

## Sergeant Floyd and me

*An attack of appendicitis recalls the Corps of Discovery's single fatality*

BY LANDON Y. JONES

*Serjeant Floyd is taken verry bad all at onc with a Beliose Chorlick.*

—William Clark,  
August 19, 1804<sup>1</sup>

I awoke at midnight on August 14, 2005, with a beliose chorlick. As Clark would have it, a “cholic” is a severe abdominal pain. Mine came 201 years to the week after Sergeant Charles Floyd’s, but I now know a little of how he felt. Lying in bed in our home in Bozeman, Montana, I was gripped by an intense, crampy pain that had twisted my stomach into a hard fist. “It must have been that seafood salad I had yesterday,” I told my wife, Sarah. Oddly, after trying unsuccessfully to go back to sleep in bed, I decided to lie on the floor, as if a firm surface might somehow bring comfort.

Floyd’s illness appeared to come on just as suddenly. He had experienced some earlier discomfort as the expedition moved up the Missouri in the summer of 1804. “I am verry Sick and Has ben for Somtime but have Recoverd my helth again,” he wrote at the end of July.<sup>2</sup> By August 15 he felt well enough to go fishing with Clark and a group of ten men, dragging an improvised seine made of brush through a creek to entrap more than 300 fish.

Floyd had been among the first recruits for the expedition as one of Clark’s “Nine Young Men from Kentucky.” He had no previous military service, having enlisted directly from civilian life, where he had worked as a postal rider and constable. It may have helped that he came from the same close-knit society of Kentucky land owners as did Clark. He was a first cousin of one of the sergeants, Nathaniel Pryor, and may have been a distant relative of the co-captain.

Floyd proved himself to be a “young man of much merit,” as Lewis later remarked.<sup>3</sup> The sight of this vigorous young man so swiftly disabled alarmed everyone on the expedition. All of the journal-keepers commented on Floyd’s illness. Deeply worried, Clark stayed up all night with Floyd. “[We] attempt in Vain to relieve him, I am much concerned for his Situation,” he wrote, “we could get nothing to Stay on his Stomach a moment.” Clark observed that all the men were



**August 20, 1804: The Corps of Discovery lays to rest Sergeant Charles Floyd, the only man to die on the expedition.**

“attentive to him,” especially York.<sup>4</sup>

At 3 A.M., with nothing staying on my stomach either, I agreed to let Sarah drive me 15 miles to the emergency room at Bozeman Deaconess Hospital. Every bump on the road hurt, but my trip would have been easy compared to Floyd’s, lying in the keelboat on the morning of August 20 while the men poled and pulled it 13 miles upstream. We “Came to

[to] make a warm bath for Sergt. Floyd hoping it would brace him a little,” Clark wrote.<sup>5</sup>

When I arrived at the E.R. in Bozeman, the attending physician interviewed me and then asked me to push on my abdomen with my finger.

“Tell me where it hurt the most,” he said.

“Here,” I said, indicating my lower right abdomen.

“I think you may have appendicitis,” he said.

Appendicitis is the most common reason for emergency abdominal pain in children and young adults, though people of all ages can get it. It strikes one in fifteen people over the course of a lifetime.<sup>6</sup> Floyd, then just 21 or 22, was right in the target zone. At 61, I was something of an outlier.

I had a CT-scan to confirm the diagnosis and was promptly wheeled into the operating room for an emergency appendectomy. It turned out that my appendix had not only been infected, it had ruptured.

Floyd’s appendix had most likely ruptured, too, and led to peritonitis, an infection of the delicate skein of membranes which lines the abdominal cavity and supports the internal organs.<sup>7</sup> Both Lewis and Clark administered to him, presumably with their usual treatments of purging and bleeding. As Dr. David J. Peck points out in his recent study of the medical aspects of the expedition, “Whatever they tried, it did not work and probably only made Floyd worse.”<sup>8</sup>

Floyd died “with a great deel of composure” on the second day after experiencing his worst symptoms.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that he had silently endured severe pain for several days during the course of the infection but before the rupture.

*Soundings continues on page 47*

ILLUSTRATION: RICHARD SCHLECHT/  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION

## Soundings (cont. from p. 48)

After Floyd was buried, near present-day Sioux City, Iowa, Clark reflected in his journal that Floyd had “at All times given us proofs of his impartiality Sincerity to ourselves and good will to Serve his Countrey.”<sup>10</sup>

An hour after my surgery I was wheeled into a hospital room that offered beautiful views of Bozeman Pass and the same field where Clark had taken his compass readings before entering the mountains. Floyd was not there with Clark because he had the misfortune to fall ill long before appendicitis was first successfully operated upon, in the late 1880s. Like many writers on Lewis and Clark, I have often envied the romance of their journey. But on this particular day I was grateful that my attendants were neither Lewis nor Clark but capable physicians and nurses armed with two hundred years of medical knowledge.

*The writer suffered his appendicitis attack*

*just a few days after his tour of the Bozeman Valley with Jim Sims. (See his story, “Clark on the Yellowstone,” beginning on page 24.)*

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition*, 13 volumes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983-2001), Vol. 2, p. 493.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 9, p. 391. July 31, 1804.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783-1854* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) Vol. 1, p. 366. Lewis to Dearborn, January 15, 1807.

<sup>4</sup> Moulton, Vol. 2, p. 492. August 19, 1804

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 495. August 20, 1804.

<sup>6</sup> Among our contemporaries, President George W. Bush had an appendectomy in 1956.



The author's view of Bozeman Pass from his hospital window.

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<sup>7</sup> While Floyd's symptoms closely resembled appendicitis, author David Peck and others have pointed out that he could have suffered from ailments ranging from stomach ulcers to tularemia.

<sup>8</sup> David J. Peck, M.D., *Or Perish in the Attempt: Wilderness Medicine in the Lewis & Clark Expedition* (Helena, Mont.: Farcountry Press, 2002), p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> Moulton, Vol. 2, p. 495. Entry for August 20, 1805.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

**SPARROW BOOKS**  
**1/3 Sq.**  
**Pickup from**  
**p. 39, 11.05**

**YELLOWSTONE**  
**SAFARI**  
**1/6 V**  
**Pickup from**  
**p. 39, 11.05**