

# **Meriwether Lewis, the Naturalist**

**by Ella Mae Howard, member of the Great Falls Garden Club**

As the Lewis and Clark Expedition moved up the Missouri River, the Captains settled into roles which both found to their liking. Meriwether Lewis was best at observing nature and William Clark was best at map making and tracking location. For President Thomas Jefferson, this natural division of duties fulfilled his orders to bring back information about the lands that were to be explored.

Meriwether Lewis had two important teachers in his life. First was his mother, Lucy Meriwether Lewis Marks, an herbalist in Virginia who used vegetable remedies to treat ailing and sick family members and neighbors. Young Meriwether observed his mother in her herbalist practice, and from her, learned to observe natural things for their benefit to mankind. Second, Lewis learned from President Thomas Jefferson. As the president's private secretary, he was exposed to latest scientific theories. Jefferson was one of the country's leading naturalists and the young Lewis was exposed to the importance of natural things.

In addition to what he learned from his mother and Jefferson, Lewis was blessed with the innate ability to see in nature what others could not. During the two and a half years of the Expedition, Lewis collected more than two hundred plant specimens which are extant today. Of these, 177 were new to science. All of these specimens are easily identifiable because Lewis wrote detailed scientific descriptions. In the present day State of Montana, Lewis collected many plant specimens, including the bitterroot, the state flower. Unfortunately, Lewis' collection from Mandan, North Dakota to Great Falls, Montana was destroyed by water that entered the Expedition's cache dug near the great falls of the Missouri.

As the Expedition traced its route back through Montana in 1806, Clark followed the Yellowstone River from the Livingston, Montana area to its mouth near the border of Montana and North Dakota. Clark collected no animal or plant specimens along the Yellowstone. The red-haired Captain did, however, leave something that no other part of the trail can claim. On a large rock just east of Billings, Montana, he carved his initials. This rock is now known as Pompey's Pillar and the Captain's initials are the only physical evidence that remains of the Expedition along the entire route from St. Louis to the Pacific and back.