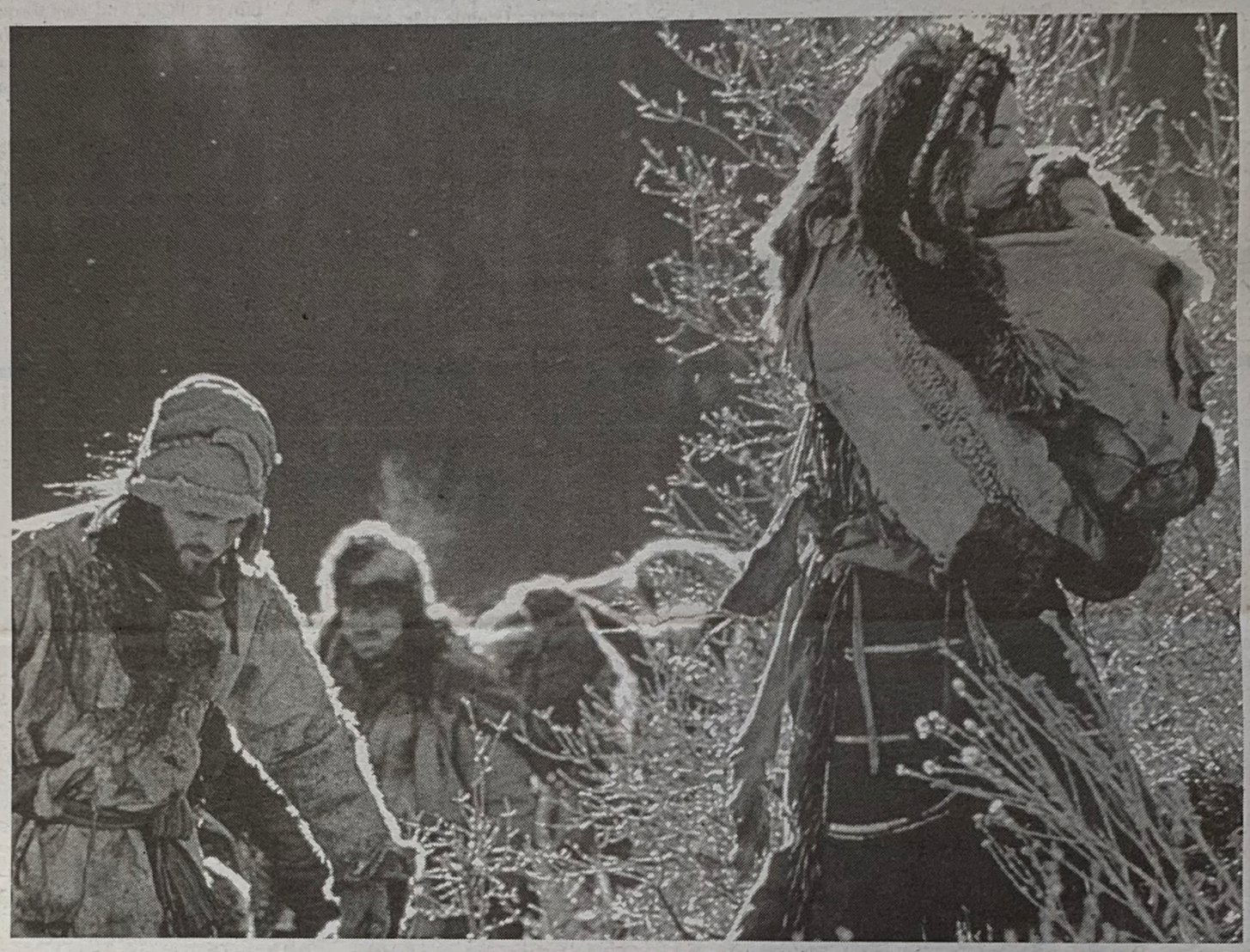
Calendar

Bear Oil Soup

Lewis & Clark Wilderness Medicine



From National Geographic *film showing at Reuben H. Fleet Center*

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark packed the medical supplies for their famous expedition of 1803–1806, they didn't forget the four pewter penile syringes. They needed them to treat the gonorrhea that some members of their party got from the Native American women they met along the trail. Add "amateur physicians" to the list of accomplishments that Lewis and Clark can claim, says David J. Peck of Clairemont, who has written a book about the wilderness medicine practiced by the two U.S. Army captains commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to find the Northwest Passage.

