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WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO MERIWETHER LEWIS?

The Suicide Explanation Is Not Generally Believed Down on the Natchez Trace.

By Dee Brown

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On an upland ridge between the Tennessee and Duck rivers, the old Natchez Trace crosses Tennessee State Highway 20. At this point on the west side of the trace is a clearing broken by an occasional giant oak, a persimmon, a dogwood. At one end of the clearing is a broken column of marble standing upon a granite pedestal. This is the Meriwether Lewis Monument.

Sometime during the dark hours preceding daylight of October 11, 1809, this peaceful little park was the scene of violence and horror and possible madness. Here died Meriwether Lewis, an American hero aged 35, killed either by his own hand or by a person or persons unknown. The tragedy has become one of the enduring mysteries of history.

Remarkably, even after a century and a half, there are still people in this area who hold strong opinions on the event. Through six or seven generations of families, oral tradition has turned the death of Meriwether Lewis into continuing legend.

Lewis was a Virginian, an army officer chosen by President Thomas Jefferson in 1801 to serve as his secretary. Both men grew up in the Blue Ridge foothills of Albemarle County. They were imbued with a similar Southern heritage, an awareness of the importance of land and a fascination with the unknown territory beyond the frontier. The aging president saw in Lewis the son he had always wanted.

Soon after Jefferson acquired the vast Louisiana Territory in 1803, he set Lewis to planning an expedition to the Pacific Ocean. With William Clark, a friend of his army years, Lewis completed this epic journey of exploration in 1806. A hero to the nation, he was named governor of the Louisiana Territory and was soon embroiled in political contentions. His keenest desire was to arrange the journals of the great Lewis and Clark expedition for publication before spurious accounts were rushed into print to satisfy the demands of the public. Petty chores of office, however, interfered with his efforts. Adding to his frustrations were the actions of Washington bureaucrats who, even in that early time, were a bane to officials in the field. The bureaucrats refused to approve vouchers for necessary expenditures and questioned Lewis's integrity.

Finally, Lewis decided to journey to Washington to present his official records directly to his accusers and, more important, to deliver the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition to his publishers in Philadelphia. He left St. Louis by boat on September 4, 1809, accompanied by his free servant, John Pernier, sometimes described as a Creole. Pernier had once worked for President Jefferson in Washington. Lewis's papers and other baggage were packed in four trunks. Not much is known about the boat, but it was probably a flatboat manned by a small crew, with a shelter at one end. Lewis's intention was to float down the Mississippi to New Orleans and continue by sail to the East Coast.

As it usually is in early September, the weather along the river was exceedingly hot and humid. Before reaching Fort Pickering at Chicksaw Bluffs (present-day Memphis), Lewis fell ill, probably of malaria. Entries in his journal contain almost daily references to "bilious fever" and "pills of opium and tartar." It is worth noting here that, during the expedition to the Pacific, Lewis served as medical officer. He was well supplied with laudanum, an opium-based medicine that is habit-forming and can eventually cause mental deterioration. When he arrived at Fort Pickering on September 15, he was evidently in such a condition that the fort's commander, Captain Gilbert Russell, decided to detain him there "until he recovered, or some friend might arrive in whose hands he could depart in safety."

On the following day, Lewis was sufficiently recovered to write—in his style of haphazard spelling and colloquial grammar—a shaky letter to President James Madison informing him of his safe arrival at Fort Pickering and mentioning his physical exhaustion. "My apprehension from the heat of the lower country," he wrote, "and my fear of the original papers relative to my voyage to the Pacific Ocean falling into the hands of the British has induced me to change my mind and proceed by land through the state of Tennessee to the City of Washington."

Rumors of an approaching war with Britain were certainly in circulation along the river, but there may have been more behind the change of plans than Lewis cared to put down in writing. Only three years earlier, Aaron Burr and General James Wilkinson had plotted with the Spanish government to establish a separate nation from the Mississippi Valley into the Southwest. Wilkinson had concealed his treasonable activities by betraying Burr, and was now back in New Orleans commanding American troops. He possessed the power to stop anyone entering or leaving the mouth of the Mississippi. Wilkinson had preceded Lewis as governor of the Louisiana Territory, and while in office he secretly accepted payments from the Spanish government. It is possible that Lewis discovered this treachery, and if so, he may have feared Wilkinson more than the British.

