Prairies as Viewed by the Lewis and Clark Expedition

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In his book *Undaunted Courage*, Stephen Ambrose noted that most American pioneers associated good-quality soils with hardwood trees and would have regarded the virtually treeless prairies of the Great Plains as poor agricultural land (Ambrose, 1997). Ambrose noted that Meriwether Lewis did not necessarily agree with this view.

While Lewis, and perhaps Thomas Jefferson, reflected dissenting views on this matter, Patrick Gass, who became Sergeant Gass after the death of Sergeant Charles Floyd, appears to represent the conventional view.

Patrick Gass’s Capability Classes

On May 27, 1805, the expedition was in what is now Fergus County, Montana, as it traveled through the Missouri River Breaks, which Gass characterized as “a country which presents little to our view, but scenes of barrenness and desolation.” Noting that the expedition has traveled “by the course of this river” nearly 2,300 miles, Gass said that “it may not be improper to make two or three general observations respecting the country we have passed” (Moulton, 1987, vol. 10, p. 94). These observations divide the land from St. Louis to the Missouri River Breaks into three classes, which I call Class I, Class II, and Class III.

Class I

Gass noted that this land extends about 600 river miles, from the mouth of the Missouri River to the mouth of the Platte River. It “is generally of a good quality, with a sufficient quantity of timber; in many places very rich, and the country pleasant and beautiful” (Moulton, 1987, vol. 10, p. 94).

Class II

Gass asserted that from the mouth of the Platte to the Missouri River Breaks (a distance of more than 1,500 river miles), “the soil is less rich, and except in the bottoms, the land of an inferior quality,” adding, however, that it “may in general be called good second rate land” (Moulton, 1987, vol. 10, p. 94). Gass associated the relatively inferior quality of the land with a scarcity of trees:

Along the Missouri and the waters which flow into it, cotton wood and willows are frequent in the bottoms and islands; but the upland is almost entirely with-