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Lewis and Clark

at the Great Falls of the Missouri River

The Explorers at the Portage

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THE EXPLORERS AT THE PORTAGE

LEWIS AND CLARK AT THE GREAT FALLS OF THE MISSOURI



Salem Bridge - Lower Portage Camp:

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Here at Salem Bridge the portage began in earnest. The steep canyon walls are characteristic of the Missouri Breaks and the terrain around which the group was portaging. Portage (Belt) Creek flows north about 1 3/4 miles and empties into the Missouri River. The expedition members hauled the dugout canoes up this creek to the little flat area above the west shore just below the bridge. After drying the canoes for five days, they hauled them up the hill to the west. The county road is very close to the original portage route as it winds up the hill. Lower Portage Camp was located about a mile below the mouth of this creek or about three miles from the bridge. Across the Missouri River opposite the mouth of Portage (Belt) Creek is the Sulphur Springs credited with restoring Sacagawea's health after she became desperately ill. It is now named "Sacagawea Springs."

A marker appears on the bluff overlooking the actual site of the Lower Portage Camp, located on private land downstream from the mouth of Portage (Belt) Creek. All the land here is private. Please do not trespass.

Finding the site: This area is located on private land and has very limited access. Please contact the National Park Service staff member at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in reference to any access requests.



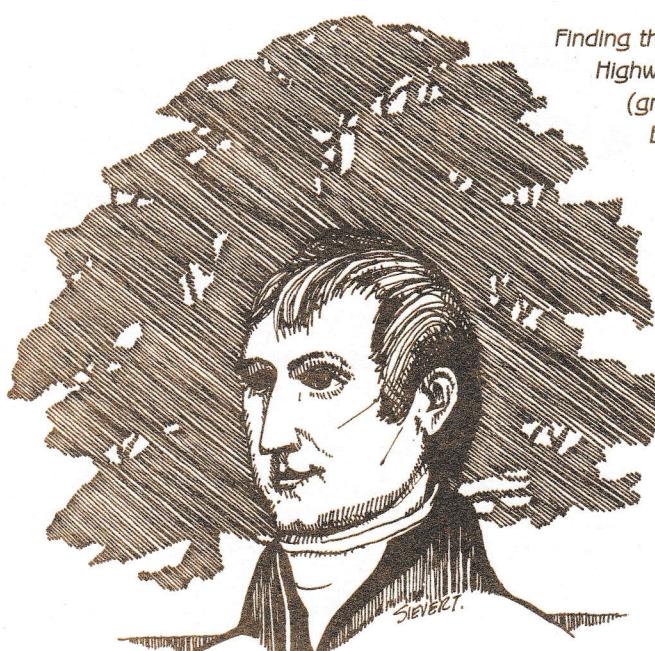
A Portage Drive: From Willow Run To White Bear Islands

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Using stakes, Captain Clark laid out the 18 1/4 mile portage. He tried to make it short and easy. Hardened ground churned up by the buffalo during frequent summer rains, prickly pear cactus, heat, wind, rain, hail, and the ever present mosquito plagued the expedition members. The men, exhausted by the strenuous labor, literally dropped in their tracks and fell asleep in an instant, according to the journals of Lewis and Clark.

A vista of the western portion of the portage can be seen from overlooks at Great Falls International Airport. From here you can see modern landmarks along the ridgeback that marks the historic route. Note the large gray water tower on 10th Avenue South, the two tree-covered cemeteries, to the south of 10th Avenue, and the large silos on a dairy along the Missouri River adjacent to the White Bear Islands south of the city. These are all features that mark the track of the original portage route.

Finding the site: On 10th Avenue South proceed east 3.2 miles to Highwood Road and turn left. Then drive 6.4 miles to Salem Road (gravel). Drive another 6.6 miles on the gravel road to Salem Bridge. On your way back, note that the portage crossed Malmstrom Air Force Base east of the city. The track crossed 57th Street South at 7th Avenue South. It continued on to the west and crossed 10th Avenue South about 51st Street (near K-Mart), then continued on through City Motors, Mount Olivet and Highland Cemeteries and then on to the former Ayrshire Dairy. The Missouri River bank and the first of the three White Bear Islands are located in a field on the former dairy property. Because the course of the river has changed, you have to look carefully to discern the original landmarks.



