MERIWETHER'S VISION

The Lewis & Clark expedition, with its thirty-nine man Corps of Discovery, returned safely to civilization at St. Louis on September 23, 1806. They had traveled over 8000 miles since leaving St. Charles, Missouri on May 21, 1804, as they made their way to the Pacific Ocean and back through the newly acquired Louisiana Territory.

President Thomas Jefferson had chosen his friend and personal secretary, Captain Meriwether Lewis, to lead the expedition. Lewis, in turn, had chosen Second Lieutenant William Clark as his co-commander. Jefferson was hoping to find a simple, all-water route to the western terminus of the country. He also sought to dissuade other foreign powers -- especially the British -- from encroaching upon America's newest lands. The expedition was also tasked with meeting and establishing friendly relations with any native Indian tribes, as well as charting accurate maps and collecting any new plant, animal, and mineral data.

The expedition was largely a success (having lost only one man over the two year and four-month journey), but its leaders were somewhat disappointed at not finding an easy "Northwest Passage," i.e., an all-water route west. Still, the celebrations upon Lewis & Clark's return in St. Louis were joyous. A letter was immediately sent to President Jefferson at the White House in Washington, informing him of the Corps' success, and promising to meet with him as soon as possible for a complete, detailed report.

Both Meriwether Lewis and William Clark left St. Louis for the nation's capitol, but traveled separately -- each wishing to stop and visit various friends and relatives on the way. Lewis arrived in Washington first in late December, followed by Clark a few weeks later. There, they met up again and quickly went to the White House.

President Jefferson greeted both men warmly. A slim and vigorous man more than 6'2" in height, his sandy red hair had gradually gone gray since they were last together, but his keen hazel eyes were as highly intelligent and alert as ever. He explained that each man would be given 1500 acres of virgin land in the new Territory, as well as double pay for the time they were away. The explorers then presented their delighted patron with their precious hand-written, self-illustrated journals, which included daily travel entries in addition to important weather and topographical data. Next came 170 carefully drawn maps of the new region; information on 120 new mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish that they had encountered; a live prairie dog and caged magpie; collected animal skins, furs, horns and antlers; and Native American artifacts such as beadwork, clothing, baskets, pots, and bows.

As further rewards for their service to the nation, Lewis was then made Governor of Upper Louisiana, while Clark was made Brigadier General of Militia and Indian Agent for the vast 530 million-acre Territory, which the U.S. had purchased from France for $15 million in 1803.

Three years went by. Thomas Jefferson completed his two successful terms as President on March 4, 1809. Once James Madison was sworn in as the nation's new Chief Executive, Jefferson immediately left Washington for his beloved home -- Monticello -- located in the peaceful, verdant hills of Virginia.

A few months later, however, he received a mysterious letter from Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, requesting an important but very private meeting at Monticello at Jefferson's earliest convenience.

"There is something troubling you need to know, sir. Something strange which no one but the three of us must ever know about. Something that was never disclosed or written about in our discovery journals. Now is the time to share what secretly happened to me on that epic trip." Lewis confessed in his request.

Somewhat baffled by this surprising and somewhat cryptic demand, Jefferson nonetheless invited his two friends to Monticello for a the day and night on May 12.

The former President greeted both men heartily but alone at his home's front entranceway that mid-morning. He had long been a widower since 1782, when his wife, Martha Wayles, died. They had six children, two whom survived into adulthood -- both daughters. It is likely that he also fathered six more children with his favored slave, Sally Hemings.

Spring was on full display on the beautiful, leveled Virginia mountaintop where Monticello was ideally located. Colorful flowers were in bloom, with a wide variety of trees displaying their fresh green leaves, and various insects and birds in happy activity.

"We can discuss your curious business fully at dinner this evening, gentlemen. But first I must show you around my humble plantation. It is such a beautiful day that I'm sure your troubling news can wait for a few more hours." the owner announced. When Clark slipped and referred to Jefferson still as 'Mr. President,' Jefferson gently corrected him. "No, William. Please call me by my first name now. After all, we are good friends here, and I am just a simple yeoman farmer once more, not an overworked Chief Executive!" Thomas smiled cordially.

Lewis and Clark were given an extensive tour of the large yet still-incomplete building, which featured in the main hallway some of the rare artifacts and personal gifts brought back from the recent Corps expedition. Jefferson shared the results of some of his latest on-going scientific experiments, then went on to showcase his newest book acquisitions for his impressive 9000-volume library collection. Next, he discussed the finer points of natural and architectural harmonics in Monticello's construction, and explained his designs for several new labor-saving inventions. After a brief luncheon of spicy rice soup, cold ham, warm corn bread with butter, and cider, the trio went outside in the glorious sunshine and fresh air, where Jefferson's 130 slaves were cultivating over 250 various food and livestock crops, as well as every Virginia plantation's staple -- tobacco. Thomas then outlined his theories on botany and horticultural genetics. He proudly admitted that he grew twenty different varieties of his favorite vegetable --the pea -- and discussed his plans for an extensive herb garden. The rest of the afternoon was spent riding around the 5000-acre grand property's grounds. At rest stops, Jefferson talked on the topics of religion and philosophy, oil painting, soil science and local weather patterns, animal husbandry, bird-watching, and his treasured European wines -- mostly French, his cellar holding over 700 fine bottles. The former President's mind was quite amazing in its breadth and depth, every visitor quickly realized!

