

Last Word *Wilbur Norman*

The Greatest Expedition You've Never Heard Of: The U.S. Exploring Expedition (1838 – 1842)

For all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidity. Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease. — Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Chapter 16.

What continent was first sighted by three different men in the same year, one of whom was an American? Another American was probably the first person to set foot on the mainland. Not sure? Hint: it is a desert, the world's driest landmass, averaging only eight inches (200 millimeters) of precipitation per year. (Reconcile this with the fact that it also holds 70% of the world's fresh water.) The continent also sits at the world's highest average elevation. Give up? Okay, we'll come back to this riddle later.

Most people in the United States think of our country geographically, first and foremost, as a great landmass stretching between two great oceans. This perspective was not always so. For the first decades of our country's existence, despite being a largely agricultural nation, we related, mostly, to the sea, the Atlantic. This was one of many stumbling blocks President Thomas Jefferson faced in closing his "unconstitutional" deal for the purchase of Louisiana, a three cents per acre bonanza unequalled in our history.

Everyone has heard of Lewis & Clark and most Americans know at least a little about their expedition, The Corps of Discovery. Certainly the other name we associate with this American milestone is that of Sacagawea (tsakáka wíá), the Lemhi Shoshone woman who traveled as their interpreter, guide and general savior. It is to "Janey" (Clark's nickname for her, probably stemming from Army slang for 'girl') that we owe much of the detail for the early stages of the Corps' travels: she dived into the Missouri River to save the Corps' records/journals when the boat carrying them capsized. In a plot straight out of Dickens, she also turned out to be the long-lost, kidnapped sister (or cousin) of Cameahwait, a chief of one of the Shoshone tribes. In thanks for the family reunion Cameahwait donated the horses the Corps needed for the overland haul of their journey.

She saved members of the expedition from starvation with her knowledge of finding and cooking the root of the blue camas, as nutritious as its cousin, the white camas lily, is

poisonous. She gave up her valuable beaded belt (without recompense) in trade for an otter fur coat the Captains sought for President Jefferson. She also participated, as did York, Clark's black servant, in what was probably the first vote by Americans on the Pacific coast, an election to select the site for the Corps' 1805-06 winter fort. In 2001, in long-due recognition of her efforts, President Bill Clinton appointed her a U.S. Army Honorary Sergeant.

With a swath of the newly acquired interior of the country explored, there were those who believed we ought to know more about the ocean bounding our western frontier. Europeans and Russians had, after all, made their mark there. After the British were defeated (again) in the War of 1812 American spirits were elevated and the sense we were a nation in the front rank matured. As well, the Monroe Doctrine (1823), with its view that the country held both North and South America under the outstretched wings of the American eagle, became formal policy.

These national feelings bumped into the hard boards of reality when ship owners and captains faced the galling fact that American shipping had to use British charts from excursions as simple as coasting to voyages as formidable as engaging in the China Trade. Merchants and commercial agents soon made common cause — New Englanders had heavy investments in whaling, sealing, and the fur trade. An idea was in the air. President John Quincy Adams, a Massachusetts man, promoted the idea of a voyage of discovery, adding science as a utilitarian addendum. And it was Benjamin Morrell, Captain of the *Wasp*, a sealer, who voiced the popular opinion that getting to the South Pole ought to be done by "the only free nation on earth."

In May 1828, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution to equip a public maritime exploring expedition to the Pacific and Southern oceans. As the only ships available belonged to the Navy it effectively became a U.S. Navy expedition. It is not only in the 21st century, however, that our legislators and executive branch quaffle and lurch along the roads of progress; a resolution does not an expedition make. The matter of funding is often a separate battle. Too, elections intervene. Adams' interest was not his successor's. Newly elected Andrew Jackson was everything Adams was not. Jackson was avowedly anti-intellectual, isolationist, anti-aristocratic, and decidedly macho. What need did America have in spending money on far-flung adventures? Additionally, there was fear in Congress that such an expedition might promote the idea of adding territory the country could not effectively administer. Then, as so often happens in politics and society, current events take on a