

Daily Hunts: Supplying Food for the Corps of Discovery



The Corps carried a large supply of food with them up the Missouri. Nearly a quarter of the original cargo, 7 tons, was food. They had 3,705 lbs. of salt pork, 3,400 lbs. of flour, 1,200 lbs. of parched corn, 1650 lbs. of hulled corn, 950 lbs. of meal, 560 lbs. of biscuit, and more.

They mainly planned for food to be delivered to them on the go. The expedition crew would mostly live off the land as was common practice in those days. They had assigned hunters from the Corps who followed close by the main party on horseback and foot along the river shores and mountain passes. These men were excellent trackers and skilled marksmen. Lewis saw to it that they did bring along teas, salt, spices, and spirits to help keep morale high and pallets satisfied. But most of that supply had dwindled by the Great Falls of the Missouri in July, 1805. They weren't even halfway into their journey.

There was no luxury of the tasty packaged camp food as have today. They did carry an emergency supply of canned nutrition called "portable soup" (193 lbs. of it). It had the consistency of gelatin and tasted worse than any of the modern day K-rations that were popularized in World War II. That meal was described by troops as a "better than nothing" meal. You get the idea from accounts by Corps members that portable soup might have been even worse. Portable soup was a kind of dehydrated food used in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was a precursor to meat extract and bouillon cubes, an industrially dehydrated food. This is also known as pocket soup or veal glue. The concoction was long a staple of seamen and explorers, for it would keep for many months or even years. In this context, it was a filling and nutritious dish that helped prevent scurvy. But honestly, the men avoided it until they were near starvation. They would even eat candles before they opened the soup. This meal was not at all satisfying to their pallets and actually made some men ill. They obviously preferred the high protein diet of wild game.

The Corps ate about any animal meat imaginable along the trail. Here's the list, top to bottom, as registered in the journals... Deer were easily the most common plate on the menu. Note that horses and dogs had a prominent place on this menu also.

Deer: 1,169

Elk: 392

Bison: 259

Dogs: 190

Beaver: 113

Duck: 68

Antelope: 62

Geese: 57

Grouse: 54

Plover: 48

Bighorn Sheep: 35

Bears: 28

Wolf/Coyote: 28

Turkey: 18

Otter: 16

Horses: 12

Prairie Dog: 10

Pigeon: 9

Rabbit/Hare: 7

Squirrel: 6

Eagle: 5

Porcupine: 5

Badger: 4

Hawk: 3

Panther: 2

Fox: 1

Resources:

Journals of Lewis and Clark by Gary Moulton

Cargo, Equipment and Supplies of the Lewis and Clark Expedition by Kenneth W. Karsmizki

Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition by Donald Jackson