

# Indians & Explorers, Dams & Tour Boats

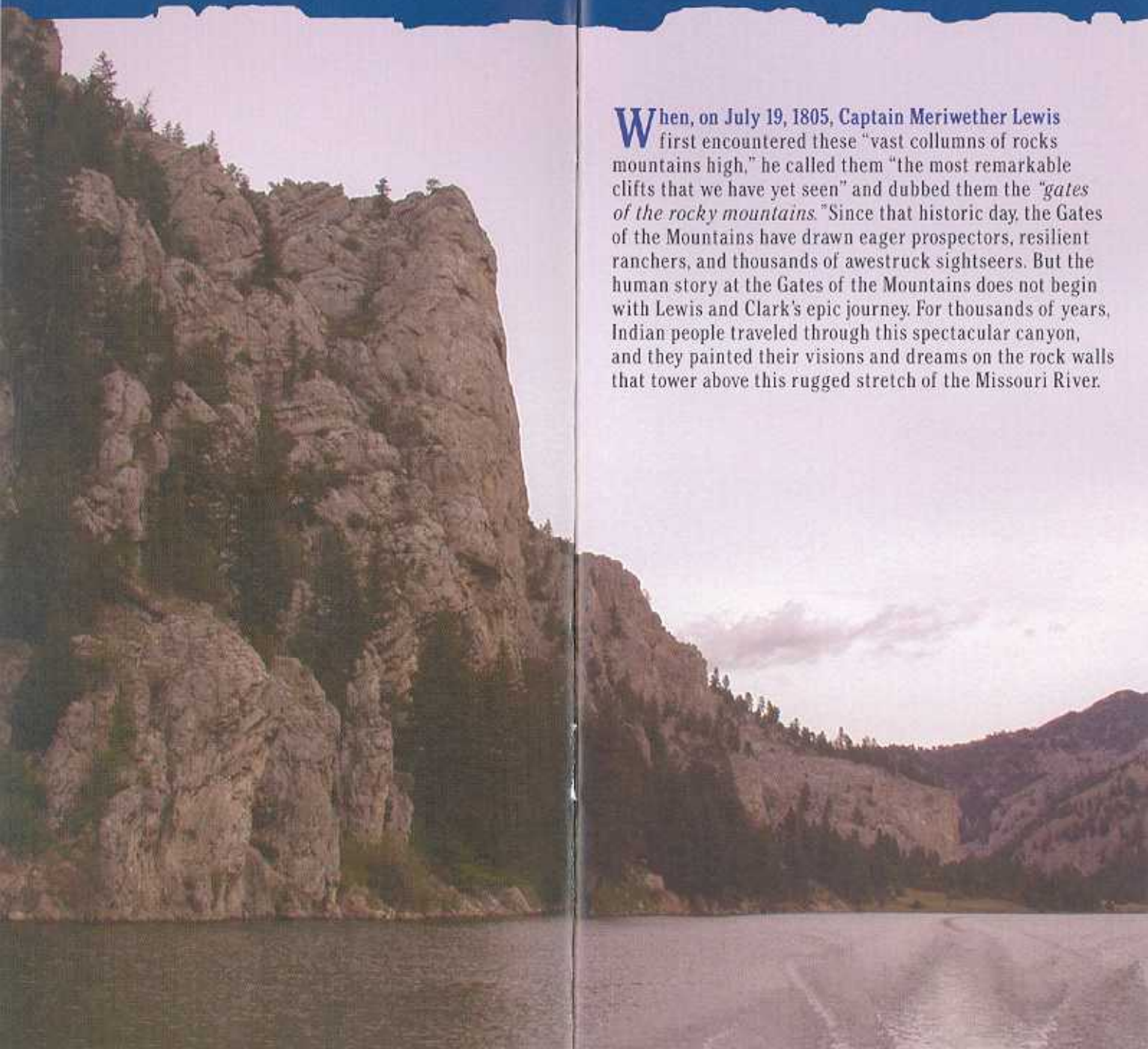
Human Presence in the  
Gates of the Mountains



## Before Lewis and Clark



**W**hen, on July 19, 1805, Captain Meriwether Lewis first encountered these "vast columns of rocks mountains high," he called them "the most remarkable cliffs that we have yet seen" and dubbed them the "*gates of the rocky mountains*." Since that historic day, the Gates of the Mountains have drawn eager prospectors, resilient ranchers, and thousands of awestruck sightseers. But the human story at the Gates of the Mountains does not begin with Lewis and Clark's epic journey. For thousands of years, Indian people traveled through this spectacular canyon, and they painted their visions and dreams on the rock walls that tower above this rugged stretch of the Missouri River.



