“Innumerable hosts of graves”

672 words

Exactly where the Corps of Discovery was when William Clark took men to a beaver dam that day no one really knows. Historians guess the place was once somewhere above Macy, Nebraska; but wherever it was, it isn’t. Too bad.

It’s not altogether clear what kind of gear they employed to catch fish. Clark described the technology this way: “the men picked up Some Small willow & Bark [and] we made a Drag.” A seine of some sort, I’m sure, which would have required a couple of the men to drag the ends through the water to thereby trap fish within.

Good night, did they come up with a catch. I’ll get to that.

Fishing may well have been therapy. They’d been looking for the Omahas the day before. They had trekked up and away from the river to what they’d guessed was a big village, but the entire place was dead quiet, mud huts not only emptied but destroyed, burned. The Omahas were somewhere out west on a buffalo hunt, they figured; the place seemed a graveyard.

They knew the Omahas had lost hundreds during a devastating smallpox epidemic four years before, in 1800. Included among the victims was their leader, Black Bird. “The Situation of this Village, now in ruins,” Clark wrote in his journal on August 14, 2004, “surrounded by innumerable hosts of graves, the ravages of the Small Pox.” And then this: “The cause or way those people took the Small Pox is uncertain, the most Probable from Some other Nation by means of a war party.”

Others say otherwise. Omaha tribal history doesn’t blame the Brule or Pawnee or anyone Native. “Around 1800 a smallpox epidemic, resulting from contact with Europeans, swept the area,” tribal history says, “reducing the tribe’s population by killing approximately one-third of its members.”

The Omaha village was deserted because of a death-like pact the Corps of Discovery wouldn’t have believed even if the Omahas had left a note and tried to explain. According to The Omaha People, when the survivors realized the extent of the horror smallpox had wrought, they saw their demise as a people in that horrific death and disfigurement. Rather than perpetuate suffering, they determined
to fight traditional enemies and even friends in what some call “a mourning war,” their tears paradoxically fueling the fire in their bellies.

Their long-time friends and cousins, the Poncas, eventually talked them out of more death, but when the Omaha went back to the village on the Missouri, they couldn’t face the misery. Instead, they used the village that once been their home as a burial ground, which is what the Corps of Discovery found that day, even if they didn’t know it—“innumerable hosts of graves,” Mr. William Clark wrote.

When they lived right here at the mouth of the Big Sioux River, “the River of the Mahas,” the Omaha had once been among the most powerful of all North American tribes. But hundreds died in 1800, and for years those deaths nearly emptied the Omaha soul.

Lewis and Clark weren’t stunned by the silence of Big Village. They simply thought the Omahas were out hunting buffalo.

The next day they dragged a rough-hewn seine through the water just behind a beaver dam and walked away with 308 fish, “of the following kind Pike, Salmon, Bass, Perch, Red horse, Small Cat, & a kind of Perch Called on the Ohio Silverfish,” Clark recorded.

Great eating the day after they walked into a ghost town they couldn’t have understood, a place that had suffered hundreds of deaths from a virus they believed the Omahas picked up from some alien warrior band.

Maybe if you don’t know the truth, it’s just easier to hold a banquet.

But Patrick Gass’s diary entry for the day they caught 300 fish ends with this line: “This day Sergeant Floyd became very sick and remained so all night. He was seized with a complaint somewhat like a violent colick.”

The Corps of Discovery, right here, were about to discover something about death themselves.