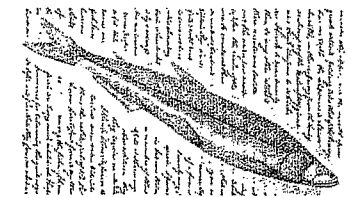


THE WESTERN COUNTRY

by Barbara Kubik



*"The Black
Woodpecker known
today as 'Lewis's
woodpecker' I often
I have frequently
mentioned and which
is found in most
parts of the rocky Mountains as
well as the Western and S.W.
mountains, I had never an
opportunity of examining until a
few days since when we killed
and preserved several of them."*

— Meriwether Lewis, May 27, 1806

In the early nineteenth century, Americans held varying beliefs regarding the geography of the western United States. Stories were told about a mountain of solid salt. Others believed that land in the West was rich and fertile and filled with trees, fruit,

and flowers. People wondered: Did mammoths live there? Was there really a Northwest Passage, an easily traveled waterway to the western ocean? And where did the Columbia River end?

Not everything about the West was a mystery, however. For more than two hundred years, explorers from France, Russia, Spain, Great Britain, and the United States had investigated parts of the region. By 1792, maps of the Pacific Coast indicated the mouth of the Columbia River, Mount Rainier, Mount Hood, Mount St. Helens, Vancouver Island, and various large harbors.

Explorers also had journeyed on the Missouri River as far as present-day North Dakota. Their recordings showed the Platte, Kansas, and Knife rivers; the "big bend" of the Missouri River; and

*Mount Rainier
is present-day
Washington
was a western
landmark that
was included
on maps as
early as 1792*

Conjectural
means based
on guesswork.

Flora are
plants.

Fauna are
animals.

The Corps
members'
journals
frequently
note with
amazement
large
numbers
of buffalo,
elk, and
other
wildlife in
the western
territory.

the large communities of Mandan- and Hidatsa-speaking Indian peoples who lived along that river in North Dakota.

Most early maps also displayed a simple, single range of mountains in the West called the Stony, or Rocky, Mountains. But the area between the eastern and western mapped portions of the continent appeared to be empty.

One mapmaker labeled the blank space between the Mandan villages on the Missouri River and the Pacific Coast "*conjectural*."