## Early Lifeways in the Gates



**G**eneration after generation, American Indians left evidence of their passing within the Gates of the Mountains canyon: at campsites, in rockshelters, and on cliff faces. Since World

War II, this rich record has brought archaeologists into the canyon. Even before Richard Forbis began the first archaeological survey in 1949, early ranchers like Daniel Hilger were aware of archaeological ruins—camps, caves, and rock art—in the Gates. Projectile points, hide scrapers, glass and shell beads, clay ornaments, and stone pipes have all been found in the canyon.

Several surveys by archaeologists since Forbis's first effort found relatively little evidence of the prehistoric human presence in the Gates because many sites alongside the Missouri had been inundated by reservoirs or disturbed by visitors.

More recently, archaeologists have revisited the Missouri River and Gates areas outside of the reservoir pools to document surviving sites. These sparse and often badly disturbed sites offer few clues to the cultural origins of the people who created them, but they are likely the product of ancient Salish (Flathead), Blackfeet, and

Shoshone occupation or use of the area. Some sites may be attributed to the many different Indian bands that traveled up and down the Missouri River in the distant past.

The rugged and narrow river canyon through the Gates—which was bypassed by major Indian trails—apparently did not attract extensive Indian habitation. Instead this remote and solitary place lured hunters searching for deer, elk, and mountain sheep—and it drew people seeking contact with the world of spirits in the rocky cliffs.

In fact, ancient pictograph sites, where Indians painted images with a liquid red paint on cliff faces, are the most abundant archaeological site type in the Gates. Ethnographic data and tribal oral history show that rock art is of great spiritual importance to Indian groups, both past and present.

The Gates of the Mountains pictographs depict humans with headdresses, deer-like figures, snakes, bear paw prints, and human handprints, as well as smears, dots, and other abstract images. These rock art sites served as doorways or portals into the supernatural world and were used by shamans for spiritual rituals. Almost certainly, individuals came to the canyon to seek visions—through solitude, fasting, and other means—that would grant them special powers from the spirit world. Many of the images drawn at these sites, in fact, may commemorate successful visions.

# Protecting the Prehistoric Legacy at the Gates of the Mountains



The Gates of the Mountains have long been, and remain today, a special place. In the past, artifact collectors have destroyed or defaced important prehistoric sites here. By studying these sites, we learn about the human experience of long ago—and by unlocking the events of the past, we begin to understand who we are today.

*The past is our legacy, a gift passed down to us by those who first inhabited this land. Protect and preserve the past for present and future generations.*

## Up the Great Missouri: Meriwether Lewis in the Gates



American Indians visited the Gates of the Mountains for centuries, but Meriwether Lewis was the first EuroAmerican to write a description of the place—and he provided the spectacular canyon with the name it bears today. These cliffs, he wrote, “rise from the waters edge on either side perpendicularly to the height of 1200 feet. every object here wears a dark and gloomy aspect. the tow[er]ing and projecting rocks in many places seem ready to tumble on us.”

### *Encountering those “most remarkable cliffs”*

After portaging around the five cascades of the Great Falls of the Missouri, the Corps of Discovery headed upriver on July 15, 1805. On July 16, they spotted 40 willow shelters and 10-day-old horse tracks they believed belonged to a band of Shoshones. Later the same day, they spotted another abandoned Indian camp that included one large lodge that measured 60 feet in diameter with another “80 leather lodges,” also empty, standing in the nearby vicinity. On July 18, William Clark and a small party set out ahead of the expedition, near present-day Holter Dam in hopes of finding the Shoshones and acquiring horses to cross the Rocky Mountains.

As Lewis and the rest of the Corps proceeded up the Missouri, they found quantities of currants on both banks of the river, along with bushes of serviceberry, chokecherry, and gooseberry. Lewis also noted sunflowers blooming in “great abundance.” Indians used the seed of the sunflower, Lewis wrote in his journal, to make bread and “in thickening their soope.” Each day, the Corps spotted bighorn rams, but “no other game.”

On July 19, as they continued up the Missouri, Lewis wrote that they “almost suffocated in this confined vally with heat.” By evening, they had come upon those “most remarkable cliffs.” Lewis and his men were forced to travel late into the evening before he “found a place sufficiently large to encamp my small party.” It was here that Lewis wrote his famous phrase, “from the singular appearance of this place I called it the *gates of the rocky mountains*.”