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White Bear Islands:

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These Islands marked the end of the portage. It was here that the men would haul the six heavy dugouts and baggage after crossing miles of prairie. It was also here that Lewis would construct his iron-framed boat, "The Experiment," under the shade of some willows along the banks of the Missouri. On July 4, 1805, the men celebrated the anniversary of the birth of our nation and the July 2nd completion of the portage. They had a sumptuous dinner and then sang, danced and consumed the last of their ration of "spirits" until they returned home the following year. Of the three islands, only two remain.

Finding the site: Drive south on River Drive about 3 miles from the Warden Bridge until you arrive at Missouri River Marine, a boat dealership located on the middle of the original three White Bear Islands. Drive another half mile and you will be near the Upper Portage Camp, unfortunately not discernible today. About a half mile further and you cross a small bridge near Franklin Avenue. You just crossed "Flattery Run," today's Sand Coulee Creek.



Canoe Camp:

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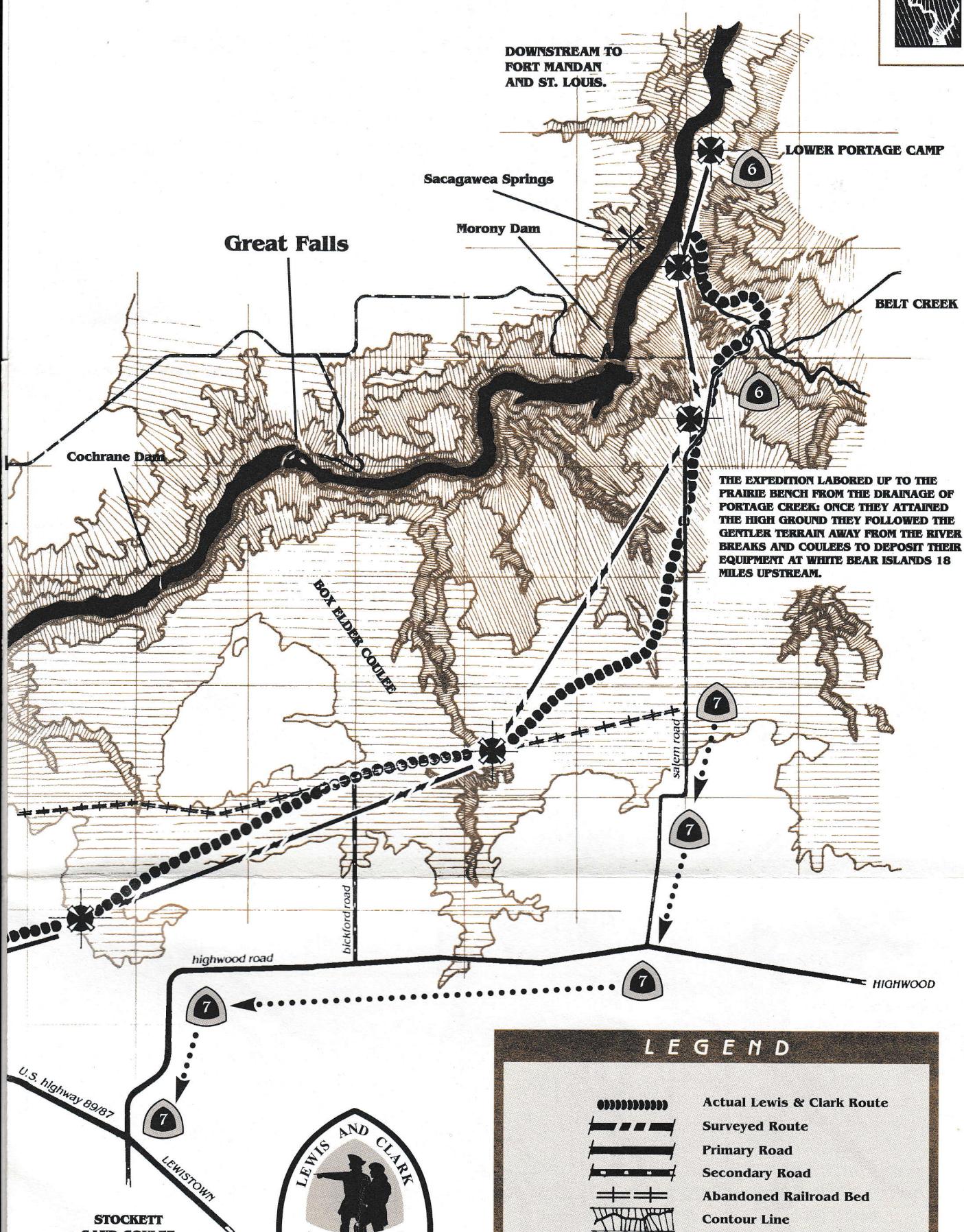
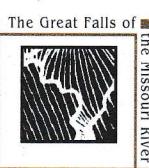
The failure of Meriwether Lewis's iron-framed boat necessitated the construction of two more cottonwood dugout canoes. During their stay at the Upper Portage Camp, hunters had found suitable trees about 8 miles west. On July 10, 1805, Clark took a crew of men across the river where very large cottonwood trees grew. Here they would construct two more dugouts: one of 33 feet in length and the other of 25 feet. On July 15th they departed this area and proceeded up the Missouri.