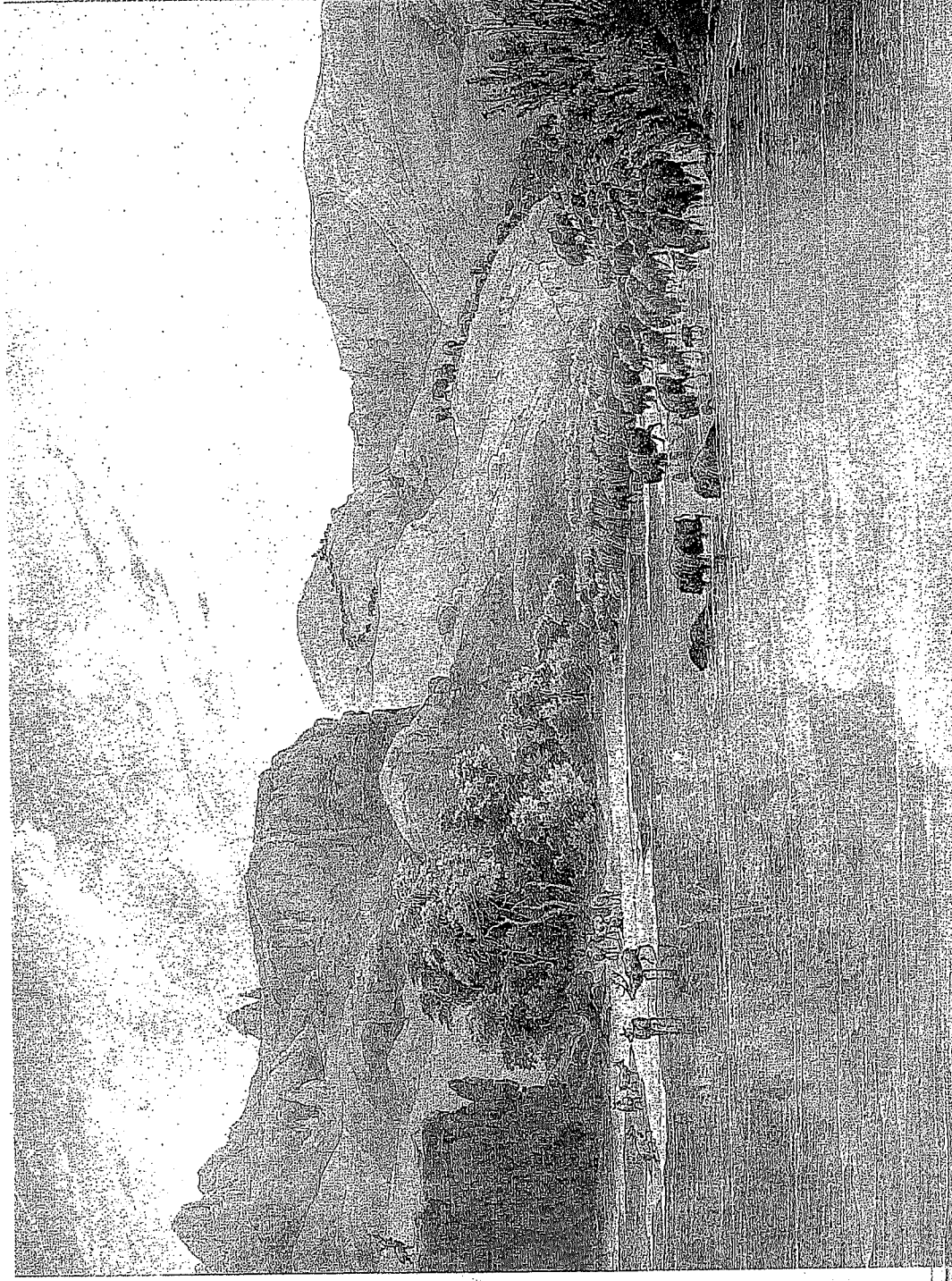
President Thomas Jefferson hoped the exploration by the Corps of Discovery would provide the answers to the many questions

about the land, people, and *flora* and *fauna* (see the sidebar).

It is important to keep in mind that while many Americans at that time used words such as "discover" and "unknown" when speaking about the western part of the country, the land was *not* new, undiscovered, or unknown.

Thousands of American Indians had lived on the land for many centuries. Most of these native peoples shared their vast knowledge of the land, waterways, flora, and fauna with the expedition's leaders.

Over the course of their more than two-year trek, the Corps's two captains were able to fill in the "conjectural" space on their



