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Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 1984

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MAPPING THE NORTH AMERICAN PLAINS

AN INTRODUCTION

Exploration, no matter how scientifically oriented or technologically involved, has been popularly viewed as mostly romantic adventure. From Renaissance mariners to “right stuff” astronauts, explorers have been remembered more for their experiences than for their accomplishments. Partly to correct this notion, the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln sponsored the symposium *Mapping the North American Plains* in April 1983, to show achievements in cartography on the North American plains from earliest times to the present. Twelve speakers from the United States, Canada, and England presented addresses on a variety of topics within the theme. Four of those essays are printed here; others will be published in future issues of the *Great Plains Quarterly*.

People's geographic conceptions of the unknown are frequently based on their own geographic experience. So it was with early European visitors to the North American plains. English and French pioneers and explorers carried their mental geographic baggage beyond the mountains and forests of eastern North America and conceived of a region similar to what they knew. Spanish thinkers likewise transferred their knowledge of the southwest and counted the northern regions to be the same. Early probes into the northern plains and nascent theoretical geography began to reshape the images established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and these new concepts were the ones that influenced the makers of the first maps of the central and northern plains.

The early maps of the French, Spanish, and British were perimeter pieces that traced the borders of the great interior. The vast middle

region of America—the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the western slope of the Rockies—was known only from Indian information. Indian geographic conceptions and accurate knowledge of interior terrain were mistranslated into a compressed area with imaginary rivers and low-lying hills where sweeping mountains should rise. Along the Pacific coast accurate maps based on the coastal voyages of ocean-going traders and explorers gradually became available. The interior remained the terra incognita and would remain a little known or largely misperceived region well into the American period. One purpose of the essays in this issue is to show how mapping the Great Plains aided the understanding process.

John L. Allen's lead article served as the symposium's keynote address. “Patterns of Promise: Mapping the Plains and Prairies, 1800–1860” is a review of the current state of scholarship on the symposium's general topic during the American period. While covering familiar historic events and the well-known explorations of Lewis and Clark, Pike, and Long, Allen also examines minor explorations, lesser known cartographers, and their mapping achievements. Military explorers, commercial cartographers, scientists, and trained topographical engineers set a pattern of exploration and mapping that gave promise of what was to be found on the great range of middle America. Through it all, Allen finds a thread of continuity: the mapping of the plains “was a mapping of the geography of hope and expectation rather than the geography of reality.” Allen's aim is to get at the thought behind the maps and discover the image they presented to those who viewed them in the first half of the nineteenth century.

W. Raymond Wood's essay, "Mapping the Missouri River through the Great Plains, 1673-1895," overlaps Allen's essay to some degree, but enlarges on and complements it as well. His research reaches back to the 1673 maps of the French explorers Marquette and Jolliet, which show the Missouri as little more than a short, wavy line, and forward to the highly accurate maps done by the Missouri River Commission in the 1890s. During much of this period the Missouri River was the "Gateway to the West" and St. Louis was the base. The river cuts through the heart of the Great Plains and has influenced the whole area dramatically. Despite its impact, Wood contends that scholars have neglected the river and focused on the overland trails. Writings like Wood's ought to promote and encourage research into the river's historic importance. Wood divides his study into three parts relating to the river's control by the competing powers of France, Spain, and the United States. In each of the eras a seminal map or two emerged that inspired numerous copies and derivatives: for the French period, Delisle's maps of 1703 and 1718; for the Spanish interim, Soulard's map of 1795 and the Mackay-Evans maps of 1796-97; and for the American period, the maps of Lewis and Clark.

The remaining two essays deal with more specific and specialized areas of mapping the plains: the ethnographic maps and scientific instruments of the Lewis and Clark expedition. This is a fortunate combination because ethnology and astronomy are two research topics that remain largely unexamined in the vast literature of the expedition. James P. Ronda's "'A Chart in His Way': Indian Cartography and the Lewis and Clark Expedition" investigates the interrelationship of two cultures as Lewis and Clark approached the problem of mapping unseen lands. More than language differences created a cultural divide. The captains also had to cope with translating native concepts of land quality and configuration. As Ronda explains, the transfer of native knowledge to paper was a difficult process, not only because the Indians' "way" made use of different materials (animal

hides or scratches in the dirt), but also because "Indian maps represented conceptions of distance, space, and time that were often fundamentally different from those commonly held by the bearded strangers." Indian maps were eagerly sought because they enabled the party to look ahead and to look beyond, that is, to alert them to the trail ahead and to reveal the nature of lands beyond their route. At several decisive points the men used Indian testimony to guide them and much of the mapping beyond the thin route of their traverse is based on information from Indians.

The dearth of study of Lewis and Clark's astronomical observations is due partly to the difficulties of understanding the intricate procedures and antiquated instruments of the Corps of Discovery. Silvio A. Bedini brings the necessary expertise to the topic and in "The Scientific Instruments of the Lewis and Clark Expedition" clarifies a very technical subject. By Lewis and Clark's time the science of astronomy was reaching high levels of accuracy in determining latitude but a correct fix of longitude was yet to come, owing largely to the unreliability of the era's timepieces. Despite some training in "shooting the stars," Lewis may not have had sufficient skill in the task and the difficult field conditions under which he worked exacerbated his problems. The leaders were not able to overcome the obstacles and their readings fell short of the accuracy for which President Jefferson had hoped.

The Center for Great Plains Studies acknowledges the assistance of the InterNorth Foundation, the University of Nebraska Convocations Committee, the University of Nebraska Research Council, and the National Endowment for the Humanities in providing financial support for the symposium. Brian W. Blouet, former director of the Center, headed a committee that planned the symposium and enlisted the speakers, four of whom have their essays published here.

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