

Here, in *The Lewis and Clark Expedition: Then and Now*, are collected for the first time the best papers on the Lewis and Clark Expedition presented at the Dakota Conference on Northern Plains History, Literature, Art, and Archaeology, held annually at Augustana College. Selected and arranged by Dr. David Kvernes, of Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, these eighteen papers treat a range of issues relating to the journey of the Corps of Discovery. The section *Then: The Journey Begins* examines Don Alonso Decalves' imaginary 1786-87 exploration of the West, Perrin du Lac's 1802 journey up the Missouri River, pragmatic-aesthetic tension and imperialistic rhetoric in the journals, medical and sexual challenges, Sioux honoring and gift-giving practices, Trans-Mississippi Indian trade, and President Jefferson's expectations.



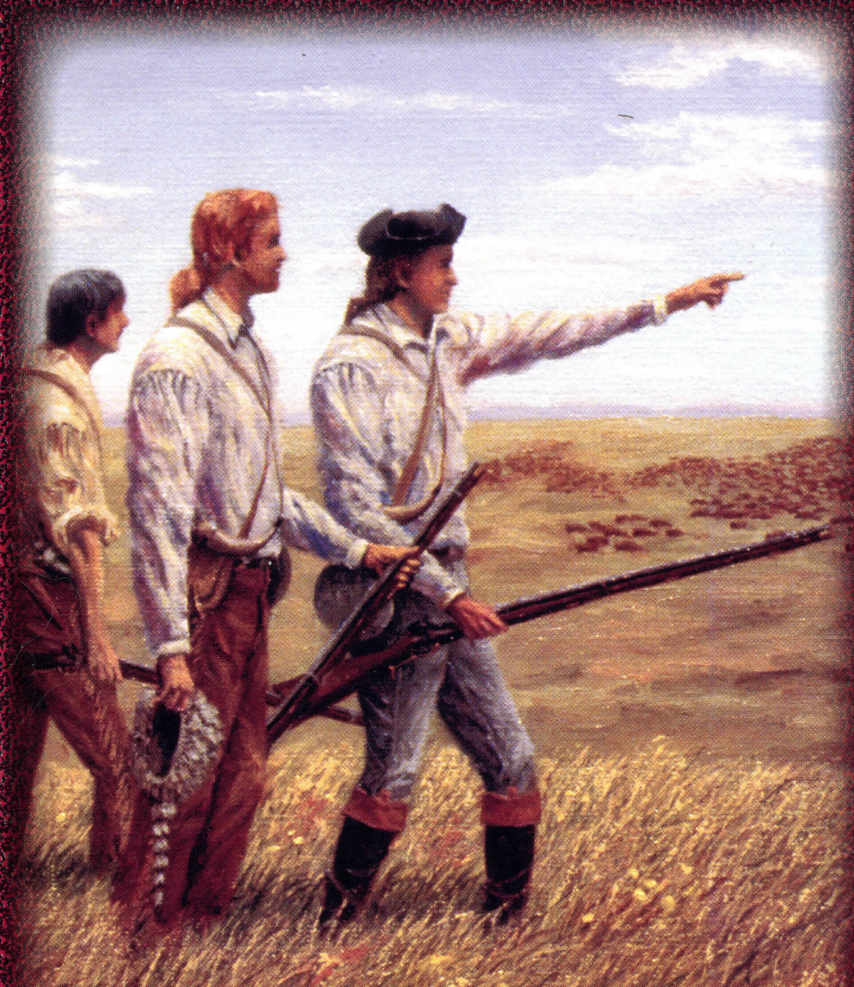
The section Now:

Contemporary Controversies and Critical Approaches considers the DeSomet

paternity claim against Meriwether Lewis, the murder-suicide debate surrounding Lewis's death, the myth of Sacagawea, the rediscovery of the Lewis and Clark story in the twentieth century, Bernard DeVoto's legacy, Lewis and Clark as harbingers of colonialism, and Fort Mandan and Spirit Mound today.



