Montana Tech professor creates map of Lewis and Clark campsites in Montana

By Barbara Laboe of The Montana Standard

Thirty years after he first started charting it, Robert Bergantino's Lewis and Clark geography map has been published by the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology.

The map, by Bergantino and Kenneth Sandau of Montana Tech's GIS division, shows Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's travels through Montana from a geologic perspective. It's for sale through the bureau (below).

Bergantino hasn't worked full-time on the map all those years: it really began as a hobby to get him out of a cramped apartment in Washington, D.C., where he worked as an oceanographer for the Navy.

These days, his job as research hydrogeologist is with the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, but he's worked periodically on the map since the early 1970s, Bergantino said recently from his office on campus.

He began mapping Lewis and Clark's travels through the state using a basic Montana highway map and marking campsites and other locations mentioned in their journals. As he researched the expedition, Bergantino said, he decided the maps, and in particular geology recorded by the men, hadn't really been explored by scholars.

"There's lots about the flora and animals they saw and even the different native people they met, but the science of the geology they recorded has been pretty much ignored," he said.

Soon, Bergantino's highway map wasn't precise enough for the cartographer and surveyor, so he made his own map, hand-lettering and text and sharing it with museums and historical societies. The first black and white grid map was made in 1974 and Bergantino has been refining it since, selling copies and working with other Lewis and Clark scholars along the way.

He visits sites, often flying over them to get a better idea of how rivers meander throughout the landscape.

The latest creation is a full color, glossy topographical map. It lists Lewis and Clark's campsites in Montana, and the dates spent there and also indicates whether Lewis, Clark or both men were present. And since many rivers have moved since 1805-06, the map also shows the current configuration of rivers and state highways to help people better locate the sites.

The map includes modern day pictures of geologic landmarks noted in the journals, such as Beaverhead Rock and Pompey's Pillar, complete with quotes from the journals about them.

And while the mapping is his, Bergantino is quick to share the credit, saying the computer experts, designers and editors brought his black and white drawings to life with their presentation and design.

The map is out in time for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, but Bergantino said that wasn't a motivating factor in his work. He just wanted the map completed and said he hopes it's useful for decades to come, not just as a souvenir.

"If someone is interested and wants to follow along Lewis and Clark and know where they were when they wrote certain things, this gives you an image of that, whether it's now or 15 years from now," he said.

And while the Lewis and Clark expedition has become his passion at work, Bergantino said he also enjoys the more routine tasks of locating water throughout the state, especially during the ongoing drought.

"We get people saying 'If I can't find water I'm going to have to sell the ranch,' so I get satisfaction out of working on that as well," he said.