

Breeds And Half-Breeds

GORDON SPECK



Clarkson N. Potter, Inc./Publisher NEW YORK

DISTRIBUTED BY CROWN PUBLISHERS, INC.

TOUSSAINT CHARBONNEAU

1758?-1804

OF all the New World explorations, the one led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark has received the most attention. It is unnecessary to dwell upon the major characters and scenes of this, the greatest of American expeditions. Its history has been drummed into every schoolboy with patriotic vigor if not always with complete candor.

Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, and William Clark all richly deserve the honor the expedition brought them, but unfortunately there is generally silence and sometimes ridicule for the men who kept the expedition on the proper trails, hunted food, and smoothed the contacts with the Indians.

If millions of words have been written about the leaders of the expedition, only a few less have been printed about Sacajawea,* the Bird Woman. But few of her admirers could name her husband. In fact, there is almost a legend that she was a frontier Madonna without husband or other earthly attributes.

Doubtless there were days when she wished this were true, for she was married to one of the less noble characters on the Missouri, the Frenchman Toussaint Charbonneau.

The record is neither clear nor uncontested. There are those who refer to Charbonneau as one of the half-breeds who roamed over the western fur lands. Others say, with equal surety, that he was a Frenchman from Montreal, and the evidence is strongly in their favor.¹

* Historians and linguists have argued for years over the proper spelling and pronunciation of this name. We have chosen the present spelling without prejudice as to its validity.

Some would have Charbonneau a harmless, simpleminded, and friendly squaw man, capable enough if he were not asked too much, but a nonentity nevertheless.²

At the other extreme is Charbonneau the panderer, boaster, liar, brawler, coward, wife beater,* and wife trader, a foul-minded and useless bit of frontier scum whom Lewis and Clark tolerated solely for the purpose of acquiring the services of his newest and youngest wife, Sacajawea.³

This last is patently a fiction, because Charbonneau "wished to hire as an interpreter" on Sunday, November 4, 1804, and Sacajawea did not become his wife until February 8, 1805; nor is there any evidence that Charbonneau had any plans for marriage in November.

Obviously, it is too late now to ascertain the whole truth about Charbonneau, but we may say that he was almost certainly a Frenchman from Montreal born about 1758, of medium height and heavily built, with brown eyes, a swarthy skin, and a face adorned with a huge mustache.

One of his many wives is reputed to have insisted that Charbonneau possessed a nasty temper, but a careful reading of the journals left by those who knew him fails to disclose evidence that he was cursed with more than the normal French fire and Indian disrespect for woman-kind.

When Lewis and Clark hired him, he was in his early forties. Though he had lived for many years among the Gros Ventres and other Missouri River tribes, he still affected the plaid shirt with trousers of the French voyageurs rather than the robe and legging costume of the natives.

No one knows when or why Toussaint Charbonneau left Canada and took up Indian life, but ten years before he came to the notice of the lower Missouri River entrepreneurs, his abilities were recognized by Canadian traders like Peter Pond, Peter Pangman, the three Frobisher brothers, Simon McTavish, and others who had formed the loose organization called the North West Company. Long before Lewis and Clark, the North Westers were operating as far south and west as the Dakotas. In 1793-1794 Toussaint Charbonneau was

* One casual entry by William Clark, "I checked our interpreter for striking his woman at their Dinner," has been blown into gigantic proportions by some writers (see Elliot Coues, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, 3 vols., New York, Francis P. Harper, 1893, II, 497n).

master at their Pine Fort on the north side of the Assiniboine River, not far from the present Carberry, Manitoba. It was the Company's southernmost post at the time, and it served the Gros Ventres and the Mandans, who were twelve days' tramp still farther south.⁴

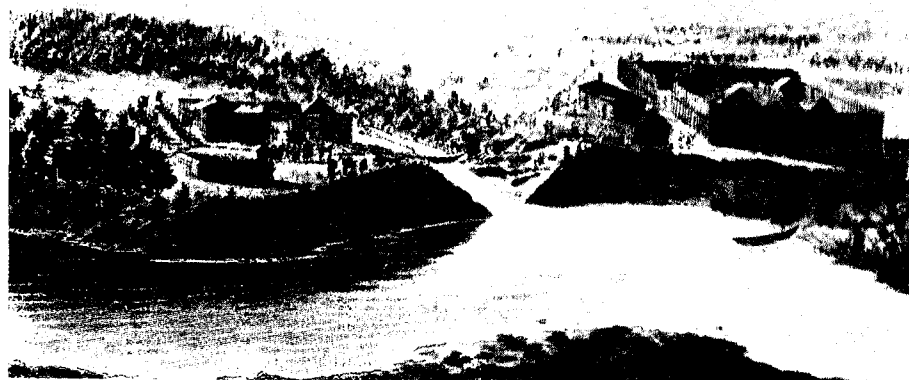
That Charbonneau held this small command argues that he was not considered an incompetent.

Two or three years later, Charbonneau moved to the Minnetarees on Knife River, north of Bismarck, North Dakota, and settled down at their central village, Metaharta. Whether he was a free trader or was still employed by the North West Company is not clear. In any event, he was a resident white man and correspondingly important because most of the middle Missouri River trade, especially that of the Mandan towns with which the Minnetarees were associated, was with the North West Company via one or another of their Canadian posts.

But Charbonneau did not have a monopoly. Hugh McCranch had been to the Mandans many times. Spanish traders from Santa Fe and Taos were not unknown, and there was a body of other white traders steadily visiting the fleshpots of the Indian towns. David Thompson remarked that "it is almost their sole motive for their journey hereto: The goods they brought, they sold at 50 to 60 per cent above what they cost; and reserving enough to pay their debts, and buy some corn; spent the rest on Women."⁵

As we have seen, René Jusseume was Thompson's interpreter when the latter visited the Mandans in 1797. Charbonneau may well have been on hand to welcome them, for it is certain that the long association of Jusseume and Charbonneau began about that time. The friendship is significant to the extent that some of the less commendable doings of both men occurred when they were together or with another interpreter. For example, there is the unproved story that Ed Rose once suggested to Charbonneau that they seize several Indian girls and take them to the cities for prostitution; and the charge is oft repeated that Charbonneau and Jusseume regularly sold the pleasure of their current wives for a bit of extra cash.⁶

During the trading season of 1803-1804 Charbonneau was again with the North West Company, in command of the small but important factory at Pembina, almost astride the 49th parallel. With him at Pembina was Alexander Henry the younger, a keen judge of men and



Toussaint Charbonneau's old post, Pembina on the Red River, as it looked in 1822. From a watercolor by Peter Rindisbacher. *The Public Archives of Canada*.

business opportunities, who was not given to suffering association with those who could not hold up their end of responsibilities.*

Thus it appears that contrary to the picture which some writers give of Toussaint Charbonneau as certainly incompetent, if not a fool and a rogue,⁷ the record does not quite bear out these indictments. And though a story somehow got started that the North West Company had terminated Charbonneau's services because he had betrayed its interests to the Hudson's Bay Company,⁸ later events would seem to contradict this also.

Following his tour of duty at Pembina, Charbonneau returned to Metaharta, where he was living a robust middle life when Lewis and Clark came poling into view in the fall of 1804.

All the way up the Missouri, the Americans had added and deleted detachments. Some were Indians whose goodwill was valuable in passing through the next contiguous territory; some were free white traders stopping for a chat; some were Indian "womin verry fond of carressing our men &c"; and some were interpreters. George Drouillard had joined the expedition before it reached the Missouri, and Pierre Antoine Tabeau, Joseph Gravelines, and the Dorions, father and son, had all been with the command for various lengths of time.

* Also attached to Henry's command about this time was one Etienne or Louis Charbonneau whose relationship, if any, to Toussaint Charbonneau is unclear (see Coues, *op. cit.*, I, 49-50).

These accretions of interpreters are worth noting, for inasmuch as Lewis and Clark already had their services available, why did they also hire Charbonneau when the time came, if he were as useless as often pictured?

On October 22, 1804, the expedition camped near the old Mandan towns, a site later occupied by Fort Lincoln, although the vagaries of time and Missouri River floods have long since erased all traces of the exact spot where the Americans camped.

A week later Lewis and Clark chose the location for their winter quarters, on the east bank of the Missouri River seven or eight miles below the mouth of the Knife, and hired René Jusseaume. Never one to overlook a few months of easy living, Jusseaume hurried home, rounded up his squaw and their two offspring, and moved in with the Americans, as we have seen.

On Sunday, November 4, "a M^r. Chaubonie, interpeter for the Gross Ventre nation Came to See us, . . . this man wished to hire as an interpiter. . . ." ⁹ Modern authorities are in substantial agreement that Charbonneau, who never learned to speak much English, was not so accomplished a linguist as he thought; but he had been among the Indians many years, and his experience "fit him to be of great value to the expedition." ¹⁰

The new interpreter and Jusseaume took Lewis on a visit to several Indian towns. On their return, F. A. Larocque and Charles McKenzie,* traders from the North West Company, as well as some Hudson's Bay Company men were with the Mandans, ostensibly for trade but more significantly to scout American intentions. They remained all winter, and Lewis and Clark had to contend with their divisive influence.

Larocque was presently clerk at Fort Assiniboine, and had already been as far west as the Yellowstone. ¹¹ Not long after the Americans hired Charbonneau, Larocque "Spoke to Charbonneau about helping as interpreter in the trade to the Big Bellies, he told me that, being engaged to the Americans he could not come without leave from

* For four or five months in the summer of 1805, Larocque toured the Rocky Mountains. He then retired from frontier life and entered business in Montreal. McKenzie, however, never left the American West. He traded with the Gros Ventres on the upper Missouri in 1806, and when the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company, he remained with the new organization until 1846. He died in 1854.

Captain Lewis, and desired me to speak to him, which I did, with the result that Lewis gave consent." ¹² This exchange of civilities is important as it seems to dispose of the slur that the North West Company discharged Charbonneau for disloyalty—at least at that date.

Charbonneau's record becomes hazy at this juncture. He is supposed to have been sent almost immediately after Lewis and Clark hired him to apprehend a Sioux who had killed a Mandan, while early February is also suggested as the date he and Clark set off after the Sioux. ¹³

In any event, the culmination of the manhunt, if it ever took place at all, never assumed much status in the journals because the chase was overshadowed by the Frenchman's wedding. On February 8, 1805, the fortyish Toussaint Charbonneau married the teen-age Sacajawea, who had been a slave of the vicious Le Borgne, chief of the Minnetarees, when Charbonneau had purchased her some five years previously.

She was about to bear Charbonneau her first child.

Her groom already had several wives. Joseph Whitehouse, chief teamster for the expedition ¹⁴ and one of the few men who bothered to keep a journal, says that Charbonneau had three wives in the Mandan towns; ¹⁵ and the commanders' own journal for November 11 says, "two Squars of the Rock mountains, purchased from the Indians by a frenchman [Charbonneau] came down. . . ." ¹⁶

There is a favorite story that Lewis or Clark, or both, required Charbonneau to marry his slave girl to salve the Puritan mores of the command. ¹⁷

Be that as it may, the excitement of the marriage, barely preceding the birth on February 11 of little Pomp, a common Shoshone name for firstborn sons, excluded further interest in Sioux murderers as far as the journalists were concerned.

Christmas had brought a discharge of firearms, hunting, and dancing among the men, with no women allowed except Charbonneau's three wives, who were permitted to watch. Then on New Year's Day the commanders relented and permitted the men to visit the Mandan towns, with the usual results—someone claimed his squaw had been stolen, and an officer had to hurry over and soothe ruffled feelings.

As the winter wore on, Lewis and Clark were increasingly involved in affairs which had little direct connection with their major objective

but which needed to be resolved lest the mission fail through the accretion of adverse details.

Charbonneau went to Turtle Hill on the Little Missouri River; he learned that the Hudson's Bay Company was busy undermining the importance of the American expedition in the minds of the Indians, and that the North West Company was planning a post on the Little Missouri. One of Charbonneau's squaws became ill and Clark gave her stewed fruit, a favor which infuriated another wife, and Clark had to compromise that. Charbonneau and Drouillard both became ill, and Lewis forgot to order the boats out of the water so that they were nearly crushed by the ice, which could be neither chopped away nor melted with hot stones. And as if all this were not worry enough, Charbonneau visited the Gros Ventres where the North West Company had a post and returned with tales of lavish entertainment, lengths of gay cloth, fancy garments, 200 rounds of ammunition, and almost ten feet of tobacco! Toussaint Charbonneau was not ill considered by the Canadians.

This esteem so annoyed Clark he accused Charbonneau of accepting a bribe from the North West Company, which only added weight to a pocket of ill will which had been building between the Frenchman and the American commanders. George Drouillard, as an interpreter, had been excused from all guard duty and common labor, and Charbonneau believed he should be treated the same. Furthermore, he insisted on his right to trade privately when he chose.

In view of this dissension, Charbonneau did not take Clark's accusation with equanimity, and there was talk of his leaving American employ. Clark had not expected this reaction to his charge of bribery. Both he and Lewis had but recently broached the subject of taking Sacajawea on the transmountain trek, but obviously they could not have her services if Charbonneau quit them.