Three days after Lewis reached Fort Pickering, a government Indian agent, James Neelly, arrived there en route to Nashville by way of the Chickasaw Agency. Although Lewis knew the country around Fort Pickering (he had commanded the post in 1797), he must have welcomed the opportunity to travel with Neelly. They set out for the agency on September 29, with two trunks carrying Lewis's precious papers strapped to a packhorse: Lewis's other two trunks were left stored in the fort. The traveling party consisted of Lewis and Pernier, Neelly and his servant, and an unspecified number of Chickasaw Indians. The on1y source of information about the behavior of Lewis over the next 11 days comes from James Neelly, who may not have been a trustworthy man.

"On our arrival at the Chickasaw nation," Neelly later wrote to Thomas Jefferson, "I discovered that he [Lewis] appeared at times deranged in mind. We rested there ten days and came on. One days Journey after crossing Tennessee River where we encamped we lost two of our horses. I remained behind to hunt them & the Governor proceeded on, with a promise to wait for me at the first houses he came to that was inhabited by white people: he reached the house of Mr. Grinder about sunset…" One of the odd actions of Neelly was sending his servant forward with Lewis and Pernier. Most men would have kept at least one assistant to aid in the onerous search for strayed horses.

The remainder of Neelly's letter contains information given him by Priscilla Grinder, who is history's sole source for the last hours of Meriwether Lewis's life. Priscilla Knight Grinder and her

husband Robert came to Tennessee from Stokes County, North Carolina; they built a cabin that became known as Grinder's Stand, an informal sort of inn for travelers between Natchez and Nashville on the Natchez Trace. Priscilla Grinder told her story to Neelly, and a few months later to ornithologist Alexander Wilson, and many years later to an anonymous schoolteacher. It is mainly from their reports that historians have pieced together the circumstances of Lewis's death.

Neelly's letter, written only a week after Lewis died, states that Robert Grinder was not at home and that Mrs. Grinder, "discovering the governor to be deranged, gave him up the house and slept in one near it." He added that the two servants spent the night in a stable loft some distance from the other house. At about 3 o'clock in the morning, Mrs. Grinder heard two pistol shots from the main house. She awakened the servants, but too late to save Lewis. "He had shot himself in the head with one pistol & a little below the Breast with the other—when his servant came in he says; I have done the business my good Servant give me water. He gave him some, he survived but a short time."

Perhaps these were all the details that Priscilla Grinder could bring herself to tell James Neelly so soon after the tragedy. Or perhaps Neelly saw no reason to send a detailed account to Jefferson. He did recognize the importance of the contents of Lewis's trunks, and arranged for them to be forwarded to Washington.

About seven months after Lewis died, a Scottish-born ornithologist, Alexander Wilson, arrived at Grinder's Stand. Wilson was a friend of Lewis's, who had given him specimens of birds brought back from the expedition to the Pacific. While stopping at Nashville on a journey to St. Louis, Wilson decided to venture down the Natchez Trace to learn something about his friend's death.

"In the same room where he expired," Wilson later wrote, "I took down from Mrs. Grinder the particulars of that melancholy event."

Apparently, Mrs. Grinder was willing to tell Wilson many details that are lacking in Neelly's report. Governor Lewis, she said, arrived at Grinder's Stand alone about sundown and asked for a night's lodging. He was wearing a traveler's duster, blue-and-white striped. When she asked if he was journeying alone, he replied that his servants were following close behind. He removed his saddle, brought it into the inn and asked for spirits, but drank very little.

As soon as the servants arrived with the packhorses, Lewis asked Pernier for some gunpowder, saying he was certain he had some in a canister, but Mrs. Grinder was unable to hear Pernier's reply. After the servants went to the stables, Lewis began walking back and forth. "Sometimes he would seem as if he were walking up to me," Mrs. Grinder told Wilson, "and would suddenly wheel round, and walk back as fast as he could."

