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Lewis and Clark...and Beer

Richard Jarman

Some things one never forgets; they range from events of great historical import to fleeting moments of ridiculous triviality. Quite why we remember all this rubbish is probably yet to be fully explained by psychoanalysis, but in the meantime these things linger, popping up at occasional unforeseen moments in the forefront of one's mind. I recall with vivid intensity, like a drug entering the vein, that moment in 2005 on the patio of The Pub on Bainbridge Island, the first seemingly innocuous sip from a pint of Skagit River IPA. Whether or not the shimmering beauty of Mount Rainier, its massive flanks bathed in the pale fire of the setting sun across Puget Sound, had any influence I cannot say, but the transformation, like that visited upon Saint Paul on the Damascus Road, was intense, instantaneous and irrevocable. Thus was my love affair with real American beer begun.

In the summer of 2008, with petrol prices soaring appropriately, Dulcie proposed the road as an alternative means of access to our traditional Pacific Northwest destination to the ritual of self-abuse formerly known as airline travel. Although the prospect of being locked in isolation with one's partner for several thousand miles was a little daunting, if it meant avoiding the humiliation of removing ones shoes at the snarling behest of the TSA in the name of "safety," I was game. Thus was our Big Beer Adventure born. The TSX's capacious trunk would furnish ample storage for the liquid mementos we would doubtless forage along the way. Our ultimate destination was Portland, known to the cognoscenti as Beervana. Yet between Chicago and Portland lay thousands of miles to navigate and beer to discover. Unbeknownst at the time of our departure, we would learn of weightier things while in pursuit of the amber nectar.

The route to the PNDub is quite straightforward; you basically take the Mannheim road north from Chicago and don't lift till you get to Washington. As the journey unfolded, we noted references to "Lewis and Clark Trail" with increasing frequency. Our voyage of beer discovery had become inextricably linked with that epic crusade into the then undiscovered bourn of the west two hundred years prior. I had heretofore been largely ignorant of all things Lewis and Clark. There had been a fifth grade musical, as badly acted as it was written, and all I recall were two chaps, a boat, and a Native American girl of unpronounceable name.

While Lewis and Clark had forged their journey against the currents of the mighty Missouri in a tiny boat, we found the endless miles of I-94 much easier sledding, although the \$4.40 per gallon was the cause of some discomfort. Our navigation was at all times aided and abetted by Dulcie's reliable Crackberry, the miracles of wireless communication providing instant intelligence as to where to stay, where to dine and where, more importantly, to drink. Lewis and Clark had only dead reckoning and Sacagawea.

In Big Sky country we took shelter in the pleasant university town of Missoula, nestling in the shadow of the Bitterroots, which form a northern promontory of the Rockies. There we made our major discovery, Big Sky IPA, a stunningly hoppy citrus beer. Taking our cue from Lewis and Clark, who recorded in minute detail every piece of flora and fauna they came across, contributing inestimably to the natural science of America in the process, we duly recorded copiously detailed notes of our finds in Beer Advocate.

In Missoula, Highway 12 rises sharply to crest the Bitterroots at the Lolo pass before swooping down some seventy miles alongside the Lochsa until it joins the Snake River at Lewiston (I imagine the giant toilet paper factory that greets one on its eastern edge was a sign of great comfort to our intrepid explorers). The Lolo pass was the last great obstacle facing Lewis and Clark in their journey to the Pacific. These mighty mountains had already squashed any hope of finding a simple passage joining east and west. What took us less than two hours in one of the all-time drives, Dulcie wailing unabashedly with pleasure (I think) beside me, took them sixteen days. Lewis recorded that he was the coldest and wettest he had ever been, beset by unexpected snow in early September. This was inhospitable territory, and largely still is.

By the time we reached Portland, having travelled the length of the Columbia Gorge (a chasm of unsurpassed, moist, craggy beauty), I had become as intrigued by the story of these men as I was about the beer we were thirstily devouring en route. Experiencing at first hand the still formidable lands they had conquered with nothing underscored the magnitude of the achievement. Later I read Undaunted Courage by Stephen Ambrose and watched Ken Burns' breathtakingly beautiful documentary about the Corps of Discovery. I learned more. Meriwether Lewis was a complex, unconventional hero. On the eve of only his 30th birthday, just before ascending the Lolo, on the cusp of completing the greatest voyage of discovery in American history, he penned the following thoughts:

"...I reflected that I had as yet done but little, very little, indeed, to further the hapiness (sic) of the human race, or to advance the information of the succeeding generation. I viewed with regret the many hours I have spent in indolence, and now soarly (sic) feel the want of that information which those hours would have given me had they been judiciously expended. but since they are past and cannot be recalled, I dash from me the gloomy thought, and resolved in future, to redouble my exertions..."

Evidently self-esteem building was not prevalent in the 18th century American education system. Only the extreme life and death challenges presented daily by the voyage seemed to concentrate Lewis' mind sufficiently to keep him from the abyss. Later, despite being lauded with land and status, he did not prosper. Summoned to Washington, alone in a remote wayside inn, he topped himself. I don't remember that from the fifth grade musical. Imagine the uproar if little

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Johnny raised a gun to his head in the final rousing chorus, generous gouts of fake blood sluicing the front rows. We tend to associate our heroes with superhuman perfection; but, while I am not condoning self-slaughter, I find encouragement in the fact that greatness can be achieved despite the afflictions of the very human failings of self-doubt, uncertainty and fear.