The Center for Western Studies
Augustana College
Sioux Falls, South Dakota



The Lewis and Clark Expedition Then and Now

Edited by David Kvernes

Spirit Mound After Lewis and Clark

Kent Scribner

Two hundred years ago, on August 25, 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with Lewis's dog and eleven other members of their Corps of Discovery, spent the day on a detour from the tedium of the Missouri River. They were determined to investigate a legendary natural landmark in what is now Clay County, South Dakota. Hiking seven miles north and generally following the Vermillion River, then known as the White Stone, the party in due time reached their goal, the prominence we know today as Spirit Mound.

Up to this point in their journey Lewis and Clark had not ventured very far from their river highway, but they chose this place out of curiosity from what Indians and perhaps fur traders had apparently told them as they were coming upriver. Clark wrote on August 24, "...this hill...by all the different Nations in this quater is Supposed to be a place of Deavels or that they are in human form with remarkable large heads and about 18 inches high; that they are watchfull and ar armed with Sharp arrows with which they can kill at great distance; they are said to kill all persons who are so hardy as to attempt to approach the hill."

August 25 was a very hot summer day, and the dog, Seaman, suffering from the heat, had to be sent back to the Vermillion River for water. Despite rumors of danger, the men approached the hill and climbed to the summit, which they estimated to be about seventy feet above the surrounding plain and of natural origin, not man-made. They also noted the abundance of insects near the top, which attracted great flocks of swallows, and the captains speculated that it was the birds that gave the mound its air of mystery.

Lewis and Clark did not see any devils in human form, but they were deeply impressed with the view from Spirit Mound. Clark wrote, "From the top of this Mound we beheld a most butifull landscape; Numerous herds of buffalo were Seen feeding in various directions, the Plain to North N. W & NE extends without interruption as far as Can be seen." He also described the birds and other life they saw and the variety of wild fruit. Uncomfortable from heat and thirst, the Corps members made a beeline east to the Vermillion River, rested, and returned to their pirogue on the Missouri River to rejoin their colleagues and prepare for the next day's journey. Before his day ended, however, Clark drew a map labeling the place they had visited the "Hill of Little Devils."

The above can serve as a backdrop, but it is not my intent here to add to the Lewis and Clark literature of August 1804. It is my intent to survey the subject, "Spirit Mound after Lewis and Clark." "After" begins in September 1806 as they passed the Sioux River on their return trip downriver to St. Louis.

The 1806-to-2004 span can be roughly divided into fifty-year segments. The first of these is the *Era of Indians and Fur Traders*. Native Americans, of course, had lived within sight of Spirit Mound for decades, even centuries. During and after the Lewis and Clark years, these lands were controlled by the Yankton Sioux, whose main village was near the mouth of the James River at present-day Yankton. A smaller community, comprising about 100 lodges, was located near the mouth of the Vermillion River at present-day Vermillion. This latter village, in particular, would have hunted in the Spirit Mound area, but, we are to understand, avoided the mound itself.

Fur traders, however, were relative newcomers to the Upper Missouri. Only two days south of the Sioux River en route home, Lewis and Clark met a trading boat belonging to Auguste Chouteau, who, with several men, was on his way north to trade with the Yanktons. As the Corps neared St. Louis they met other parties of traders preparing to engage the Omahas, Pawnees, and Yanktons in trading beaver furs for all manner of goods prized by the tribes.

It is estimated that during this era up to one hundred fur-trading posts were operating at one time or another in present-day South Dakota. Three of them were at or near the mouth of the Vermillion River, the most substantial of which was the American Fur Company's Fort Vermillion slightly downriver near where Burbank is now. It is easy to envision Yankton Sioux plying the lower Vermillion River and a tributary such as Clay Creek, both within three miles of Spirit Mound, in search of beavers to supply the nearby posts.

