

Lewis and Clark in Idaho

On August 12, 1805, Captain Lewis and three of his men reached Lemhi Pass to enter what is now Idaho. They spent nearly a year in Idaho and without the help of different American Indian tribes their expedition may not have been successful.

The Missouri River became too narrow for their canoes, and Lewis realized that they needed horses or another route to continue. Shortly after, the explorers met Chief Cameahwait and the Shoshones. Amazingly, Chief Cameahwait turned out to be Sacajawea's brother. This connection lessened the Indians' fears of these strangers, and made it easier to trade for horses.

The American Indians told Captains Lewis and Clark that there would be no easy river passage to the Pacific after crossing Continental Divide. Clark thought they were exaggerating, but once he tried to travel on what is now called "The River of No Return," he believed them. So the group decided to cross the mountains on horseback and brought experienced Shoshone traveler, Toby, as their guide.

The expedition crossed the Lost Trail Pass and on the way down the Bitterroot River from present-day Sula to Lolo, Montana, they met the friendly Salish Indians.

There Toby showed them the Lolo Trail. The group rested for two days at aptly named Traveler's Rest and then began a 9-day trip to cross the Bitterroot Mountains. The expedition traveled a harrowing 12 miles to reach the top and regain the Lolo Trail. They were wet, cold and food was running out and they still didn't know how far they needed to go. Captain Clark and some men went ahead of the group and met the friendly and helpful Nez Perce. When they were joined by the rest of the party, the Nez Perce gave them food and information about the route ahead to the Pacific.

The expedition reached the Pacific, and after they spent a miserable, wet winter at Fort Clatsop in western Oregon, the captains decided to head home. They traveled by canoe and horseback up the Columbia River and re-entered Idaho on May 5, 1806. They set out to re-cross the Bitterroots by horse, but deep snow blocked their way. It seemed winter was everywhere.

The Nez Perce again helped them, providing shelter. They even played games and held races with them. Lewis and Clark in return helped the tribe by using their doctoring skills to help several American Indians. Captain Lewis also fulfilled his charge from President Jefferson; he wrote about the bears, birds, plants, and other natural features of the area to document all that was found by his group.

After a month, the snow hardened enough to bear the weight of the expedition. Lewis and Clark, with the Nez Perce's help, finally made it across the mountains. They spent their last night in Idaho near today's Powell Junction. On June 29, 1806, Lewis wrote that he happily "bid adieu to the snow."