Finding the site: The campsite is on private property. Please do not trespass. We ask you to please contact the National Park Service staff member at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in reference to any access requests.

the Missouri River

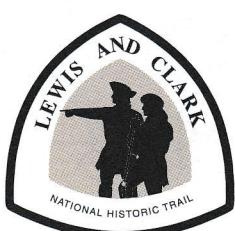


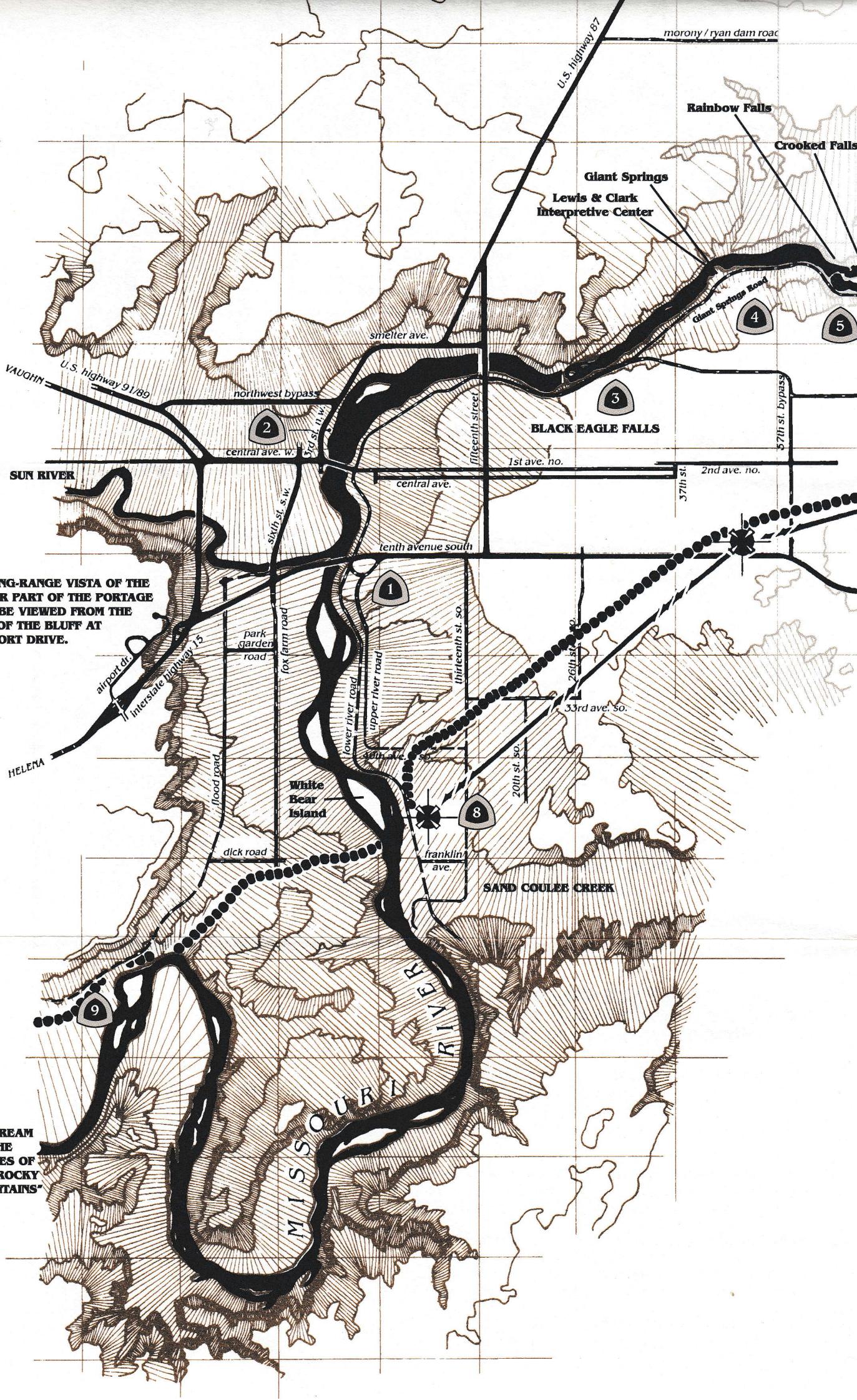
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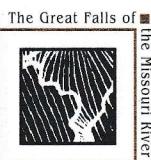


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Map Drawn by Ken Slevert







As you enjoy traveling the portage, please keep in mind that almost all of the land is private. Please respect the owners' rights and do not trespass.

Please note: rattlesnakes are very common in this part of Montana. Their bite, while not necessarily deadly, is very painful. Be alert. If you do encounter a snake of any kind, give it a wide berth. If you happen to get bit, seek medical help at once!



Broadwater Overlook Park:

This is the home of the Bob Scriver bronze, "Explorers At The Portage." It depicts Lewis, Clark, York, and Lewis' Newfoundland dog, Seaman. Surrounding the base of the statue and the approaching walkway are 35 commemorative stone plaques honoring the members of the Corps of Discovery. West of this park, across the Missouri River, is the mouth of the Medicine, or Sun River.

Captain Lewis and 9 expedition members descended the broad Medicine River valley on their return in 1806. Thousands of buffalo, and numerous elk, deer, grizzly bear, and wolves could be seen. The mountains visible in the west are the Lewis Range of the Rocky Mountains. The shallow rapids on the Missouri near the black railroad bridge to the northwest mark the location of the original ford, called by the Blackfeet "Rock Bottom Crossing." The Indians used this crossing for many hundreds of years as they traveled to and fro in search of the migratory buffalo and other game.

Finding the site: This beautiful park is located southeast of Warden Bridge on the Missouri River on 10th Avenue South. Look for the big flag. While here, stop in at the Visitor Information Center.



West Bank Park:

Very near here on June 14, 1805, Meriwether Lewis was chased into the Missouri River by a grizzly bear. Later that same day he was charged by three large buffalo....when Lewis decided to aggressively advance in return, they spooked and ran. He had many wondrous encounters that day as he reconnoitered everything from the Great Falls to the Medicine (Sun) River. Look for interpretive signs.

