In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson charged Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and the Corps of Discovery with exploring the Missouri River and finding a route over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Little was known about the North American interior at the time. The British had mapped the coastline north of San Francisco, and European traders had described some Indian communities, but authoritative knowledge about the “Indian country” was scarce.

The Corps’ interactions with Indian country peoples brought together cultures with very different world views, motivations and expectations. These differences had a direct impact on the historic “Voyage of Discovery,” and continue to resound throughout Indian country and across the United States.
CROSSING THE INDIAN COUNTRY, 1804–1806

The Corps of Discovery set off from Wood River, Illinois, on May 14, 1804. As it traveled west to the Pacific in 1804 and 1805 and returned to St. Louis in 1806, the expedition crossed the traditional homelands of more than 50 Native American tribes. Eager to learn as much as possible about the region’s geography and resources, and often needing directions and fresh supplies, the explorers depended upon assistance from Native Americans. In fact, the expedition would have failed without Native generosity, hospitality and information. For the most part, the people the Corps met were generous and helpful. But the Americans did not always understand what they owed in return.

Indians had their own reasons for establishing relationships with their visitors. Some Native groups felt threatened or excluded by neighboring tribes and saw the explorers as useful allies and trading partners. Tribes who had already established alliances with outsiders were often less welcoming. Although the Corps and Indian people frequently had very different goals for their meetings, encounters between them were successful when both parties appeared to achieve their objectives. Differing perspectives and assumptions, however, often led to misunderstandings.

Upon their return to St. Louis, the members of the Corps of Discovery were viewed as experts on the Indian country. Their journals and maps greatly increased the public’s knowledge of the American West. However, their reports and impressions about the region and its inhabitants left out Indian voices and perspectives and presented a distorted view of Native culture.

A NEW NATION COMES TO THE INDIAN COUNTRY

Little changed in the Indian country in the first years after Lewis and Clark’s journey. But the expedition opened America’s eyes to “The West” and convinced political leaders and entrepreneurs that national expansion was desirable. Settlements increased throughout the region during the next few decades, as traders, miners, ranchers, and farmers rushed westward into what they believed to be uninhabited land. With the coming of the railroads, the transformation of the Indian country was completed.

There was no place for Native Americans in the plans for national expansion. As the new settlers demanded more and more territory, the treaties protecting tribal homelands were repeatedly broken. Mining, homesteading, ranching and the fur trade all undermined the thriving, centuries old institutions of the Indian country. Diseases such as smallpox decimated tribes, and violent encounters between Indians and settlers were common. “Americanization” campaigns, especially at federally regulated schools where only English could be spoken, sought to suppress all aspects of traditional culture. By 1900, Native Americans found it almost impossible to maintain their traditional ways of life.

THE INDIAN COUNTRY TODAY

Today Indian people living in the lands visited by Lewis and Clark belong to two nations. They are Americans who work, pay taxes and send their children to serve in the military. But they are also proud members of tribal nations who are determined to carry on the traditions and values of their cultures.

Members of these communities are finding innovative ways to revitalize and care for the Indian country. For example, tribes along the Columbia River are collaborating to restore and protect the waterways that play such an important role in the lifestyle of the Pacific salmon. In other cases, tribal governments are working with state and federal agencies to implement environmental protection plans for traditional homeland areas that are currently outside of reservation borders.

There are also important innovations taking place in tribal education. The percentage of Native Americans working as teachers in tribal schools has increased dramatically. As a result, Indian-run schools are able to provide a home for preserving and teaching tribal culture and history. Schools such as Nizipuhwahsin “Real Speak” School on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in northwest Montana offer children a complete curriculum in the Blackfeet language. At the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, a community college founded by the Three Affiliated Tribes—Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara—is training community leaders and teachers.

The cultures of the Indian country have survived in spite of the obstacles they have faced since their encounter with the Voyage of Discovery two centuries ago. “We are still here,” Indian people often find themselves repeating.

Related Readings
Ronda, James. Lewis and Clark Among the Indians. (University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

On the Web
http://www.newberry.org/lewisandclark/
The Newberry Library web site for the original exhibition.
http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/
The companion web site to the Ken Burns PBS series, The Journeys of the Corps of Discovery.
http://lewisandclarkjournals.uml.edu/
The journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition web site at the University of Nebraska Lincoln.