With pretended magnanimity, they gave Charbonneau overnight to consider his loyalties.

At this late date, it is impossible to know which side was the more worried that March night. Charbonneau very much wanted to go to the Pacific and be paid for his pleasure, frontier life being no hardship for him. And Lewis and Clark needed the Frenchman's abilities, especially since they believed Sacajawea would be of help if they made contact with her people far to the west.

The contestants retired for the night, each doubtless hoping the

other would give in. Next day Charbonneau said he had decided not to accept the American terms of employment, and Ordway wrote in his journal for March 14, 1805, that the commanders hired Grave-lines to take Charbonneau's place.

Neither Lewis nor Clark evinced any public concern, and the matter rested—Sacajawea's figure growing more valuable day by day, the glamour of the Pacific shining brighter and brighter night after night.

A week late Charbonneau asked "thro our French inturpeter . . . to excuse his Simplicity and take him into the cirvice. . . ." ¹⁸ The matter was not referred to again, but Lewis and Clark were careful to treat Charbonneau with reasonable consideration for his position as interpreter; and we shall see that the relation of Charbonneau and Clark evolved into one of mutual liking, if not deep respect.

By the end of March the expedition was ready to leave winter quarters, but first Charbonneau had to settle a family row. His entourage was to include only one wife—Sacajawea—and those to be left behind set up an unholy racket, hoping thereby to be included in the expedition. Charbonneau stood firm, and all the disgruntled women could do was annoy Sacajawea with their jealousy.

April 7, 1805: Dispatches had been sent to Washington and Mandan farewells said, and Lewis wrote of "this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life." ¹⁹

New routines had to be established. The military formalities of the past months would give way to more practical arrangements, whereby each man would be assigned the duty he could best perform regardless of former prestige or rank. But there were certain notable exceptions. A close reading of the expedition journals will quickly disclose that Charbonneau was very often given tasks for which he had no ability with nearly disastrous effects, and that Lewis, despite a manful and sincere attempt, never forgot that his regular commission outranked Clark's and automatically assumed the preferred positions and less arduous tasks. He often rode the pirogues while Clark tramped the shores, as we mentioned, and Drouillard, as the greatest hunter and most valued adviser, had already become Lewis' almost constant companion and confidant.

It was left for Charbonneau and Sacajawea to attach themselves to Clark, and as the miles wore past an interesting triangle developed. Lewis, Clark, Drouillard, Charbonneau, Sacajawea, and little Pomp all slept together in "a tent of dressed skins," said Lewis. But Saca-

jawea had no interest in anyone except her Pomp and the red-haired William Clark, whom she adored.

Nothing was too good for him. She hunted the wild artichokes cached by the gophers; she collected serviceberries; she made special Indian dishes to please him. And Clark would have been less than the man he was had he not responded in kind. Nor did Charbonneau mind: he saw no reason for jealousy; and the Charbonneau-Clark-Sacajawea triangle was never strained. If there were some developments which might have more than one interpretation, historians have charitably avoided dwelling upon them.

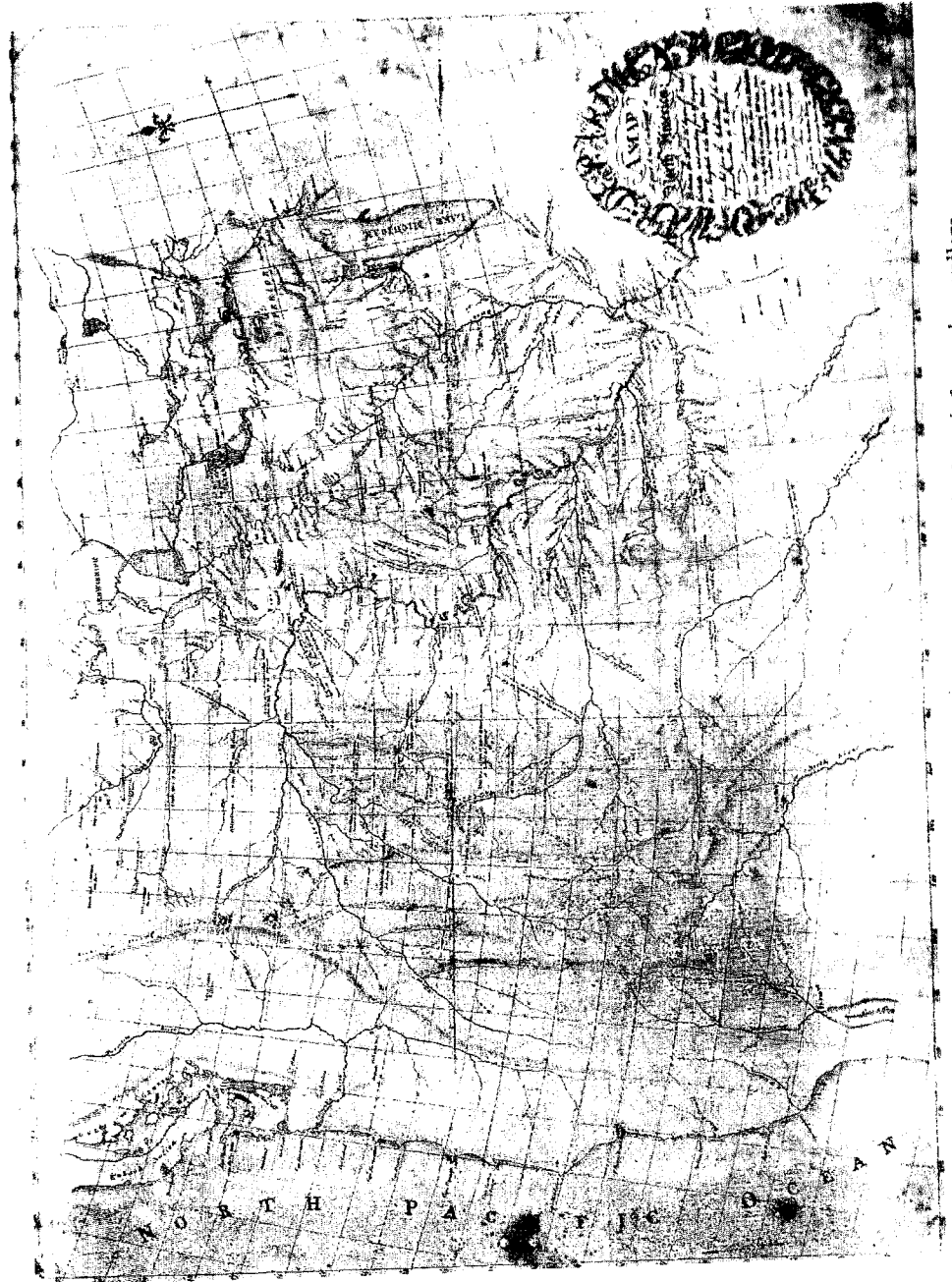
As the expedition moved slowly westward, the commanders, for some now unknown reason, put Charbonneau as steersman on one of the pirogues. It would have been difficult to find a position for which he was less fitted. Charbonneau's incompetence and the commanders' poor judgment came near causing fatal accidents. Since the poor Frenchman knew nothing whatever about handling a pirogue, it was not surprising that when one of the Missouri's sudden gusts hit the crude sails, he was helpless. While the boat tipped and plunged, the supposed steersman did everything wrong. Just before the craft turned bottom up, Lewis ordered Drouillard to take command.

But it was a narrow escape. Lewis, Sacajawea, Pomp, all the valuable papers and instruments, and both interpreters were aboard. Had the pirogue gone under, the heart of the expedition would have been lost, and historians would be blaming a clumsy Frenchman.

Perhaps Lewis sensed this injustice to Charbonneau, for as they crossed the mouth of our present-day Indian Creek, between Shell Creek and Little Knife River, he named it Charbonneau Creek in honor, he said, of the Frenchman's having hunted there previously. Sergeant Ordway gave the interpreter more credit: "the above small River . . . is named after our Int^r Charbonae river as he has been to the head of it which is farther up the Missouri Than any white man has been."²⁰

On Thursday, April 25, Lewis decided to cut overland to the mouth of the Yellowstone with Drouillard and three or four others; Clark was to bring up the pirogues. Such a move gave Lewis extra time for his observations, he said. Also, it would make him instead of Clark the first American on the Yellowstone.

Making note of the commercial value of the Yellowstone site, the expedition moved on, with Clark, Charbonneau, and Sacajawea



Map of part of North America, "from the authorities of the best informed travellers . . . and from Indian information," by Meriwether Lewis, 1806. *The National Archives*.
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trudging along the shore fighting the spring mosquitoes. But Sacajawea was happy. There were wild fruits for Clark, and a few days later, on the Milk River, she came radiantly into camp with a meal of "white apple"* for the entire crew. Lewis called Sacajawea's offering insipid but admitted that "our epicures would admire this root."

If Lewis thought little of Sacajawea's "white apples," he was more impressed by "what our wright hand cook charbono calls the *boudin blanc*, or white pudding":

About 6 feet of the lower extremity of the large gut of the Buffaloe is the first mo[r]sel that the cook makes love to, this he holds fast at one end with the right hand while the forefinger and thumb of the left he gently compresses it, and discharges what he says is not good to eat, but of which in the s(e)quel we get a moderate portion; the mustle lying underneath the shoulder blade next to the back, and fillets are next saught, these are needed up very fine with a good portion of kidney suit; to this composition is then added a just proportion of pepper and salt and a small quantity of flour; thus far advanced our skilfull operater . . . sceizes the recepticle . . . and tying it fast at one end turns it inward and begins now with repeated evolutions of the hand and arm, and a brisk motion of the finger and thumb to put in what he says is *bon pour manger*; thus by stuffing and compressing he soon distends the recepticle to the utmost limits of it's power of expansion . . . and all is completely filled with something good to eat, it is tyed at the other end, but not any cut off, for that would make the pattern too scant; it is then baptised in the missour with two dips and a flirt, and bobbed into the kettle; from whence, after it be well bolied it is taken and fryed with bears oil untill it becomes brown, when it is ready to esswage the pangs of a keen appetite or such as travelers in the wilderness are seldom at a loss for.²¹

Thus again, Charbonneau is found performing a task in no way associated with his rank as interpreter, but by some quirk of his simple mind he appeared to enjoy cooking, and there is no record of a serious protest on his part.

* Called *pomme blanche* by the French and *Psoralea esculenta* by the scientists. These roots were eaten raw or cooked in any manner convenient at the moment.

ACROSS THE CONTINENT

1804-1806

DESPITE their earlier experience, Lewis and Clark again assigned Charbonneau to the helm of a pirogue. One day early in May, both commanders went ashore, leaving all valuable equipment in the craft controlled by the Frenchman, "perhaps the most timid waterman in the world," said Lewis.¹

Sacajawea, with Pomp on her back, sat quietly nursing her own thoughts, which almost certainly had nothing to do with her spouse. Long ago she had transferred any sentiment of which she was capable to William Clark. If she thought of Charbonneau at all, it was with a smoldering hate, the cause of which is only partially clear. True, he had bought her for a slave, fathered Pomp without benefit of clergy, used corporal punishment, and probably offered her to the men with Lewis and Clark. But reprehensible as all these were, they were widely accepted as inevitable by Indian women, and it is difficult to assess Sacajawea's special hate for Charbonneau.

F. G. Burnett, once a teacher at Fort Washakie on the Shoshono reservation in Wyoming, said years later, "Sacajawea rarely spoke of Charbonneau. When she did mention his name, it was with bitterness and in remembrance of his temper and abuse. . . . She spoke of Charbonneau as being a bad man who would strike her on the least provocation. . . . Clark . . . would not allow Charbonneau to abuse her."² Also, Burnett continued, if she had been given to Lewis and Clark's men, she would have been disgraced and have had her nose cut off. This is open to debate, because the mutilation could hardly have been effected in the presence of the American commanders as well as in the absence of her own tribe to enforce such a code.

Sacajawea's relationship with Charbonneau is extremely confused for many reasons. Neither Sacajawea nor Charbonneau was literate,

and all quotations from either are therefore indirect. Charbonneau entered into domestic relations with numerous Indian girls, and it is seldom possible to know positively which of his consorts was involved in a given situation. And there is no unanimity regarding the date of Sacajawea's death, some having it as early as 1812, others 1837, and still others as late as 1884.

All these factors becloud any evidence attributed to "Charbonneau's wife"; for instance, the above quotations from Burnett were reputedly made many years after some authorities believe Sacajawea to have died. Obviously, if she died in 1812, the remarks about Charbonneau attributed to her in her later life were made not by Sacajawea but by another Indian woman who lived with him at some time. Or if the 1884 date is correct for her death, then the charges of misuse which she leveled against a husband may have referred to another of the several men with whom she is said to have lived after she reputedly ran away from Charbonneau while she was still quite young. If she lived to the age of 100, the memory of early spouses would likely have taken on the inaccuracies of old age.³

But all these discrepancies of history were far in the future. For the moment Sacajawea sat motionless, as a good pirogue passenger should, while Charbonneau steered the craft.

And then it happened again. Like a mighty hammer a squall hit broadside, and long before Charbonneau could collect whatever wits he had, the pirogue was on her side, saved from turning bottom up only by the sail.

