

Anonyme

SACAGAWEA: AN AMERICAN LEGEND



Sacagawea is an American heroine shrouded in mystery. Perhaps one of the most famous Native American women of all time, she has been both idealized and downplayed as to her importance on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Nonetheless, she remains a symbol of Native American Women and of manifest destiny.

For all her fame, little is known about her. The short time she spent with the expedition is the only documented period of her life. The precise date of her birth is unknown, and more controversial is the time of her death. Even the journals can provide only clues to her character, her real self will be a mystery perhaps forever. But the largely technical and bureaucratic journals remain as the most promising evidence to understanding the person of Sacagawea. The writings of Lewis, Clark, and Biddle portray her as a resourceful and strong woman, who was able to withstand the labor and hunger of a trek across the continent. They often mention her help in guiding the expedition through territory familiar to her, and her ability to aid in the negotiations for horses from the Shoshones because of her Shoshone background. She provided food for the expedition and managed to do all this while at the same time carrying her infant son along for the journey.

In November 1804, Sacagawea and her French Canadian husband Toussaint Charbonneau joined the expedition from the Hidatsa-Mandan villages . "So on the spot they signed up

Charbonneau and one of his wives "to go on with us." He chose Sacagawea, who was about fifteen years old and six months pregnant" (Ambrose 187). Her journey from the Mandan villages to the Pacific and back did not finish until August 17, 1806. During that time, the story of a young woman on the greatest American Adventure took place. Within that year developed the many facets to the legend of Sacagawea, that we look to as an example of the almost vanished culture of Native American Woman.

Sacagawea: The Mother

At the estimated age of fifteen, Sacagawea gave birth on February 11, 1805 to a young boy, Jean Baptiste. "About five o'clock this evening one of the wives of Charbono was delivered of a fine boy. it is worthy of remark that this was the first child which this woman had boarn, and as is common in such cases her labour was tedious and the pain violent; Mr. Jessome informed me that he had frequently administered a small portion of the rattle of the rattle-snake, which he assured me had never failed to produce the desired effect, that of hastening the birth of the child; having the rattle of a snake by me I gave it to him and he administered two rings of it to the woman broken in small pieces with the fingers and added to a small quantity of water. Whether this medicine was truly the cause or not I shall not undertake to determine, but I was informed that she had not take it more than ten minutes before she brought forth" (De Voto 80). Within two months of her baby's birth, the expedition was underway.

The infant is almost never mentioned and nothing is known of the relationship between mother and child. Jean Baptiste appears when Lewis discusses his sleeping arrangements on April 7, 1805, "Capt. Clark myself the two Interpretters and the woman and child sleep in a tent of dressed skins" (De Voto 92). The little baby traveled on his mother's back strapped into a cradle board while she rode and stayed in the boat while they were out on the river.

Clark took a particular fondness to the boy and who called him by the nickname Pomp. Clark even specifically requested permission of Sacagawea and Charbonneau to raise the boy as his own and did indeed once the child was old enough to be away from his mother.



Sacagawea: The Provider

Although there were many times of abundance there were as many times of hunger. Sacagawea supplemented the diets of the expedition on two noted occasions and probably others. On April 9, 1805 Lewis comments on her poking the earth to procure wild artichokes, and on May 16, 1806, Clark comments on her food excavations assistance in quelling the head aches and stomach aches of the men. "Shabonos Squar gathered a quantity of fenel roots which we find very paliatiable and nurushing food. the onion we also find in abundance and boil it with our meat" (De Voto 388).

Sacagawea: The Guide

Her importance as a guide is disputed among historians. Many no longer believe that her knowledge of the land was essential to the success of the expedition, but it is indisputable that she eased the way by allowing them to skip the guess work and also feel sure they were on the right track. As the Corps, approached the Three Forks, Sacagawea recognizes her nations' country and assures the party they are going the right way. Lewis says, "this piece of information has cheered the sperits of the party who now begin to console themselves with the anticipation of shortly seeing the head of the missouri yet unknown to the civilized world" (De Voto 163). Eight days later on July 30, 1805, Sacagawea recognizes the very spot where she had been abducted those years before. The expedition camped there for the night. A final reference to Sacagawea as a guide comes on August 8, 1805 from Lewis. "the indian woman recognized the point of a high plain to our right which she informed us was not very distant from the summer retreat of her nation on a river beyond the the mountains which runs to the west. this hill she says her nation calls the beaver's head from a conceived re[se]mblance of it's figure to the head of that animal. she assures us that we shall either find her people on this river or on the river immediately west of its source; which from it's present size cannot be distant" (De Voto 181). This idea of Sacagawea as a guide has prompted artists to draw her with an outstretched arm, guiding the way.