Fur traders were not the only newcomers to visit the Lower Vermillion Valley during these times. Father Pierre DeSmet visited the mouth of the river in May of 1839 to secure a pledge from the Yanktons to desist from attacks on Pottawatami bands downriver. John James Audubon reported in his journal a stop at Fort Vermillion in 1843, including some hunting in the area, on his way upriver to Fort Union in present-day North Dakota to complete scientific studies for a book on quadrupeds. Fort Vermillion was also the site of a sizeable Mormon camp from the summer of 1845 to the spring of 1846, when the party received instructions to join the main body of Mormons in Omaha for its westward trek to present-day Utah.

By this time fur trading among the Yankton Sioux and elsewhere was on the wane, brought to decline by a fashion change in men's hats among Easterners and Europeans. Fort Vermillion closed in 1850, signaling the end of an era in what is now southeastern South Dakota.

The decade of the 1850s began for the Lower Vermillion Valley what I will call the *Era of Homesteaders and Community Builders*. Considerable settlement had already occurred in northwest Iowa, and nearby Sioux City was bustling. Minnesota became a state in 1858. Opening the land west of the Big Sioux River for settlers was facilitated by a treaty with the Yankton Sioux ratified by Congress in February of 1859. The tribe agreed to withdraw to a reservation in what is now Charles Mix County, ceding the rest of their lands to the whites for \$1.6 million. The departure of the Yanktons for their new homes on July 10 of that year marks the official opening of the future Clay County for settlement. We can only wonder what the tribal members who had called the Vermillion valley home for many years must have thought on leaving such a natural wonderland behind, Spirit Mound included.

A small land rush occurred after July 10 as hopefuls who had gathered along the Nebraska side of the Missouri moved across the river. Vermillion, Yankton, and other towns were quickly established, and nearby farmland was claimed. A movement began almost immediately to obtain Congressional approval for a territorial government. Success came on March 2, 1861, when President James Buchanan, two days before Abraham Lincoln succeeded him, signed the bill creating Dakota Territory. Clay County was formed the next month, with Vermillion as its county seat.

Early in 1862 the territorial capital was officially located at Yankton, and the territorial university was placed in Vermillion, although no funds were appropriated for the latter. Later that year unrest among the Santee Sioux in Minnesota resulted in an uprising that spilled over into Dakota Territory, causing settlers in and around Sioux Falls and Vermillion to flee to Yankton or Sioux City for strength in numbers.

The Homestead Act passed by Congress in 1862, effective the following January 1, was the catalyst for waves of immigration into what is now southeastern South Dakota over the next two decades. Early on, moderating influences slowed settlement: a Civil War in progress until 1865, bad grasshopper years, and intense competition from other areas for land seekers. Conditions improved markedly by 1868, when the Laramie Treaty stabilized conditions along and west of the Missouri River. That same year the railroad reached Sioux City, and the next five years saw the greatest increase in homesteading in and around Clay County.

In the spring of 1868 Nathan Hixson filed a claim in Spirit Mound Township, including a portion of the Mound itself. Besides breaking the sod and otherwise doing what was necessary to maintain his claim under the Homestead Act, he was hired as the construction supervisor for Clay County's first gristmill. It was located along the Vermillion River at the nearby Bloomingdale settlement.

Jonathan and Hannah Kimball and their five children soon arrived in the township from Illinois. Kimball also secured employment at the Bloomingdale mill. His son Charles related many years later that fish, mostly buffalo and carp caught in the mill's nets, were on the Kimball dinner table every day. He also said the family's substitute for coffee was "scorched barley." Charles often climbed Spirit Mound as a boy and recalled in particular the north view, where only one tree could be seen all the way to the far horizon.

In the fall of 1868 brothers Peter and John Cleland from Wisconsin settled near the Kimballs. Peter was a Civil War veteran who had marched across Georgia with Sherman. On June 20, 1869, he wrote a letter to his sister, Belle, back home, saying in part:

John has commenced to draw lumber for his house and when we get that built would like to have you come and make us a visit. Would ask you to come now, but haven't but one bed and no room for another one. I beg of you don't come until we get it built. You won't, will you? You can tell Nettie that we would like to have her come then, too, if she thought Joe would not care, but don't want him to come for there is too many men here now. All we want in this county is oxen and women.

