to read from the journals and scope out the surviving landmarks, from Indian camps along the Knife River in North Dakota, to the rock in Billings, Montana, where



Clark carved his name.

Of course, the trail has undergone some changes in the past 200 years.

“A lot of the rest of the trail has been developed,” Cline said. “They put a big Air Force base in one spot—that disturbs a little bit of the pristine element of it, to be looking along the trail and suddenly see this mile and a half of asphalt runway.”

Still, long stretches of the route are still clear and beautiful, and both men are eager to return.

On Thursday, Lipscomb’s living room was cluttered with Lewis and Clark books, maps and memorabilia. He leaves today with his wife and daughter to walk a few more miles in the explorers’ footsteps, sharing the experience with his family for the first time.

Lipscomb, a retired junior high school history teacher, credits his fascination with the journey to the explorers’ pioneer spirit and the dream of travel into an uncharted land ripe with adventure.

“Nobody knew what was west of the Mississippi River,” Lipscomb said. “It was incredibly exciting.”

Lipscomb’s journey started five years ago, heading to Montana to travel a portion of the route. At the time, Lipscomb hadn’t camped since he was 13 years old. He didn’t know how to set up a tent, and he was terrified of rattlesnakes. But the expedition had captured his imagination, and the chance to relive a portion of it in person was irresistible — even if it meant, “being in the backwoods, 150 miles from the nearest outhouse.”

“It’s humbling, and it makes you a better person — you appreciate what a hard life they had,” Lipscomb said. “You can’t help but be more spiritual when you’re out there in the middle of the wilderness.”

Lipscomb eyes light up when he is asked about the expedition. He can rattle off names and events, dates and locations.

He hasn’t traveled as much of the trail as Cline, but his enthusiasm is contagious. His 15-year-old daughter, Johanna Lipscomb, has begun attending chapter meetings in full costume as Sacagawea.