

More than 200 years ago, in 1804, two explorers made an important journey. They were named Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Today, people know a lot about the places they visited, but 200 years ago there were no maps of that part of the United States. They would travel by boat most of the way and they would make the first maps of that part of our country. They were going to trace where a great river went. The river they were mapping is a very big one called the Missouri River. They wanted to find out where it went. They hoped it would take them to the ocean.

They took many people with them to help with the exploration. There were more than 40 people on the trip. They also carried many supplies, including a lot of food. They hoped they would find food along the way, but this was long ago and they did not know what the territory would be like. The explorers had three boats to carry them and their supplies. It was summer when they started on this long trip.

They traveled slowly, each day traveling a short distance because they had to row their boats on the river. They would only travel a few miles every day. They traveled for months and were still far from their destination. In winter it was difficult to travel, so they camped along the river. There they would wait for spring when traveling would be easier. Snow and ice made it very hard to travel in winter.

Native Americans helped them along the way. They helped them get food, and they showed them where places were. The explorers had never been to this area before, so they were not sure where to find food or even where the river went. The Native Americans had lived there for many years, so they knew the area and how to survive there, even in the hard winter.

A Native American woman named Sacajawea helped them travel. She became their guide, and she traveled with them for months. It was hard work for everyone, including Sacajawea. The explorers needed her help to find their way to the West. They wanted to find out how to get to the ocean.

As they traveled, they made maps. Their maps showed the way the river went. It passed through grasslands, and then they were in mountains. When they got to the mountains, they had to leave their boats and walk.

It took more than a year for the explorers to get to the ocean. When they got there they had made maps that would help many people. But they had to bring the maps back. It had taken more than a year to make this first part of the trip. It also took a long time to get back. When the explorers came back, in 1806, they had been gone two years, and people said they were heroes. They would not make such a great journey again. They had done their job.

Their maps would help people settle in the new land. Long after their trip, people would build roads to the west. They would travel quickly by car. Today people can travel their route by plane. If you look out the window from the plane you will see those high mountains, you will see what a difficult journey it was.