There is some question as to where Lewis’s party actually camped that night within the Gates of the Mountains. Robert Bergantino, a noted Lewis and Clark expert who has painstakingly mapped the routes of the expedition, believes that the camp was on the southeast side of the river, close to the Gates, on a small level area just big enough to accommodate Lewis and his 15 men. The late Stephen Ambrose thought that they camped in Field’s Gulch. Because the explorers only camped in the Gates of the Mountains one night, they left behind little or no remains. As a result, the location of their camp may well remain a mystery.

The passage through this hot, narrow canyon must have been disconcerting to the explorers. Expressing his fears, Lewis wrote that surely the river could not have “worn a passage” through every “immence body of solid rock,” as it had through the Gates. Luckily, on the following day, the Corps “passed through a range of low mountains and the country became more open again.” Their campsite that evening presented new challenges. “The prickly pears,” wrote Lewis, “are so abundant that we could scarcely find room to lye.”



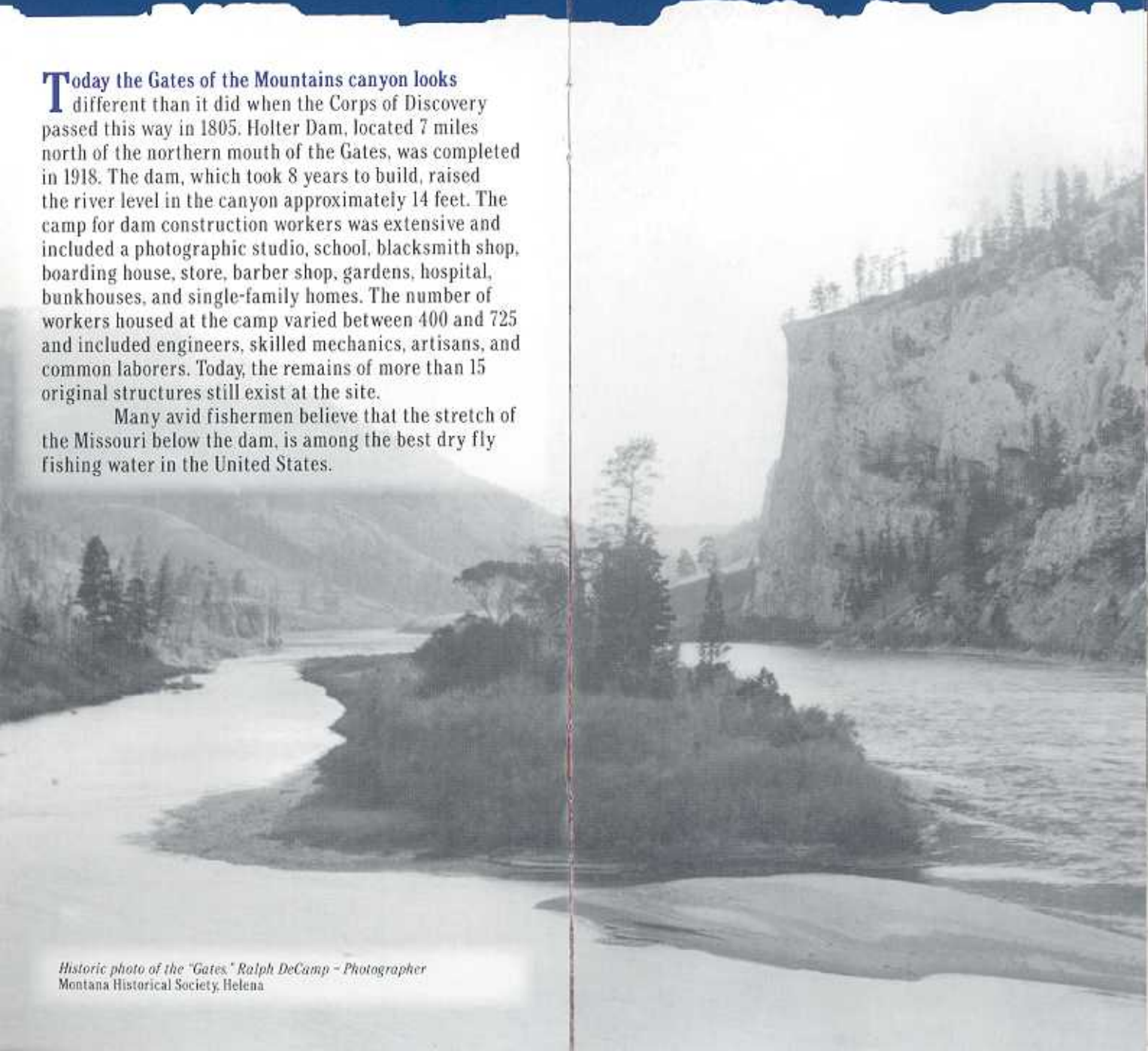
*Prickly Pear in bloom*

## Building a Dam



**T**oday the Gates of the Mountains canyon looks different than it did when the Corps of Discovery passed this way in 1805. Holter Dam, located 7 miles north of the northern mouth of the Gates, was completed in 1918. The dam, which took 8 years to build, raised the river level in the canyon approximately 14 feet. The camp for dam construction workers was extensive and included a photographic studio, school, blacksmith shop, boarding house, store, barber shop, gardens, hospital, bunkhouses, and single-family homes. The number of workers housed at the camp varied between 400 and 725 and included engineers, skilled mechanics, artisans, and common laborers. Today, the remains of more than 15 original structures still exist at the site.

Many avid fishermen believe that the stretch of the Missouri below the dam, is among the best dry fly fishing water in the United States.



## The Hilger Legacy: Ranching and Boating in the Gates



**N**icolas Hilger II came to Helena, Montana's capital city, during the gold rush of 1864. Two years later, he brought his family west from Minnesota in a covered wagon, and in 1867, the Hilgers settled on a homestead near the Gates of the Mountains. That same year, Nicolas became a Helena judge and was thereafter known as Judge Hilger.

In 1886, the judge purchased the stern wheeler steamboat he named the *Rose of Helena*, and he began running tours down the Missouri to Great Falls, a 106-mile journey that took two full days.

In 1908, Hauser Dam, located 23 miles upriver from Holter Dam, broke and flooded the area downstream, sweeping the Hilgers' home up in the floodwater. The house floated around the lake in a circular pattern, settling again almost exactly in its original spot. The house required only minor repairs, and the family

