

The Oregonian

TALES FROM THE TRAIL THE LEWIS AND CLARK BICENTENNIAL REDISCOVERING FORT CLATSOP

Date: Monday, February 9, 2004

Section: LOCAL STORIES

Edition: SUNRISE

Page: A01 BRIDGET A. OTTO - The Oregonian

Dateline: ASTORIA

Summary: With an expanded boundary, the site could become part of a new national park

Near the northern end of U.S. 101, a two-lane ribbon of asphalt juts off east and meanders inland, away from the ocean. Lush forest cushions the edge of the road as it rolls past a boathouse and along pastures. A road sign points toward Fort Clatsop Road, the entry to the 125-acre national memorial dedicated to the winter home of Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and the Corps of Discovery.

The nearby Lewis and Clark River -- known to the explorers and the native Clatsop tribe as the Netul River -- is hidden from view, leaving the fort surrounded by swaying firs and spruce, and visitors scratching their heads, puzzled over how the corps ever landed there.

That confusion is about to be straightened out, one of several major developments at Fort Clatsop sparked by the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial.

* A shuttle system begins this summer bringing visitors to Netul Landing, the park's new entrance along the Lewis and Clark River.

* A boundary expansion moved one step closer to reality with last week's budget from President Bush that included \$6.25 million for land for the Fort to Sea Trail.

* Support for a new national park is gaining momentum. The park would unify three of Washington's Lewis and Clark sites with Fort Clatsop and help bury a decades-old squabble between Washington and Oregon over who owns bragging rights to the western end of the trail.

The people pushing the changes -- politicians, businesspeople and historians -- hope to pull them off by November 2005, in time for the official bicentennial event at Fort Clatsop.

Up first: crowd control

Fort Clatsop rumbles, racing to be ready for the crush of visitors expected for the bicentennial. Massive front-loaders and graders prepare Netul Landing, where, beginning this summer, the shuttle will drop off visitors. Fort Clatsop Superintendent Chip Jenkins calls it the park's new front door.

Tucked alongside the slow, slate-colored waters of the Lewis and Clark River, Netul Landing is a mile south of the visitor center. Arriving near the river -- just as the explorers did -- makes it much easier for visitors to understand the lay of the land and how Lewis and Clark got around, Jenkins says.

The oblong shuttle hub, which will house a canoe/kayak landing and be dotted with educational panels and restrooms, will have limited parking. The parking lot adjacent to the visitor center closes during summer and becomes the drop-off point for the shuttle. Jenkins, along with leaders in nearby towns, wants visitors to Fort Clatsop to park in the coastal communities, then catch the Lewis and Clark Explorer Shuttle.

"We're very conscious of making a person's trip -- arriving and riding on this shuttle -- part of the park experience, not a bus experience," Jenkins says. At the landing, park rangers will orient the visitors and provide historical context for the visit. "What we're saying is, there is more to Fort Clatsop than just the fort."

That sentiment is not lost on those who built the fort replica 50 years ago, or those who fought to get it under the wing of the National Park Service.

The prize possession

The Astoria Jaycees, the Clatsop County Historical Society and the Finnish Brotherhood of Astoria spent more than a year building the fort. The 50-square-foot replica was based on a design culled from Clark's sketches and journal entries. The front gate was hung Aug. 21, 1955, the morning of the fort's dedication, just months before the 150th anniversary.

As the sesquicentennial party folded, the hangover of taking care of Fort Clatsop hit. Thomas Vaughan, then-director of the Oregon Historical Society, which managed the site, knew the fort needed federal support to survive.

"We worked like tigers," Vaughan says, recalling how he, Sen. Richard Neuberger, D-Ore., and others pushed the National Park Service to manage the fort. "The park was a very reluctant bridegroom," Vaughan says, because many didn't value the fort's significance. "They didn't understand the huge, potential financial value it had as a tourist attraction. Now, 50 years later, that is a prize possession of the Clatsop County area."

Vaughan was right.

More than 200,000 people visit Fort Clatsop yearly, and park officials predict up to 1 million visitors by the time the bicentennial ends.

