

Western Historic Trails Center



The Lewis and Clark Trail

The journey of the Corps of Discovery from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean was one of the most monumental episodes in the early history of the United States. President Thomas Jefferson who had always had an interest in the Trans-Mississippi West and had just arranged to purchase France's Louisiana Territory planned the Corps multifaceted goals. Jefferson greatly desired increased knowledge about the geography, people, plants, animals, minerals, and weather of the West, a place where it was rumored woolly

mammoths still existed, where lived blue-eyed Indians who spoke Welsh, and where an all-water "Northwest Passage" provided an easy route across the continent.

Jefferson also hoped to persuade the Indian Nations that inhabited the Louisiana Territory that the United States had only the friendliest of intentions and also to counteract the claims of various European powers to the "Oregon Country" in the Columbia River Basin.

Jefferson chose his personal secretary Meriwether Lewis to lead the expedition and Lewis asked his former commanding officer William Clark to be co-commander. On May 14 these two able Virginians set out with a party of 46 (including Lewis's dog) hauling a keel boat up the Missouri. By the end of July they had reached the present day area of Council Bluffs, Iowa which was named for the "Council Bluffe" where the Corps had their first council with the Indian Nations. It would take the expedition another year and four months across the Plains and through the mountains (where no Northwest Passage was to be found) before they reached the Pacific Ocean. There they spent a cold, wet winter at Fort Clatsop hoping to get a ride back home on a passing ship. But no ships passed near their camp, forcing them to return up the Columbia River, back through the mountains, and down the Missouri River.

By then the people in the United States had given them up for dead and their return to Saint Louis in September 1806 sparked great fanfare that would be repeated where ever Lewis and Clark traveled. The Corps went their separate ways and many of them died young. Lewis, who was appointed Governor of Louisiana Territory, died mysteriously at the age of 35 while Clark lived a productive life in Saint Louis before passing away in 1838 at the age of 68. But the effects of their journey on the expansion of the young United States would continue long after their deaths.

The Oregon Trail

In the early 1830's waves of pioneer farmers and groups of missionaries began to journey overland to the "Oregon Country" from the United States. The farmers wanted cheap land where they and their families could build a new life for themselves while the missionaries wanted to convert the Indians from their "pagan" lifestyle. The trail west began at a string of frontier towns on the Missouri River known as "jumping off places". There emigrants could buy last minute supplies while they formed themselves into groups called Companies and waited to "Jump off" into the West by crossing the river on ferries at places like Weston, Independence, St. Joe, Nebraska City, Council Bluffs, or Bellevue. Their paths would merge in the vicinity of Fort Kearny where the road led west along the Platte River through Nebraska into Wyoming. Their trail then headed into the Rocky Mountains through Idaho and Oregon to The Dalles on the Columbia River. Mount Hood blocked their way overland until 1846 when Samuel Barlow built a road around it so most of the emigrants built rafts or ferries to float down the Columbia River.

Eventually they reached the English stronghold of Fort Vancouver where John McLaughlin of the Hudson Bay Company was ready to greet all travelers. Emigrants then continued overland to Oregon City (south of present day Portland) and they gradually established farms and settlements throughout the Willamette Valley and into what is now Washington.

Their arduous journey of about 2000 miles was alternately tedious and dangerous as hostile Indians were much less of a threat than disease, exposure, and deadly accidents. Their arrival in Oregon laid a strong American claim to the Pacific Northwest and before long the United States would stretch across the continent.

The California Trail

California was a sleepy northern province of Mexico before the United States acquired it after the Mexican-American war. It became the destination for some overlanders but the discovery of gold by James Marshall at Sutler's Mill in January 1848 set off a flood of emigrants suffering from "gold fever" as places like Sacramento, San Francisco, and Placerville boomed almost overnight. Miners from China, Europe, Hawaii, and South America would join those from the United States and all would become known as '49's.

Some of these '49's from the United States traveled by sea either around the tip of South America or across the Panama isthmus but many of them decided to head west by wagon following the Oregon Trail as far as they could. Unlike the Oregon-bound farmers, the '49's went west all but unprepared for the journey and bought most of their supplies at the increasingly competitive "Jump Off" towns on the Missouri like Leavenworth or Saint Francis where they could mail a last letter home while eager outfitters waited to sell them as much as possible before they crossed over the river.

The California Trail followed the Platte River west through Nebraska but split off from the Oregon Trail either at Fort Bridger in southwestern Wyoming or near Soda Springs in Idaho. The road for the '49's then headed southwest across mountain ranges where the snow came early and deserts where waterholes were tainted by alkali and cholera. Finally their trail ended at the mining areas in the Sierra Nevada Mountains or down into the fertile Sacramento and American River Valleys.

These '49's were mostly men in a hurry who only intended to get rich quick before returning to their families back East or across the Pacific. None of them ever found any gold nuggets the size of hen's eggs though and only a few acquired enough gold to "strike it rich". Most of them returned home discouraged as the mining boomtowns faded away and panning for gold was replaced by expensive extractive methods. Others, however, stayed in the Golden State to build the towns and cities that would attract people from all over the world to move to California right to the present day.

The Mormon Trail

Religious persecution in the United States forced groups belonging to the Latter-day Saints Church to find new homes for themselves where they could practice their beliefs in peace. As groups of non-Mormon "Gentiles" sought to chase them out of Illinois, the Mormon's journey to the West from the town of Nauvoo began in 1845 after the murder of their leader Joseph Smith in 1844. They traveled west across the muddy prairies of Iowa to the Missouri River where they, with the permission of the local Indians, established numerous camps and small villages including Kanesville which became modern Council Bluffs. It was at Kanesville that the Mormon Church announced Brigham Young as their new church leader.

From their Missouri River camps like Winter Quarters, Kanesville, or Bethlehem they followed the Platte River west across Nebraska on the opposite side of the river from the Oregon and California Trails. The trails merged together at Fort Laramie in Wyoming and continued west until the Mormon Trail headed south at Ft. Bridger, Wyoming then on into the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. There on land thought to be too barren to grow crops and isolated from any sort of civilization the Mormons would build their city of Salt Lake surrounded by a host of irrigated farms and villages. This frontier "Deseret" would someday become the modern state of Utah.