

A Night in a Fort

| BY ISAAC O'CASEY |

"Sorry for the delay in getting back to you," says Superintendent Chip Jenkins, in the thick of erecting a replica fort at Lewis and Clark National Historical Park, replacing the one that burned last year. Jenkins is juggling "a ton of volunteers," he says—along with satellite trucks and a congressman—before heading out of town in two hours. "About a month after the fort burned I had the opportunity to meet Alec Burpee, a 10-year-old from Vancouver, Washington. He and his best friend organized a penny drive, and got classmates to donate their lunch money, over \$500, to help rebuild the fort." That, and the letter below—from another 10-year-old—speak directly to the power of the places entrusted to the National Park Service. "The best care is in concert with the people who own the park—whether they're neighbors or live across the continent. Channeling their energy and excitement, sometimes you learn something—like when a couple of kids bring you to tears with the consequences of your park."

I WAS 10 WHEN I GOT INVITED FOR A SPECIAL NIGHT at Fort Clatsop by the superintendent. Kids my age spend too much time with their video games pretending about things that never happen. I had to pinch myself because I was pretending right where something really did happen. It was too cool. The night we spent at the fort, a television crew was filming what it would have been like with all the men, a woman, and a baby 200 years earlier. **FIRST, I GOT TO MEET LEWIS AND CLARK!** Then I met Sergeant Ordway and Private John Colter. Then there was Private George Shannon, who was not much older than me. I got to meet their HUGE black Newfoundland dog, Seamen, who slobbered whenever I went over to say hi to him. Yuck. **TO SPEND THE EVENING IN THE CAPTAIN'S QUARTERS** was like a dream. The big stone fireplace warmed the room. The candles made everything seem cozy. (Our class helped make the candles during a field trip.) Then it was bedtime. We slept in the enlisted men's quarters. The bunks were rickety cedar, made with axes and draw knives. We slept on slabs of cedar planks. The mattresses were bearskin. The covers included elk and deerskins. I am glad they did not use porcupine skins for blankets. I got the top bunk and my brother slept on the bottom. You could hear the wind up in the Sitka Spruce that night. The wind would knock the small pinecones onto the roof above my head. Every time I fell asleep, kerplunk, kerplunk. I had to go outside once to the bathroom. The stars were sooo cool. In the middle of the night was the sound of a barred owl.

You could hear the change of the guard out in the parade grounds. I was glad I was wrapped up and warm inside. Poor Sergeant Gass. My dad told me not to talk in my sleep because the local newspaper reporter was sleeping in the other bunk. I wonder if the reporter could interpret my dad's snoring. It was loud. **THE NIGHT IN THE FORT MADE THE PARK MORE REAL** to me. My dad, brother, and I worked all summer helping to build the trail from the fort to the sea. It was really neat because we get so much rain here, some of the woods are really thick. The trail dropped over the edge and into the trees. It goes by streams with these neat little eels and past a small lake with cut-throat trout and next to a beaver pond. Helicopters lowered all the wood for the bridges and boardwalks. Then we would carry them from the drop zone to where the workers were building. **THE BEST PART IS I GET TO LIVE** right next door to a national park!

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Millions of kids visit the parks every year, and every experience can be meaningful. Introducing our children to the legacies of the land is a high calling, for parents and for those of us fortunate enough to help care for the places where these legacies live on. Kids love history that's real, history they can see, touch, and even talk to, like Sergeant Ordway. And the authentic is not only in the national parks, it's in communities across the country—in places of preservation, places of learning, and places of inspiration. This National Park Week, April 22-30, take its theme—"Connecting Our Children to America's National Parks"—to heart. For inspiration, read more letters from kids at [Common Ground online](#).