Sacagawea: The Interpreter

Having a woman on the trip was a sign of peace to the Indian tribes the Corps met along the journey. These tribes would never carry a woman with their war party, and so Sacagawea and her tiny child were sure indications that no violence would come from these white men. Sacagawea's presence had just such a calming effect on an agitated group of Chopunnish. On October 19, 1805 Clark wrote: "as Soon as they Saw the Squar wife of the interperter they pointed to her and informed those who continued yet in the Same position I first found them, they imediately all came out and appeared to assume new life, the sight of This Indian woman, wife to one of our interprs. confirmed those people of our friendly intentions, as no woman ever accompanies a war party of Indians in

this quarter" (256-7).

Notably, Sacagawea is often referred to as the "interpreter's wife" instead of being labeled as an interpreter herself but the Captains do not fail to document her part in the negotiation sessions. "We were crowded in the Lodge with Indians who continued all night and this morning Great numbers were around us. The One Eyed Chief arrived and we gave him a medal of the small size and spoke to the Indians through a Snake boy Shabono and his wife. we informed them who we were, where we were came from & our intentions towards them, which pleased them very much" (De Voto 380-1).

As mentioned earlier, Sacagawea's most valuable skill as an interpreter was her fluency in Shoshone. The expedition relied on her to talk to the Shoshones and barter with them for the horses the Corps would need to cross the Bitterroot Mountains. "It was mutually agreed that he should set out tomorrow morning with eleven men...also to take the Indians, Charbono and the Indian woman with him; that on his arrival at the Shoshone camp he was to leave Charbono and the Indian woman to hasten the return of the Indians with the horses to this place" (De Voto 205). The story of this bartering with the Shoshone's is particularly fascinating because it involved the reuniting of Sacagawea with her friend from captivity, and her brother Camehwait, who was now chief of the tribe.

Sacagawea

by Michael Haynes

Text by Bob Moore

Her hair is braided and bound with red trade cloth. A streak of red vermilion has been applied to the skin in the part of her hair, a beauty mark among the women of most plains tribes of that era.

She is dressed in an early plains style garment made of two deerskins. The yoke is painted gold and is outlined with deer fur and accented with a deer's tail on the front. The dress is a example of everyday working attire of the early style.

Sacagawea's belt is adorned with a mix of porcupine quillwork (in a pattern taken from a Hidatsa robe painted by George Catlin) and early trade beads made in the very popular blue color.

Hanging from her belt is an awl case wrapped in red, yellow, violet and green plaited quills and fringed with quill-wrapped leather, dentalium shells and died horsehair.

Sacagawea carries wood and deer's antler rake, a common tool among Hidatsa women, expert farmers who owned the fields they worked.

At her side is a shoshone-style cradleboard within which her two-month-old son sleeps.



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Sacagawea: The person

It may be impossible to ever determine the true character of Sacagawea. Lewis and Clark were not concerned with documenting the personalities of the members of the Corps of Discovery, their mission was to fulfill the diplomatic goals set forth by Jefferson. Fragments of details regarding peoples' personalities slip into the journals from time to time, but even these can not be taken for absolute truth because they were merely opinions. In some cases these opinions even conflict, such as Lewis's comments regarding Sacagawea's emotions pertaining to her lost family. He comments on July 28, 1805 about her apparent lack of excitement and emotion as they approach her home territory: "Our present camp is precisely on the spot that the Snake Indians were encamped at the time the Minnetares of the knife R. first came in sight of them five years since. from hence they retreated about three miles up Jefferson's river and concealed themselves in the woods, the Minnetares pursued, attacked them, killed 4 men 4 women a number of boys, and mad[e] prisoners of all the females and four boys, Sah-cah-gar-wa-eh o[u]r Indian woman was one of the female prisoners taken at that time; tho' I cannot discover that she shews any immotion of sorrow in recollecting this event, or of joy in being restored to her native country; if she has enough to eat and a few trinkets to wear I believe she would be perfectly content anywhere" (De Voto 171). This speculation about Sacagawea's lack of emotion is washed away when Biddle describes her reunions with family and friends:

August 17, 1805 Biddle

"On setting out at seven o'clock, Captain Clarke with Charboneau and his wife walked on shore, but they had not gone more than a mile before Clarke saw Sacajawea, who was with her husband 100 yards ahead, began to dance and show every mark of the most extravagant joy, turning round him and pointing to several Indians, whom he now saw advancing on horseback, sucking her fingers at the same time to indicate that they were of her native tribe....We soon drew near to the camp, and just as we approached it a woman made her way throughout the crowd towards Sacajawea, and recognising each other, they embraced with the most tender affection. The meeting of these two young women had in it something peculiarly touching, not only in the ardent manner in which their feelings were expressed, but from the real interest of their situation. they had been companions in childhood, in the war with the Minnetarees they had both been taken prisoners in the same battle, they and shared and softened the rigours of their captivity, till one of them had escaped from the Minnetarees, with scarce a hope of ever seeing her friend relieved from the hands of her enemies. While Sacajawea was renewing among the women the friendships of former days, Captain Clarke went on.....Sacajawea was sent for; she came into the tent, sat down, and was beginning to interpret, when in the person of Cameahwait she recognized her brother: She instantly jumped up, and ran and embraced him, throwing over him her blanket and weeping profusely: The chief was himself moved, though not to the same degree. After some conversation between them she resumed her seat, and attempted to interpret for us, but her new situation seemed to overpower her, and she was frequently interrupted by her tears. After the council was finished the unfortunate

woman learnt that all her family were dead except two brothers, one of whom was absent, and a son of her eldest sister, a small boy, who was immediately adopted by her" (De Voto 202-203).

It seems that the language gap between the Captains and Sacagawea could have been one factor in Lewis and others to not see her emotions. Sacagawea spoke Hidatsa and Shoshone, and the Captains spoke English. Only her 45 year old husband was effective at the Hidatsa language. Coupled with the fact that Sacagawea was the only woman on the trip, and also a native american, it is no wonder she kept a tight grip on her feelings. But there were more praised to Sacagawea's character. When the pirogue nearly capsized in May of 1805, Lewis congratulated Sacagawea on her level-headedness. While her husband panicked and had to be "reminded" at gunpoint to do his job and control the rudder, Sacagawea was retrieving materials from the water such as the valuable journals. "The Indian woman to whom I ascribe equal fortitude and resolution, with any person onboard at the time of the accident, caught and preserved most of the light articles which were washed overboard." (De Voto 111)

She even develops enough clout with the Captains to put in requests. When the Corps is camped at the mouth of the Columbia they hear of a whale which had been stranded a few miles down the beach. Sacagawea takes the initiative to ask if she could be include in the party that was going to see it. "Capt Clark set out after an early breakfast with the party in two canoes as had been concerted the last evening; Charbono and his Indian woman were also of the party; the Indian woman was very importunate to be permitted to go, and was therefore indulged; she observed that she had traveled a long way with us to see the great waters, and that now that monstrous fish was also to be seen, she though it very hard she could not be permitted to see either (she had never been to the Ocean)" (300-1).

Few other people outside of the expedition have written about her character. One author explorer Henry Brackenridge wrote that he had met her on a boat going upriver from St. Louis in 1811 and he thought her "a good creature of mild disposition" (Brackenridge 154) .

The End of the Journey : August 17, 1806 Clark

Clark wrote of his sorrow at losing "his boy Pomp" when Sacagawea and Charbonneau left the Corps at the Mandan village on August 17, 1806. He records: "we also took our leave of T. Charbono, his Snake Indian wife and their child who had accompanied us on our rout to the pacific ocean in the capacity of interpreter and interpretest...I offered to take his little son a butifull promising child who is 19 months old to which they both himself & wife wewilling provided the child had been weened. they observed that in one year the boy would be sufficiently old to leave his mother & he would then take him to me if I would be so friendly as to raise the child for him in such a manner as I thought proper, to which I agreed &c" (De Voto, 458).