LOCAL EVENTS

Lewis and Clark brought no "real" doctor with them on the 8000-mile round trip between what is now St. Charles, Missouri, and the Pacific. "There are those who think they would have been much better off with a trained physician along," says Peck, who is a doctor of osteopathic medicine. "I think that's nonsense. Many medical treatments of the time were beneficial, but many others were harmful. Even the best-trained physician of the day wouldn't have been able to handle some of the problems they encountered. Microscopic anatomy, histology, microbiology, physiology — these things were in their infancy." Even aspirin hadn't been invented.

Because of their military experience, Lewis and Clark knew how to treat wounds and set broken bones. But what about the frequent "explosive watery diarrhea" they and their men suffered, some of which was probably due to the giardia in their drinking water? What about the pus-filled boils that many of them developed in the inner-thigh area from the constant chafing of their wet clothing? What about sudden snow blindness? Foot wounds from stepping on prickly pear cacti? Muscle strains from lifting quartered game? And complications from eating that game — 8 or 9 pounds of deer, elk, buffalo, and grizzly bear, and little else, every day? "It was the Atkins Diet of 1805," says Peck, who writes that they also often merely subsisted. Try soup made only of bear oil and melted candles.

Lewis received predeparture medical coaching from Benjamin Rush, a prominent Pennsylvania physician who was also a signer of the Declaration of Independence. It wasn't always helpful. Rush was a devotee of bloodletting. He sold his own brand of purgatives, Dr. Rush's Bilious Pills. The men on the expedition called them "thunderclappers." Back then, the recommendation for frostbite was a cold soak, not a hot one. No wonder good use was made of the saw in their basic surgeon's kit for amputating necrotic toes.

Peck published *Or Perish in the Attempt* last year. This year, to celebrate the expedition's bicentennial, other books are coming out, scholarly conferences have been organized, and *National Geographic* has released a large-format film that's currently showing at the Reuben H. Fleet Center.

Those who study Lewis and Clark use the men's journals as primary sources. Clark, for example, wrote that he suffered with an ankle abscess that eventually burst, discharging "a considerable quantity of matter." Peck's interpretation of Lewis's journal is that he suffered from depression. He thinks Lewis medicated himself for it with the era's two most popular drugs — alcohol and opium.

Of the 30-odd people who accompanied Lewis and Clark, only one died. Evidence suggests it was the result of inflammation of his appendix. "If it was, he probably would have died even if he'd been in Philadelphia; surgical treatment for appendicitis was still 70 years away," says Peck. "But it could also have been the result of tularemia, a bacterial infection he could have contracted from cleaning infected game meat, drinking infected water, or inhaling infected dust."

One death: good record. (It puts the guys in *Deliverance*, among others, to shame.) Had the men been screened, the way astronauts are? Unofficially, yes, says Peck. They were either from the military or young men already comfortable with life on the frontier. "Lewis told Clark specifically to avoid what he called 'soft-palmed gentlemen with dreams of high adventure.' And because they were so young and healthy, they were able to overcome a lot of illnesses and injuries that may have killed somebody older or of a weaker constitution."

In school, you hear about the Native-American woman who acted as an interpreter for Lewis and Clark. What you don't learn is that 16-year-old Sacagawea gave birth on the journey, and that the midwife was Lewis.

The baby's father was Sacagawea's husband, a French fur trapper and trader. "Lewis and Clark contracted first with him to be an interpreter, because he spoke French and Hidatsa [an Indian language]; only afterwards did they realize that this woman, a Shoshone, was going to be thrown into the deal for essentially nothing. Well, she had a son during the winter of 1804–1805, and he went on the whole trip, arriving home in good health." As an adult, Sacagawea's son settled in California, but left for the gold fields of Montana in 1866, where he caught pneumonia and died along the route.

— *Jeanne Schinto*

Book signing with David J. Peck, author of "Or Perish in the Attempt: Wilderness Medicine in the Lewis & Clark Expedition"
Saturday, May 3, 7:00 p.m.
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