Summary of Project

Historical Events: Lewis and Clark “went to the Pacific Ocean,” proclaimed an American newspaper upon their return, and brought back “curiosities of the countries through which they passed…” The specimens and information Meriwether Lewis and William Clark collected from the distant wilderness were much more than “curiosities” – they formed a nucleus of knowledge about the American West that proved priceless. Lewis was not a formally schooled cartographer. Both were simply gifted amateurs. Yet the information they recorded, the specimens they collected, and the maps they constructed significantly advanced the knowledge of the day in zoology, botany, ethnology, cartography, and other fields. Captain Clark’s maps dramatically advanced the existing knowledge of western geology. Mapping was one of the primary purposes of the expedition, and Clark proved himself to be an able cartographer. Even before leaving Camp Wood, he sent back to Jefferson his first comprehensive map of the Missouri Territory, produced from first-person accounts of trappers and travelers on the fringe of the unknown West. He labored through the winter at Fort Clatsop. He also made numerous “map like” sketches of geographical features. “I employ my Self drawing...” he often noted in his journals. While Clark’s work was not based on precise field surveys, his maps – especially the major works – were remarkably accurate, and made a significant contribution to the geographic knowledge of the American West. Despite their lack of formal professional training. Lewis and Clark made a contribution to knowledge that would be unequalled in American history.*

Significance of Events: Along with dozens of carefully preserved bird bodies, they collected skeletons, antlers, hides, and claws from a variety of western animals, and amassed excellent notes on the behavior of numerous animal species. Their observations on Indian cultures were detailed and extensive, and they also collected an array of Indian artifacts – a buffalo robe decorated with historical art, a bow constructed of elk antler, warrior shirts, women’s buckskin dresses, beadwork, weapons, and even a, meticulously fashioned conical hat from the Clatsops. Lewis and Clark’s contribution to the knowledge of western plant life was immeasurable. They collected more than two hundred plant specimens, and eventually almost one hundred newly named plants would be credited to the expedition. The common names of the plant species toted back east by Lewis and Clark would forever carry the lyrical ring of the wide-open West: avalanche lily, western bluegrass, Rocky Mountain beeplant, Oregon bitterroot, silver buffaloberry, western chockcherry, fire-on-the-mountain, Rocky
Mountain juniper, Missouri milk vetch, Osage orange, prairie rose, Cascade serviceberry, snow-on-the-mountain, western woodberry.