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A Keelboat on the Rivanna

essay and photos
by Jim Crosby

Resting on the banks of the Rivanna River in Albemarle County is a strange looking vessel that looks like it might have washed up from another era. Fresh lumber mixed with aged planks, however, give it an odd appearance. The sight is one that begs an explanation.

That explanation is offered by the Lewis and Clark Exploratory Center

Above: Young passengers were unloaded following the maiden voyage of the Discovery Virginia on the Rivanna River. Right: A stash of clamps hangs above the pirogues built in a barn in Charlottesville.





Boat building started in this barn with the goal of a "wet launch" into the Rivanna to coincide with the October 23, 2004 issuance of the U.S. nickel bearing the keelboat's image. Aiming for that completion date, the group set out to construct the 22-oar sailing vessel, and the keel was laid in October, 2001. The center enlisted technical assistance from master historical boat builder Butch Bouvier, of Iowa, to build the 18th-century keel-

Summer intern Jennifer Bell explains the contraption used to steam ship frames and planks so they would bend. She also demonstrates knot tying for a group of visitors.



Rivanna River?

of Virginia, who directed the construction of a full-sized replica of the keelboat that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark used in their expedition to explore and map America. Uniquely, over 250 young people from central Virginia built the vessel under adult supervision. Practice stations were established to teach nail driving, sawing, chiseling and hole boring. All of this activity took place in an old barn in Albemarle County, which now houses exhibits of art, drawings and historical tools, along with the keelboat replica.

Acclaimed boat builder Butch Bouvier talks with visitors while taking a break from work on the Discovery Virginia.



More than 250 young people helped to build the Discovery Virginia. Here, one practices her skill at nail driving.

boat. A celebration was held in October, 2003 so the boat could be pulled from its barn and turned upright to continue the construction process. That celebration corresponded with the Corps of Discovery's historical keelboat launching on Oct. 26, 1803. On that date, William Clark joined Meriwether Lewis on their keelboat at Louisville, Kentucky.

The Lewis and Clark Exploratory Center now operates in the old barn in Darden Towe Park, located on a bend of the river just north of Route 250 in Albemarle County. The "hands-on" facility commemorates the origins of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in Virginia, and construction of the keelboat represented an impressive first step. By building the boat, young people not only gained an appreciation of history and the use of tools, but also played a part in creating an important display. Many of the children were involved in a "Hammer, Chisel and Saw" summer camp activity where they learned boat-building skills and received merit badges.

Organizers met their goal and



Top: Butch Bouvier recruits a young man to help install the mast stays. Above: Two visitors try out the bunk beds in the aft cabin of the boat.

launched the 55-foot replica on that Saturday in October, 2004. U.S. Mint Director Henrietta Holsman Fore took part in the ceremonies, while state representative Virgil Goode smashed the traditional champagne bottle across the bow to christen the locally built replica as the *Discovery Virginia*. The boat weighs over six tons, and its launch required a very

large crane to lift and then lower it into the river.

For more information about the center, explore www.lewisandclarkeast.org. □

Over the past decade, Jim Crosby has written several features for Virginia Wildlife in addition to his regularly appearing "On the Water" column. Crosby lives in Crozet and has been an active boater for more than 50 years.