

Teacher Reading – Lewis Goes Shopping

Unit: Preparing for the Trip (Elementary and Middle School)

From *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide* by Carolyn Gilman

But Lewis did not spend all his time bookishly. He was often out on the bustling streets, buying equipment. Philadelphia was also a commercial hub; its wharves were lined with visiting ships, and its shops displayed goods from around the world. Lewis's purchase records, preserved by diligent federal clerks, portray an expedition with aspirations to be a demonstration of state-of-the-art technology, despite its limited budget.

The hand of Jefferson and the scientific advisors can be seen in the list of "Mathematical Instruments" that Lewis purchased. These instruments included the latest in high-tech navigational and surveying equipment, packed into a custom-made box. Lewis's army background came to the fore in his purchases of arms and supplies. He armed the party not only with rifles and muskets but also with a small cannon, blunderbusses, and pistols—enough to send a message about U.S. military power. But even here he could not resist some gadgets, such as pocket pistols with secret triggers and an experimental air gun. Under "Camp Equipage" is listed not only practical things like spoons and tumblers but also patent chamber lamps and an invention he called "portable soup"—a dried mix that could be easily kept and transported in the field but that proved so unpopular with the men that it was used only for starvation rations. He would travel west with a pharmacopoeia of medicines, surgical and dental instruments, and a complete carpentry shop. But the most expensive category of purchases was "Indian Presents." To entice the Indians away from British traders, the expedition needed to be a traveling trade show of superior American goods. Here, Lewis's limited knowledge of the western tribes' needs and tastes led to some guesswork. Sometimes—as with kettles, knives, and rings—he guessed correctly. Other times—as with wampum and "knitting pins"—his guesses were wrong.

The list is a graphic reminder that Lewis expected this to be a water journey. Except for the "single portage" from the Missouri to the Columbia, he never expected to have to carry all this tonnage. The equipment list explains, as does nothing else, his later panicky search for horses to transport the expedition across the Rockies. The equipment list also reflects the various motives that were propelling the planning of the expedition: commerce, empire, and science.