When she called him to supper, he sat down at the table, but ate only a few mouthfuls before he sprang up and began talking to himself in a violent manner, his face flushing. Calming himself, Lewis lighted his pipe, drew a chair to the door, and sat down, remarking to Mrs. Grinder in a kindly tone of voice, "Madam, this is a very pleasant evening." Finishing his pipe, he arose and began pacing back and forth again. Refilling his pipe, he sat down to look toward the dying light in the west. "What a sweet evening it is," he said.

Although Mrs. Grinder prepared a bed for him, Lewis told her he preferred to sleep on the floor, and he called Pernier to bring his bearskins and buffalo robe. Mrs. Grinder went to the nearby kitchen-house to sleep with her children, leaving the main cabin to Lewis.

Disturbed by Lewis's strange behavior, Priscilla Grinder was unable to sleep. As the kitchen-house was only a few paces from the cabin, she could hear him walking back and forth and talking to himself "like a lawyer," she said. Sometime before sunrise she heard a pistol shot and something falling on the floor, followed by the words "O Lord!" Then she heard a second pistol fired.

A few minutes later Lewis was at her door, calling out: "O madam! Give me some water, and heal my wounds."

Why Priscilla Grinder did not respond to Lewis's cry for help has puzzled historians of the American frontier, who believe most frontier women would have done so. Years later, the Grinders' slave girl, Melindy, said she was with Priscilla and the children and that the sound of gunshots and Lewis's strange behavior made them all afraid to unbar the door.

Through chinks in the logs, Priscilla Grinder saw a shadowy figure stagger back from the door and fall against a stump between the kitchen-house and the cabin. He then crawled for some distance to a tree, where he raised himself and sat for about a minute before making his way back into the cabin.

Mrs. Grinder did not, or could not, recall how much time passed before Lewis once again returned to her door. He did not ask for water or help this time, but moved on to the well, where she heard him scraping the bucket with a gourd for water. "It appeared that this cooling element was denied the dying man!" Alexander Wilson wrote. "As soon as day broke and not before—the terror of the woman having permitted him to remain for two hours in this most deplorable situation—she sent two of her children to the barn, her husband not being at home, to bring the servants."

They found Lewis lying on the bed in the cabin, still conscious. A piece of his forehead was blown away, exposing the brain "without having bled much." Lewis uncovered his side and showed them where another bullet had entered. He begged them to take his rifle and blowout his brains, in return for which he would give them all the money he had in his trunk. "I am no coward," he kept repeating, "but I am so strong, so hard to die." He told Pernier not to be afraid, that he would not hurt him. About two hours later he died, "just as the sun rose above the trees."

James Neelly, in his letter to Jefferson, stated that he had Lewis ''as decently buried as I could in that place—if there is anything wished by his friends to be done to his grave I will attend to their Instructions."

In most violent and unexplained events involving persons of historical importance, folklore enters the telling with passage of time. The mythology of Meriwether Lewis's death was undoubtedly already in oral tradition some 30 years later when an anonymous schoolteacher from the Cherokee Nation visited the Lewis grave. He found Priscilla Grinder, who was then in her late 60s, and listened to her story.

During her conversation with the schoolteacher, Priscilla Grinder added three men to the opening scene at Grinder's Stand. The trio arrived shortly after Lewis and his servants, whereupon Lewis drew a brace of pistols and ordered them to leave. Mrs. Grinder also added a third pistol shot. She omitted her previous statement that she had sent her children to the stables for the servants and instead said she was surprised to see them coming from the stables because she believed they had shared the cabin with Lewis. John Pernier, she added, was wearing Lewis's clothes—the same outfit Lewis had arrived in. When she asked Pernier about the clothes, he replied that Lewis had given them to him. The servants then searched for Lewis on the trace and found him badly wounded and dressed in tattered clothing. Not long after they brought him back to the cabin, he died.

