

III. Main Event Salted

Because books, whether print or electronic, matter is why I continue with the Lewis and Clark Expedition story, born of Thomas Jefferson's mind and library.

The diet of the members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition Corps of Discovery consisted of a great deal of game meat. The narrative of the Expedition, as told by Elliot Coues in three day-by-day journal volumes (see below), leaves the reader with a clear impression concerning the very high importance of game to the sustenance of the Corps. Flour, portable soup, pork, parched meal and dried apples carried from the east were kept in reserve as much as possible. In periods of game scarcity west of the Continental Divide, the explorers ate root and fish substitutes obtained by trade from the Indians; there were unpleasant bodily consequences.

It is very highly probable that the members of Jefferson's Lewis and Clark Expedition Corps used salt, when they had it, to prepare jerked meat, its use this way being a practice even today. Salt helps to extract water from bacteria through bacterial cell membrane walls, as a result of an osmotic gradient between the food and bacterial cells. The bacteria are thus dried out and killed. Jerked game meat was prepared by the Corps by drying it in the sun, and, under the rainy conditions of Fort Clatsop, the westward-most wintering-over refuge near modern-day Astoria, Oregon on the Pacific coast, by smoking.

The Corps was out of salt at Fort Clatsop and a long way from a previously cached supply at Great Falls, Montana, on the Missouri River. Thus, the captains made salt-making a priority. They assigned five men, nearly 1/6 of the Corps, to the task of evaporating seawater in a small manufactory to make a fresh supply. This was done with five large kettles, at an average rate of three to four quarts of salt daily. The output was ample for those of the Corps who preferred meat with salt; taste seemed to have been as much an issue as preservation of the meat, but perhaps the two are closely related matters. The off-taste of lightly tainted meat can be masked with salt, and the precious meat thereby salvaged. Twenty gallons of seawater salt were accumulated eventually at Fort Clatsop, of which 12 were set aside in kegs for the return journey.

There was another, more science-oriented, use for salt; that was to preserve animal specimens for transport back to the east coast of North America to the attention of Mr. Thomas Jefferson. A preserved badger may have been the first zoological specimen on which Lewis practiced taxidermy. Whether or not he used Jefferson's method for preservation, it is Jefferson's prescription that comes down to us for the preparation of a bird skin: "Make a small incision between the legs of the bird: take out the entrails & eyes, wipe the inside & with a quill force a passage through the throat into the body that the ingredients may find a way into the stomach & so pass off through the mouth. fill the bird with a composition of 2/3 common salt & 1/3 nitre pounded in a mortar with two tablespoonfuls of black or Indian pepper to a pound, hang it up by its legs 8 or 10

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weeks, & if the bird be small it will be sufficiently preserved in that time. if it be large, the process is the same, but greater attention will be necessary.”

The Main Event required such attention to detail and science. It is recounted in these books from which I have been drawing: (1) DeLong, Deanna, “How to Dry Foods,” Tucson, AZ: H.P. Books (1979); (2) Coues, Elliott, ed., “The History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,” Vol. I - III, New York: Dover Publications (1987 reprint of Francis P. Harper’s unabridged 1893 edition); (3) Ambrose, Stephen E., “Undaunted Courage,” New York: Simon & Schuster (1996); (4) Cutright, Paul Russell, “Lewis & Clark: Pioneering Naturalists, Lincoln,” NB: University of Nebraska Press (1989).

You don’t need to go to Monticello for them, just to the WLN’s on-line catalogue. All four books can be delivered to you at Murrysville Community Library or any of our 23 WLN Libraries!

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