Only three days latter Clark writes again to Charbonneau while still on the pirogue and expresses regret that he could not do something more for the explorer and his wife, and he repeats the request for Jean Baptiste. "You have been a long time with me and conducted

your Self in Such a manner as to gain my friendship, your woman who accompanied you that long dangerous and fatiguing rout to the Pacific Ocean and back deserved a greater reward for her attention and services on that rout than we had in our power to give her at the Mandans. As to your little Son (my boy Pomp) you well know my fondness of him and my anxiety to take him and raise him as my own child...If you are desposed to accept either of my offers to you and will bring down you Son your famn Janey had best come along with you to take care of the boy untill I get him....Wishing you and your family great suckcess & with anxious expectations of seeing my little danceing boy Baptiest I shall remain your Friend, William Clark" (Jackson 315).

Her Death

On the front cover of Clark's cash book which he kept from 1825 to 1828, Clark wrote of knowledge of the whereabouts of the former Corps of Discovery members. Most controversial has been his listing of Sacagawea as dead by this point. "Se ca ja we au Dead, Tousant Charbon[o] in Wertenburgh, Gy." (Jackson 638). This assertion contradicts the Shoshone belief that Sacagawea lived until age 100, reunited with her son Pomp at a Shoshone reservation. Clark's listing of her as dead has been discounted by those who point out that Clark made other mistakes on this same list. For example, Clark writes "P. Gass Dead" when Gass in fact lived until April 2, 1870 when he died at the age of ninety nine (MacGregor 17). It is important to note that Gass separated ways with Clark long before Sacagawea had. Because of Clark's connection to Pomp, he was more likely to know of her whereabouts.

She is believed to have died at Fort Manuel, on December 20, 1812. John Luttig's, a clerk at Fort Manuel, recorded her death. "this Evening the Wife of Charbonneau a Snake Squaw, died putrid fever she was a good and the best Women in the fort, aged all years she left a fine infant girl" (Luttig, 106). This infant girl was name Lissette and it is not know if she lived past infancy. There is more speculation that the woman who died at Fort Manuel was not Sacagawea, but instead was the other Shoshone wife of Charbonneau. Shoshone oral tradition insists that Sacagawea, reunited with her son Toussaint and lived their lives out in Wyoming on the Wind River Shoshone and Bannock Indian's reservation.

Her legacy

Sacagawea's story has been influential in all kinds of arenas from fantasy to the economy. Her name is featured on web sites and advertisements, she has been the subjects of plays and mountain passes and streams bear her name. Even the United States Government minted a dollar coin in her honor. She has also been much manipulated, the little information we have about her has been stretched to make her a whole person, sometimes a Pochahotas-verison American Indian Princess. Because of the mystery surrounding her, artists, historians and dreamers have created her into a legend that perhaps was never there.

One theatrical company produced on a musical entitled, Sakakwea: The Woman with Many Names. It was performed in September 1989 to a sold out crowd in the Chester Fritz Auditorium in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The inaccuracy of the portrayal is humorous, a romantic relationship is assumed between Clark and Sacagawea. Clark sings to her, "I don't need you to buy horses. I don't need you to find food. I need your bright laugh, I need your warm hand in mine. I need you close to me" (Kessler 163-165). Donna Kessler assumes a more viewpoint that Sacagawea has been ironically been picked as a symbol of western expansion, a figurehead for the movement that destroyed her culture." Because hundreds of texts have connected her to this endeavor and declared her its sometime "savior," she has illustrated and validated critical facets of myths of manifest destiny...Sacagawea has come to signify "Indian" compliance with the mission to carve a sacred space out of the wilderness" (Kessler 17). Although we may never know the truth of Sacagawea's life and death, her legacy will live on in the collective stories of American Culture. And every time someone glances on Sacagawea River, or Sacajawea Peak, they perpetuate her memory.

May 20, 1805 Lewis

"The hunters returned this evening and informed us that the country continued much the same in appearance as that we saw where we wer or broken, and that about five miles above the mouth of shell river a handsome river of about fifty yards in width discharged itsefl itno the shell river on the stard. or upper side; this stream we call Sah-ca-ger-we-ah or bird woman's River, after our interpreter the Snake woman." (De Voto 113)

Recognition of Sacagawea was re-ignited in 1997 with the \$1 Coin Act, in which a Golden Dollar coin depicting an image of Sacagawea and her son replaced the Susan B. Anthony Dollar Coin, which had been used since 1979.



<http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~landc/2003/projects/projects2001/indianwomen/sacagawea.html>