Vaughan is quick to credit others for advancing the national memorial, including Robert D. Holmes, former Democratic Oregon senator and governor from Clatsop County; Rep. Julia Butler Hansen, D-Wash.; and former Oregon Gov. James Douglas McKay, a Republican who became interior secretary in the Eisenhower administration.

"They had the political power and perseverance," Vaughan says.

President Eisenhower signed legislation making Fort Clatsop a national memorial May 29, 1958.

Ocean in view

Today it's still about politics and perseverance.

The push for the money to expand Fort Clatsop, and the proposal to create the Lewis and Clark National and State Historical Park on the lower Columbia River, have united Oregon's and Washington's congressional delegations.

They worked for the Fort Clatsop Expansion Act in August 2002 that permitted the park to grow beyond 125 acres, the first step for the Fort to Sea Trail.

The 5-1/2-mile trail, which links 1,500 acres, will unfurl to the west and up an old rail line to a forested high spot overlooking the ocean. From there it will cascade down the hill, under U.S. 101 and southwest to its end at Sunset Beach, recently acquired by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

The parks department's willingness to seal the Sunset Beach deal with Clatsop County is another of the unconventional collaborations that have built the trail. Gov. Ted Kulongoski got on board the trail project when he named it his first Oregon Solutions Project in March, which brought together all the state and federal agencies, and private and nonprofit partners with a role in making the trail happen.

"This is like one of these fairy tale stories," says Rep. Betsy Johnson, co-convenor of the Oregon Solutions Project Team. "I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. . . . Instead it just gets better and better," says Johnson, D-Scappoose. "Everyone is so invested and independently thinking up other ways to make this work."

Nearly \$8 million is needed to buy the land, a hurdle that was lowered last Monday when Bush released a budget that includes \$6.25 million for the land.

"If it appears in a line item in the president's budget, that's a really good sign that it will get funding," says Chris Matthews, spokesman for Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore. Congress must appropriate the money. "The senator will be pushing this until the funding goes through."

Smith's not pushing alone.

Rep. David Wu, D-Ore., was "absolutely delighted" by the budget news.

"We had success in getting \$1.25 million this year, and with this \$6.25 million, we are within a half-million of getting this done," Wu says. "This has been a long, hard slog."

The expansion not only enriches the history of Fort Clatsop, but also fires up an economic engine in an area hard-hit economically.

"Having a much larger, more significant Fort Clatsop will act as a draw and help folks locally."

National park ahead?

Oregon and Washington have long bickered over whose Lewis and Clark sites deserved more attention. The Fort Clatsop Expansion Act could settle the score.

The expansion act called for a study of the lower Columbia River Lewis and Clark sites to determine whether Station Camp, Megler Safety Rest Area and Cape Disappointment State Park (formerly Fort Canby State Park) could become part of Fort Clatsop National Memorial. It also provided four management options. The National Park Service supports the option that keeps state ownership of the parks, while uniting them under a national umbrella: Lewis and Clark National and State Historical Park. It would include the three Washington sites along with Fort Clatsop and Oregon's Ecola State Park and Fort Stevens State Park.

The plan's been widely praised.

Jonathan Jarvis, director of the western regional office of the National Park Service, likes the idea because it honors everyone's role from regional to national to state. It also sits well with Rex Derr, director of Washington's Parks and Recreation Department, who says it should be a model for interstate and federal cooperation.

But will the Lewis and Clark National and State Historical Park happen? Whether it snakes its way through the Department of Interior to Congress to reality -- let alone before the bicentennial -- is too early to tell.

Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash., thinks the bicentennial is the target to hit.

"For the full flavor of Lewis and Clark at the mouth of the river, it's important to see both sides, as they did," he says. An expanded, bistate national park would accomplish just that.

"It's a very exciting and unique opportunity," Baird says. "Centennials don't come along often."

Nor do national parks.

While applauding the efforts to create a new park, David Nicandri , director of the Washington State Historical Society, remembers the past and looks to the future.

"Bear in mind," Nicandri says, "this is not just a benefit for and by the bicentennial." The benefits of a unified park are long-term and pay off in community pride and perception. "It's a century's worth of value," he says. "The return isn't between now and 2005; the return is in the context of the tricentennial and a longer time than that."

You have to take the long view, Nicandri says. "If historians don't, no one will."