Blind, trembling panic seized the Frenchman, and there he huddled with fear-frozen hands, too terrified to do anything. He was "still crying to his god for mercy" when one of the crew cut the sail loose and the pirogue righted itself, full of water to within an inch of the gunwales.

Everyone was shouting orders. Even Lewis lost his head and plunged into the river fully clothed in an attempt to help, but he came to his senses and returned to shore before he was caught in the current.

And Charbonneau prayed.

Finally Pierre Crusatte, acting as bowman that day, pulled his pistol and threatened to shoot Charbonneau if he did not do his duty. In the meantime, Sacajawea was leaning over the side of the pirogue busily scooping up every article within reach; she saved some of the most valuable expedition records and supplies.

Crusatte, without much help from Charbonneau, got the pirogue ashore, dumped it free of water, and spread the freight out to dry.

A ration of grog went the rounds that night.

This episode is one of those always cited to prove Charbonneau a coward. It is a picturesque interpretation of an unchallenged occurrence, but it does not present very good historical balance. Certain important items are generally omitted: Sergeant Ordway, not a man to hide his opinions, says little more about the accident than that the pirogue was hit by a squall and turned on her side, with no particular imputation of guilt; Toussaint Charbonneau, like the majority of his fellow Frenchmen, could not swim, and to fall in any water deeper than his head meant almost certain drowning; and perhaps most important, it was as much a psychological truism then as now that every human being has an area of paralyzing fear peculiar to his own ego. It may be great heights, or battle, or fire.

For Charbonneau it was water. It held a mortal terror for him which he was as powerless to resist as many a better man has been unable to combat the panic of fire.

It was on the Pacific journey, too, that another episode occurred that has contributed to Charbonneau's reputation as a coward. One day when he and Drouillard were surprised by a grizzly bear, the animal chose to chase Charbonneau, who fired his gun in the air and hid in the nearest thicket while Drouillard killed the beast.

Here again no one disputes the facts, but their interpretation may be questioned. Charbonneau's customary weapon was a knife; he was a poor shot and seldom carried a gun, one authority saying he never did.⁴ Furthermore, climbing a tree or hiding were accepted defenses against grizzlies. Captain Lewis said he would rather fight two Indians than one grizzly, and Sergeant Ordway tells how six of his hunters once wounded a brown bear, far less dangerous than a grizzly, whereupon it chased two of the hunters into a canoe while a third jumped into the river to escape—and no one accused them of cowardice.

Now, all this is not to say that Charbonneau was a noble and fearless frontiersman. But neither was he an abject coward. If he feared more things than some men, by that very token it took a larger measure of bravery just to endure the day-by-day dangers of the American frontier.

When the expedition reached the forks of the Missouri, digressive excursions were made to determine which was the main stream. When

this was decided the commanders, not too confident of their opinion, secretly agreed that Lewis and Drouillard would lead a small detachment overland seeking the rumored Great Falls, which, if found, would vindicate their judgment. Clark, Charbonneau, and the remainder of the men would continue moving their bulky craft up the shallow stream.

But it was killing work. The cordelle or towline was the only means of moving the boats. Raw, human muscle must overcome the pull of the river. Barefoot, naked, wading in water often up to their armpits, the men pulled and hauled and stumbled and cursed. But each night they were a little nearer the Pacific. By the first of June, they were eating supper only a few miles below the Great Falls.

In many respects the next two weeks were the most trying for the expedition. Lewis and Drouillard were seeking the Falls, leaving Clark with the poorer interpreter and a short food supply.

Sacajawea was ill and Clark bled her, which did not help; he did it again, and she got worse; he moved her under cover on a pirogue; he switched from bleeding to a "doste of Salts," and "the Indian woman [was] verry sick." Lewis, having reached the Falls on June 13 "about 12 OClock having traveled by estimate about 15. Miles," dropped downstream to find Sacajawea "excessively bad," which concerned him greatly "from the consideration of her being our only dependence for a friendly negociation with the Snake Indians on whom we depend for horses to assist us in our portage from the Missouri to the Columbia river."⁵

Meanwhile, Lewis, apparently without consulting Clark, chose a sixteen-mile portage around the Falls. Whatever Clark's private thoughts were regarding this somewhat high-handed decision, he said nothing, and set about making crude wheels from the cross-sections of giant cottonwood trees. The wheels were to be used on a vehicle it was hoped would lighten the labor of the long portage.

Sacajawea was no better, and Lewis gave her two "doses of bark and opium," which improved her pulse, but a relapse followed. Both commanders then became unreasonable and said that if she died it would be the "fault of her husband."⁶ There was little justification for this. Sacajawea's illness almost certainly stemmed from a severe cold contracted at an unfortunate time, and Clark's own journal admits that Sacajawea finally took further medication on orders from Charbonneau. But the contradiction lends weight to the idea that

the Frenchman was not well liked, at least by Lewis, and that it was customary to put him in as bad light as possible.

Lewis followed his opium with "15 drops of the oil of vitriol," and Charbonneau made Sacajawea a meal of "white apple," after which her fever rose and Lewis castigated Charbonneau for preparing the delicacy for his wife. Poor Charbonneau could only shrug his puzzlement while Lewis switched from "oil of vitriol" to dilute niter and laudanum!

Frontier medicine was always crude, seldom scientific, and surprisingly effective. Those who were fit survived.

While Lewis was doctoring Sacajawea and damning her husband, Clark was finding the sixteen-mile portage far more difficult than Lewis had thought. The men were exceedingly tired. Prickly pear, insects, and the summer heat were taking a dangerous toll in human strength, and it is doubtful whether Charbonneau's cooking helped matters.

Next to the last day in June, a sudden storm trapped Charbonneau in another of the events which have been turned to his disadvantage. He, Clark's Negro servant York, Clark himself, and Sacajawea were upriver just above the Falls when a black sky warned them of an approaching storm. With the exception of York, they took shelter in a narrow, dry canyon, where they were almost immediately engulfed by the cloudburst runoff racing down the narrow confines.

Water! Charbonneau was as terrified as ever, and with his plaid shirt plastered to his back and his great mustache dripping, he froze midway between life and drowning, clutching Sacajawea by the hand while little Pomp hung wide-eyed from his mother's neck. Charbonneau had instinctively grabbed his wife's hand in a protective gesture and as instinctively failed to do anything but endanger her life. They were perched halfway up the steep walls of the canyon when Clark pushed them both to safety.*

* Referring to still another mishap in which Clark saved Charbonneau's life when he was knocked off his feet by a swift current, the vitriolic editor of the Lewis and Clark journals Elliot Coues said, "On most occasions Captain Clark showed . . . rare judgement. . . . Today he was not up to the mark, and the cowardly wife-beating tenderfoot still lived" "Tenderfoot" indeed! Toussaint Charbonneau had already lived many years among the Indians and was the undisputed dean of the interpreter-expatriates on the Upper Missouri. Whatever he was, he was no "tenderfoot." (See Elliot Coues, *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Lewis and Clark*, 4 vols., New York, Francis P. Harper, 1893, II, 442.)

While Clark was saving the Charbonneau family from drowning, the men on the portage were in equal danger from the giant, two-inch hailstones which accompanied the storm.⁷ Said Lewis:

Saw a black cloud rise in the west which we looked for emediate rain we made all haste possible but had not got half way before the Shower met us and our hind exeltree broke in two. We were obledged to leave the load Standing and ran in great confusion to Camp the hail being so large and the wind so high and violent in the plains, and we being naked we were much bruuzed by the large hail. Some nearly killed one knocked down three times, and others without hats or anything about their heads bleading and complained verry much.⁸

Nothing was going too well on the portage. Lewis had insisted on bringing the iron frame for a knockdown boat, which, after Drouillard had killed enough animals to supply hides to sheath it, proved impractical and had to be sunk in the river to await the return of the expedition. "I fear I have committed another blunder," said Lewis.⁹

He had.

Swarms of insects allowed little rest, day or night; Lewis suspected what Charbonneau could have told him—that they could not reach the Pacific and return that season, and that as the mountains closed in, game would become scarce and the "white puddings . . . lost and Sharbono out of employment." York was sick; clothes were worn out; and beyond the portage, which was completed July 4, 1805, Clark must build smaller canoes before they could move on.

After this Pryor dislocated a shoulder for the second time; Lepage became ill, and Charbonneau had to relieve him aboard the boat—this time without mishap.

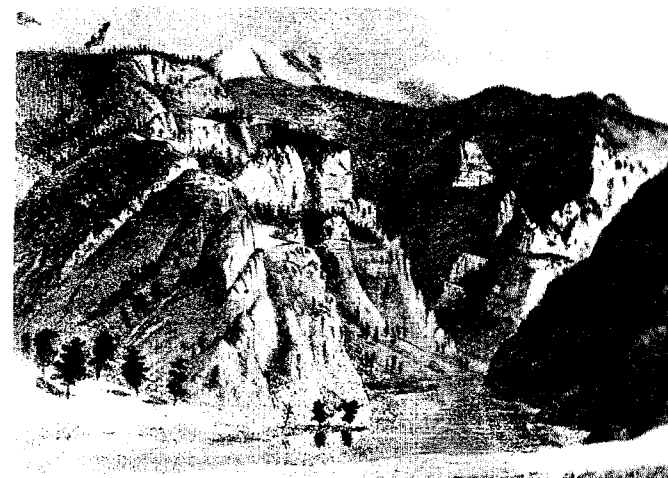
As they neared Snake country, the commanders led small detachments in search of the Indians, from whom they wished to buy horses to use in crossing the Continental Divide. In view of the legend that Sacajawea was indispensable, it is interesting to note that Clark took neither her nor Charbonneau on his excursion. And when, after passing the Three Forks, food was in dangerously short supply and no Snakes or any other tribesmen had yet been found, Lewis took Drouillard and Charbonneau, but not Sacajawea, in a desperate bid to contact the Indians.

Illness, ineffectual sanitary precautions, and accidents had so

delayed the expedition that it was August 3 before they arrived in the vicinity of Butte, Montana. Three days later Lewis and the two interpreters again went searching for help.

Lewis would remember the day: a canoe overturned; Clark missed a direction signal; the medicine got wet; Whitehouse fell in the river and narrowly missed death when the plunging canoe passed directly over his head; some powder was missing; and George Shannon got lost again because the commanders had left no direction markers for him, and it had taken him three days to backtrack and pick up their trail.

Near Grayling, Montana, Lewis agreed it was useless to attempt further navigation of the river, and again went in search of the Indians. Shortly thereafter he reached the headwaters of the Missouri, "in surch of which we have spent so many toilsome days and wristless



Meriwether Lewis called this scene "Gates of the rocky mountains." Pencil sketch by A. E. Mathews. *Montana Historical Society, Helena.*



John M. Stanley's lithograph of the site where Lewis and Clark crossed the Continental Divide. *Report of Explorations and Surveys . . . 1853, U.S. Senate, 36th Congress, Executive Documents, Phillips Collection, University of Oklahoma Library.*

nights," and the same day crossed the Continental Divide, where "I first tasted the water of the great Columbia river."*¹⁰

The story of the first contact of the Americans with Sacajawea's people and her joy at finding her brother, Cameahwait, who in turn furnished the horses needed for crossing the mountains, needs no retelling here. It is the *pièce de résistance* of every history of the Lewis and Clark expedition. It is enough here to note that Sacajawea recognized her nation, and that Lewis used "Labuish, Charbono and Sah-cah-gar-wea"¹¹ in the long-drawn-out negotiations which eventually resulted in the acquisition of the horses; and that when the Americans took temporary leave of the Snakes in order to reunite the several segments of their command, they left both Charbonneau and Sacajawea to continue bargaining for help.

Between the period of negotiations and the expedition's return to the Mandans, Charbonneau and Sacajawea ceased to be of particular significance, and fulfilled only routine duties. From time to time they are mentioned: On August 24, Lewis said, he gave "the interpreter some articles with which to purchase a horse for the woman he had obtained," but the journalist failed to say which interpreter—his favorite George Drouillard or the Frenchman Charbonneau.¹²

Some horseplay between Charbonneau and the two Field boys ended in a dispute serious enough for Clark to record, and he also spoke to Charbonneau "about his duty"; Lewis took "a belt of Blue Beeds which the Squar had," purchased pelts, and reimbursed Sacajawea with a blue cloth coat; at the council held to determine the location of the winter camp on the Pacific, Charbonneau's name is followed with a dash, indicating that he either was not permitted to vote or declined, the latter a most unlikely thought.

Sacajawea made from a minute bit of flour saved for her baby a tiny loaf of bread for Clark, which "I eate with great satisfaction"; on Christmas day the red-haired commander received "2 Doz weasels tales of the Squar of Shabono";¹³ and the Frenchman himself was detailed to help clear the stockade of Indians before the gates were locked for the night.

Charbonneau and Sacajawea begged to be allowed to go see a whale washed up on the beach, the woman saying it would be hard to have come all the long miles and be denied the sight of the ocean or the

* This is not strictly true since Lewis was on the Lemhi, a branch leading to the Snake River.

great fish; Charbonneau brought the commanders an "Oregon robin" (varied thrush) for their specimen collection; and on the return trip, Charbonneau and Drouillard negotiated again for the horses.

