

# THE PERFECT PASS THAT LEWIS AND CLARK MISSED

By Rick Hull

In traveling around the state, I have cataloged what Lewis and Clark missed -- the lowest pass across the Continental Divide, or the wagon route that did an end run around the Rockies. But I now realize they were restrained by their mandate, hostile tribes and a basic misconception about travel on the Great Plains. And these geographic near misses remained essentially unlocated for decades after their return.

One problem was the expedition's chief goal. According to President Thomas Jefferson, it was to find "the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce."

It was a logical mandate. After all, that was how all of western Canada was traversed. Starting at the Grand Portage on Lake Superior, Hudson Bay Company traders could carry trading goods and furs all through the network of rivers. And Canadian explorer Alexander Mackenzie, who reached the Pacific Ocean in 1793, made most of his journey by canoe, though it involved multiple portages through alpine lakes.

It was one reason Lewis and Clark ignored tribal advice to take the well-traveled "Road to the Buffalo" along the Blackfoot River, and instead canoed upstream to the far end of the Missouri, and then Jefferson, drainage.

But the Great Plains were not the muskeg swamps of Canada. The hard lesson was the mountains and semi-arid grasslands were made for horses, not boats.

One supposed misstep was when Meriwether Lewis came to within sight of Marias Pass, near East Glacier, in 1806. It is the lowest pass across the Rocky Mountains and was not officially discovered until 1889.



Oregon Trail and Snake River Plain

*Credit - Adam Cuerden and U.S. National Archive*

But it was also in the Blackfoot Nation's backyard. Canadian explorer David Thompson would travel 300 miles out of his way to avoid the tribe when traveling to Montana. And passes favorable for railroads and highway are not always suitable for wagons or horses. Local tribes crossed two mountain ranges to bypass the rough spots.

Lewis and Clark's biggest miss was not finding the Snake River Plain and South Pass.

The idea there was a practical wagon route across the mountains probably wasn't even on their minds. But, because of flukes of geology and geography, there was. It would become the Oregon Trail.

They came close to stumbling on the Snake River Plain. If they had gone up

Lemhi Creek after crossing the Continental Divide into southern Idaho, instead of downstream to the Salmon River, they would have found it. But their horses were in bad shape, and Lewis and Clark were not prepared to gamble on further exploration. Once they discovered the Salmon River was impassible, heading back over the mountains at Lost Trail Pass seemed a safer bet.

The other lost opportunity was if they had followed the Madison River, instead of the Jefferson River. Where the Madison veers into the mountains of Yellowstone Park, south of Ennis, is Reynolds Pass. Though higher than Logan Pass in Glacier National Park, it is a barely perceptible rise in terrain that connects with the Pacific-bound Henry's Fork of the Snake River.

The Snake River Plain is a volcanic anomaly that forms a crescent across southern Idaho, bypassing the crags of the Rocky Mountain chain. The feature stands out on satellite maps.

The bulk of this treeless plain is the result of a plume of molten rock poking through a weak spot in the Earth's crust. A chain of eruptions have occurred along it, each covering the path in lava. The volcano is presently under Yellowstone Park, and is headed northeast towards Billings. The movement is an illusion. It is really the North American Continent moving instead.

Originally the "hot spot" was thought to have its origin in the Columbia River basalt outflows of eastern Washington and Oregon. But now it has been tracked to the McDermitt volcanic of northwest Nevada. The western portion of the crescent-shaped Snake River Plain did originate in the Columbia Basin lava flows.

The real key to this route where the Continental Divide wanders across western Wyoming. At points the divide splits into two and leaves landlocked basins that drain to neither ocean. It is these splits that the Great Plains ties seamlessly into the Snake River Plain.

The discovery of South Pass was made in 1812 by a group of Americans from the Pacific Fur Company in Astoria, Oregon. They were trying to get back east to tell founder John Jacob Astor that his company ship had been seized by Indians and destroyed. It was a journey that went badly wrong, including near cannibalism.

It was what could have happened to Lewis and Clark with less discipline.

Led by 27-year-old Robert Stuart, the group went veered south along the Snake River, trying to avoid the Crow Indians. Often lost, their route took them through southern Idaho and western Idaho, sometime going hundreds of miles out of the way. In early October the Crows stole all their horses. Starving, they voted to eat an unpopular member until overruled by Stuart.

Local Indians had told them about the easy pass through the mountains. When they finally found it, they could not believe how flat it was.

But by now it was snowing, and they had to winter along the North Platte in Wyoming. Stuart finally made it to New York in April 1813 with his bad news for Astor.

The pass was essentially lost until rediscovered by mountain man Jed Fisher in 1824. It was not until 1832 that explorer Louis Bonneville took the first wagons across. The first migrants made the journey in 1836, and eventually 400,000 people used the route.

At 7,412 feet above sea level, the pass is the only practical wagon route in the 2,000 miles of the Rocky Mountains. The 35-mile pass leads across an arid landlocked basin, but is short enough and there is enough water for horses and oxen.

The Great Divide Basin directly south is a more direct route. But the lack of water made it impassible until the railroad and automobile arrived. The railroad mainline and Interstate 80 now take this southern route.

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