Whether these discrepancies were due to blurred memory on the part of Mrs. Grinder or to other tales heard by the schoolteacher, no one can say. By the 1840s there was already an oral tradition of a coroner's jury assembled by Justice Samuel Whiteside immediately after the death to hold an inquest. The jury's decision supposedly was for suicide, but at least two of the five jurors were said to have decided for murder, yet were reluctant to name the killer. Failure to find any report of this inquest has led some historians to conclude that the county records were lost in a courthouse fire; others believed that the pages containing the report were torn from the record book.

According to Jill Garrett, who until recently was Maury County's official historian, there was no courthouse fire, the records still exist, and no pages are missing. Her further research into the matter indicated that local justices such as Samuel Whiteside did not begin forwarding reports to the county courthouse until the decade following Lewis's death. Findings of the coroner's jury, therefore, would be in Justice Whiteside's docket book, which apparently has been lost.

Supposedly, moccasin tracks and the print of an unusual rifle butt were found around the cabin on the morning after. The rifle butt's markings were recognized as belonging to Tom Runions, a part Indian who was suspected of being an occasional land pirate. Local residents believed that Runions would show no mercy to anyone who attempted to expose his alleged robberies and murders. The jurors may also have feared Robert Grinder because he sold 'high wine" and whiskey illegally to the Indians. In 1904, the centennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, a newspaperman went to the grave site to photograph the lonely monument. After talking with a number of people in the neighborhood, he wrote, "By the settlers of that vicinity, only one opinion was ever entertained—that Grinder had murdered Lewis for his money."

Yellow journalism was in full flower by the turn of the century, and in addition to Robert Grinder and Tom Runions, other names were soon on the list of possible murderers—Priscilla Grinder, James Neelly and John Pernier. One elaborate theory concerned General James Wilkinson, who might have hired a murderer to stop Lewis from revealing the general's guilt as a traitor.

As for Neelly, he continued for three more years as agent to the Chickasaws and then was abruptly discharged by the secretary of war for incompetence. After that he seems to disappear from the pages of history.

Soon after Lewis's death, Robert and Priscilla Grinder moved to a farm near Centerville, where they lived out their lives and left descendants who, for the most part, were substantial and responsible people. Tom Runions married one of their nieces, Perthania Grinder, and remained in the area.

John Pernier, the trusted servant, traveled straight from Grinder's Stand to Virginia to visit his former employer, Thomas Jefferson. He told Jefferson that Lewis had committed suicide, and Jefferson accepted that judgment. He recalled that Lewis "had from early youth suffered from hypochondriac affections…inherited by him from his father." Pernier then visited Lewis's family, presumably to claim $240 that he said his deceased master owed him for back wages. The family members refused to accept Pernier's story of suicide and fixed their suspicions upon the servant as a murderer.

Seven months after the death of Lewis, John Pernier himself died suddenly in Washington. Folklore has it that his throat was cut from ear to ear, but the man with whom he was boarding wrote Thomas Jefferson to inform him that Pernier deliberately ended his life with an overdose of laudanum. Jefferson recorded the event in a letter to a friend: "You will probably know the fate of poor Pierney, Lewis' servant, who lately followed his master's example."

The verdict for suicide reached by Jefferson, and by most modern scholars, has never been accepted by the people of the area around the scene of Lewis's death. Today, even though they are deeply concerned by the rapid changes taking place in middle Tennessee (construction of General Motors' huge Saturn automobile plant at Spring Hill, for example), they will stop whatever they may be doing to express their opinion on what happened at Grinder's Stand. And it's not unusual for descendants of the "suspects" to state that their ancestors "might have done it."

Not too long ago, vandals invaded a graveyard near Centerville and broke the tombstones of Priscilla and Robert Grinder. A descendant retrieved them and carried them off to Nashville for restoration. It was noted at the time that the name on the stones was Griner, not Grinder, proving that historians do not always get their spellings right. As to what really happened at Grinder's Stand, only Priscilla Grinder ever told. Still, "everybody knows what happened," one native of the area recently declared. "Robert Grinder came home that night, found Meriwether Lewis in bed with his wife, and shot him. The rest of the story she just made up."

Dee Brown's books include Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. He lives in Little Rock, Arkansas. This article was previously printed in* Southern Magazine of Little Rock, Arkansas*, and is reprinted here with permission from the magazine and Dee Brown.*

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