Dinner time arrived just as they returned to the house and slaves stabled their horses in the now late afternoon. Jefferson emphasized more healthful vegetables over heavy meats whenever he dined, so the menu included his favorite dish of macaroni and cheese (he had brought home a pasta machine from Naples, Italy on one of his many foreign trips). He went on to offer preserved tomatoes and creamed corn, rabbit stew with carrots, potatoes and celery, roast chicken, warm fresh bread, two bottles of vintage wine, and the meal concluded with his favorite dessert: refreshing honey-infused ice cream. The food was delivered via cleverly hidden wall dumbwaiters from Monticello's subterranean kitchen, to prevent slave-servants from interrupting the meal or eavesdropping on any guests' private conversations.

After the trio dined, Meriwether Lewis cleared his throat and looked at his companion. "Go ahead, tell Thomas the whole story now," William Clark urged. "I'll stay quiet, seeing as your strange incident didn't involve me." None of the three men smoked that evening, but they did partake in some some fresh coffee and hot tea at dinner's end as Meriwether began to speak.

"As you may recall from our journals, Thomas, William and I -- after leaving our camp at Fort Clatsop near the Columbia River -- briefly split up on our return east. This was near the Bitterroot Mountains on July 3, 1806, at a spot we dubbed Traveler's Rest. I went up the Big Blackfoot River north with four men with the intention of exploring the Marias River, to see if it led to a water route west that the expedition had possibly missed. William, meanwhile, went south with the rest of the Corps on the Jefferson River, through the Bozeman Pass, and onto the Yellowstone River. Our plan was to meet up again where the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers merged, which we did, successfully, on August 12.

My exploration of the Marias area yielded little, however. So on my way back south, near the Two Medicine River, my small party was confronted by a band of ten mounted Blackfeet Indians. They were young, suspicious, and not very friendly. They were partly armed with British muskets, which they later explained had been traded for pelts up north with British fur merchants -- I assumed the HBC. We shared tobacco and some jerky with them, and communicated through sign language that we were harmlessly passing through their lands. They stayed the night with us at our campfire. But in the morning, one young buck grabbed my musket and ran to escape, while two other braves attempted to steal our horses. I repeatedly shouted for the brazen thief to stop, then fired my pistol when the buck ignored my warning. My shot hit him in the stomach. He dropped my gun as he fell, dead. His companions quickly fled, but fortunately without our vital mounts. This was the only time I was forced to kill a Native American on our expedition. Of course, you know all of this, as these events so far were detailed in our report."

"Yes...pray continue, my friend," Jefferson acknowledged, his hazel eyes intent, waiting for what unusual event might next be revealed.

"Now, I and my party of four knew that we had to leave the area immediately, but before we could flee, a band of perhaps twenty-five Blackfeet arrived and surrounded our escape. We were taken prisoner to their nearby camp. I assumed we were surely dead men, who would be ultimately killed after we were brutally tortured.

But, to our surprise, we were taken to see their chief, who, in turn, took us -- unbound -- to the old village shaman or medicine man. His name seemed to be 'Jacy', which in their tongue meant 'born of the moon.' He explained through sign language that we should not have killed their young brave, because such thievery was to be reserved only for known enemies like the Crow -- which we were obviously not -- and the novice brave would have been severely punished if he returned to their camp with my stolen musket and his band with two of our five horses, and would have to return such. My killing was hence understood and forgiven. Thus, through sheer luck, our lives were spared, and we were soon feasted as guests.

We stayed at the Blackfoot camp -- consisting of perhaps 120 young and old braves, women, and children -- all that day and into the next. That second night, however, the shaman coaxed me to accompany him alone to a secret location about twelve miles away, by my estimate, in the mountain foothills that he called 'the place of whispers.' And so, under a full moon, we rode through dense forests and rocky canyons until we reached a deep cave. The shaman bid me to follow him inside, where we made a fire near an odd, almost perfectly round hole in the ground, perhaps six feet across. 'The Place of Whispers' he carefully announced through solemn, almost reverential sign language.

Next, the medicine man opened a small leather pouch and removed what appeared to be several dried roots or mushrooms. He ate some and bid me to eat the rest. Not knowing what else would happen if I refused, I partook.

After several minutes, I felt a strange sense of euphoria and a kind of heightened awareness. The cave walls flickered in the dancing shadows of our fire. The ancient shaman -- his hair mere wisps of gray and white, his teeth mostly missing, and his weathered face a mass of conflicting wrinkles -- then bid me to come to the lip of the unusual hole in the ground and kneel with him. After muttering a few incantations, he suddenly pressed my head firmly downward into the opening. That's when it happened."

"And what was that?" Jefferson wanted to know. Clark, meanwhile, as promised, said nothing. The array of candles on Jefferson's dining table cast their light and shadows on the faces of those assembled.

