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Commemoration a Chance to Tell Different Stories

By Fred Tasker Knight Ridder News Service

BLACKFEET RESERVATION, Mont. -- As America nears the 200th anniversary of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, American Indian leaders are demanding a major reassessment of how the country views its heroes and its history.

In the white consciousness, the daring trek rivals that of Christopher Columbus. The two leaders and their 31-member "Corps of Discovery" opened up the American West, created a heroic, defining myth and started to sketch the ultimate shape, the Manifest Destiny of a fledgling nation.

But to American Indians who had lived on those rivers, plains and mountains for 10,000 years it was the beginning of something not far short of holocaust.

Within months settlers were pouring into their native lands bringing smallpox, scarlet fever and liquor. Within years they were slaughtering the buffalo, the tribes' chief source of food, clothing and shelter. Within decades they had decimated Indian populations and pushed the survivors onto hardscrabble reservations where many have failed to prosper to this day.

American Indians, who numbered more than 10 million when European settlers arrived, could count only 250,000 by 1900 -- recovering since to about 2 million.

Revisionist History? "Americans have never been taught proper history," says Ronald McNeil, great-great-great grandson of Sioux Chief Sitting Bull and president of Sitting Bull Community College in Fort Yates, S.D. "We need to use this opportunity to tell the story of how the land was taken from us, how our culture was taken, our language -- why we're in the condition we are today."

"It's not revisionist history," says Darrell Kipp, Harvard-trained historian of the Blackfeet Tribe in Montana. "It's setting the record straight."

Their view resounds among the 54 tribes -- from the Sioux in the Dakotas to the Blackfeet in Montana to the Chinook on the Pacific Coast -- that came in contact with Lewis and Clark during their 4,100-mile, 28-month journey from St. Louis to the Pacific and back in 1804-06.

Still, the tribes recognize that the 35 million visitors expected on the Lewis & Clark Historical Trail during the three years of the bicentennial commemoration could be a big boost to their tourism.

"We can't ignore that kind of economic benefit," says Ben Sherman, a Lakota Sioux and president of the Western American Indian Chamber of Commerce in Denver.

It left them in a dilemma: protest the events or profit from them?

They chose a little of each. Tribal leaders have won prominent places on the commissions planning bicentennial events and set up university seminars at which tribal scholars will voice their views. At the same time they are building replicas of the villages that Lewis and Clark visited to snag tourist dollars and tell their side of the story.

The American Indian groups demanded that the National Council of the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial, the volunteer group coordinating events, change the bicentennial's official designation from "celebration" to "commemoration."

Says Sherman: "Jefferson ended up with a policy of Indian removal, displacement and extermination. How can we celebrate this?"

They won the point.

The council also put together a 30-member Circle of Tribal Advisers to promote Indian participation in the bicentennial -- both out of conviction and a desire to avoid the kinds of protests that met 1992 ceremonies marking the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage.

Dollars and Sense: That the tribes are fighting for dollars and understanding can be seen in New Town, N.D. The Three Affiliated Tribes there -- Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara -- are building an \$11-million cultural heritage center and a replica of the old Mandan village where Lewis and Clark spent the frigid first winter of their trip in 1804-05.

When it opens this summer, tourists can stay overnight in an earthen lodge, among other activities.

And they can listen to folk lectures by Amy Mossett, a Mandan/Hidatsa storyteller who spent 15 years studying the oral history of Sacagawea, the 16-year-old Shoshone girl who served as interpreter for Lewis and Clark. Dressed as Sacagawea, Mossett will explain that the interpreter never was a Mandan slave, as she is portrayed in history books.

"No one was ever kidnapped and enslaved in the Hidatsa culture," Mossett will tell them. "We went to war and took captives, who sometimes were absorbed into tribes."

In Browning, Mont., leaders of the Blackfeet Tribe are telling their side of the story in a total-immersion elementary school, where students are taught about their heritage in the Blackfeet language.

They hear how the tribe, which originally inhabited a large area around Montana, was relocated against its will to this remote location on the Canadian border. They learn of the 1870 Massacre on the Marias River, in which U.S. Army troops pursuing murderers mistakenly attacked an innocent Blackfeet village.

Children in Arthur Westwolf's history class hear two sharply divergent versions of their tribe's fatal run-in with the Lewis & Clark Expedition 200 years ago.

From the history books, Westwolf tells them Lewis and one of his men killed two Blackfeet boys in 1806 because they tried to steal the explorers' rifles.

The Two Medicine Fight Site, where Lewis & Clark encountered eight members of a Blackfeet Tribe (Pikuni) and made camp for the night, is about 25 miles southeast of Browning, Montana in Pondera County on the eastern edge of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.



Then he invites tribal elders to give their oral history version -- a much more complicated tale of young boys stealing into an enemy camp in an ancient ritual that had little to do with thievery and much to do with courage, honor and coming-of-age.

"According to our oral history, those two boys were doing what they were supposed to," says Blackfeet spokeswoman Susan Weber. "It was a way of gaining honor in battle," she says.

Many Misunderstandings: Even after 200 years, tribal leaders are still angry over the way the journals of Lewis and Clark describe many of the Indians they met.

Several American Indian leaders will make this point in speeches at official bicentennial ceremonies Saturday at Monticello, the Virginia home of President Jefferson, who created the expedition.

Their view -- that the journals prove how little Lewis and Clark understood the Indians -- is backed up by the late historian Stephen Ambrose in his 1996 book, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson and the Opening of the American West* (Simon & Schuster, \$17 paperback).

In his journal, Lewis says Mandan tribal members eagerly offered their wives -- "tawny damsels," he calls them -- to the white men for sex.

Says Sherman, the Lakota Sioux: "There's absolutely no reason to call it primitive. It's just a different standard. There were no rigid, puritanical restraints. They were much more enlightened about sex. There are societies in Europe . . . that are much more liberal than we are about sex."

Another major goal of the expedition, Ambrose wrote, was to stop the wars between the various tribes and get them to sign treaties of peace and friendship, with one another and with Jefferson's government. The attempt was a failure.

Still, efforts today by American Indian leaders and the white leaders of the bicentennial to hammer out a working arrangement seem hopeful.

"We're not vindictive," says Kipp, the Blackfeet historian. "But we're looking for a renegotiation of reality. The tribes have been exploited, placed in difficult positions. Today we seek self-reliance, self-management. We're asking to correct wrongs."