

MY LEWIS AND CLARK – DISCOVERY IS AT THE CORE
by
Julianne Couch

Mrs. Eolah Lewis Couch, 93, descendant of both leaders of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-06, died yesterday of infirmities at her home, 738 Ethel Ave., Richmond Heights. She had lived in Richmond Heights since 1903. Born at Ashland, Kentucky, Mrs. Couch was the daughter of Mehlon Lewis, descendant of Capt. Meriwether Lewis, one of the expedition's leaders, and Mrs. Isabella Clark Lewis, descendant of Capt. William Clark, the other leader. She came to St. Louis with her parents during the Civil War.

The St. Louis newspaper confirmed the myth of our family heritage, back in the 1960s when newspapers did not lie. No wonder I've spent 40 years believing it. The only trouble is I no longer think the story is true.

About 10 years ago I started looking into the connection I was raised to believe existed between my father's family and those famous two men who carried the baton of westward expansion under President Thomas Jefferson. Political philosophy did not enter in to my research: whether one views the opening of the West as an unforgivable decimation of indigenous cultures, or as the natural next step in the development of the greatest nation in the world, the fact remains that an enormous feat took place. Captains Clark and Lewis were brave, intelligent, disciplined, ingenious, and adventurous, and by golly their blood surges in my veins. I could have gone on believing that myth had I not used my own bravery, intelligence, and so on to do my own discovering. I set out to read scholarly editions of the published journals. I read books. I joined the Lewis and Clark societies. I spoke with experts and worked the genealogy knot. I learned about William Clark's extraordinary skills as a mapmaker

Julianne Couch has a bachelor's and master's degree from Emporia State University. Since 1998 she has been a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Wyoming. In addition to teaching, she does freelance writing for newspapers and magazines.

and riverman, his ability to lead the several dozen members of the Corps of Discovery and get along well with Native Americans along the trail. I learned about Meriwether Lewis' knowledge of medicine, his education, and his careful preparation under Thomas Jefferson to record all he observed about the people, the plants and animals, and of course, the trading routes to the Northwest.

I also learned two important facts about Meriwether Lewis: he was reputed by contemporaries and by present scholars to be of a dark and brooding disposition, prone to spells of depression. Tragically, his death in 1809 was quite possibly a suicide, committed because he was depressed over finances and general business miseries. The circumstances still provoke debate, but his slow, messy death by gunshot and knife wounds at a cabin along the Natchez Trace was certainly not part of the story my family ever told.

The other key fact I learned but that my family never talked of was that Lewis never married. Of course, that fact doesn't eliminate the possibility of his having fathered children, but experts I've consulted concur that in spite of rumors of Lewis having left some Native women along the trail in the family way, there is no convincing evidence that he had done so. That would make it tough to be his direct descendant.

So how did the family story begin? Did my great-grandmother Eolah Lewis Couch know the real details? It seems to me that my family has taken the anti-intellectual approach to ancestor worship so common in a country where people have immigrated, emigrated, and often become lost from one another over the vast stretches of prairie and time. Most of us have only a hazy knowledge of where our ancestors came from, what ghastly battle claimed our great uncle, or how our grandparents managed during the Depression. My family, with our sundry long-lost cousins, is typical of many American families who do their best to connect with relations over the haze of the past, and when stories exist at all, tend to take them on faith.

So far, I've not been able to verify that Lewis and Clark were related to each other, as family lore has held, merely that Lewis had served under Clark in the military, and that they had developed a friendship and mutual respect. Nor have I been able to discover any linking of their genes down

through the generations, as the obituary of my great-grandmother might suggest. In spite of my lack of evidence, I believe that a member of Lewis's family at some point linked up with a Clark, and that is how my great-grandmother came to descend from both men. It is true that Clark named his first child Meriwether Lewis Clark; perhaps the mix-up started there.

Frankly, I've become less interested in the pursuit of genealogy as I've thought about this question and more interested in what my findings mean to how identity is shaped. Of the two explorers, I somehow allied myself more closely with Lewis. I'm sure the association started for me as a young child because he was the more famous of the two (after all, his name comes first when you say Lewis and Clark). Looking into the doubting faces of teachers and the admiring faces of peers, I bragged about my ancestry. As I began to grow up, I could attribute my adolescent dark side and rebellious behavior to the blood that flowed in my veins. Of course, I never disciplined myself to be a mapmaker or navigator or naturalist or leader of men. But possessing their legendary wanderlust was enough; for in my suburban community where few ever left the 'burbs, let alone the city or state, a call to adventure was tantamount to a loaded canoe and an airgun from the hands of President Jefferson.

