The Search for the Welsh Indians

By Rick Hull

Lewis and Clark first met the Flathead Indians on Sept. 4, 1805, in Ross's Hole, south of of present-day Darby, Montana. The band of four hundred were friendly and generous, and furnished the horses the expedition so desperately needed at a fair price.

A dramatic painting by Charlie Russell captures the meeting. Measuring nearly 25 by 12 feet, the oil painting is the backdrop for the House of Representatives in the Montana Capitol building.

But as the two groups struggled with communications through a young Shoshone translator, Meriwether Lewis took careful notes. Could this guttural language have Welsh roots? And had he finally found the Welsh Indians that haunted American history for centuries?

In organizing the expedition, President Thomas Jefferson gave Lewis several additional goals. One was to look for elephants. After all, mastodon bones been found for years in the U.S.

Another goal was to find the Welsh Indians.

The story had its roots seven hundred years before, when Wales was still an independent county. It revolved around Madoc, the son of famed Welsh king Owain Gwynedd. According to the myth, a succession fight broke out after Gwynedd's death. Discouraged by the family strife, Madoc organized an expedition to explore the Atlantic.

Supposedly in 1170 he discovered North America and about 100 men, women and children were left to found a colony. Madoc returned to Wales to recruit more settlers. The second expedition supposedly headed west, only to vanish into history.

Madoc's story originally survived only in folklore and brief mentions in poems. But when Columbus actually discovered the New World, the tale suddenly took off. Published accounts in the late 1500s used the tale to support claims the English had beaten the Spanish to America.

Soon the story evolved into speculation that the Welsh settlers had intermarried with local tribes, and their remnants still existed somewhere in North America. The search soon rivaled the lost Roanoke Colony as part of American folklore.

In 1608 an English expedition was convinced it had found Welsh-speaking Indians in the James River in Virginia. And there was the story of Reverend Morgan Jones, who swore he had been captured by a tribe in North Carolina in 1669 and saved himself by conversing in Welsh.

A rock formation along the Ohio River near Louisville, Kentucky, was rumored to be the site of a fortress built by Madoc. There is a similar story about a rock formation on Fort Mountain in northwest Georgia, while Alabama has its Welsh caves in DeSoto State Park.

A prime candidate for Welsh ancestry were the Mandan Indians. The light-skinned tribe live in North Dakota. German explorer Prince Maximilian prepared a comparison of Welsh and Mandan words in the 1830s in search of a connection. Famed frontier painter George Catlin also supported a Welsh heritage for the tribe.

As tribe after tribe were eliminated, the story faded. But it has never really gone away.

In 1953 the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a plaque in Mobile Bay, Alabama, in memory of Madoc who landed there in 1170. The plaque was removed, but there is talk of bringing it back.

Whitefish-born author Anna Lee Waldo tried followed up her blockbuster success of the novel *Sacajawea* with *Circle of Stone* (1999) and *Circle of Stars* (2001) about a Welsh prince in pre-Columbian America.

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