Once Charbonneau embroiled Lewis in a row with the Indians over a stolen animal and pilfered goods; Pomp got what appears to have been the mumps; and when Clark digressed to explore "636 Miles of [the Yellowstone]. . . I descended in 2 Small Canoes lashed together in which I had . . . John Shields, George Gibson, William Bratten, W. Labeech, Tous.' Shabono his wife & child & my man York."¹⁴

"The Squaw brought me a large and well flavoured Goose berry" and some other fruit, said Clark;¹⁵ and as they reentered Mandan territory, Charbonneau was sent to bring the Minnetarees to a powwow, while Drouillard was to collect the Mandans and invite René Jusseume to rejoin the expedition as an extra interpreter.

With such isolated entries, the Frenchman and the Bird Woman are dismissed from the journals between the time the expedition made contact with the Snakes and the return to the Mandans, where Charbonneau was paid off with 320 acres of land, "500\$ 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ cents," and a gift of blacksmith tools which would add greatly to his prestige among the Indians.

Clark offered to take the Charbonneau family on to St. Louis as unemployed attachments to the expedition, or, if they preferred, to take Pomp and rear and educate him. Toussaint at first declined, saying that interpreting and Indian trade were the only things he knew and civilization would have no need for his services, and that the separation of Pomp from the family must be deferred because the little fellow was still nursing.

The following letter reveals the friendship and respect which the long months and hard miles had built between the illiterate Frenchman and the future governor of the Missouri Territory:

On Board the Perogue Near the Ricara Village
August 20th 1806

CHARBONO

SIR: Your present Situation with the Indians givs me Some concern— I wish now I had advised you to come on with me to the Illinois where it most probably would be in my power to put you in Some way to do Some-

thing for your Self— I was so engaged after the *Big White* had concluded to go down with Jessomme as his Interpreter, that I had not time to talk with you as much as I intended to have done. You have been a long time with me and have 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 for him and my anxiety to take and raise him as my own child. I once more tell you if you will bring your son Baptist to me I will educate him and treat him as my own child— I do not forget the promise which I made to you and Shall now repeat them that you may be certain— Charbono, if you wish to live with the white people, and will come to me I will give you a piece of land and furnish you with horses cows & hogs— If you wish to visit your friends in *Montreal* I will let you have a horse, and your family Shall be taken care of until your return—if you wish to return as an Interpreter for the Menetarras when the troops come up to form the establishment, you will be with me ready and I will procure you the place— or if you wish to return to, trade with the Indians and will leave your little *Son Pomp* with me, I will assist you with merchandize for that purpose and become myself concerned with you in trade on a Small scale that is to say not exceeding a perogee load at one time—. If you are disposed to accept either of my offers to you and will bring down your *Son* your fann Janey had best come along with you to take care of the boy until I get him— let me advise you to keep your Bill of Exchange and what furs and peltries you have in possession, and get as much more as you can—, and get as many robes, and big horn and Cabbra Skins as you can collect in the course of this winter. and take them down to St' Louis as early as possible in the Spring— When you get to St' Louis enquire of the Governor of that place for a letter which I shall leave with him for you— in the letter which I shall leave with the governor I shall inform you what you had best do with your furs pelterees and robes &c and direct you where to find me— If you should meet with any misfortune on the river &c. when you get to St' Louis write a letter to me by the post and let me know your Situation— If you do not intend to go down either this fall or in the Spring, write a letter to me by the first opportunity and inform me what you intend to do that I may know if I may expect you or not. If you ever intend to come down this fall or the next Spring will be the

best time— this fall would be best if you could get down before the winter—. I shall be found either in St' Louis or in Clarksville at the Falls of the Ohio.

Wishing you and your family great success & with anxious expectations of seeing my little dancing boy Baptist I shall remain your friend

WILLIAM CLARK

Keep this letter and let not more than one or 2 persons see it, and when you write to me Seal your letter. I think you best not determine which of my offers to accept until you see me. Come prepared to accept of either which you may chuse after you get down.

Mr. Teousant Charbono, Menetarras Village.¹⁶

The letter was a sincere tribute bred of shared dangers and mutual help, and Charbonneau was not unappreciative. He accepted Clark's generous offer, and arrived in St. Louis at the end of the same August of 1806 with two wives and two sons!

And with that turn of affairs, history becomes involved in another dispute. Which wives and which children? The record is incomplete and contradictory. As noted, Charbonneau had other wives and children whom he left with the Mandans when he joined Lewis and Clark, and which of these he brought to St. Louis is in question.* At bottom it doesn't matter, for almost immediately Charbonneau repented of his decision to reenter civilization and joined a trapping and trading party somewhere southwest of St. Louis, probably on the Red or the Arkansas River.¹⁷

* As might be expected, even Charbonneau's contemporaries were confused about his family relations. Willard E. Smith said that Pomp was actually the son of William Clark ("Journal While with the Fur Traders Vasquez and Sublette in the Rocky Mountain Region, 1839-1840," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, September, 1913), while T. D. Bonner said only that "The Red-headed Chief [Clark] adopted the child . . . , and on his return to St. Louis took the infant with him, and baptized it John Baptiste Clark Chapineau" (*The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1931, p. 364). A scrutiny of dates and events will disclose obvious discrepancies in such tales, of which there were many, but they illustrate the opinions held by some of Clark's fellow frontiersmen.

CHARBONNEAU AND THE WAR OF 1812

As might be expected in the life of one who could neither read nor write and who was unaware of his role in the building of America, there are numerous gaps in Charbonneau's record. A month here, a year there. Wives came and went. He hired to whoever paid the best wages and offered the best fleshpots. For Toussaint Charbonneau was unashamedly a man of the flesh—he never pretended to glib respectability.

After his trip to the Red or Arkansas, he appears next in late October of 1810, when he acquired some land in St. Ferdinand township on the Missouri River, presumably with the intention of settling down to husbandry. But he could no more stick fast to that than he could overcome his fear of water. Five months later he bought fifty pounds of "bequit" (hardtack), sold his parcel of land to William Clark for \$100, and was on his way up the Missouri with Manuel Lisa and Henry Marie Brackenridge, on the voyage culminating in the famous race between Lisa and Wilson Price Hunt of the Overland Astorians.*

* For details of this race, see Chapter 22. Here again, there is confusion over details. Grace Raymond Hebard says that Charbonneau took Otter Woman, who was another of his wives, and their four-month-old child with him as he returned to the Mandans, leaving Sacajawea and Pomp in the care of Clark (*Sacajawea*, Glendale, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1933, pp. 100-115). In the appendix of John C. Luttig's *Journal* we find that "When Charbonneau and the Bird Woman returned to the Mandan village," they may have left their son in St. Louis (*Journal of a Fur Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, ed. Stella M. Drumm, St. Louis, Missouri Historical Society, 1920, pp. 133-134). W. J. Ghent states that Charbonneau and Sacajawea accompanied Lisa, but he does not mention another wife or children (*The Early Fur West*, New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, p. 138). And Olin D. Wheeler

Sufficient here to note that Lisa sent Charbonneau overland to Hunt to urge his cooperation, and that Charbonneau returned a week later believing Hunt had agreed. How Hunt dishonored this implication and left Lisa to enter dangerous Indian country alone is detailed elsewhere.

Following this, Lisa built Fort Manuel between the Arikaras and the Mandans and made John Luttig post commander. Charbonneau was one of the employees.

One day in mid-September of 1812, Charbonneau came flying into the Fort shouting that François Lecompte, another employee, had just been killed by the Indians. Luttig, who did not like Charbonneau, jumped to conclusions and accused the Frenchman of cowardice, saying he had "run off and left the poor fellow, the Indians spoke to Lecompte and they told him to go about his business."¹

Charbonneau paid no attention to such rebuffs, and two days later he and his questionable friend René Jusseaume headed for the Gros Ventre country looking for horses supposedly stolen by the Big Bellies. They found the horses without difficulty, but they had not been stolen by the Gros Ventres—rather by the Mandans, the white man's friends!

Luttig wryly remarked, "a lesson to take care of our property, no matter friend or Enemy."²

Shortly thereafter Manuel Lisa arranged for Charbonneau to take over the Gros Ventre trade, but Luttig did not share Lisa's confidence in the Frenchman.

Charbonneau & Jessaume Keep us in Constant uproar with their Histories and wish to make fear among the Engagees, these two rascals ought to be hung for their perfidy, they do more harm than good to the American Government, stir up the Indians and pretend to be friends to the white People at the same time but we find them to be our Enemies.

... some Rees [Arikaras] arrived which were enraged against Charbonneau & Jessaume, ... they said that C & J were Lyars and not to be considered as good frenchmen, and if Mr Manuel Lisa would send them

quotes Brackenridge as saying, "We had ... a Frenchman named Charbonneau, with his wife, ... both of whom had accompanied Lewis and Clark to the Pacific" (*The Trail of Lewis and Clark*, 2 vols., New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926, I, 128).

to the Grosventer with a pipe they would not consent such Credit have these Men amongst the Indians—they find their Character gone and try every Scheme, to Keep themselves alive like a Men a Drowning. . . .³

These harsh words bothered Charbonneau none at all, nor did they influence Lisa, for when intertribal war was about to explode as a reflection of the American-British hostilities of 1812, it was the old “rascal” and “Lyar” Toussaint Charbonneau, accompanied by two other emissaries, who was sent to arrange peace among the tribes.

Historians quite properly credit Manuel Lisa with keeping the Missouri River Indians either friendly to the United States or neutral during the War of 1812, but they generally choose to forget that it was the “coward,” “Lyar,” and “rascal” who risked his life to go among the quarreling Indians and on whom Lisa relied for his contacts with the tribes—contacts which only a trustworthy interpreter could give. As the war spread beyond the Great Lakes and the weight of Indian arms became more and more important, Charbonneau was constantly among both friendly and hostile tribes.

On November 23, 1812, he was talking trade and peace to the Sioux camped near the Arikara towns; a month later the war touched his own family when “the Wife of Charbonneau a Snake Squaw,* die of a putrid fever she was a good and the best Woman in the fort, aged abt 25 years she left a fine infant girl”⁴ (perhaps Lizette), who was hastily given into the care of the Indians living at Fort Manuel lest she fall into the hands of unfriendly savages.†

His child thus cared for, Toussaint and a companion set “off for their stations” with the Gros Ventres on February 21, 1813. He returned shortly with the glad news that Le Borgne, perhaps the most bestial chief ever to live on the Missouri and Sacajawea’s former master, had at last been dethroned by his own people, and was now begging Charbonneau for twenty-five pounds of powder and twice that amount of shot with which to honor a promise to the North West Company that he would side with the Canadians in the present war.

* This wife was probably Otter Woman, although some authorities are positive it was Sacajawea (see Luttig, *op. cit.*, p. 106; Hebard, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-111; and Ghent, *op. cit.*, p. 149).

† Lizette and possibly a brother, Toussaint, Jr., were later taken to St. Louis by Luttig, who believed Charbonneau was dead because he had not returned on time from “one of these expeditions.” The child or children were given into the guardianship of William Clark (Luttig, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-134).

Inexplicably, the old chief had also promised only to steal from the Americans, not to kill them. Why he needed ammunition to implement such a promise is a nice bit of Indian rationalization.

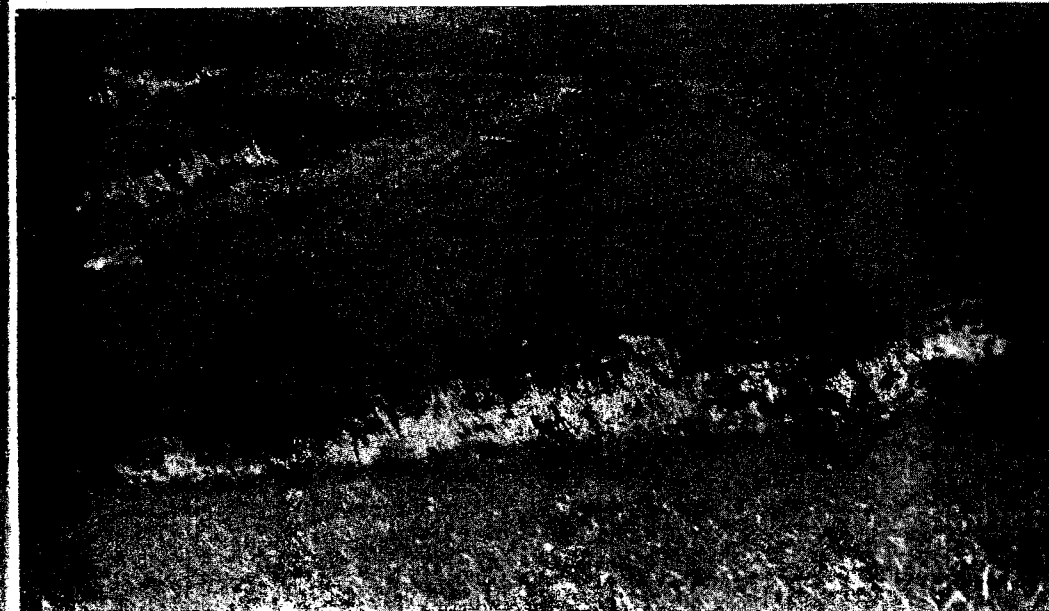
As animosities beyond the Mississippi intensified, Lisa believed Charbonneau should have some protection, but the Frenchman was unconcerned. Nevertheless, when the Cheyennes near Fort Yates, North Dakota, warned him there were unfriendly Sioux nearby, Lisa ordered him “escorted by 5 of our Men, untill he would be out of Danger,” said Luttig.⁵

Lisa valued his interpreter even if Luttig did not.

