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H&S scene; In the footsteps of Lewis and Clark

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In search of spacious skies and the majesty of purple mountains, twenty-eight Boy Scouts commemorated America's bicentennial year last summer by spending eighty-one days retracing the Lewis and Clark expedition from St. Louis, Missouri to Astoria, Oregon. The group, Explorer Scouts ranging from fourteen to eighteen years of age from Omaha's Post 476 and four leaders, included Omaha partner Lawrence F. Chandler and his son, Larry Jr.

In 1804 President Thomas Jefferson gave Meriwether Lewis and William Clark $2,500 to lead thirty men to the Pacific Northwest. It took them nearly two years to complete a 3,600-mile journey that did much to dispel ignorance about the region and open the way for westward expansion.

What cost only $2,500 in 1804 cost $10,000 in 1976. Much of the expense of the 1976 expedition was attributed to a combination of inflation and contemporary means of supply and transportation. A caravan consisting of a U-Haul van, trailers portaging fourteen motorized canoes, and an eighteen-foot, fully equipped kitchen trailer followed the truck, trailers portaging fourteen motorized canoes, and an eighteen-foot, fully equipped kitchen trailer followed the boys, stopping at towns along the way to pick up prearranged orders of groceries. There were also four cabin cruisers waiting at St. Louis to transport the boys up the Missouri River and a bus to get them back home from Astoria.

Larry Chandler, chief fundraiser for the venture, had no small task. To begin, he asked that each boy raise $1,000 toward the trip. Then he found companies willing to contribute much of the necessary camping equipment. Even though businesses, parents and friends were very generous, some boys were still unable to raise the initial $1,000. "If they wanted to go, I found a way," Larry said.

Despite the advantages of modern technology, the scouts were beset by many of the same problems and accidents faced by the Lewis and Clark expedition. First, a fire destroyed one of the cabin cruisers. Then a second cruiser was damaged by a floating log. In Glasgow, Montana, hurricane-force winds whipped through their campsite, forcing the boys to seek shelter in the truck. Although uprooted trees and broken branches caused considerable damage to cars, picnic tables and tents, no one was injured.

At one point on the journey fourteen scouts were stranded for a day and a half without supplies. The boys had decided to separate, half of them traveling to Devil's Creek, Montana by supply truck and the others by canoes. Heavy rains in the area didn't slow the canoes too much, but the truck became bogged down in the eastern Montana gumbo, a type of soil that when wet becomes very sticky. Meanwhile the boys in the canoes reached Devil's Creek, a desolate location sixty miles from the nearest town, only to find no trucks waiting. They spent the night without food, drinking water or blankets. Two of the leaders used CB relay to ask relatives in the area to bring food. The boys were finally reunited two and a half days later.

The most serious accident came not in a canoe or on the trails, but on the highway near Pierre, South Dakota. The group's supply truck collided with a semi-trailer truck hauling a crane. The supply-truck driver was pinned inside his vehicle by the crane and suffered lacerations of the head and legs requiring some 100 stitches. However, he was able to rejoin the expedition two weeks later.

Added to these obstacles were washed-out bridges, rattlesnakes, a dam lock which nearly smashed the canoes and malfunctioning equipment. Nevertheless, the boys agreed that theirs was probably the experience of a lifetime. "This is the greatest high adventure any single scout unit in America has ever attempted," the senior Chandler said.

Because of a heavy work schedule, Larry spent only the second half of the trip with the boys. He led the group over the wilderness trails and down the Pacific slope. "When I first mentioned this trip to the Mid-America Boy Scout Council, nobody thought we could do it," Larry said. The council was wrong. The boys hiked more than 350 miles through the Rockies at elevations of up to 18,000 feet, at a pace of twenty to thirty miles a day. "I've been hiking a long time, so at first the boys had a tough time keeping up with me. After a while it became apparent that old legs in shape are not as good as young legs in shape. They could hike about one mile every fifteen minutes," Larry said.

After more than two months on the road, the mishaps and rising tensions from blisters, sore feet and exhaustion caused some temporary morale problems. "It's like C rations that we carried for our lunches," one scout said, "you have to get used to them, so you make fun of them and it turns out all right." By the end of the trek, after canoeing the last 700 miles, they were once again a cohesive group.

It was the last week in August when the expedition finally reached the blue-green expanse of the Pacific Ocean. "It was a definite learning experience," Larry said. "I watched the boys gain confidence in themselves and their outdoor skills. It gave them a feeling of accomplishment. I found that very rewarding."

Larry is deeply involved in scouting. At present he is the Mid-America Council vice-president of finance, a member of its executive board, and a trustee. In addition he has assumed other regional and national responsibilities. "Scouting promotes character development and leadership ability, mental and physical toughness. Through activities like the trek, a boy becomes aware of his strengths and limitations. He gets a real sense of himself."