Wanderlust finally tightened its metaphorical shoelaces when I realized at around age 30 that the West sang to me, and that Wyoming felt like home, and that the college town of Laramie held the perfect combination of convenience, culture, and roughness. (That was an important time of life for Lewis, too, who celebrated his 31st birthday along the trail after reaching a milestone of the journey. To mark the occasion he jotted down in his journal that he hadn't done much in his life but waste time, and that from that moment on he hoped to live more for others and less for himself.) Lewis and Clark became the patron saints of my wanderlust, leading me to rally my husband, quit my job, rent out our house, say goodbye to family and lifelong friends, and strike out in a U-Haul for the West.

Predictably the trouble came when my husband realized he wasn't related to expansionist explorers, but to Missouri homesteaders. After a year or two he went back to Kansas City, and I stayed put, divorced, but

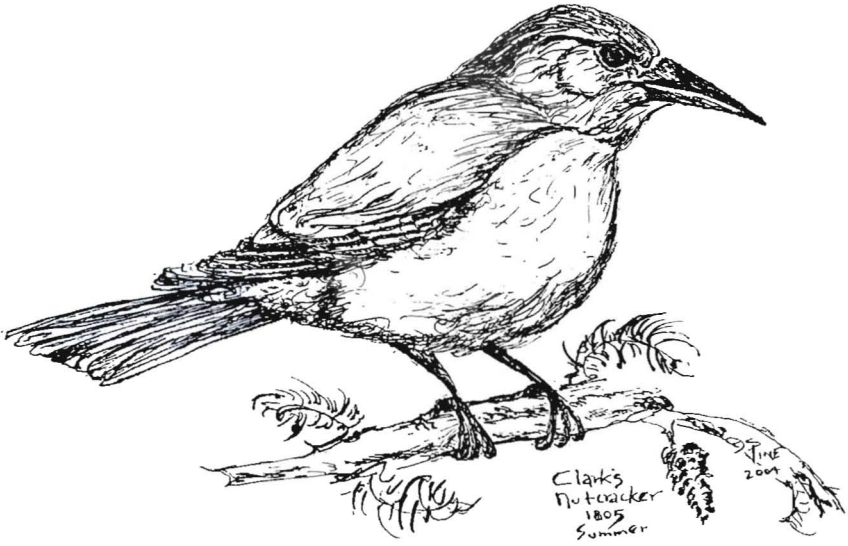
somehow content to be a person to whom a sense of place meant more than the security of family. After all, Lewis and Clark said goodbye to all they knew for several years, never sure if they'd see home again: that's how committed they were to their cause and how deeply the desire for discovery ran in them. If they could face malaria, mosquitoes, unnavigable rivers, fearsome winters, uncertain relations with Natives, and dwindling food, I could face, and would face, this new place in unlooked for circumstances. As I thought then, I was their great-great-great (at least) grandchild. An oft-repeated phrase from Lewis and Clark's journals became my mantra, and I "proceeded on."

The time for me to become a skilled navigator arrived. Not because Laramie was uncharted, but because I was and still am. I'm not the product of inescapable genealogical urgings that I thought I was. I miss being the product of the explorers' fabulous alchemy. I didn't come West because of psychological manifest destiny, as it turned out, but because I was sick of the heat and the crowds. I didn't end my marriage because I wanted to document animal species unknown to science. The marriage started to shake before the move West, I now see. Lastly, I'm not the brooding genius I'd fancied myself to be, though never really have been, in the fashion of Meriwether Lewis. Instead I'm descended most likely from William Clark, one of the most noteworthy men in our nation's history, which provides plenty of rations for my self-identity quest.

It turns out I'm just an average woman living in a place she loves, who grew up in a family connected enough to tell some stories, with sufficient personal confidence and independence to try new things. I got lucky when I picked Laramie. I didn't know I'd land in a town of other expatriates, so many adventurers just like me here from Missouri, and Kansas, and Illinois, and Iowa, looking for a place they can call home. I got even luckier when one such expatriate turned out to be a man who wanted the same thing.

As it happens, I'm no more an adventurer than my next door neighbor, or the mailman. I've not done anything worthy of marking the occasion of this insight by carving my name and date on a tree, as did William Clark when the Corps of Discovery finally reached the Pacific Ocean. I'm not sure whose blood runs in my veins, besides my own, or

if that even really makes a difference. But I do owe a debt of gratitude to Lewis and Clark for kindling in me a love of discovery and a willingness to examine what it is I've found.



Drawing of Clark's Nutcracker courtesy of Susan Tine