continued to live in it for many years. In 1913, Judge Hilger died and left the ranch to his son, Nicolas D., known as N. D.

In 1922, another of Judge Hilger's sons, David, formed the Gates of the Mountains Transportation Company and began operating tour boats on a regular basis (though they no longer went as far as Great Falls). In 1933, the Hilger children turned the family ranch into a successful Hereford operation. The ranch was sold to the current owner in 1986.

In 1973, Judge Johnson of Butte bought the Gates of the Mountains Transportation Company from the Hilgers and formed the Gates of the Mountains Foundation. Today, the Foundation continues to offer boat trips through the canyon, where bighorn sheep and bald eagles make their home alongside painted images inscribed centuries ago by American Indians.

*"Steamboat Rose on the Missouri River, Nicholas Hilger at the wheel"*  
Montana Historical Society, Helena



## The Mann Gulch Fire



**T**he Mann Gulch fire in the Gates of the Mountains, which killed 13 men on August 5, 1949, was an extremely important historical event. The tragedy changed the way fires were fought in the Northwest. After this fire, the concept of setting back fires gained acceptance and more emphasis was placed on smokejumper and firefighter training. The site where the 13 men died, located a few miles up Mann Gulch, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A sign commemorates the event at the mouth of Mann Gulch along the Missouri River.

## For More Information



The Gates of the Mountains area is currently managed as a recreation corridor by the Montana Department of Natural Resources, the USDA-Helena National Forest, and the USDI-Bureau of Land Management. For more information about recreational opportunities, please contact the Helena National Forest, Helena Ranger Station, at (406) 449-5490, or visit the HNF website at [www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/index.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/index.shtml).

Both Meriwether Picnic Site and Coulter Campground are located in the Gates of the Mountains area. There is no charge for use of either site. Meriwether Picnic Site can be accessed by boat from the Gates of the Mountains Boat Club or from the Holter Dam area. It can also be reached by hiking an 18-mile-long trail from Refrigerator Canyon. Coulter Campground can be accessed by boat from the Gates of the Mountains Boat Club at Upper Holter Lake, or from the Holter Dam area, or by hiking 4.5 miles on the Spring Gulch Trail #257 which can be accessed from the American Bar Road. To access the Boat Club that offers commercial tours throughout the summer months, take I-15 north from Helena to the Gates of the Mountains exit. To access the Holter Dam area, take either the Wolf Creek exit or the Craig exit.



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