Finding the site: Drive north across the Ninth Street Bridge and turn left at the light (stay in the LH lane). Turn left again at 17th Avenue NE (across the street from McDonald's Restaurant). Follow the signs to the entrance road to the park. There are several parking areas to choose from.

The Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center is located about a quarter mile above Giant Springs. This new center focuses on the entire journey of the Lewis and Clark expedition and features many speakers, films, demonstrations and displays.

Finding the site: Giant Springs State Park and the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center are located just off of the US 87/89 Bypass in northeast Great Falls on River Drive. Follow the signs.



William Clark

1770 - 1838



The Rainbow Falls and Lewis and Clark Overlooks:

Here are two overlooks located almost side by side that give you a beautiful view of Handsome (Rainbow) Falls. Downstream a quarter of a mile is Crooked Falls. Meriwether Lewis discovered these falls on June 14, 1805, as he reconnoitered the area in advance of the portage. Rainbow Falls is 47 feet high while Crooked Falls is about 19 feet in height. The deep ravine located just below Crooked Falls is where Capt. Clark and his small band spent the night of June 17, 1805, as he made his initial survey of the river and the portage. Just above Rainbow Falls in the pool behind the dam lies Colter Falls, a small (6 to 14 feet in height) but impressive falls that is now covered by the waters behind the dam.





Black Eagle Falls Overlook:

This overlook graces the sandstone cliffs at the uppermost of the five falls. Named "Black Eagle Falls" for an eagle that had her nest on a little island immediately below the falls, it was called the "upper pitch" in the journals. Don't mistake this falls for the Great Falls, which is located about 10 miles downriver. Just across the river behind the falls is a large hill where Lewis stood on June 14, 1805 and overlooked immense herds of buffalo and large flocks of waterfowl. To the southwest he could see the "Medicine River" coming into the Missouri exactly as the Indians at Fort Mandan had said.

Finding the site: This popular overlook and parking area are on River Drive, about a quarter mile east of 25th Street North.

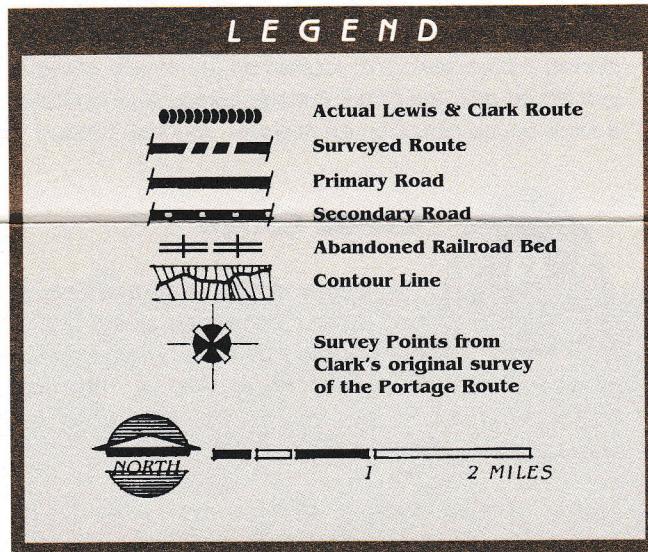


Giant Springs Heritage Park and the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center:

Captain William Clark discovered Giant Springs on June 18, 1805, as he made his way up the south shore of the Missouri surveying the river and trying to determine the length of the portage. This the largest fresh water springs in the world and site of the world's smallest river, "Roe River." Also visit the state fish hatchery, located near the springs, as well as the park headquarters building which has an impressive wildlife display.

Colter Falls was named after one of the valued members of the expedition by the founder of the city of Great Falls, Paris Gibson. Just to the east, Lewis and Clark Overlook provides easy access to the River's Edge Trail, a scenic recreational route you may want to explore further. Just down the trail to the east about half a mile is Crooked Falls Overlook. It's well worth the short walk to take in the breathtaking scenery. Don't be tempted to take a hike down to the river. It is off limits and very dangerous.

Finding the site: Drive east from Giant Springs on River Road about a mile and a half.



The Great Falls of
the Missouri River