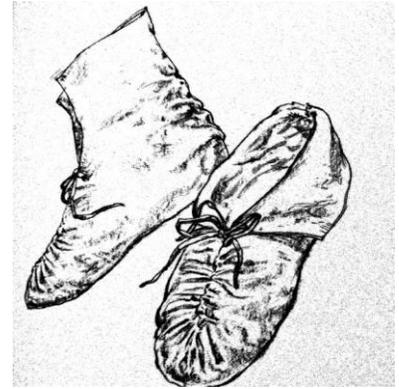


CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT OF THE CORPS

Moccasins

Submitted by Jack Puckett

The footwear of the Lewis & Clark Expedition left a lot to be desired. For an expedition starting forth to explore a continent the official footwear of the U.S. Army consisted of black leather shoes with one inch wooden heels and ties. They were made on a straight last with no rights or lefts. While designated right and left shoes had begun to be produced in Europe in the 1790s, the US Army was slow to adopt new fashions. The result was that knock-kneed soldiers would wear out the inside of the heel and the bowlegged ones would wear the outside of the heel making it difficult to walk. The army in all its wisdom decreed that the men would alternate shoes every other day. The shoes themselves were poorly made and would barely last a week under constant use. This was the situation with the army men assigned to the Expedition. In 1803 a pair of these shoes cost one dollar and a pair of socks cost 18 cents.



It is surprising that Meriwether Lewis did not give more thought to the comfort of the men's feet when he was purchasing equipment for the Expedition. It is apparent that he did have in mind that the men would all be in moccasins before the trip was over, because he purchased four gross of assorted moccasin awls in Philadelphia along with awls for trade with the Indians.

It wasn't long after the start of the Expedition that the men were either wearing moccasins or in their bare feet when towing the boats up river. Being barefoot caused cuts, abrasions, and sores that hampered walking. Within a month from the start of the Expedition the men were all in moccasins. They bartered for them from passing traders or made their own.

Indians east of the Missouri mainly wore a one-piece moccasin and some of the men of the Expedition did also, but during the winter at Fort Mandan most of them learned from the Indians how to construct a two-piece moccasin.

A considerable amount of time was spent during the journey either making or repairing moccasins. Cactus native to the Plains were a considerable problem for the feet, even with moccasins, as the thorns pierce the soles and in many cases left the thorn in the foot. Lewis found that a parfleche insole helped but that the thorns still cause problems in the ankles and legs. The portage around the Great Falls was a constant source of cactus and the men spent the evenings around the campfire pulling thorns out of their feet. They also encountered a different cactus while ascending the Bitterroot River.

Clark exclaimed that he was so cold that he might freeze his feet in the thin moccasins he wore when the Corps encountered snow while traversing the Lolo Trail.

The winter of 1805-1806 was long and wet. One of the duties of the men at Fort Clatsop was to make moccasins for the return journey. Over 300 pairs were turned out. Some say 358 (Lewis and Clark) and some say 338 (Gass, Ordway, and Whitehouse) but whatever the amount, it wasn't enough to last all the way back to St. Louis.

When all things are considered the moccasin was probably one of the most important pieces of equipment on the whole journey.

Dig Deeper into the clothing and equipment of the Corps of Discovery:

Tailor Made and Trail Worn by Robert J. Moore, Jr. and Michael Haynes (2003)