

Lewis and Clark Center opens at Hells Gate Park

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LEWISTON, Idaho (AP) -- An aging state park with a plain parking lot has been transformed into a state-of-the-art tourism center complete with a babbling brook, bronze wildlife sculptures, natural landscaping and spectacular view of the Snake River.

More than a hundred people spread across its outdoor plaza Thursday morning as local leaders and officials congratulated Idaho on its new Lewis and Clark Discovery Center at Hells Gate State Park.

"This is another example of Idahoans coming together to preserve our unique history and our unique heritage," said U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho.

Smelling of campfires and dressed in homemade buckskin leggings, Vern Illi and Phil Johnston of the Lewis and Clark Bitterroot Corps, a living history organization, strode among the park employees and community leaders at the grand opening celebration. The two met 20 years ago at a winter outing and have since participated together in commemorative and educational events focused on the Corps of Discovery. They were among 10 people in traditional attire Thursday.

"We do it because it gives a little more life to the story," said Illi. "But we also enjoy putting on the gear and getting into the history of it."

The Idaho Parks Department is hoping that as the 200th anniversary of the expedition reaches Idaho next August, others will want to get into that history through the new center, where it hopes to hold commemorative events.

"Hells Gate has always been a jumping off point for people wanting to visit Hells Canyon," said Park Manager Mike McElhatton. "Now we can offer something else."

The \$1.4 million facility opened its doors 10 days ago and has since welcomed a trickle of visitors eager to sample a bit of history. So far the glitches have been at a minimum. "This week we did have a big storm here and our tepee blew down," said McElhatton.

The handmade tepee, which was quickly re-erected, plays a role in one of three outdoor themes for the center. The first is the meeting of the European and Nez Perce Indian cultures that resulted in friendship when the tribe supplied the expedition with horses and guided the members through the mountains. The other themes, which are set along winding trails between the center and the river, are based on the expedition's difficult trek through the Bitterroots and its journey by dugout canoe down what is now called the Snake River.

The Discovery Center project started several years ago when community members came to state park officials with ideas for updating the old visitor's center. "That evolved into a Lewis and Clark theme," said McElhatton. "Then we realized we needed a whole new facility."

Pulling funding from other state park accounts, the agency was able to raise money to build and landscape the site.

"When we first visited, everything was dried up and brown and miserable," said architect Steve Simmons, president of Lombard-Conrad Architects in Boise. He said the project was planned to fit in with the rocky surroundings, turn attention to the river and emphasize the view toward Swallows Nest Rock across the Snake, which looks much as it did when Lewis and Clark came through here.

Many at the ceremony said they hoped the center would draw visitors not only to the Lewiston and Clarkston areas, but all along the expedition's routes in Idaho and Eastern Washington.

"This is an undiscovered area," said Lewiston Mayor Jeff Nessett. "It's going to be discovered and we're helping make that happen."