FLORA AND FAUNA

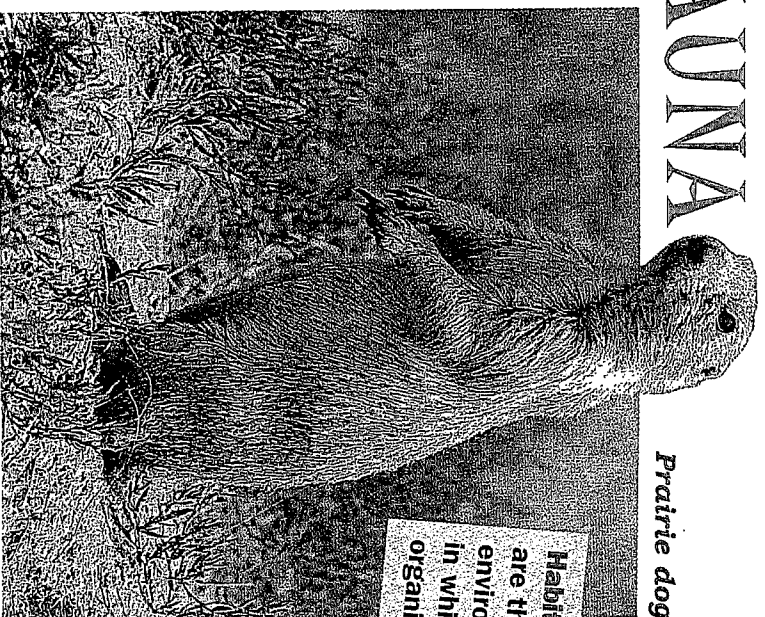
Prairie dog

The journal keepers for the Corps of Discovery noted many plants and animals on their trip. They described the ranges and *habitats* of the flora and fauna, as well as the feeding, nesting, and breeding practices of many animals. Many specimens were weighed and measured. The men of the Corps included the different names of each (including the French and English translations), tribal names, and occasionally, scientific names. The travelers learned many uses for these western plants and animals from various native tribes.

Some of the mammals “unfamiliar and new to science” in the early 1800s were the pronghorn, coyote, Oregon bobcat, and prairie dog. The Corps’s two captains called the latter a “barking squirrel,” while the French-speaking members of the group referred to it as a *petit chien*, or “little dog.” From Fort Mandan in present-day North Dakota, Meriwether Lewis shipped by boat back down the Missouri River a live prairie dog, a prairie grouse, and magpies (birds with chattering-type calls) to President Thomas Jefferson in April 1805. They were three of many “discoveries” to be sent back East.

The Corps described 178 “new” plants in detail, including the Osage orange (a spiny tree with inedible fruit), several species of currants (shrubs with tart berries), the

maps. They added rivers, mountains, prairies, landmarks, and American Indian villages. They noted both the familiar and unfamiliar trees, plants, and animals that they saw. As they moved up the Missouri River, crossed the



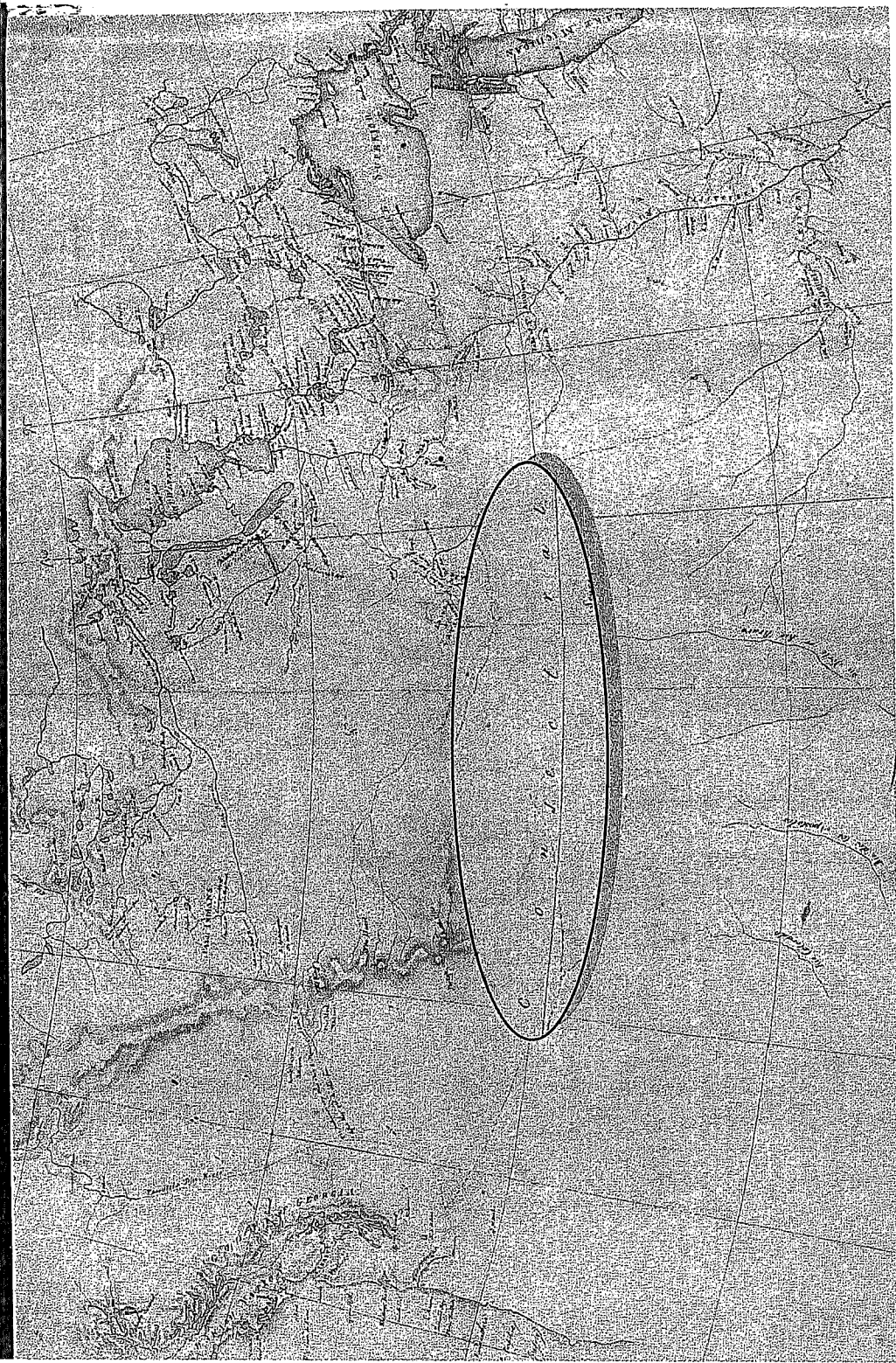
Habitats are the environments in which organisms live.

