

SCRIM SHOTS—SIDELIGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF AN EXPEDITION

Joseph Mussulman

You remember it, of course. The August twelfth issue of Newsweek? The little sidebar about Lewis and Clark seeing lots of California condors on their trip down the Grand Canyon 200 years ago?

But you may have forgotten that almost four years ago we all had the chance to buy item number 340206143 on Ebay. “A classic illustrated children's book,” first published in 1916, “describing the travels of Lewis & Clark and a brave, independent, adventuresome Native American woman guide.” Its author was Virginia Watson, the artist George Wharton Edwards. The title? The Princess Pocahontas! As a matter of fact, author Watson was blameless, but the person hawking her book was guilty as sin!

And I, for one, will never forget that handy pocket guide titled What Every American Should Know About American History: 200 Events that Shaped the Nation, published in 1992. It says that the Lewis and Clark Expedition “started out with twenty-nine in their party, including a few Frenchmen and a goodly number of Kentuckians. Some, like Simon Kenton, were already well-known frontiersmen.”

|

Just for a moment, hold those thoughts.

This story you and I are reading, and re-reading, and writing and teaching about, and participating in, is almost boundless. What is more, it is total, living theater.

The starring actors in this oceanic pageant, this grandest of grand operas, are 23 young enlisted men, three non-coms, two captains, three civilians, a woman, a baby and a dog, plus a huge cast of supporting actors—men, and even some more women—from a hundred different nations. Indians, Americans, Europeans. The script is by Nicholas Biddle, Elliott Coues, Reuben Gold Thwaites and Gary Moulton. Enlightened by a cast of prominent historians, critics and storytellers. A chorus of thousands. Sets designed by the National Park Service. House management by the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation. The proscenium reaches from ocean to ocean, the cyclorama from one horizon to the other. During the past two hundred years the borders at stage right and left, as well as the footlights and follow-spots from the house, have gained in candlepower, and the whole scene has become clearer year by year, detail by detail.

Upstage is a gauze curtain called a scrim. A scrim is opaque when light is shined on it from the front, but translucent when lit from behind. Images can be

projected upon it to insert surprises, anomalies, contradictions, and ironies into a scene. The actors, intent upon delivering their lines to the audience, never see the scrim or its shadow-plays.

Those little back-lit images with which I began this little diversion are part of the legacy brought again to this ongoing pageant in the years of the bicentennial. They are the tabloids of the Trail. While the cast of thousands—maybe millions!—has paraded across the stage over the past 200 years, smiling and bowing to the plaudits of the multitudes, there are people in the audience who have been looking intently over our heads at those shadowy figures on the back-lit scrim.

The most grandiose shadow-play of recent years is the National Geographic's IMAX, complete with Idaho batholith granites framing the clumsily-cloned and full-screened fictional "Great Falls of the Missouri." Just a year ago, at a showing of it here in this very town, a girl in a small group of teenagers sitting behind me couldn't refrain from commenting on that vast "herd" of bison: "Hey! That's just one little bunch of buffaloes running around in circles," she giggled.

Even a few of us, enlightened though we may be, take a kind of superior relish in harboring a rare copy of another shadowy legacy: *Sacajawea* of the Shoshones, the novel written by Della Gould Emmons in 1943. It's the gripping story of the young Indian mother who helped Lewis and Clark "gouge out new trade routes in a wild and trackless country," along with Charbonneau, Jean Baptiste, Patrick Gass, and humorous York the negro servant, all "unabashedly themselves and infectiously alive." But *Sacajawea*'s efforts to become a white lady are "pathetic," and her educated son "stumbles back to the blanket, because the blood remembered." In 1955 Ms. Emmons' story became the screenplay for *Far Horizons*, —a real "chapter of accidents," as Meriwether Lewis might have put it—starring Fred MacMurry, Charlton Heston, Donna Reed, William Demarest. In 1964 Emmons's book re-appeared in a new edition, amplified by sixteen pages of freeze-frames from the movie, "that dramatically and hauntingly underscore memorable moments in the great Lewis and Clark Expedition, and in the life of *Sacajawea*." It may be unnecessary for me to tell you that copies of this scrim-shot still stand on the shelves of libraries throughout the land. On the plus side, it's not listed at all on amazon.com.

