

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 22, 2018

The MacKenzie Expedition: In 2004-2006, we celebrated the Bicentennial of the Voyage of Discovery by Lewis and Clark, the first citizens of the new United States to lead a group of 33 men overland to the Pacific Ocean. President Jefferson selected Meriwether Lewis, a 29-year-old Virginian, to head the expedition and gave him explicit instructions to learn about the flora and fauna and the Indian tribes that inhabited the vast region known as the Louisiana Purchase that he had bought from France for \$3 million. Lewis requested that 33-year-old William Clark be his assistant on this treacherous journey, which began from Wood River, Illinois, in the summer of 1804 and ended at St. Louis in late summer of 1806. Thirty-three men took part in the adventure, and only one lost his life (from ruptured appendix). Many Americans since that time have marveled at the achievements of Lewis and Clark, celebrated especially during the bicentennial years. Ruth and I took a Lewis and Clark cruise on the Columbia and Snake Rivers in 2000 and visited many of the Yellowstone and Missouri River sites and as far west as Missoula, Montana, in 2004.

Often overlooked is the MacKenzie expedition across western Canada, which reached the Pacific in the summer of 1793, 12 years before Lewis and Clark. I remember well the model in the former Hillendale Museum depicting this party in the Canadian Rockies. Alexander MacKenzie was a prosperous fur trader who had been born in Scotland in 1764 and had come to New York with his father at the age of 10. Being loyal British subjects, they moved to Montreal when the American Revolution broke out in 1775. He became involved in the lucrative fur trade, which depended on remote forts and trading posts and friendly relationships with the Native Americans. From an outpost on Lake Athabaska and knowledge of nearby Great Slave Lake, MacKenzie attempted to find an overland route to the Pacific in 1789 but followed a river, which later bore his name, that dumped into the Arctic Ocean instead of the Pacific. Disappointed but not defeated, he returned to England to learn more about navigation and started out again in October 1792 with 10 men and a single canoe 26 feet long built for the purpose.

Moving southwestward, they set up winter camp on the bank of the Peace River, just east of the main range of the Rockies. Leaving there in May 1793 and attempting to follow the Peace River Gorge through the mountains, rapids and dashing falls tore up the canoe and required long portages. Most of the Indians were very friendly and had heard of the great Pacific Ocean but had never seen it. In some cases, Indians were taken along as guides, but they were afraid of the coastal Indians who were known to be fierce and warlike. The valley of the Fraser River was reached, probably 300 miles north of present-day Vancouver, but it was full of rapids and falls and had to be abandoned for a better route. Attempts were made to cross the Coastal Range with its peaks 15,000 feet and more above sea level. Finally, a short but somewhat navigable river brought them to the Pacific at Bella Coola, over 100 miles north of Vancouver.

As mentioned, most of the Indian tribes were friendly and helpful, but this was not the case with those who lived along the coast. They were warlike, and other tribes lived in fear of them. Some thought it was because of the ill treatment they had received from Captain George Vancouver, who explored the west coast for Great Britain a few months before MacKenzie arrived. When the latter and his party were at the coast, they were uneasy and fearful, so they didn't stay long, and returned over the trails they had used in reaching their destination. Within three or four weeks, they were back at Great Slave Lake or Fort Athabaska. They had covered about 2,000 miles, most of it in about 120 days. (Lewis and Clark, with 33 men instead of 10, covered about 6,000 miles in just over 2 years.) MacKenzie's exact route was never followed again.

Alexander MacKenzie was a leader and had a strong physique. He was not defeated easily. Still a young man, he gave up life as a fur trader and eventually returned to Scotland, where he was knighted by King George III and died in 1820 at the age of 56.