By 1872 the railroad reached Vermillion, and the next year two stage lines began service past Spirit Mound up the river valley to points north. The national depression known as the Panic of 1873 and some bad grasshopper years in the mid-'70s quieted homesteading fervor, but by that time most of the government land in Clay County was claimed.

Times were hard, but community building continued apace. Five schools were begun during the 1870s in Spirit Mound Township, one of which, the Spirit Mound School, was across the road from the west slope of the Mound. The Sunday School movement sweeping the country hit Spirit Mound Township in 1869, and church-building soon followed. Four denominations built in Spirit Mound Township—Baptists, Norwegian Lutherans, Methodists, and the United Brethren—while others appeared in nearby townships. The Spirit Mound Baptist Church just northwest of the Mound, when abandoned some years later, became the township hall for many years.

The 1880s and '90s brought more prosperous times, and life styles expanded. Spirit Mound Township was formally organized in 1881. The same year Nathan Hixson proved up on his claim to the land that included Spirit Mound and gained title to the quarter section. Also, after twenty years of being a school on paper only, the territorial university finally began classes in 1882 in the Clay County courthouse. The people of Spirit Mound Township were among the jurisdictions voting favorably on bonds to help build the first building on the new campus, University Hall, now called Old Main, which opened in 1883.

A quick listing of leisure activities which became commonplace in these decades demonstrates that folks then were beginning to mix pleasure with their hard work: fishing, boating, ice skating, gun clubs (including one in Spirit Mound Township), lyceum courses, literary societies, debating societies (one of these in the Township, too), fraternal organizations, temperance societies, community bands, drum and bugle corps, drama groups, circuses, ventriloquists, lecturers, even intercollegiate baseball and football at the University by 1889.

The most important happening in 1889, of course, was the long-awaited statehood for South Dakota on November 2. Now all of the governmental, economic, and social institutions were in place. Thus the turn of the century marks a convenient close to the Era of Homesteaders and Community Builders.

The first half of the 1900s was ushered in by at least fifteen years of what some historians have termed the Golden Age of Agriculture. It is important for an observer of Spirit Mound Township to know that this entity has always been completely rural. No incorporated town was founded within these 36 square miles. Only one mile of railroad penetrated, the Vermillion-Yankton line in the far southwest section, and no U.S. highway and no interstate highway have ever been part of the township.

Thus, manifestations of rural progress have been "big news" in this enclave. While we will call this fifty years the *Era of Economic Extremes and Foreign Wars*, during the first segment prosperity was arguably the norm. Spirit Mound Township is blessed with highly arable land. The map shows us that over one-third of the sections are in the rich Missouri River plain. Farmers in this sector fought for and won a huge 1908-1910 project to reclaim thousands of acres of marginal wetlands along Clay Creek, which was channeled into a sixteen-mile canal. The new century's first decade also brought into Clay County extension of the nation's rural free delivery postal system and its first rural telephone lines. Most important, the country's stable farm economy, shared by South Dakota, prospered as a sharply expanded urban population increased the domestic market for farm products.

Once America entered the Great War, Spirit Mound Township furnished its sons to the armed services abroad and responded well on the "home front." By now the Alexander C. McDonald family had come into ownership of the quarter section of land which includes the peak of Spirit Mound, having purchased it from the Hixson family in 1908. The Mound was now destined to shed almost 120 years of relative obscurity as a historical treasure, thanks to the teamwork of Doane Robinson, noted state historian of the time, and the Vermillion chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.). In December of 1921, as part of a statewide D.A.R. focus on marking significant historic sites, the Vermillion ladies contracted for a huge granite boulder faced

with a lettered eleven-by-fourteen inch bronze plate to be placed on top of Spirit Mound. Alexander McDonald's son Vergil, whose family resided in the adjacent home, used his team of horses and his stone boat, fittingly, to haul the unusual load to the top. This monument, despite erosion around it, crowned Spirit Mound until recently.