Much, much more entertaining, in a clumsy sort of way, is *Almost Heroes*, the movie that escaped from Hollywood in 1998, starring comedian Chris Farley. It's a parody, a spoof, a farce. Farley and his crew beat Lewis and Clark to the Pacific by only a few steps, sending the Corps of Discovery home in disgrace, while the triumphant covey of clowns heads north toward the Bering Strait, aiming to walk all the way through Russia to Paris. (Hold that thought!)

Another historic legacy, so dim on the scrim behind us as to be scarcely discernable now is Nicholas Biddle's idiosyncratic little summary of Lewis's account of the Mandan Indians' buffalo-calling ceremony. This is the scene in which the elder hunters have ritual intercourse with the wives of the young hunters in order to transfer to their husbands the experience and prowess of the elders. It opens as the old men seat themselves crosslegged around a fire in the middle of the lodge, each with a sort of doll before him, dressed like a female. "Next, the old man shows the little girl doll." Here, Biddle lapses into Latin.

No bare-breasted "Sioux Princess" such as drew post-expedition readers to the "spurious" *Travels of Capts. Lewis and Clarke* beginning in 1809 could have been any more salacious than that dozen lines of Latin that appeared in every reprinting of the Biddle-Allen edition, all the way to Elliott Coues' in 1893. Listen!

Tunc egrediens coetu, jecit effigium solo et superincumbens, senili ardore veneris complexit. Hoc est signum! Oh, how many readers did those lines send—shhh! Discreetly, of course—in search of someone who could translate them!

There's more.

Multum ille jactatus est, sed debilis et effoetus senectute, frustra jactatus est. Unis nostrum sodalium, multum alacrior et potentior juventute, hac nocte honorem quatour maritorum custodivit. Which is to say, "One of our men, much more hearty and potent due to his youth, this night preserved the honor of four husbands." Ah, that Biddle was a raconteur worthy of the company of a Meriwether Lewis.

Some of those shadow-plays on the upstage scrim are among the more fondly embraced legacies linked to the story of the expedition during the twentieth century. I'm thinking of the simple little silhouette of the two captains that was created to mark the official Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail some fifty years ago. Stuart Knapp, whom many of you know, told me just the other day that it was drawn by Bob Davenport, whose first draft nearly conveyed the wrong message, for it showed Captain Lewis resting his forearm on the muzzle of his upturned rifle.

On the other hand, another good friend of mine recently told me of a man who was born and educated in Lewistown, Montana, at least fifty miles from the nearest actual route trodden by the Corps of Discovery. He recently confessed to her that he was more than thirty years old before he figured out that the expedition hadn't really hiked west down U.S. Highway 12.

One of the most bizarre of all literary legacies of the expedition is the 22-page monograph by a shadowy historian named Don Viles. Its title is *Lewis and*

Clark: They Never were Here. This must rank either as a conspiracy-theory tale surpassing the Lewis-was-murdered and the WMD hypotheses combined, or as the longest and corniest shaggy-dog story ever perpetrated. But for the virtual obscurity of its author, you might have heard about it on Fox News, or else from Andy Rooney on 60 Minutes.

“Unfortunately for the historians of North America,” it begins, “there was an age in this land when literary connivery was a well-practiced game wherein a literary ring was placed in the future scholar’s nose, with which to lead him along a designated path for centuries to come.” Ever since then, historians have been compelled to “counterfeit the records of a continent and to lay out a false line of history for their followers to study.” This is because historians rely strictly on written records, attributing flaws to “ignorant people, such as sailors or mountain men.” (Viles was a fisherman who sailed out of the village of Garibaldi, Oregon, 25 miles south of Cannon Beach and Ecola Creek..

