

Missouri News

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Bicycle Ride Marks Zebulon Pike Bicentennial

(JEFFERSON CITY, Mo.) – During the first week of August, a St. Louis athlete will bicycle across Missouri to commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of Zebulon Pike's 1806 expedition across the southwest portion of the Louisiana Purchase.

Zebulon Pike's journey across Missouri began in St. Louis on July 15, 1806, from Fort Belle Fontaine, a U.S. Army cantonment that was abandoned by the military 20 years later (www.stlouisco.com/parks/FtBellefontaine.html).

Commissioned to provide an escort home to a group of 51 Osage Indians who had been hostage to the Pottawatomie tribe, Pike's party traveled west along the Missouri River then headed southwest following the Osage River, passing what would become such modern day towns as Bagnell Dam, Warsaw and Osceola. Pike and his men camped between Aug. 19 and Sept. 1 by the Little Osage River in an area Pike named Camp Independence, now known as Four Rivers Conservation Area (417-395-2341). There, Pike visited nearby Osage towns and took a census of the Osage tribe.

Endurance athlete David Pokorny will follow Zebulon Pike's path west by bicycle – both to honor the bicentennial of Pike's expedition and to raise awareness of polycystic kidney disease. With an old-time fiddle send-off, Pokorny will leave St. Louis from Fort Belle Fontaine Park, 13002 Bellefontaine Road, on Aug. 3, the post from which Zebulon Pike's expedition departed in July 1806. From Aug. 3-6, Pokorny plans to ride across Missouri, ending his ride in Colorado Springs in time to run the 51st Annual Pikes Peak Marathon on Aug. 20. Local cyclists are invited to join Pokorny for a leg of the ride, and anyone can follow his progress via his blog at www.ridetopikespeak.blogspot.com.

While in Missouri, Pokorny will make stops at St. Charles, Jefferson City, Lake of the Ozarks and Osage Village State Historic Site. On the National Register of Historic Places, the Osage Village State Historic Site near Walker marks where Europeans first encountered Osage Indians in 1673. It is also a spot where Pike spent some time among the Osage in 1806. Now, visitors to the site may enjoy a self-guided walking tour of outdoor exhibits on Osage life and history (417-682-2279).

Pike's crew left Missouri on Sept. 3, 1806, entering Kansas. Pike's expedition traversed the newly purchased Louisiana Territory, including what would become the states of Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Texas and New Mexico. In addition to the safe return of the Osage Indians, Pike and his men were assigned to negotiate peace between the Kansas and Osage tribes, develop a relationship with the Comanches, explore the headwaters of the Arkansas River, locate the source of the Red River and follow it to the Mississippi, and, some historians say, spy on the Spanish along the southwestern border of the Louisiana Purchase.

Like Lewis and Clark's journey to the northwest, Pike's southwest mission resulted in a detailed account of the people, geography, and natural resources of the uncharted territory. But Pike is most famously associated with Pikes Peak, a 14,110-foot mountain the explorer sighted in November 1806, on his journey through Colorado. Though Pike did not discover the mountain or even reach the summit, Pike saw it on his journey and called it "Grand Peak." An 1818 map by Dr. John Robinson, a member of Pike's crew, named the peak for Pike. Though explorer Stephen Long attempted to popularize the name James' Peak after Edwin James, a botanist who was first to reach the top of the mountain, military maps from 1835 show that the Pikes Peak moniker had stuck.

Pike also blazed the Santa Fe Trail, a military and trade route used from 1821 until the installation of the railroad along the trail in 1880. Accordingly, the Santa Fe Trail Association has formed the Zebulon M. Pike Exploration Bicentennial Commission to oversee commemorative events scheduled for 2006 and 2007 (zebulonpike.org).

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