wapato (a potato-like tuber), and the camas (another edible root). The last two were important root vegetables for American Indians. Lewis and William Clark brought back seeds from many of these plants for Jefferson and other gardeners to try growing in the East. Many of the pressed plants still survive today in museums.

“New” birds included the sage grouse (a game bird), magpie, and whistling swan (named by Lewis for the sound it made). The two leaders’ notes also provided much new information about the feeding habits and range of the California condor (presently an endangered species) and the Carolina parakeet (now extinct). — B.K.

Rocky Mountains, and followed the Columbia River, they came up with their own names and labels for the features they charted. As the Corps’s *cartographer*, William Clark carefully recorded it all.

A *cartographer* is someone who makes maps.



The Corps of Discovery hoped to fill in the "conjectural" space on this map from the early 1800s.


Immortalized means never to be forgotten.

The author would like to thank Dr. John Logan Allen and Dr. Gary E. Moulton for their work. Without Dr. Allen's studies of the geography and Dr. Moulton's editing of the journals and maps, this article would not be possible.

Some of the map names reflect events, such as Fourth of July Creek and Camp Fortunate. Some are American Indian names, such as the Koos-koos-kia (Clearwater) River, the Ki moo e-nim (Snake) River, and the Youmalolam (Umatilla) River. Members of the expedition got their names *immortalized*, too: Colter's Creek, Pryor's Creek, and "Yorks 8 Islands."

Many of the places the Corps traveled through resembled gardens, with edible roots and berry-laden bushes. One day, Clark noted, "[T]he Country about abounds in Bear Deer & Elk...the lands are well timbered and rich... & well watered." Another time, he

wrote, "The Country on either Side is fertile...thickly timbered with Fir and White Cedar. The Soil of the richest quality."

The Corps of Discovery is with us today — in the place names on the maps, in the stories the American Indians share about the land and their ancestors, and in the flora and fauna of the woodlands, prairies, rivers, and mountains. From Spirit Mound in South Dakota to Mount Jefferson in Oregon to Pompeys Pillar in Montana, the Corps's remarkable journey has a permanent place in American history. 

Barbara Kubik is a historian, author, and member of the Lewis & Clark Trail Heritage Foundation. She has written extensively about the Corps of Discovery.