"For lack of a better explanation, Thomas, I experienced some kind of a vision. A look into the future, perhaps. Four startling future events vividly appeared before my eyes."

"Go on..." Thomas urged.

"Very well, my friend. I can share two of the events with you. William, and he alone, of course, knows all four. The first vision told of the virtual extinction of all Native Americans from the continent by the end of this century. The second told of a terrible Civil War -- beginning in about fifty years -- which will tear our nation apart for many months, with the accompanying loss of hundreds of thousands of American lives."

"Incredible..." Jefferson replied, aghast and deeply disturbed. "Can I also know the final two visions?"

"William, what do you think? Should we tell Thomas the other two awful predictions?" Meriwether asked, in serious hesitation.

Clark thought for a moment, then answered. "As I made it known years ago when I first heard Meriwether's full account -- in strictest confidence -- I let him know that it was possible that his 'visions' may have been simply hallucinations brought about by the Blackfoot medicine man's mysterious potions. That being said, if the four prophecies were indeed somehow real, I would say that our good friend Thomas here should be made aware of them in their entirety."

"Very well," Lewis replied. "Here is the third prediction. I warn you, sir: it is very distressing.

A second Civil War will erupt in about two-hundred years -- only this time, it will totally destroy our Republic. The United States of America will cease to exist as a result."

Jefferson blanched in horror. "Oh, no!" he cried aloud.

"I am sorry to distress you, my good friend, in such a manner with such dire news, yet both William and I felt you needed to know the fact as I -- incredibly -- experienced it. We delayed telling you until now, seeing as you were earlier burdened with the rigors of leading the country as our third President when we returned from our expedition three years ago."

Thomas recovered, then asked what was the fourth and last vision.

"It pertains strictly to you, sir. Are you absolutely sure you want to hear it?" Lewis gently asked.

"Yes, let's have the rest of it, Meriwether," the squire of Monticello replied, his jaw set in grim determination.

"Very well, Thomas. Here it is: I was shown the exact date of your death..."

"What? How can such a thing be possible?" he wondered aloud, appalled.

"I don't know, my friend. I believe, however, that I should give you only the year of your death, rather than the exact month and day. I think that specific information should remain unknown to any mortal man, to preserve his mental integrity."

Jefferson sighed in resignation, leaned to one side in his chair, and scratched his scalp. "What year then..."

Lewis paused, then looked down, bit his lip, and uttered the number, "1826."

The American patriot and famed author of the renowned Declaration of Independence said nothing. A large grandfather clock slowly ticked away the minutes in the great dining hall.

Lewis broke the silence first. "After my session with the shaman, we returned to the Blackfoot village and went to sleep. My four companions and I were given some farewell food and left in peace to return south the following morning. As I mentioned to both of you, I never told the other Corps members -- or anybody, other than William -- exactly what happened in that cave in the foothills. Nor do I think I could ever find its location again, given that I was led there and back guided only by moonlight."

Jefferson spoke next. "I sincerely thank you both for coming, my friends. Obviously, none of us will be alive to see if these four predictions of yours will come to fruition, Meriwether. Perhaps the entire experience was just an peculiar hallucination, as William suggested. But it does give one pause, gentlemen. It surely gives one pause...

Now, kind sirs, it is my habit to read for at least an hour every evening before I retire. So I must wish you a sincere good night." He led the pair to two guest bedrooms. "I always rise with the sun, gentlemen, so we will meet again at breakfast before you both return home. Sleep well. If you can, that is..." he added, clearly disturbed.

After the following morning, the three men never met again.

A few months later, Meriwether Lewis fell into a deep depression and began drinking heavily. He was traveling on the Natchez Trace and stopped at an inn at Grinder's Stand, about seventy miles southwest of Nashville, Tennessee. The innkeeper's wife heard Lewis cry out in agony from his rest cabin in the middle of night. Then two pistol shots rang out. Meriwether was found with a bloody bullet wound to his stomach and a ghastly fatal shot to his head. It was presumed in his despair that he had committed suicide. The tragic date was October 11, 1809. He was only thirty-five years old, and had never married.

William Clark, however, fared better. He was later made Governor of the Missouri Territory by President Madison and was generally very helpful towards recognizing the rights of Native Americans. He had five children with his first wife, Julia Hancock. After she died, he remarried, to Harriet Kennerly Radford, who was Julia's first cousin. They, in turn, had three children together. Clark also served as guardian to Sacagawea's son, Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, after she -- the loyal, female Shoshone Indian guide on their Lewis & Clark expedition -- died in 1812 at the age of twenty-four. William Clark died in St. Louis on September 1, 1838, at the age of sixty-eight.

As for Thomas Jefferson, he died at the age of eighty-three on July 4, 1826 -- the precise year predicted in Meriwether's vision -- on the same day as the second U.S. President, John Adams. Once bitter political rivals, the two patriots eventually became supportive friends in their old age. They both had died exactly on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Of Lewis' four eerie predictions, you know that all but one has come to pass. We can but worry, and wonder: will it, too, one day, prove itself to be true?

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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