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Passage of Discovery:

The American River Guide to the Missouri River of Lewis and Clark

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Knife River Indian Villages: Choosing a Place to Live Within Nature's Constraints and Opportunities. *From Bismarck, North Dakota, take Route 83 north past Washburn and turn left onto Route 200. Turn left onto Country Route 37 where there is a sign to the Knife River Indian Village National Historical site. Or you can make this visit part of a trip to the restoration of Fort Mandan. To do this, take 83 north to connect to Route 1806, a route named in honor of Lewis and Clark's year of return, to Garrison Dam which forms Lake Sacagawea. Drive to Sacagawea State Park where there is good viewing of wildlife. From there return on Route 1806 east to Route 200 south and visit the Knife River Indian Village National Historical Site.*

Soon after Lewis and Clark arrived near the present location of Bismarck, North Dakota, they began to settle in for the winter, to build their cabins and fort, and to meet with the local Indians. Several closely related groups of Indians lived in the area in small villages, some using different if related languages. Lewis and Clark visited the nearby villages including one on the Knife River where they spoke with the chief. Today, the Knife River village is a National Historical Site, historic because Indians lived there at the time of European expansion into the American West, and also a significant archaeological site, because Indians inhabited this village for many generations. Its villagers were Hidatsas Indians known as the Awaxawi, who were close relatives of the Mandans. Charbonneau and his and wife, Sacagawea, probably lived in this village before joining the expedition.

The Knife River Village people were known to later travelers. Karl Bodmer, the famous landscape artist, painted this area and many of the Indians when he accompanied Prince Maximilian who came from Europe to retrace the travels of Lewis and Clark in 1833-34. Living in the days before photography and being a person of considerable means, Maximilian brought Bodmer along as his personal illustrator of their travels.

I thought of Bodmer's paintings and decided that the Knife River village would be a good place to try to understand how the Indians visited by Lewis and Clark lived within the countryside, in this environment famous for its cold winters. I wanted to

see in what ways they made use of the topography and if they located their village in proximity to resources.

Lewis and Clark chose to build their fort near a Mandan village but down on the floodplain of the Missouri River. The Mandan and Hidatsas villages were somewhat away from the main channel, up on the prairie. In our day, we are used to housing developed in large tracts where the land is bulldozed and flattened, where water is supplied by a central water authority, trash is picked up, sewage systems take away other wastes, and central heating and air conditioning keep us comfortable. Within this modern environment, it is easy to think that there is no connection between the location of a settlement — village, town, fortification, or city — and its environment. But that wasn't true in the past, and it isn't really true today.

We stayed overnight in Bismarck and drove north early in the next day. The countryside to our right, away from the river, was planted in hay, corn, and small grains and looked pretty in the morning summer light. Where a sign indicated a turnoff to the town of Washburn, we saw a dense band of trees covering a number of acres on the western, far, shore of the Missouri which looked less settled and populated.

We reached a parking area where a sign said "Awatixa X'e Village". We saw a few people walking through the remains of the village. It was a warm summer day with a pleasant steady breeze beneath cumulus clouds. I walked about a half mile to the shore of the Knife River, a small, pleasant stream well wooded along its shores. Along the way, I passed remains of Indian dwellings, round depressions in the soil. These seemed to fit Clark's description on October 27, 1804, when he visited a village of similar design and wrote that "the houses are round and Very large Containing Several families." The dwelling sites were crowded so close together that there was little room between them even to dry corn, suggesting either a close-knit social structure or a need for protection against other tribes. There were 51 such depressions visible. At least 400 people occupied this village from the late 1790s until 1834. At the shore of the Knife River a sign advised us to look for artifacts, and we did, finding bones of animals embedded in the side of the bluff, where did not have to excavate in order to see them.

I looked at the village setting and asked myself, if I were to settle here and try to survive the winters, and also enjoy the kind of pleasant summer day that we were fortunate to find, would I pick this location? Yes, I decided, I might. It seemed to be a well chosen place for a village – near water, in a pretty countryside. Game was nearby. We noticed few annoying insects. The streamside was wooded and would provide fuel for the winter. From the village one could see buffalo or enemies in the distance.

Before modern technological civilization, people had to locate their villages and homes to make the best use of the topography and resources. I had a friend who worked as a plumber but was well known for his ability to find Indian artifacts even

where there was a highly settled landscape. One day we got to talking about how he found so many arrowheads and other tools. "It's easy," he said, "I just go to a place and look around and ask myself: If I were going to live here, where would I put my home? Then I go to that spot, and that's where I find Indian tools." The rules are the same, it just takes experience in understanding what makes a good dwelling site. Perhaps his work as a plumber made him more aware of these factors.

When you visit the Knife River Indian Historic Landmark, you can look around and try to decide if you would want to set a village here, and if so, just where would you put your home. It is a lesson we need to learn again. Even with modern technology, a house will be more efficient in terms of energy use and more comfortable if it is properly situated in relation to its local environment. For thousands of years houses were designed so that they were positioned to gather sunlight in the winter. The classic Mediterranean house of Greece and Rome had an enclosed courtyard that faced south so that the sun warmed the house in winter. Recently, the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency supported research that shows that deciduous shade trees planted on the south side of a house cool the house in warm climates significantly in the summer and let the sunlight warm the house in the winter. The early European settlers built sod houses set partially into the ground, because this made them warmer.

Today there is a growing return to the understanding that the location of a house, the compass direction it faces on that location, and the kind of vegetation planted around it, can make a big difference in economics, energy efficiency, and the coziness of the house.

A visit to Knife River Indian Historic Landmark, in a cold climate where people lived for centuries, set me to thinking about this important connection between ourselves and our environment. A breeze picked up and the air felt just a little chilly, a reminder of the cold that was ahead, and of the harsh winter that Lewis and Clark spent near here along the Missouri River.