

Missoula Musings

Journals, Land, People: Thoughts on the LCTHF's 55th Annual Meeting

With each Annual Meeting, the stories of the Lewis and Clark Expedition come more alive for me. When I began working for the Lewis & Clark Exploratory Center in Charlottesville, VA, I had been to almost every state except the ones of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. It was as if the area had been left for me to discover through my job. As a result, I read the Expedition journals first, before seeing the land. I imagined the Missouri, and in my mind it was the twin to the Mississippi. I pictured the Columbia, and it was similar to New York's East River. I visualized the Bitterroots as the jagged, snowy peaks of the highest Rockies.



High Verisimilitude. We are fairly certain that Lewis and Clark had the same view of the Bitterroots from the Lolo Trail except with snow.
Photo by Alexandria Searls

take boats up the coast each year on a meaningful voyage. They described their efforts at tribal recognition and contributed to our awareness of inter-tribal issues. The Mandan told us of their life in North Dakota and invited us to a tribal meeting debating fracking. Scholars and keepers of the trail and story – spiritual descendants – also shared their perspectives. With each gathering, the closeness of the past comes down to this fact: The Annual Meetings are reunions of people who first met in 1804-1806. The conversations continue.

The 55th Annual Meeting in Missoula, MT, exceptionally hosted by the Travelers' Rest Connection, brought new knowledge of the journals, the land, and the people. We visited the National Bison Range of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. We listened to stories of preserving the prairie, some from

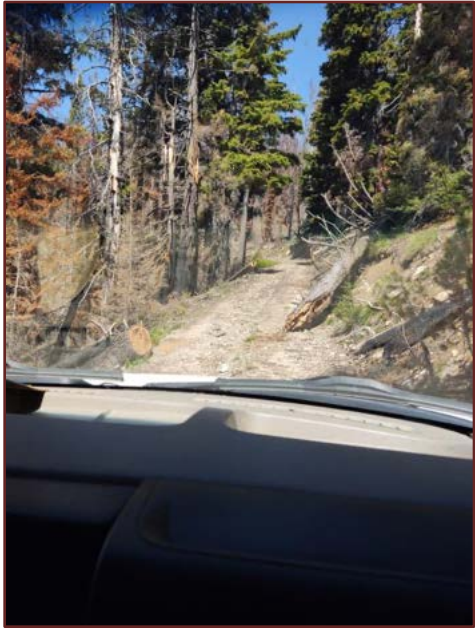
When I arrived in Bismarck, and in St. Louis, and in Astoria for the Annual Meetings my vision was corrected and expanded. The land itself taught me, along with the journals. The mouth of the Columbia was like nothing I had seen; it astounded me. Suddenly the accounts of the explorers' canoes' hugging the shore, their sorrowful rain-soaked state, and their admiration for the paddling skills of the Chinook and the Clatsop came into sharp focus. Finally, each Annual Meeting brought people together to discuss the history from multiple points of view.

The Chinook welcomed attendees with a salmon feast and the display of one of their red and black traditional boats; they continue to



National Bison Range in Moiese, MT, managed by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. *Photo by Alexandria Searls*

poet Corrie Williamson, who writes of Montana but also of Julia Hancock Clark and Fincastle, VA, where she grew up. Julia Hancock Clark, who lived in Fincastle, is a subject of her poetry. Her latest book is called "The River Where You Forgot My Name." And on the last day, we walked in the presence of the witness trees of Travelers' Rest State Park. These trees were standing when the Corps of Discovery camped there, their campsite evidenced by the presence of char and mercury in the soil separated by 300 feet, as prescribed by Baron von Steuben in his book of military



The Road to the Lolo Trail. The tour guide had removed the logs before the trip, the kind of task typically performed by the Lolo Trail Work Week volunteers. *Photo by Alexandria Searls*

procedure carried by Lewis and Clark all the way to the Pacific and back.

On the post-conference trip to the Lolo Trail, I saw for myself that the Bitterroot range was more forested than I had thought and with unfamiliar contours. We drove on rocks, were scraped by branches and bushes on the side of the narrow road, and we saw sheer drops. On the ridge, we hiked by stones placed by the Nez Perce. Lower down, I learned of the flight of the Nez Perce in 1877; they had passed by where we were standing.

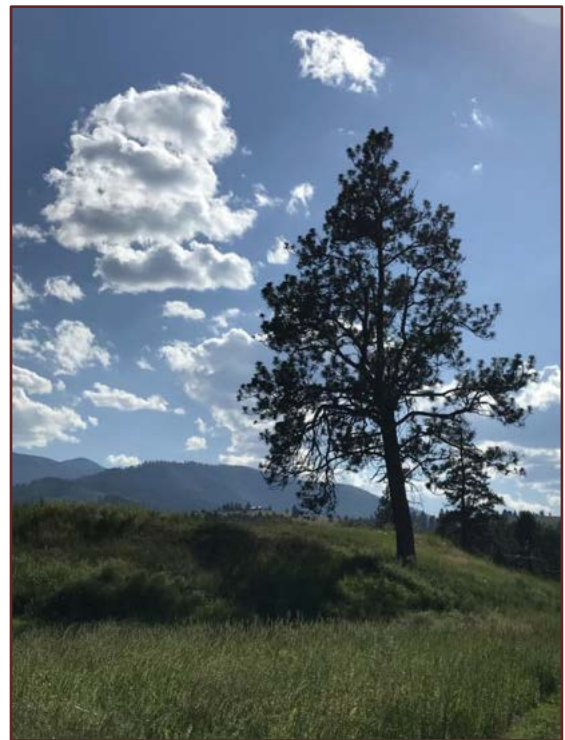
Afterwards, we made our way, on foot, to the Cinque Hole, a pool of water within the woods where the Expedition is said to have camped on September 17, 1805. According to our guide, archaeologist Kevin O'Briant, the pool has been gradually getting smaller over the last few years. He also told us that there were no invasive species where we were; the height, conditions, and temperature prevented the spread. We were in an oasis of native plants in contrast to my home in Virginia where invasive species are spreading in the valleys and on the mountains.

Mr. O'Briant read from the journals. They had come back to where they were written, in a different, modern form and speaking through a person on the trail. The trail spoke too, but with tactile reality in the form of the geology and the plant and animal life. By contrast, when we returned to our van, we saw weekend revelers in wildly painted, off-road vehicles, a Dynamix and a Talon, UTVs many steps up in size from ATVs. The 4th of July weekend had arrived. I worried for the sake of the trail. What would the wheels do to our teacher? I take comfort in the trail's resilience. As with the Lewis and Clark story, it's a big tent. *Submitted by Alexandria Searls*

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Witness to History. "Witness Tree" shown to be at Travelers' Rest when the Lewis and Clark Expedition camped there through trunk coring to determine the age of the tree.