Throughout the war Lisa and Charbonneau used their very considerable influence in favor of the American cause, with the result that the Missouri Indians never seriously challenged American arms. To that extent, Lisa the Spaniard and Charbonneau the Frenchman deserve our thanks.

When the war was over, Charbonneau’s insatiable craving for new trails and new faces, especially feminine ones, resumed sway, and when Auguste Pierre Chouteau and Jules de Mun turned their fancies from the Missouri to the Rio Grande, Charbonneau was close at hand.

The faint foundation lines across the small creek are believed to be the remains of Manuel Lisa’s sanctuary for infirm River Sioux near Cedar Island on the Missouri River, circa War of 1812. Photo by author. Courtesy of William Arch, owner of the site.



CHARBONNEAU GOES TO SANTA FE

1815-1817

If Mandan towns and Minnetaree fleshpots were steady sources of profit and pleasure, nevertheless, the dream of many a Missouri riverman was to cross the prickly pear fields to the southwest, climb the long, blazing sand reaches of the Spanish mountains, and enter the fabled valley running from Taos to Santa Fe, magnificent every fall with golden foliage symbolizing the material desires of all fur men. There were the streams teeming with luxurious pelts; there were the

Santa Fe, 1846, looking north. Fort Marcy on the far hill was not there when De Mun and Charbonneau visited the town. *Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe.*



soft summer nights and tingling winter dawns; there were the clean beds and the lithe, perfumed companions to share daytime laughter and nighttime ecstacy.

It is no use pretending that gold and pelts were all that lured these men to Taos. Puritan America and prim chronologists like to sweep unholy facts under the historical carpet, but the interpreter-guides were less sanctimonious. They made no bones about the multiple lure.

Thus far, however, those who had dared the desert, the mountains, and the Spanish laws against foreign traders' entering the Taos-Santa Fe corridor had generally landed in jail and lost their goods, and were indeed lucky to escape with their lives. But the fur trader was essentially a gambler and adventurer, and after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, it was a rare season when some reckless band did not turn southwest instead of toward the Sioux and Mandans.

On September 10, 1815, Jules de Mun and Auguste Pierre Chouteau led a party to trade at the headwaters of the Arkansas, close by Spanish domains.

On the way they bought out Joseph Philibert, who was returning to his men with supplies and horses for the purpose of bringing out his own catch of the previous year.

At the mouth of Huerfana Creek, De Mun found that Philibert's men, under pressure of starvation, had crossed the mountains into Spanish territory.

De Mun seized the chance to follow them to Taos. He found them safe and well received, went on to Santa Fe to seek permission to trade and trap, was encouraged to believe his request would be granted, and then returned to Huerfana Creek, where he, Chouteau, and Philibert sat down to consider their situation.

They still had more men than their supplies would support, and it was decided that De Mun, Philibert, and one other should return to St. Louis to replenish their needs. They were to meet Chouteau at a rendezvous on the Kansas River.

Forty-six days later De Mun wrote, "I bought the goods and engaged men for a new expedition, and, having taken another license, started on the 15th July [1816] to go by water to the Kansas river, where Mr. Chouteau and I appointed to meet."¹

John Luttig says that Toussaint Charbonneau was a member of this second De Mun expedition.² The fragmentary De Mun journal makes

no mention of Charbonneau by name. But Luttig generally knew whereof he spoke, and Charbonneau swore he was on the journey.³ Hence it is safe to assume that the virile old Frenchman, wrinkled with the trails of fifty-eight summers, hitched up his none-too-tidy britches again, tucked in his plaid shirt, and shouldered his full share of the second De Mun expedition, an expedition which quite possibly represented the first white man's crossing of the Front Range into the "Bull Pen" area of the North Platte.⁴

Without mishap, except for a brush with 200 Pawnees, De Mun met Chouteau, arranged to ship their catch to St. Louis, and headed for the mountains with Charbonneau and some two dozen men.*

By this time both De Mun and Chouteau were planning how best to crack the Taos-Sante Fe barrier, and when some chance-met Spaniards told them there were unfriendly Utes and Apaches nearby, De Mun abandoned local trapping, left Chouteau at Sangre de Cristo pass, and rushed headlong toward Taos again.

But this time he encountered official opposition, even if clothed in Castilian courtesy. He was stopped before reaching his destination, and although he was allowed to send a request for permission to plead his case before the governor, he was told to stay on his own side of the fence in the meantime.

The American West was not conquered by men who paid overmuch attention to such orders, and when De Mun missed Chouteau at the pass and had to trace "him up the Rio del Norte [the upper Rio Grande] near where it enters the mountains,"⁵ he was all the while mulling over how best to circumvent the Spaniards.

That his own life and those of his men might be forfeit never entered his head. Death was a daily specter in the mountains, and one got used to the sight of the Scythe.

When a courier from the governor brought a denial of all De Mun's requests, he and Chouteau accepted the rebuff and outlined a trading trip to Crow country instead—a region less strange to Charbonneau than Taos or Santa Fe, and by that token less appealing.

Before the Crow expedition could get under way, however, De Mun

* There is the possibility that Charbonneau was sent to St. Louis with the pelts, but since he was paid \$200 for the year July, 1816, to July, 1817, this fact would argue that he remained with De Mun.

risked another trip to Taos in March, 1817. There he found wild rumors regarding his intentions in the mountains. To prove his good faith, he led a detachment of Spanish soldiers back over his trail to show that he had built no fortifications and had no soldiers under his command.

By the time the Spaniards were convinced he was a peaceful trader, it was too late to get to the Crows, so the Americans decided to forward what pelts they could to St. Louis and make a new start next season.

Before these good intentions could be put into execution, another detachment of Spanish troops arrived with orders to arrest the Americans and take them to Santa Fe to stand trial. There De Mun and Chouteau were thrown into dungeons, and presumably Charbonneau and his comrades received like treatment.

After they had spent forty-four days in irons, a court-martial was held in which the Spanish commandant acted as prosecutor-judge, presiding over a court "Only one of [whose] . . . six members appeared to have some information [education], the others not knowing even how to sign their names."⁶ The court routine consisted largely of threats to blow out De Mun's and Chouteau's brains. Finally a verdict was announced: the Americans were stripped of \$30,000 worth of goods which they had cached on American soil but which had been stolen by Spanish troops and brought to Santa Fe; they were made to kneel and kiss the document providing for the theft; and they were to be given an emaciated horse each and allowed to make their way home as best they could.

It would be difficult to overstate Charbonneau's disappointment. Prison, or a few welts across a bare back, or a bit of personal indignity—these were but the hazards of a good adventure. But to be denied access to the dusty streets of the oldest town in North America, to be kept from its grogshops where there were liars as great as he, to be down at night alone on a cold floor—that was cruelty indeed!

But then, this was not the first adventure which showed no financial profit or personal pleasure, and there is no record that Toussaint Charbonneau brooded over his lot. Once back on the Missouri, no richer, almost two years older, but still the adventurer and interpreter-guide, he cast about for new employment, which for him was never difficult to find.

*CHARBONNEAU, MAJOR LONG,
AND PRINCE PAUL*

1819-1823

THESE were the years of the United States's adolescence. In two short generations we had effectively, if ruthlessly, shoved our own peculiar civilization to the midcontinent and were now entering our trans-Mississippi expansion.

Toussaint Charbonneau played his little part.

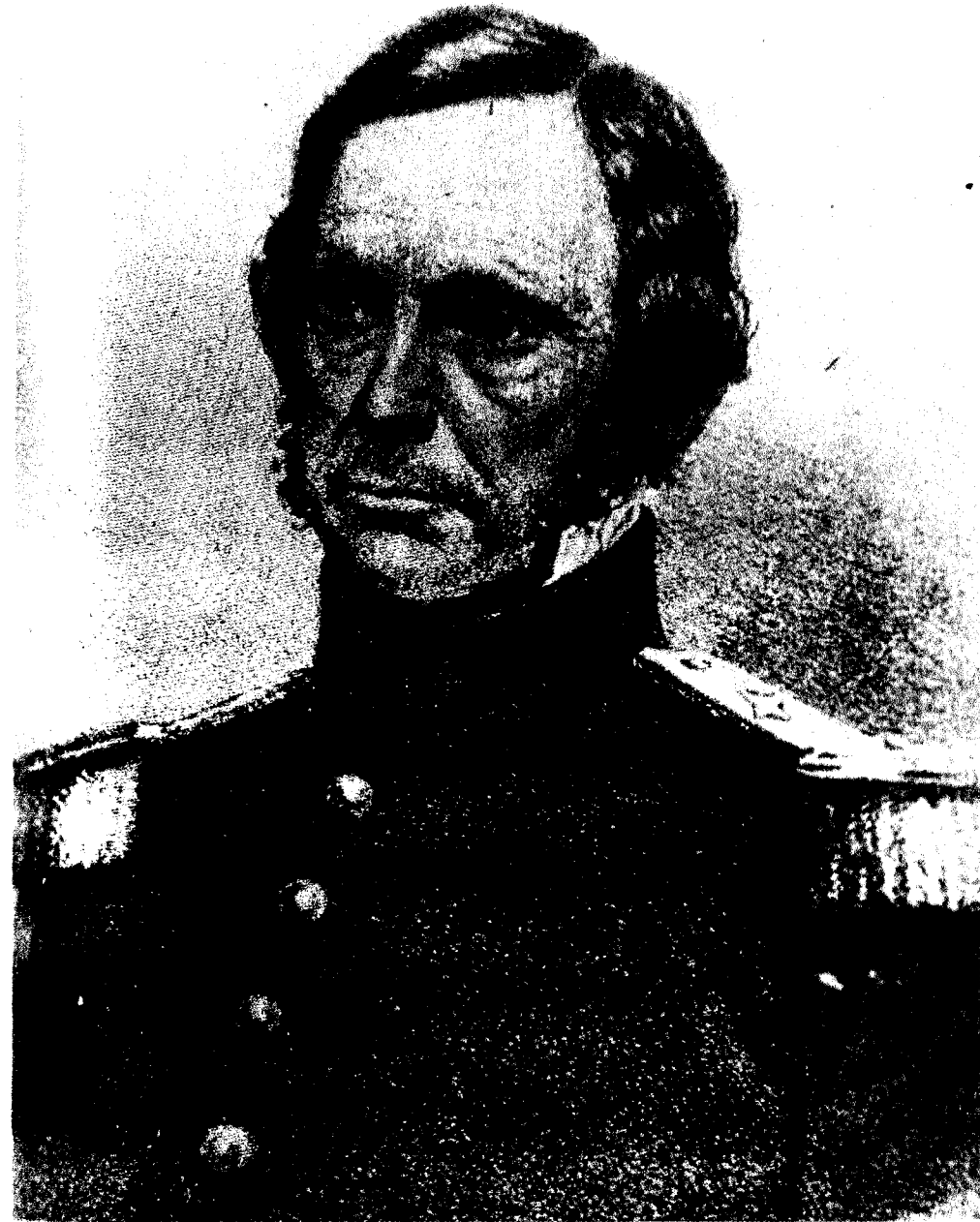
When the Treaty of Ghent closed the War of 1812, several ventures were soon afoot to control trans-Mississippi Indians, protect the traders, and neutralize the influence of the British traffickers on the Upper Missouri. Among these ventures was the expedition of explorer-engineer Stephen Harriman Long.

Congress appropriated funds, and in early May of 1819 Long went to Pittsburgh to study how best to conquer that part of the American West on which only the red man had as yet built a fire.

Despite fewer funds than he had been promised and a bit of Army meddling, Long assembled a staff of prominent specialists: Major John Biddle, journalist; Dr. William Baldwin, physician and botanist; Dr. Thomas Say, zoologist; A. E. Jessup, geologist; T. R. Peale, naturalist; Sam Seymour, painter; and Lieutenant J. D. Graham and Cadet William H. Swift, topographers. With these he went to St. Louis in June, 1819. There he was joined by Benjamin O'Fallon, Indian agent; John Dougherty, O'Fallon's interpreter—and Toussaint Charbonneau.

The old man never traveled in poor company.

Exactly when Charbonneau was attached to the Long expedition is uncertain, but after it was on the move and Dr. Say cut across from the Osage villages to the "Konza" (Kansas) towns, as he called



Stephen H. Long, leader of the western expedition of 1820. *U.S. Signal Corps, Photo 111-BA-1790, The National Archives.*

them, Charbonneau was already out on the prairies talking to the Kansas tribes and urging them to a council with Say.¹

Excepting a brush with the Pawnees late in August which Charbonneau had no trouble in controlling,² nothing of interest happened, and the Long expedition went into winter quarters near Old Council Bluffs.

