

These days, you can fly across the United States in six hours. But imagine what it would have been like two hundred years ago, when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark travelled 3,700 miles from Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean in non-motorized boats, on horseback, and on foot. Not only did they have no cars or airplanes to travel in, they also had to do it with no reliable map.

The expedition started from St. Louis, where Missouri empties into the Mississippi, on May 14, 1804. Along the way, Clark carefully mapped the route, while Lewis made scientific observations and collected specimens of animals and plants. The trip was arduous – the men worked outdoors, hunted for food, and rowed the boat up the river, often towing it from the shore when the current got too heavy or the river became difficult to navigate. They fended off huge clouds of mosquitoes that swarmed them. They made only 2 or 14 miles on a good day.

By October, they had reached what is now North Dakota, but they were obviously nowhere near the Missouri's headwaters and winter was at hand. Since little was known about the route beyond the Mandan villages, Lewis and Clark decided to build a fort and spend the winter with the Mandan Indians known for their friendliness and generosity.

During the winter, Lewis and Clark hired a French fur trader, and his wife, a Shoshone woman named Sacagawea, realizing that this woman could help them by acting as interpreter with her people, who lived near the Missouri's headwaters. In the spring, the expedition continued up the river in canoes, taking along Sacagawea, her husband, and their newborn baby, Jean-Baptiste.

The group spent the next months making their way west up the river into territory unknown to white men. They made their way into present-day Montana, and found the river becoming increasingly impassable, with fierce rapids and waterfalls. When they finally reached the area of the Missouri's headwaters, they sought out the Shoshones. As it turned out, Sacagawea's brother was chief of the village they first contacted. With her help, the party obtained the horses they would need to go across the mountains ahead.