

SUICIDE OR MURDER? What Happened at Grinder's Stand?

By Vardis Fischer (an excerpt reprinted with permission)

The man riding up the slope toward her was Meriwether Lewis, 35 years old, and now governor of the entire Upper Louisiana Territory. This is the Meriwether Lewis of the famous Lewis and Clark team—the Lewis who, with his friend William Clark, led a handful of bold brave men and an Indian girl named Sacajawea for thousands of miles into and across the unknown—up the Missouri to its source and across the Rocky Mountains to the ocean, in one of the greatest feats of exploration in human history. Before that, he had been an officer in various military engagements, and then Thomas Jefferson's secretary. On this October afternoon he was deep in trouble.

As governor of the vast sprawling Louisiana Territory, with headquarters at the frontier river-town of St. Louis, he had had trouble from the beginning. It will be necessary to examine the nature of his difficulties; at the moment it is enough to say that some of his official vouchers had been rejected by the War Department in Washington, rumors about this had spread, his creditors had closed in, and he was making a long and tedious journey in late-summer heat to Washington to try to get matters straightened out.

No doubt the woman had known he was coming. Though it was only a blazed trail through a wilderness there was a heavy traffic over the Trace, going both ways. The Governor had been on it the past six or seven days, and surely someone had left word at Grinder's that this famous man would be passing by, on his way to Nashville and Washington. Mrs. Grinder could hardly have known that he would stop for the night at the rude inn her husband had built only recently, but knowing that he was coming she must have been curious. She knew that he would stop for the night somewhere. On the Trace south of her, toward Natchez, there was no other stand in a day's journey. North of her, toward Nashville, the next one was at a considerable distance.

So it is possible that she thought she might have the famous man as an overnight guest. With her were her small children and one or two youthful slaves. Where her husband was is something that nobody knows: he may have been lurking in the woods and watching this famous man approach. Or he may have been, as legend says, off harvesting on his small creek farm. It may be that Mrs. Grinder knew that Governor Lewis was drawing close before he came in sight. It may be that she was astonished to see that he was alone.

He rode up the gentle slope along a winding path, two handsome pistols and a dirk at his waist, a rifle slung along his saddle. About a hundred yards from them he came within sight of the two cabins, but no doubt had seen smoke from the kitchen chimney above the trees long before that. When opposite the cabins he turned off the path, to his right, and rode over to them, across a distance of about fifty yards. What did he see there, what did he say? He mustn't have been weary. On October 7, 8, and 9 he averaged about fifty miles a day over rough hill country. This day, October 10, he had ridden about thirty miles. But he was a



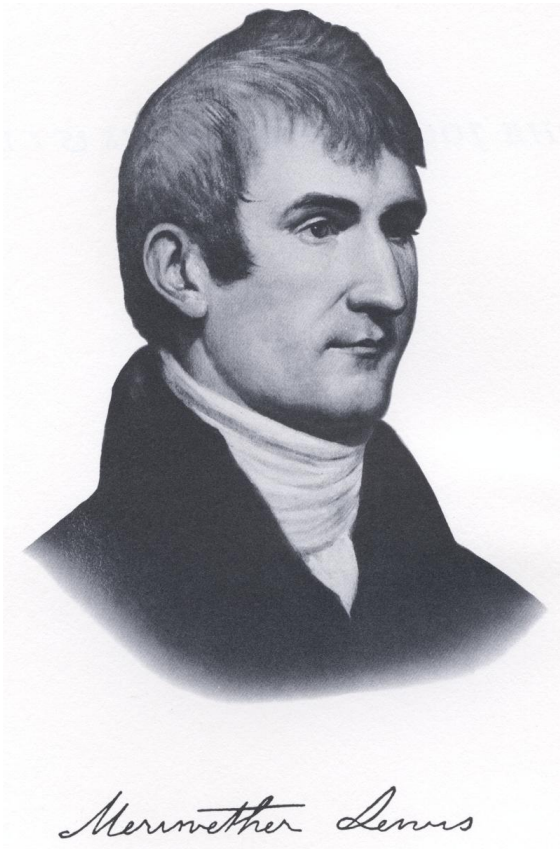
polite, even a courtly, gentleman toward women; it is easy to believe that he made a little bow toward her, before dismounting or afterward, and said, “Madam, it is a very pleasant evening.”

But what he said and what she said we shall never know. At this point we come face to face with one of the great mysteries in American history. On this spot, at Grinder’s Stand, a great American died, when still a young man. He died this evening or night or the next day, and was buried in a split-oak coffin in a hole in the earth, up the ridge about four or five hundred feet north of the cabins. All that is left of him is supposed to be there today, under a shabby monument that was erected more than a century ago.

Did he kill himself or was he murdered? It should be said at once, in plain words that we simply do not know, and can never know, unless evidence turns up of which today we have no knowledge. Many have said it was suicide, many have said it was murder, including on both sides persons who were distinguished. As late as 1956 a reputable historian published an essay in which he said it was suicide and the matter is settled. But the matter is not settled, as we shall see.

No book and no essay heretofore published has presented more than a part, and usually no more than a small part, of the available evidence. This book presents all the evidence that this writer was able to find in two years of research in libraries and historical societies all over the nation. On reading the evidence presented here the reader may think it was murder or he may think it was suicide, or he may feel that an unprejudiced mind can come to no conclusion either way. He will discover that there is little direct and positive evidence to support either view—that any conclusion drawn must rest almost entirely on deduction and inference. Indeed, the case is a fascinating study in the nature of evidence. If the reader is wary, he needs no advice, but even so he may be interested in the fact that a distinguished Boston lawyer, Robert H. Montgomery, has recently published a book on the Sacco-Vanzetti case, in which he presents all the known evidence. He has no doubt that the men were guilty. Another lawyer, Justice Musmanno of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, has published a book in which he examined all the evidence. He has no doubt that the men were innocent.

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