Viles explains: During the same era when Columbus discovered the Western Hemisphere, the Gutenbergian revolution began. Spain “not only found a treasure in North America, but also had the means by which to protect it. Multiple erroneous documents could now be distributed.” Ship-captains were ordered to falsify their log-books. England, France, and all the empire-building nations joined the conspiracy in self-defense, convincing one another that they believed the mutual deceptions. Latitudes were recorded roughly twenty degrees north of true. You may be astonished to learn that the expedition did not begin near St. Louis, Missouri, USA, at 38° 37’ North Latitude, but in St. Louis, Saskatchewan, Canada, on the South Saskatchewan River, at 52° 55’ North.

But what about the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition? They were faked. All of them! And what of that one great map of Clark’s, that accompanied the paraphrase of the “big lie” by Nick Biddle? Spurious! Don Viles says: “Apparently the map counterfeiter was not working in conjunction with the person falsifying the journals of the exploration,” for “many latitude notations in the ‘official journals’ do not fit those on the ‘official map’.” The terminus of extreme navigation on the “Missouri” river was said to be 43° 30’ North; actually, it was at Christie Pass, at approximately 63° North. Lewis and Clark weren’t ever on the Columbia River but on the Yukon. (Maybe they weren’t even Lewis and Clark!) The Great Falls of the Missouri were really 315-foot Virginia Falls on the Nahanni River in the southwest corner of the Northwest Territories..

I continue to quote: “On November 7 [1806] the party was...at today’s Mountain Village, Alaska, where the last mountain range touches the [Yukon] before it reaches salt water. From this place to the ocean, which is fifty miles away in a direct line, the land is all flat tundra, with nothing to obscure their

view from a high point.” No wonder Clark could exult “Ocean in view! O! the Joy!” from twenty miles upriver. (Up there, the earth isn’t curved, it’s flat!) “Lewis and Clark’s trek,” Viles concluded, “did not take them to the areas we have for many years believed they entered. The revelation of this fact is not a catastrophe as some may be wont to declare, but instead will furnish future generations a more clear and truthful record of North America’s past.”

It’s not too much farther-fetched to suppose that sometime during the tricentennial observance someone will present a more serious, detailed study of Don Viles’s little essay, in an quintessentially academic effort to decide whether it’s really just a practical joke or not. I can only say—although the future is probably not listening, that Don Viles took his-story seriously, and meant every word he wrote. How could anyone possibly believe it, you say? Never underestimate the depth of human gullibility.

Hold that thought!

For me, perhaps the most remarkable legacy of all is the novel, *Lewis and Clark: Northwest Glory*, by James Raymond, published in 1988 by Dell Books. It far outreaches the works of Eva Emery Dye, Grace Hebard, and Della Gould Emmons combined.

Here’s what it promises: Lewis and Clark and their men “faced 900 miles of savage wilderness where a man chose between fortune and love.”

The back-cover blurb gives us the story in a nutshell: “Captains Lewis and Clark explored a wilderness where life was sacred and death commonplace. Their band of daring young American soldiers pitted themselves against fearless Indian warriors and callous fortune-seekers in search of furs in the uncharted world of the great Northwest. Into this world stepped a young woman, who sought the man that no one really knew. And amid the harsh realities of the new frontier, she traveled a road to passion. Follow Lewis and Clark through the great American landscape as they guide fifty rugged men and one beautiful woman on the trail to Northwest Glory.” That “one beautiful woman” is Roxanna, the voluptuous Mrs. Douglas Fairchild

Meriwether Lewis is “an impressive man, blond, thin and attractive.”

Roxanna blackmails Lewis into letting her go along on the expedition in order to find her husband, who has wandered into the wilderness to seek his fortune. Lewis agrees she will be disguised as a man, and names her “Mr. Garcia,” who “speaks only Spanish, so he won’t be saying much.” She scuffs her face with dirt, and pulls her hat low on her forehead. She keeps her eyes down.” And she nods a lot. The men don’t see through her disguise for a while, but become convinced “he” is gay!

Tom Wentworth, who’s on board just to get rich, whacks a skel who tries to rape Roxanna, and figures she owes him a few. But Roxanna is faithful to her wandering husband.