When the expedition started toward the Continental Divide the following season, there were twenty men, including "Dougherty and four other men to serve as interpreters, baggage handlers and the like," and on the Loup River two Frenchmen were also engaged as interpreters.³

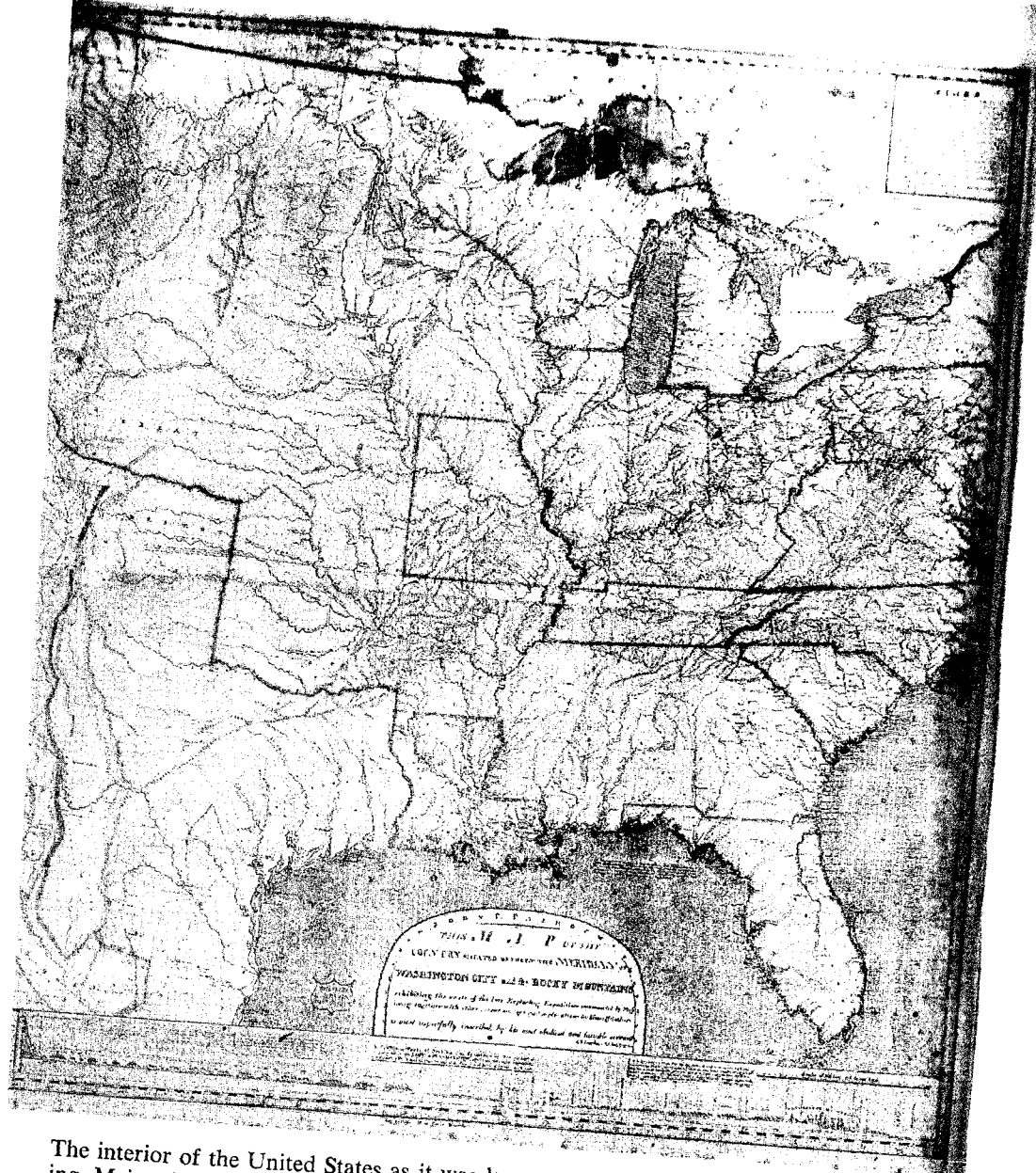
Was one of these six interpreters Charbonneau? Presumably. Yet, except for the fact that he positively was with Long on the Missouri River, no one knows whether he was with him at Old Council Bluffs, whether he went with the expedition up the Platte to the mountains, or whether he climbed Pike's Peak and drifted down the Arkansas to La Junta, Colorado, where Long split his command into two parts on July 24, 1820.

No one knows whether the uninhibited old blade was looking at pretty ankles all the way along the Cimarron and the Canadian rivers to the Texas-New Mexico border with Major Long or was with Captain Bell, who had been detailed to reexamine the Arkansas Valley, already explored by Zebulon Pike.

Perhaps neither. Perhaps Toussaint had found a "Konza" girl and a warm tepee and had settled down to a happy winter.

It is all confused. At the very time Charbonneau was certainly with Long, he is also reputed to have been on the payroll of William Clark, Indian Affairs superintendent, St. Louis, for a fee of \$200 covering service from July 17 to December 31, 1819. Furthermore, there is some indication that he was with Stephen Watts Kearny, frontier Indian fighter and United States Army man, during his tour of duty on the Missouri.⁴ Of course, these apparent conflicts may not be real, for all these reputed employers were government-sponsored and Charbonneau may have been loaned by one to the other.

Anyway, the blood of Toussaint never lost its fever, and one day sometime before the New Year, 1820, he was back in St. Louis with a new wife, Eagle, from the Minnetarees. In the city he picked up a second spouse, believed by some to have been Sacajawea,⁵ and hired out to another fur company. But there are no details.



The interior of the United States as it was known to official Washington following Major Stephen H. Long's expedition of 1820. Long reported that the western plains were worthless for white habitation. Note the "Great Desert" east of the Rocky Mountains. *The National Archives, Record Group #77, U.S. 62.*

While in St. Louis Charbonneau must have talked at length with Clark, for about this time the latter, now governor of the Missouri Territory, wrote that he had paid tuition for two Charbonneau sons to two separate St. Louis schoolmasters. Perhaps these boys were Jean Baptiste (Pomp) and Toussaint, Jr., son of Otter Woman, who had died in 1812. But as noted, there is seldom agreement regarding Charbonneau's children or the identity of their mothers. Only their paternity goes unchallenged—an unusual twist to a timeless problem.

None of this historical confusion bothered Toussaint. He went away again and came wandering home with still another woman, a Ute, who, according to one interpretation, was a troublemaker.⁶ The Ute girl immediately became embroiled with another wife (Sacajawea?), and Toussaint lost his patience at their wrangling and beat the older woman, whereupon she ran away—to live with three or more men in her turn and give birth to a hazy number of breeds and half-breeds, some of whom became valuable guides and interpreters all the way from Oklahoma to Idaho.

And none of this bothered Charbonneau either. His was a lusty life, and with it he expected certain domestic irregularities and differences. He spanked the offender and forgot it—or went on another excursion and came back with a new love, not infrequently costing as much as \$250.⁷

In the present instance he headed for the Great Salt Lake; crossed the Rocky Mountains to Wind River, the Big Horn, and Yellowstone; and thence turned back to the Missouri and down to the Gros Ventres. It was on one such ramble that he may have discovered South Pass.⁸

It would be easy to think of Toussaint Charbonneau as nothing more than a squaw-chasing French renegade because almost every time his name appears, he is living with another woman. But such a judgment would be unjust. The very inclusion of his name in so many journals argues that he was more than he seemed. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this extraordinary man was his talent for being sought out, employed, and appreciated by so many notable figures over so long a time.

When Paul Wilhelm, Prince of Württemberg, made the first of his five visits to the American West in 1822–1823, he met Charbonneau, a wife (just possibly Sacajawea), and Pomp at the mouth of the Kaw on June 1, 1823, and was much impressed by the old Frenchman. The Prince was journeying up the Missouri aboard a “French Fur



South Pass City, ghost town just northeast of the most famous of passes across the Rockies. *Wyoming State Archives and Historical Department.*

Company keelboat,”⁹ the only reasonably sure and minimally comfortable transportation available despite the advent of steamboats on the river three years before.

When Paul arrived at Fort Recovery on August 23, 1823, the factor at Fort Kiowa, a few miles upstream, sent Charbonneau to invite the royal visitor to Kiowa.¹⁰ The Prince accepted, and took an increased fancy to the Charbonneau family. This encounter developed into an expensive attachment for Paul. Before he left the Missouri, he had arranged to take Pomp to Europe to receive a classical education—to become fluent in English, German, French, and Spanish in addition to the almost limitless Indian languages and dialects he already knew.

When the Prince and his twenty-four-year-old protégé returned to the Missouri six years later, he generously purchased tobacco and ammunition for the "interpreter, Charbonneau," and saw Pomp launched on his own career as interpreter-guide.

Young Charbonneau was superbly equipped to follow in his father's path. He did so, but with two notable differences: he was not to experience the luxury of association with the great and celebrated figures and events his father had so casually enjoyed, nor was he to build the legend of rakish adventure which adds so much color to old Charbonneau. Instead, the younger man tramped prosaically over most of the American West, leading detachments of traders or sight-seers over trails already worn deep by others.

Legend says that he died on the Wind River, Shoshone Reservation, 1885; that his body was carried to a nearby mountain, lowered forty feet down between two great crags, and covered with boulders; and that a subsequent mountain slide erased the burial site.¹¹

*CHARBONNEAU AND MAXIMILIAN,
PRINCE OF WIED*

1832-1834

WHEN Colonel Henry Leavenworth went to the relief of the fur trader William Henry Ashley, who had been attacked by the Arikaras, he found Toussaint Charbonneau, then in the service of the "French Fur Company" (Berthold-Pratte-Chouteau) at Fort Kiowa,¹ a willing go-between, and sent him with the following communication to the Indians on August 14, 1823:

RICARAS:

You see the pipe of peace . . . in the hands of Mr. Charlonnau, and the flag of the United States.

These will convince you that my heart is not bad. Your villages are in my possession; come back and take them in peace. . . . You shall not be hurt if you do not . . . molest the traders. . . .

H. LEAVENWORTH
Colonel U. S. Army²

This chore done, Charbonneau returned to Kiowa, and was there when the mountain man Hugh Glass crawled into the Fort following an attack by a grizzly and desertion by his companions, John S. Fitzgerald and Jim Bridger.

Meanwhile, Joseph Brazeau was organizing at Kiowa the first attempt to ascend the Missouri since Ashley's recent defeat. It was to be a small party, composed of Antoine Citoleux, or Langevin as he is often recorded, in command, and Jean Eymas, Joseph A. Sire.

Toussaint Charbonneau, and two others. At the last moment Hugh Glass joined them, despite his still bothersome wounds.

The seven men left Fort Kiowa October 10, 1823. Neither Citoleux nor Charbonneau believed they could get through the Arikaras, and five days later, while the party was still some thirty miles below the mouth of the Teton River, Citoleux made his will, anticipating the worst.

However, the men did reach the Arikara villages, but found them deserted and burned. Years of wary association had taught Charbonneau an almost infallible sense of Indian psychology, and he told Citoleux that the Arikaras had doubtless gone to the Mandans and would attack the whites at the first opportunity.

No one paid any attention.

One day before reaching the Mandans, Charbonneau announced he was leaving the river to continue by land, where the chances of survival were better. His companions snorted their disgust at such cowardice, as they saw it, but made no attempt to dissuade him.

Then Glass went ashore to hunt, and Citoleux apparently started off alone through hostile country.³

Within minutes Glass was ambushed by the Arikaras but was saved by a friendly Mandan who galloped by, swooped Glass to the back of his pony, and raced for a nearby trading post.

Before this excitement had subsided, Charbonneau walked into the same stockade, unharmed.

Citoleux never arrived.*

Except for casual notice by Stephen Watts Kearny and Henry Atkinson, United States Army commanders on the Missouri, no further mention is made of Charbonneau until the spring of 1825 or 1826, when one of the Missouri's great floods came roaring down from the north and west. Charbonneau went fleeing from the thing which robbed him of all coherent thought—water.

He tore off blindly across country as if the demons of hell were snatching at his faded plaid shirt. Two miles away he clawed to the top of a pile of Indian corn, where he sat shivering from ice, spring

* Dale E. Morgan says that none of Citoleux's party were ever seen again (*Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1953, p. 100); but John C. Luttig refers to affidavits made later by Eymas and Sire (*Journal of a Fur Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, ed. Stella M. Drumm, St. Louis, Missouri Historical Society, 1920, pp. 156-157).

snow, and terror for three days.⁴ He claimed the water was twenty-five feet deep, and it doubtless was—at river flood, but not out on the prairie where he was hunched on a pile of old corn stalks.

These lapses of manhood, if such they were, did not keep Charbonneau from full employment. Between November 30, 1828, and September 30, 1834, John F. A. Sanford, United States Indian agent on the Upper Missouri, said the Frenchman was paid \$2,437.32 in wages as an interpreter—an amount roughly equal to that paid United States Government Indian subagents, and a princely sum since Charbonneau would be trading on his own account, either with or without his employer's permission.

