

## Imagining America

Unit: Preparing for the Trip (High School)

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

The Lewis and Clark expedition began in the mind of Thomas Jefferson. He had never set foot beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains, but no matter. From books and travelers' tales, Jefferson had imagined the West—not just the West that was but the West that was to be—more vividly than anyone else alive. But still he craved facts. In 1801 he offered his cousin's stepson, a young army captain named Meriwether Lewis, a position as his private secretary. "Your knolege of the Western country, of the army and of all it's interests & relations has rendered it desireable . . . that you should be engaged in that office," he wrote. Living together in the unfinished White House "like two mice in a church," Lewis and Jefferson hatched an ambitious scheme. Together with "ten or twelve chosen men, fit for the enterprize and willing to undertake it," Lewis would ascend the Missouri River and find "the most direct & practicable water communication ascross this continent for the purposes of commerce."

When Jefferson sat down to form a mental image of the West, he turned to books. In fact, it was a book that pushed him into action. In 1801 a British fur trader named Alexander Mackenzie published an account of his voyage to the Pacific Ocean. The first non-Indian to cross the continent north of Mexico, Mackenzie concluded his journal with a plan of how the fur trade might be organized to monopolize the commerce of the western tribes. The essay was aimed at his former employers, the North West Company, whom he had left in a snit; but it

was Jefferson who took alarm. The British still ruled Canada; if they had designs on the territory west of the Mississippi, the nascent United States would be surrounded on two sides by an acrimonious former colonial power with enormous commercial capital. Jefferson decided to assert a claim on the West by duplicating Mackenzie's feat.

This chain of events reflects Jefferson's first preconception about the West: that it was a stage for the geopolitical ambitions of European nations. For centuries, the European convention of claiming portions of western North America like animals marking territory had mainly affected only other Europeans, just as bear territories are respected only by other bears. The actual inhabitants of the land continued to rule their own societies and control the trade and travel of visiting Europeans as they always had. In the year Jefferson read Mackenzie's book, the United States claimed (without really controlling) most of the territory east of the Mississippi, minus Florida; west of the Mississippi, Spain administered the scattered towns and trade but had secretly ceded the Louisiana Territory, including the watershed of the Missouri, to France. The west coast was claimed variously by Spain, Britain, and Russia. To the north, the redcoats lurked. Thus, when Jefferson looked west, he saw a gameboard of European boundaries that seemed like the most important aspect of the land. How little impact such imaginary boundaries had on the ground, his explorers were soon to learn. And yet, Lewis and Clark would continue to follow the dictates of geopolitics, even when their actions seemed self-defeating from any other point of view.

A second set of preconceptions about the West related to its geography. Here also Jefferson's ideas had a long lineage. For centuries, Europeans had sought a water route across North America, the fabled Northwest Passage. At first, they imagined

this to be a sea route, then a chain of lakes, and finally a pair of rivers—one flowing east, the other west, connecting near their sources, where a short portage would make it possible to ship goods across the continent. The fabled River of the West even had a name—”Oregon.” This river theory suited Jefferson, since a sea lane would have made it possible for European commerce to bypass the United States, but a river could be the conduit of settlement as well as trade. In 1792 the theory received a boost from another British explorer, George Vancouver, who visited the west coast and mapped the estuary and lower course of a great river, the Columbia, flowing into the Pacific from the east. The Missouri had to be the other link in the passage; three centuries of geographers could not be wrong.

Supporting the Northwest Passage theory were two other geographical concepts: “the pyramidal height of land” and “symmetrical geography.” The pyramidal height of land was a mythical spot in the West where all the major rivers of the continent had their sources. From this commanding height, armchair explorers imagined it would be possible to travel north, south, east, and west by river. Symmetrical geography projected onto the West what was known of the East. Reasoning from known to unknown, geographers assumed resemblances: between the Missouri and the Ohio, the Rockies and the Appalachians, the Columbia and the Potomac. In their minds, the West became a rough mirror image of the East, only better. Symmetrical geography must have appealed to the architect of Monticello, since symmetry was one of the guiding principles of neoclassical aesthetics. If the beauty of Euclidean geometry reflected God’s mind, it was only reasonable to assume that the continent would also obey rules of symmetry.

In 1803 this collection of geographical concepts was compiled into a map for Lewis’s use by the government mapmaker Nicholas King. King’s map combined

some of the most accurate geographical information available and wishful thinking. It had the width of the continent correct because the longitudes of the west and east coasts had been measured with precision, thanks to the Royal Navy. But instead of showing the Rockies as an unbroken north-south chain, it portrayed intermittent hills that ended a little south of today's Canadian border, complying with Jefferson's description of them as "highlands" rather than mountains. A branch of the Columbia interlocked with a southern branch of the Missouri, illustrating the president's claim that the Missouri offered "continued navigation from its source, and, possibly with a single portage, from the Western Ocean."

Lewis and Clark internalized the implications. Symmetrical geography led them to believe that the Missouri would be relatively short and navigable, the mountains would be green and rolling, and the Columbia would flow in a valley through them. The pyramidal height of land was so strongly embedded in their minds that even when they stood at the source of the Missouri, deep in the Rockies, they could barely believe their eyes that the Columbia was not just over the next hill. Lewis even called the Lemhi River the Columbia until reality set in. After they returned, Lewis still reported to Jefferson that, just beyond the lands they had explored, there was a place where the Willamette and Colorado had their sources in the same height of land. The myth had receded but not died.