Leaving St. Louis in a wagon, Lewis arrives among the “neatly dressed, well-scrubbed townspeople from St. Charles.”

By the time they leave La Charrette, the last civilized place on the lower Missouri, Lewis has blabbed about Roxanna’s scheme to William Clark and George Drouillard. To quiet Clark’s concerns, Lewis assigns Tom Wentworth to take care of Roxanna. (Aha!)

Rumor has it that her husband is living with the Arikaras, according to a French trader named Cartel, a friend of Cruzatte’s.

(By the way, Private Ned Craddock, known among the gang as “an unfeeling bastard,” but is really a stupid bastard, wonders aloud why they don’t take steamboats up the Missouri, but gets no answer.)

Hugh Hall explains: “During that long winter on Wood River, we kinda broke off into groups among ourselves. Captain Clark and Captain Lewis approve it—I guess it works out all right,”

Somewhere along the way they expect to run into Welsh immigrants who “live like Indians” and “might be descended from Welsh pirates.” They were “sitting on millions of dollars’ worth of stolen British and French treasure—“

They meet up with Daniel Boone, just as he has found the corpse of a man who has been skinned alive and thrown in the river. Boone’s wife tries to persuade Roxanna to go home. Dan’l has heard of Lewis’s air gun, and wishes to see it; Lewis fetches it out of the wagon.

On June 26, 1804, near the mouth of the Kansas River, Tom and Roxanna find themselves standing in a bed of rattlesnakes, one of them seven feet long! Tom is bitten. He and Roxanna are rescued and their wounds treated, by a “mountain man” named Buck Brussard,

One day Lewis promises: “The future of the country depends on our controlling the commerce of the rivers of the west.” We’ll use “force, diplomacy, trickery—anything we have to use to lay our claim to this land and make the Missouri safe for American trade.”

“Then my father was right,” Tom [Wentworth] mused. “This is a lot more than a trip to explore the West.”

Sergeant Floyd, in his final agony, begs “Mr. Garcia” for something to relieve his pain.

Forgetting herself, Roxanna finds her voice. “There’s nothing I can do,” she whispers.

A puzzled look crosses Floyd’s face. He almost smiles as he motions to her to bend closer to him. He yanks off her hat, and her dark hair falls about her shoulders. “I knew it,” Floyd exclaims.

“Damn!” Sergeant Gass blurts out. “Look at that! Garcia’s a woman!”

“There is something you can do,” says Floyd.

“Anything. Just name it.” She replies.

“Could you. . . .kiss me? Just once?”

A moment later, Roxanna has to pry his dead hand off her breast. She laments that she couldn’t have done anything to help him.

“You’re wrong about that,” Clark says. “You did a great deal for him. More than any man could do.”

That scoundrel Sioux boss-man, the Partisan, un-hats her too, in front of all the men. The cat’s out of the bag!

In chapter eleven, Roxana and Sacajawea reach out to one another. “Roxanna always found her fresh, vibrant and easy to talk to. Sacajawea possessed the ease and grace of a New Orleans lady—something she missed out here in the wilderness.”

Now, how is it possible that you and I, who have looked into the hidden-most corners of the expedition’s story, have never heard of all this before? Simply because Lewis and Clark and all the other journalists agreed not to tell.

It was nearly ten years ago that Jack Taylor, of Helena, Montana, stumbled upon two copies of Northwest Glory in a store in Virginia City, Montana. “I’ll take both of them,” he said to the woman behind the counter. “One for myself and one for my friend Joe.”

“Oh, that’s a wonderful book,” she smiled. “I didn’t know anything about Lewis and Clark until I read that!”

Suitably, Amazon.com rates it at a glowing 4-1/2 stars. Hurry! There are just a few copies left, at the premium price of. . .four cents each!¹ Simon Kenton (1755–1836) was an important figure on the Kentucky frontier, and a friend of Daniel Boone as well as of William Clark’s older brother, George Rogers Clark. He had nothing whatsoever to do with the Lewis and Clark Expedition. But you knew that.