Vergil's daughter, Laura Lou McDonald Marsh, who now lives with members of her family near Hartington, Nebraska, was born two years later in the north slope house. She has shared with me memories of her childhood in the shadow of this Lewis and Clark landmark. Here are some of her recollections:

- I remember picking wild flowers on the Mound—a cactus-type plant with dull gray leaves and large white or ivory blossoms that opened only at night—sweet aroma—“snow on the mountain” plants.
- Grass flowers with pastel colors were picked on the native west slope, but there was not a lot of vegetation because of the chalk rock formations and the extreme drought during my childhood years in the 1930s.
- I remember the awful winter of 1936-37—continuous storms from November to March. Roads were constantly blocked and temperatures were sub-zero for days. My father walked across fields with my teacher (who lived with us) and me to see that we reached school safely.
- The heat was equally awful in the summer. Huge green and yellow grasshoppers hung solidly on fence posts so thick the posts were half again their usual diameter. They ate our corn to stubs, as if a mower had gone across the fields. Mother would hang clothes on the line and stand there with a dish towel fanning it to keep the hoppers from eating holes in the sheets and clothing.
- Sledding on the Mound during the winter was a favorite pastime of kids in the neighborhood.
- My friends and cousins and I loved to go to the top of the Mound and check on the covered pipe embedded in the ground. Visitors to the Mound put names, dates and addresses in it—yes, there were some tourists even in the “Dirty Thirties.”

From this point I will “fast forward” through this era. Farm relief and crop management programs under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's tutelage helped rural America turn the corner. The most important of these may have been the Rural Electrification Administration (R.E.A), whose lines first entered Clay County in 1937. The next year highway crews began a project near and dear to Spirit Mound folks, the grading and first gravel on South Dakota Highway 19 north and south through the township. This brought a modern farm-to-market road for the first time to the very slope of the Mound, while at the same time making the site more accessible to visitors. By the time the Depression had run its course, the United States became involved in World War II. Improved economic conditions during and immediately after

the war allowed farmers to reduce their indebtedness and build up financial reserves. Thus, the curtain closes in 1950 on our Era of Economic Extremes and Foreign Wars.

The most recent half century, among all the fifty-year segments since 1806, is obviously the most familiar to area residents in 2004. I call it the *Era of Consolidation and Technology*. Here we will narrow our focus to Spirit Mound Township as an example of changes ringing through rural America.

The population of the township by the 1990 census had fallen to 194, or less than half the 1950 figure. None of the township's four houses of worship even survived into this era, having closed or merged prior to World War II. While four of the five one-room schools survived beyond 1950, none made it to 1970 before consolidating with larger districts nearby. Construction during the 1960s of Interstate Highway 29 just eight miles east and parallel to Highway 19, coupled with the widening of South Dakota Highway 50 to four lanes between I-29 and Yankton, changed traffic and living patterns in nearby rural townships like Spirit Mound. It was now easier to commute to the larger population centers for work, shopping, and entertainment. Some farm families even began to move to the towns and drive back to the home place to work the land or tend the livestock.

What is far and away Spirit Mound Township's largest piece of construction, East River Electric Power Cooperative's Spirit Mound generating plant, went on line on a multi-acre site two miles northwest of the Mound in 1978. This imposing facility now competes with the Mound itself for “skyline” honors in the township. An important construction project of a different nature also occurred during the '70s, when the Clay County Rural Water System spread its lines throughout the area.

This decade was significant to Spirit Mound for yet another reason: fledgling efforts began to preserve the Mound site as a public landmark to honor its significance to Native Americans and its importance in the Lewis and Clark story. Local historians spearheaded a move in 1974 to add Spirit Mound to the National Register of Historic Places. After the mid-1980s, efforts to preserve the Mound were led by the small but devoted Lewis & Clark-Spirit Mound Trust, a non-profit organization that doggedly called attention to the deteriorating hill and its importance as a historic site. The Trust organization has been aided strategically in recent years by both local and national attention building up to the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition from 2003 to 2006.

