

Biographical Sketch of Captain William Clark©

Co-Leader, Lewis & Clark Expedition

Written by Patrick Lee

It is said of William Clark that he rendered the spelling of word "Sioux," as in Sioux Indians, more than 20 different ways in his journals and never the same way twice. Spelling was never Clark's strong suit. Leading men into the wilderness and successfully bringing them back alive was.

Five brothers were already born into the Clark family when William joined them in 1770, in Caroline County, Virginia. All five fought in America's war for independence, so it was logical that young William would eventually begin a career as a military man. Although he lacked any formal education, his seven-year enlistment, from age 19 to 26, taught him well in the areas of leadership, fortification, communications, espionage and supply. He became a keen observer of the natural world ... plants, animals, geology, geography. He learned a great deal about the Indian people. Spelling skills notwithstanding, Clark became a faithful and prolific scribe, a trait he continued throughout his life.

A fortuitous army event would change Clark's life. For six months, he had an officer four years his junior assigned to him, and they became fast friends. His name was Meriwether Lewis.

Clark resigned from the army at age 26. He returned to family holdings at the Falls of the Ohio River, now Louisville, Kentucky. He was settling into the life of a land speculator and businessman on the western frontier, when completely unexpected, he received a letter on July 19, 1803, from his old friend. Meriwether Lewis wanted Clark's help on a grand adventure.

President Jefferson had acquired Louisiana from France and commissioned Lewis, his private secretary, to lead a team to explore it. Lewis wanted a co-commander, and he chose Clark. Clark accepted Lewis' invitation on the spot and wrote a confirming letter the following day.

For over three years, they would lead that exploration, named by Jefferson the Corps of Discovery, in a way unheard of in military circles. They shared leadership and command equally. They complemented one another well. Such was the mutual respect they enjoyed that there was never a hint of disagreement or conflict between them.

While Lewis was the Corps' scientist, Clark was the leader of its men. He supervised the boats and logged the route as they traveled west. His steady hand and engaging personality kept the party on an even keel. Their journey was around 4,100 miles, mostly by water, through heat and cold, famine and plenty, snow covered mountains and occasionally hostile Indians. Twenty-eight months after their departure, they returned to a hero's welcome in St. Louis.

St. Louis became his home. He remained a government and Indian agent throughout his life. Among other responsibilities, he was to represent and protect the rights of the Indians in a time when the federal government cared less and less for those rights. William Clark came to be one of very few white men trusted by the Indians. Every year, chiefs from the west and north came to St. Louis to meet with the "red haired chief."

Clark became Missouri's Territorial Governor before statehood. He stood for election as governor of the new state of Missouri in 1820. He was badly defeated. One of the charges leveled against him was this: "Clark is too good to the Indians."

Married twice and widowed twice, he was the father of seven and guardian of Sacagawea's two children. He helped establish the Protestant Episcopal Communion

in St. Louis, marking the first time that expression of the Christian faith had been celebrated west of the Mississippi River. Clark became one of the most influential men in the West. Thousands mourned his passing at age 68, on September 1, 1838. He was given a hero's burial in St. Louis.