By 1833, the bulk of the Indian trade was controlled by three groups: Lisa's old forces (he had died in 1820) held the Upper Missouri; the Columbia Fur Company, with James Kipp as commander in the field, ruled the middle river; and John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company dominated the St. Louis area.⁵

The Columbia Fur Company was absorbed by the American Fur Company in 1827. Kipp remained as administrator for the new combination, and when he visited the Mandans in 1833, he hired Charbonneau as his personal interpreter. His wisdom in doing so was challenged by Mr. Laidlaw, also of the company, who said, in a letter dated January 14, 1834, at Fort Pierre, "I am much surprised at your taking old Charbonneau into favor after [his] showing so much ingratitude upon all occasions. The old knave, what does he say for himself?"⁶

These various employments in no way interfered with Charbonneau's association with important people. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the American West attracted the wealthy who were bored with the stale limits of the European grand tour; big game hunters and scientific junkets moved up the Missouri to the heart of the continent; and royalty, coming to see the "Wild West," engaged in sport or serious study.

Maximilian, Prince of Wied, arrived in America in 1832 just as the American Fur Company's *Assiniboine* was ready to make her maiden voyage up the Missouri.* Since Astor and Maximilian repre-

* The *Assiniboine* was built in Cincinnati and destroyed by fire only two or three years after launching (*Travels in the Interior of North America*, Vols. XXII-XXIV of Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1906, XXII, 240; XXIII, 178n).

sented similar social circles, if not bloodlines, it was to be expected that the Prince would “explore” the West aboard Astor’s newest boat, which in theory would make the royal journey comfortable and safe.

Exploding boilers, river pirates, and endless delays while the countryside was combed for provisions and wood to feed the ever-hungry fires did not always validate this confidence in speed, safety, and comfort, but nevertheless the steamboat gradually increased the pleasure of river travel.

Maximilian planned to go to the mouth of the Yellowstone, making such side excursions as his fancy might choose. Somewhere along the Mandan sector of the route he met Charbonneau, “the old interpreter . . . who had lived thirty seven years in the villages . . . near this place,”⁷ and an easy rapport was soon established between the Frenchman and the Prince. Charbonneau knew everything Maximilian wanted to learn. He was perhaps the first white man ever to live with the Minnetarees,⁸ and had come among them long before the men from St. Louis plied the Upper Missouri. He had found the Indians using the shoulder blades of the buffalo for hoes; and now, thirty-odd years later, he could encourage them to accept the as yet unpredictable steamboat as something beneficial to their life.

And so the Prince and the interpreter-guide toured Indian towns where the braves greeted Charbonneau cordially and shook hands solemnly with the Prince. Such familiarity was hardly in keeping with royal etiquette, but Maximilian accepted it in the spirit in which it was offered. Only when a young blood became overzealous was there any friction. It came about when Maximilian refused to exchange a compass, which he carried on a cord around his neck, for a horse and the warrior’s best clothes, and the Indian attempted to effect the sale by force. It “was only by the assistance of old Charbonneau that I escaped a disagreeable and, perhaps, violent scene,” said Maximilian.⁹

Charbonneau did not accompany Maximilian up the Missouri. Instead he went on another of his wanderings. Captain R. Holmes, United States Army, found him among the western mountains during the season of 1833, and he is sometimes reported with Sublette at the Green River rendezvous of 1834, although this Charbonneau was almost certainly his half-breed son Baptiste.¹⁰

When Charbonneau returned from the mountains, he found his domestic affairs in an uproar, and during October of 1834 he rushed to the Gros Ventres “in quest of one of his runaway wives . . . for I



Minnetaree Indians at the arrival of Maximilian at Fort Clark, 1833, probably by Karl Bodmer. *U.S. Signal Corps, Photo 111-sc-92838, The National Archives.*

must inform you he had two lively ones. Poor old man,” said Francis Chardon, clerk at Fort Clark.¹¹

“Poor old man” indeed! There was still more life and zest for adventure in the heart of the old Frenchman than in a dozen Chardons.

By the time the difficulty of the runaway wives was resolved, Maximilian was returning downstream. Near the mouth of Knife

River, he was hailed from shore by Charbonneau, who was temporarily serving as interpreter for Joseph L. Dougherty, clerk at the newly established post of William L. Sublette-Campbell Company not far from Fort Clark.¹² The captain of the boat immediately pulled ashore to accommodate his royal guest, and Maximilian and Charbonneau began a conversation which lasted so long no attempt was made to proceed that day.

Even the next morning the old interpreter and the Prince went blithely off across four miles of Missouri countryside to look at a petrified tree, leaving the ship's commander to fidget. At their convenience they rejoined the boat.

As the vessel pulled into the Mandan towns about three o'clock in the afternoon, Charbonneau "hid himself, that they might not recognize him and invite him ashore. He had five names among these Indians—the chief of the little village; the man who possesses many gourds; the great horse from abroad; the forest bear; and fifth, which, as often happens among these Indians, is not very refined," said Maximilian.¹³

Why Charbonneau should suddenly become self-conscious before the Mandans is unknown. Certainly it could not have been because he was unaware of their numerous names for him. Long ago he had been accepted as the chief of a Minnetaree village; very early his refusal to mix all his food in a single gourd had earned him the name "man of many dishes"; the tall tales he told as he returned from his incessant wanderings fell on unbelieving Indian ears, and "the great horse from abroad" was but their derisive summation of these travels; he never pretended to exceptional bravery and would rather run from danger, as did the "forest bear"; and the fifth name was simply some earthy reference to his dealings with women, a facet of his life he never so much as bothered to defend.

All these were known for thirty years. All these he had accepted as a sort of reverse compliment from a people who understood him and whom he understood, a situation not unlike the profane names given and accepted as tokens of affection by sincere but unpolished men everywhere.

Despite these peculiar actions, Charbonneau continued to serve Maximilian. He helped the Prince make a glossary of Mandan words and, said Maximilian, "Mr. Kipp and Charbonneau, with some of the others . . . , daily assist me, . . . with much patience and kindness, in this work."¹⁴

The Prince was also given reviews of Mandan and Minnetaree life and legend ranging from their versions of sin, virgin births, and the creation, to the intimacies of their sex mores.

The Mandans believed they were often inhabited by animals, and Charbonneau told Maximilian the story of the Indian girl who refused to get married. One night a brave lay down beside her, but she repulsed him and he left wrapped in a white buffalo robe. On each of two succeeding nights, she rejected him. On the fourth day she stained her hand red, and as he again approached her that night, she struck him with her stained hand. Next day she vainly searched for a brave with her mark on him. Instead, she found her print on the glossy coat of a great white dog. In time she gave birth to seven pups.¹⁵

Once Maximilian saw a young man boastfully display a bundle of small sticks, with one end of each painted red. Another had a larger branch with red and white circles painted thereon. Charbonneau explained that each small stick or circle represented the conquest of a

Loaded dogsled of the Mandan Indians on the frozen Missouri, not far from Fort Clark. A woman with a burden is walking ahead, a child is sitting on the sled. Water color by Karl Bodmer, 1834. *Northern Natural Gas Company Collection, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.*



chosen girl, and that the stick in the center of the bundle with the jaunty feather signified the favorite conquest.¹⁶

If Toussaint Charbonneau was a man of the flesh, his chosen people were no less so.

But obversely there was the beautiful Minnetaree version of the creation. All was water until a huge, red-eyed aquatic bird which had been sent by the first man, Eh sicks-Wahaddish, dived into the depths and brought up the earth, after which an old grandmother helped populate the new world with sand rats, toads—and two cooking pots.

As a climax to Maximilian's frontier tour, Charbonneau arranged an invitation to a great Indian medicine feast thirty miles away "among the Manitaries, an invitation which I gladly accepted," said the Prince.¹⁷

Toussaint Charbonneau was now seventy-four years old. His eyes lacked the luster of the days of Lewis and Clark, but his spirit and body seemed untouched by fatigue. Without thought he led Maximilian and one or two others over river ice only twenty-four hours thick and on across thirty miles of prickly pears to the Indian rites. The Prince slithered across the flimsy ice as courageously as Charbonneau, and when his royal footwear gave out, he donned a pair of moccasins and tramped on.

North American Indians were often jealous of their religiomedical rites, but Charbonneau had joined with them many times, and people he sponsored were accepted. Once arrived at the rites, Charbonneau quickly introduced the visitors, and all joined the circle about the ceremonial fires inside the great earthen lodge.

The feasting began; the braves made speeches; they sang their monotonous chants; and they danced their rude shuffling steps to the rhythm of their mounting passions.

Two hours later each brave's wife solemnly approached her spouse, untied her leathern girdle, removed her undergarments, and handed them all to her husband. Then, with the lodge held in ritualistic hush, she approached another male of her choice, slid her hand softly down his arm, and turned and walked slowly from the lodge. The chosen man followed to consummate what was, for the Indians, a part of their ageless rites to woo from their gods fertility, good crops, and good hunting, but for Puritan America only a degrading orgy.

Who knows which was right?

TOUSSAINT CHARBONNEAU

GROWS OLD

1836-1839?

If the first quarter of the nineteenth century was marked by nobility's interest in the American West, it was also replete with those who saw therein a possible solution for all the ills of mankind. And dreamers, honest and dishonest, set afoot all manner of schemes. That they generally failed in no way dimmed the color or excitement of their dreams.

While Charbonneau was off to the Gros Ventres trailing a runaway wife—and shortly thereafter getting mixed up in a tribal war in which he narrowly missed death when two shots intended for a nearby companion passed instead through the crown of his battered old hat—a visionary scheme was being hatched in Buffalo, New York, for freeing the American Indians from white domination and Texas from the thralldom of Mexico.

James Dickson (no one knows who or what he really was¹) believed that by marching boldly into the wilderness, he could recruit zealots along the way, rally the braves to his banner, throw out the white rascals, establish man's humanity to man—and leave a name for himself—Montezuma II.

Leaving Buffalo on August 1, 1836, he headed west leading sixty Canadians, some of whom had joined his pennant merely for safety. "As yet I know little of this man, but if I may judge from so short an acquaintance, he is somewhat visionary. . . . *N'importe* I wish to go North and Westward and will embrace the opportunity," said Martin McLeod, one of Dickson's majors.²

It was already far too late to start toward the mountains, but Dickson gave it no thought. In mid-October he was at the west end of Lake Superior, ready to strike overland across Minnesota. Before he realized his danger, he was surrounded by deadly winter.

The Hudson's Bay Company on the Red River refused help because it nurtured the absurd fear that this starving, freezing band might in some mysterious fashion undermine its hold on the Red Valley. And so the dreamers died one by one and were left where they fell. The living stumbled on, suckling the hope that Pembina, Charbonneau's old command, might have food. Instead it had no garrison. Only Dickson and two followers remained. Some had deserted. The rest had died.

Whatever his faults, James Dickson was neither coward nor weakling. With a heart worthy of a greater vision, he fought across Minnesota snow, and turned north toward Fort Garry (Winnepeg), and, with nine deserters who had rejoined him, staggered into the Canadian post, heading an even dozen strong.

After an unusually long and severe winter, "the Liberator" headed for the Missouri and the Minnetarees. He hoped to go up the Missouri, up the Yellowstone, through South Pass, and on to Santa Fe. In so doing the Cherokees would be rescued from a worthless reservation, New Mexico would fall to righteousness, and California would be taken from the dons and given to Yankee traders.

But somehow it didn't work out.

Close by the "Little Village" on the Missouri, old Charbonneau found "the Liberator" prostrate on Minnetaree soil. Montezuma II was tired! Tired of dreaming! Tired of walking!

He had lain down to die.

Or so legend says. No one really knows. All that is certain is that Charbonneau was again involved in some small way in another episode which would always be retold in any serious history of the great Missouri.

One more adventure and one last valiant fling at romance were to be granted the old dean of Missouri interpreter-guides. As a final great hazard, he must survive the smallpox epidemic of 1837—a visitation which killed and killed and killed until entire Indian towns vanished; until fathers tomahawked their families rather than see them suffer; until a suicidal death lust led men and women to cut



The famous Albert Gallatin map, 1836, of North American Indian tribes is also notable for depicting the incomplete knowledge of Arctic geography. *American Antiquarian Society.*

their throats, hang themselves, or put a gun in their mouths and pull the trigger; until the stench and terror drove brave men mad. "... only grog keep me alive," said Francis Chardon.

The pox had been brought by a company steamboat just before July 4, 1837, and because the Indians had refused to stay away from the annual celebration, the disease was soon out of hand.

Chardon did the best he could, but the Indians declined to be quarantined, and modern vaccination, while known, was not in common use. An isolated case or two of crude vaccination or plunging the open sores into hot ashes were not enough to halt the plague. By Christmas it had invaded every Indian tribe from the mid-Missouri west to the Blackfeet and beyond.

While there was still hope that a few might escape the disease, Chardon sent Charbonneau on his last mission—to search for a band of Minnetarees who had not yet returned from their summer hunt, and beg them to stay away from the river towns and thus perhaps avoid the pox.

That they refused was no fault of Charbonneau's.

At the same time, the old interpreter must drink his own bitter cup. He must go once more to the Gros Ventres and find there, too, the stench; must pick his way among the unburied dead; must beat off the scavenging dogs; must hear the screams and see the agonies; must bear the laments of those who would live to hate their pox-marked skins.