Since the arrival of the first homesteaders, ownership of the Mound and its slopes has been in private hands. All four of the principal landowning families in the late 1990s were proud of the historical significance of their property. Each was, in terms of the realty business, a willing seller. They were also anxious to have Spirit Mound restored as much as possible to its condition at

the time the Lewis and Clark party climbed it in 1804. Everyone familiar with the site knew that restoration would not be easy, given the numerous incursions on the site brought about mainly by farming practices over some 130 years. However, fortune smiled: a six-acre tract on the west slope, while having been grazed, has never been plowed. The considerable flora and fauna of this prairie remnant were inventoried, and this information and other research helped facilitate restoration planning.

Fortune also smiled in October of 1998 when United States Senator Tim Johnson, who has roots in rural Clay County and whose official voting residence is Vermillion, was able to obtain authorization in Congress for federal funds to purchase the 320-acre site. By March of 2000 additional legislation had passed both houses of Congress and was signed by the President to transfer the federal land purchase funds to the State of South Dakota once an acceptable plan was drawn up by the state for preservation and management of the site.

At the same time Congress was getting involved, South Dakota Governor Bill Janklow was also seeing the merits of preserving Spirit Mound in a more natural environment. In the summer of 2000 the state approved a grant for the restoration, at the same time as an agreement was being reached among the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks; the National Park Service, and the Spirit Mound Trust to move forward with the project. Game, Fish and Parks became the principal coordinating agency for the restoration, and the National Park Service, the South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation, and the South Dakota Department of Transportation are principal partners in planning and funding the project.

Agreements were reached with the landowners during the winter of 2000-2001, and restoration work began in the spring of 2001. Buildings, fences, driveways, and trees were removed. Prairie grasses and other native plants were reestablished through a massive seeding and planting project over at least three years. About forty species were reintroduced to the half section by way of 2,500 pounds of native grass seeds and 6,000 plugs on the more difficult east slope. Decent rainfall enhanced the efforts, but the visitor to the Mound needs to be reminded that prairies were created over time and that it will take many years before Spirit Mound begins to replicate what it was in 1804.

Part of a grove of large trees on the southeast corner of the site was retained as a shade anchor for a small parking lot and day-use area adjacent to Highway 19. Visitors find restrooms, a drinking fountain, and picnic tables available for their use. An interpretive kiosk is located at the start of a three-quarter mile, recycled-asphalt trail that leads across Spirit Mound Creek and up to the summit of the Mound. The relatively simple visitor services were intended in part to forestall obtrusive incursions at the small 320-acre site.

Those visitors who want more information are directed to the Lewis and Clark Learning Center at the W.H. Over Museum in Vermillion. Ample food and lodging services are also available in this university town. Major improvements to Highway 19 complemented the overall Spirit Mound plan. From Highway 50 at the northwest corner of Vermillion, "Nineteen" has been widened and otherwise modernized. This project also added a new enhancement: a bicycle trail that will generate non-motorized traffic along the attractive seven miles from town to the Mound.

Thus, the Spirit Mound Historic Prairie, as the restoration has officially been named, is ready for the many thousands of visitors expected annually at sites from St. Louis to the Pacific during the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial years and beyond.

It is important that guests experience three elements of the restored Mound. First, it will represent the vast prairies of mid-America before pioneer settlement. Second, it serves as a reminder of the many years the native peoples called this area home, including the final residents, the Yankton Sioux, many of whom now reside on a reservation eighty-five miles west. Finally, the Mound hosted the small, curious Lewis and Clark party on one hot summer day in 1804. The vagaries of nature along the Expedition's trail have wiped away evidence of most campsites and other places they visited, but we know they stood here, marveling at the birds and the buffalo and the vastness of the land they were about to enter.

And what about Spirit Mound Township, until now among the most typical of American rural township communities? Its role will change during the twenty-first century. A nation is about to rediscover an important place in our Native American tradition as well as a true Lewis and Clark landmark deep in the heart of Clay County, South Dakota. The next fifty years—let's call it the *Era of National Rediscovery*—is now dawning at Spirit Mound, two hundred years after Meriwether Lewis and William Clark left their imprint forever on this simple prairie hill.