

HISTORICAL

Lewis and Clark, Pioneering Rangeland Managers?

By Richard H. Hart

Two hundred years ago, the “Corps of Discovery,” as the expedition led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark was formally known, was well into the Northern Great Plains. They were not the first Euro-Americans to enter this region. Henry Kelsey had been on the Saskatchewan River in 1690 or 1691 and described his travels in verse of awkward rhyme and worse meter.¹ Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye, reached the Mandan villages on the Missouri River in 1738. His sons, Louis-Joseph and François, traveled up the Missouri from the villages in 1742 and 1743, reaching the mouth of the Teton River.² DeVoto describes several other explorations of the Northern Plains before 1800.³ Representatives of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company had been trading with the Mandan villages for decades before the appearance of Lewis and Clark,³ and several had left journals.⁴ However, none of them showed any interest in the agricultural or stock-raising potential of the Plains.

Curiously, neither did Lewis and Clark. Their primary objective was to discover the shortest route between the headwaters of the Missouri and Columbia rivers. They were also to determine the northernmost reach of the Missouri drainage; to assert American sovereignty over the West and proclaim American authority over its Indian tribes and British traders; and to add to the knowledge of the plants and animals, weather, seasons, and natural wealth of the region. Although this knowledge might be of use in establishing agriculture in the West, this objective was not stated specifically.

In their journals, Lewis and Clark^{5,6} continually express astonishment at the immense herds of grazing animals on the Northern Plains. On April 22, 1805, Lewis described “immense herds of Buffaloe, Elk, deer, & Antelopes feeding in one common and boundless pasture”⁶ near the present Williston, North Dakota (p. 60). On August 29, 1806, near the mouth of White River, Clark wrote: “I had a view of a greater number of buffalow than I had ever seen before at one time. I must have seen near 20,000” (p. 238).⁶

However, neither Lewis nor Clark made the connection that rangeland that could support such masses of bison could

also support large numbers of domestic livestock. On the other hand, Steven Long⁷ and John C. Fremont⁸ concluded that, although the Great Plains were unfit for crop agriculture, they were excellent grazing lands. However, Lewis and Clark’s sighting of large numbers of bison nearly every day and of bison on 19 of the 29 days they spent near the Great Falls of the Missouri casts doubt on the regular migration of bison and the rationale for rotational grazing.⁹

Although they frequently mentioned woody vegetation and the more showy forbs, Lewis and Clark rarely mentioned grass in general, and never, as far as I could find, mentioned a particular species of grass. Perhaps they viewed grass as outside the plant kingdom, as Fremont⁸ apparently did when he recorded “. . . hunting plants among the grass” (p. 33). Lewis did complain about the abundance of prickly pear: “The prickly pear is now in full blume and forms one of the beauties as well as the greatest pests of the plains” (p. 383).⁶

Although Lewis and Clark were truly pioneering naturalists,¹⁰ we must conclude they were not pioneering rangeland managers. This is not so strange, considering that our profession is a relatively new one; the Society for Range Management is 60 years old.

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