He must walk into his own tent to find a wife bloated and still; must turn and drop the tent flap with whatever grief he could know on that bit of his own domesticity, and journey slowly back to the Minnetarees.

Long since, the natives had blamed the white man for the Terror, and Chardon's Fort Clark was under virtual siege. Vengeance-minded Indians stood stolidly waiting with guns at the ready for Chardon to leave his quarters so they could kill him and by this revenge perhaps appease their angry gods.

Mandan Chief Four Bears used his last hours inciting his braves to retaliation:

My Friends one and all, Listen to what I have to say—Ever since I can remember I have loved the Whites . . . and to the best of my Knowledge, I have never Wronged a White Man . . . Which they cannot deny. I have

done everything that a Red skin could for them, and how have they repaid it! With ingratitude! . . . I do not fear Death my friends, You Know it, but to die with my face rotten, that even the Wolves will shrink with horror at seeing Me, and say to themselves, that is the 4 Bears the Friend of the Whites. . . .

Listen well what I have to say, as it will be the last time you will hear Me. Think of your Wives, Children, Brothers, Sisters, Friends, and in fact all that you hold dear, are all Dead, or Dying, with their faces all rotten, caused by those dogs the Whites, think of all that My friends, and rise altogether and Not leave one of them alive. The 4 Bears will act his part.³

But death was too near. No war party arose, and the old warrior tried to kill Chardon alone. Failing, he staggered to his village and died, as he had said he would.

Meanwhile, the Sioux raided cornfields and butchered the living. And in March of 1838 the Arikaras took advantage of the worse plight of the Mandans and seized and occupied their village, leaving forty of their own old women to starve in their abandoned Arikara town.

Francis Chardon sent them one meal.

Nine of every ten Mandans died, and the tribe never recovered. Today there are no full-blooded Mandans, and few persons of Mandan extraction.

The epidemic caused amazing havoc. Alexander Culbertson, agent on Maria's River, wondering why not a single Indian had come to trade all summer, investigated and found, deep in Blackfoot land at Three Forks, a village in which every living thing, man and beast, had died, save two insane old women crawling among the rotting corpses.

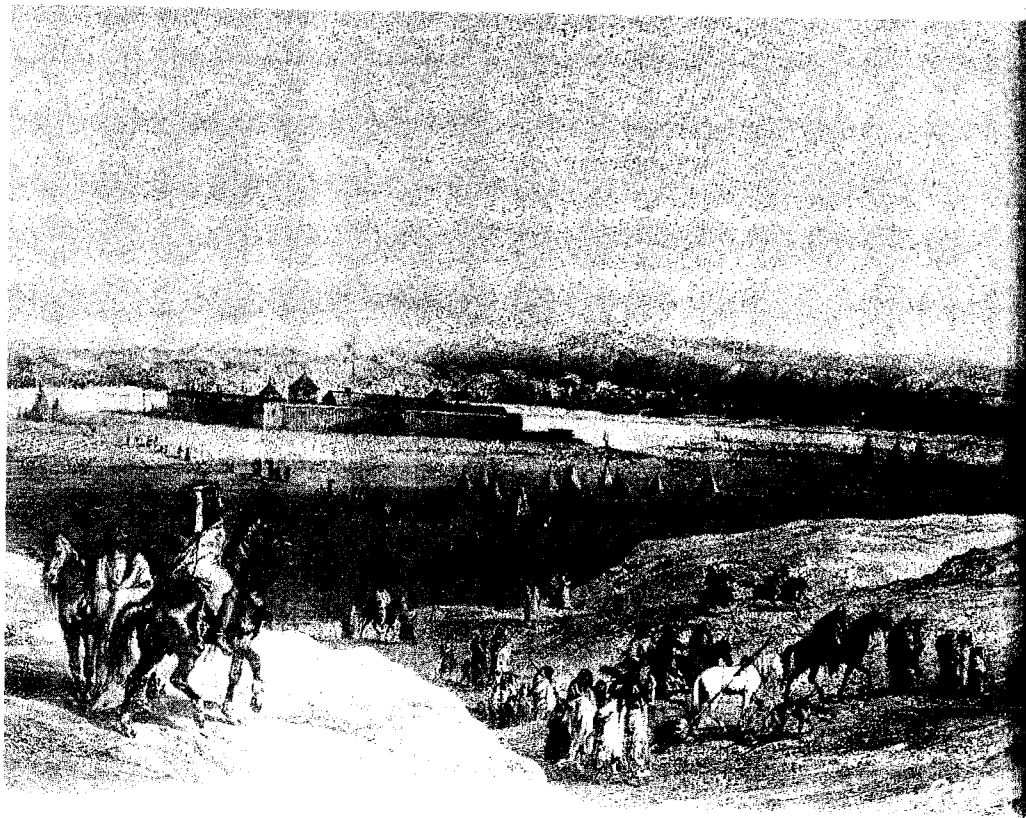
Thousands lay unburied across the Missouri prairies. No one knows the total dead: Mandans, Arikaras, Minnetarees, Sioux, Assiniboines, Blackfeet—certainly 15,000, perhaps five or six times that many.

But Toussaint Charbonneau survived. Survived without ill effect except such scars as may have been burned into his soul by the horrors he had seen.

As the plague drifted into the autumn of 1838, the pitiful fragments of once-proud tribes resumed whatever they could of normal life. But they were in a nasty mood.

When Charles Larpenteur, clerk for the American Fur Company at Fort Union at the mouth of the Yellowstone, started downriver with one companion and two canoemen to visit his family in Baltimore, they were repeatedly harassed by the Indians—the Assiniboines, the Arikaras. Along the banks of the river the red men were “running back and forth” in a most hostile manner, said Larpenteur. Doubting his own leadership, he landed on the opposite shore and magnanimously released his three companions of any responsibility for his safety, telling them to pursue whatever course they thought best to ensure their own escape.

They agreed to stay together, keep to the river—and hope.



Fort Union, 1833, by Karl Bodmer. U.S. Signal Corps, Photo 111-sc-90803, The National Archives.

Piling tobacco on the bow of their canoe as a token of peaceful intentions, the four men shoved off again and began paddling, one eye on the river, one on the growing number of Indians running along the shore. Larpenteur's fright was increasing with every stroke of the paddles, and he had no very real expectation of ever enjoying his furlough.

Exactly when his dejection was at full tide,

when our fears were at the highest pitch we perceived an individual with pants and a red flannel shirt on, looking very much like a white man. To our surprise and joy we found it was old Mr. Charbonneau who had been 40 years among the Missouri Indians. He used to say that when he first came on the river it was so small he could straddle it. Imagine our joy to find ourselves befriended instead of butchered. . . .⁴

Charbonneau told Larpenteur which Indians to present with tobacco, and that done, the four men passed in safety downstream.

We have said repeatedly that Toussaint was a man of the flesh who pretended to nothing else, and it came as no surprise to his contemporaries (or to those who have chronicled his years) that the fetor of the pox did not deter him from embarking on his last romance.

On October 27, 1838, Francis Chardon sold Charbonneau a fourteen-year-old Assiniboine girl who had “roused a spring fret in the blood of this man of many wives,” and the “young men of the Fort and two rees [Arikaras] gave the Old Man a splendid Chariveree, the Drums, pans, Kittles &c Beating; guns firing &c. The old gentleman gave a feast to the Men, and a glass of grog—and went to bed with his young wife with the intention of doing his best,” wrote Chardon in his Fort Clark journal.*⁵

A few months later Joshua Pilcher, who had come to St. Louis during the War of 1812, had held many positions since, and was now superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Missouri, paid Charbonneau, “tottering under the infirmities” of eighty winters, a last claim for six months' wages as a government interpreter although the post had been

* Following a not uncommon custom, Charbonneau is purported to have shared his new bride with the men of the Fort the following night (Grace Raymond Hebard, *Sacajawea*, Glendale, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1933, pp. 105-107).

abolished, unknown to Charbonneau. "This man faithful servant of the Government—though in a humble capacity," said Pilcher.⁶ He paid the claim August 26, 1839, because the old Frenchman was in want (Missouri rivermen never saved), and Pilcher believed Charbonneau deserved consideration for his life of service to the United States, for after all, he had been born a French Canadian.

No one knows positively where or when Toussaint Charbonneau died, but the 1839 transaction is the last recorded.

Toussaint Charbonneau: perhaps the first white man to live in the Mandan-Minnetaree towns, associated with the earliest traders at Pembina—Lewis and Clark, Sacajawea, Auguste Chouteau, Brackenridge, Luttig, Manuel Lisa, Jules de Mun, Long, Kearny, Prince Paul, Colonel Leavenworth, General Atkinson, Maximilian, John Jacob Astor, "the Liberator," Larpenteur, Pilcher—every name important to the Missouri prairies.

The old Frenchman knew and served them all.

All the West and all its Indians, three generations of chiefs and traders, had engrossed on his mind an incomparable pageant. He had come to these parts early in the last decade of the eighteenth century and, if with no spectacular success and not too much praise from a catalogue of employers, he had been working for fur companies, the United States Army, and the government ever since. Long ago he had developed a distaste for his own race. He was an Indian now, a good one, and lived with his own people, not at the fort. He was as bent as a scrub cedar on a bluff, his face was as seamed as a clay bank, but he was more sagacious than his overlords . . . and could travel river or prairie forever, winter or summer.⁷

And just perhaps out there somewhere on those prairies where the buffalo bulls no longer stomp and roar but where the long, lean coyote still cries across the snow—just perhaps, we say—the soul of old Charbonneau still wanders Missouri trails.

RIVER TRADERS AND MOUNTAIN MEN

THE story of mankind is a saga of nobilities and depravities, ennui and adventures—lives motivated more often by greed than by the arts, sometimes lonely, frequently unique. One Moses led his people, one Caligula disgraced an empire, one Isadora Duncan thrilled a world with her nimble feet and died with a knotted scarf around her neck. And in this company of saints and sinners the New World mountain man, the great Missouri River traders, and the interpreter-guides who served them stand straight and high, living the last chapter in the Age of Discovery—as contradictory as the tribes they feared and loved, as mean as the debaucheries they encouraged, as magnificent as the rivers and mountains they called their own. We shall not see their kind again.

Justice of the Peace, St. Louis, August 5, 1808; Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

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3. Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 3 vols., New York, Francis P. Harper, 1902, I, 119.

4. Burton Harris, *John Colter*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952, pp. 88 ff.; see also W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West*, New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, pp. 118-119.

5. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 89; Skarsten, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-270, 339.

6. Chittenden, *op. cit.*, I, 119 ff.

7. Skarsten, *op. cit.*, Chap. 24.

8. Olin D. Wheeler, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark*, 2 vols., New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926, I, 110-111.

9. Ghent, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

10. For a vivid description of this ailment, see Skarsten, *op. cit.*, pp. 287-289.

11. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

12. Chittenden, *op. cit.*, I, 146.

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1. Grace Raymond Hebard, *Sacajawea*, Glendale, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1933, pp. 115, 237; Patrick Gass, *Gass's Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, ed. James Kendall Hosmer, Chicago, A. C. McClurg & Co., 1904, p. xxxvi.

2. Olin D. Wheeler, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark*, 2 vols., New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926, I, 131.

3. Della Gould Emmons, *Sacajawea of the Shoshones*, Portland, Ore., Binford & Mort, 1943, pp. 69-71.

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5. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

6. Emmons, *loc. cit.*

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8. Emmons, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

9. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, 8 vols., New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1904-1905, I, 217.

10. *Ibid.*, I, 229n; Hebard, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

11. W. J. Ghent, *The Early Far West*, New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1936, p. 106.

12. Hebard, *op. cit.*, pp. 49n, 95.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 49n.

14. Lewis and Clark, *op. cit.*, VII, 111.

15. Hebard, *op. cit.*, p. 31n.

16. Lewis and Clark, *op. cit.*, I, 219.

17. Hebard, *op. cit.*, p. 49n; Stanley Vestal, *The Missouri*, New York, Farrar & Rinehart, 1945, p. 248.

18. Lewis and Clark, *op. cit.*, I, 275.

19. *Ibid.*, I, 285.

20. Lewis and Ordway, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
21. Lewis and Clark, *op. cit.*, II, 15-16.

Chapter 15. Across the Continent

1. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, 8 vols., New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1904-1905, II, 34.
2. Grace Raymond Hebard, *Sacajawea*, Glendale, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1933, p. 235.
3. For a discussion of these divergent views regarding Sacajawea's later life, see *ibid.*; W. J. Ghent, *The Road to Oregon*, New York, Tudor Publishing Co., 1934; John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, ed. Stella M. Drumm, St. Louis, Missouri Historical Society, 1920.
4. Luttig, *op. cit.*, p. 138.
5. Lewis and Clark, *op. cit.*, II, 163.
6. *Ibid.*, II, 161-169.
7. *Ibid.*, VII, 108.
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11. *Ibid.*, II, 356.
12. *Ibid.*, III, 28; Stanley Vestal, *The Missouri*, New York, Farrar & Rinehart, 1945, p. 253.
13. Lewis and Clark, *op. cit.*, III, 291.

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17. Hebard, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

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7. Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, Vols. XXII-XXIV of Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels*, Cleveland, Arthur H. Clark Co., 1906, XXIII, 203.

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