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For the Want of An Interpreter

A widespread misperception of Lewis and Clark's expedition of discovery involves two intrepid frontiersmen trekking their way across an uncharted continent accompanied by their Indian guide and **interpreter** Sacagawea. More recent popular interpretations have added recognition of Clark's servant York and the presence of Lewis' dog Seaman. The two U.S. Army captains actually led a well-organized group of individuals chosen for their specific skills that was formed around a "permanent party" of twenty-nine soldiers, two civilians under contract for special work with the War Department, and two dependents (increased to three after the birth of Sacagawea's son), one of whom was Sacagawea. At various times, they also hired other civilians with particular talents to perform important tasks. Without minimizing her contribution to the expedition, she was neither the only guide, nor the lone **interpreter**.

The ability to communicate in Indian languages was one of those absolutely crucial capabilities that Lewis and Clark had to acquire in order to accomplish the diplomatic component of their mission. One must recall that there is no single American Indian language. The native inhabitants of the Great Plains spoke many different languages and dialects. Even those from within the same "language group," are not always mutually intelligible. Long before contact with Europeans, the various Indian nations on the plains developed a system of hand signs that could be mutually understood in order to communicate, negotiate peace, establish military alliances, and conduct trade with one another. What made the Captains' task of finding sufficient **interpreter**s even more complex was the fact that they did not know how many different Indian tribes of the various nations would be encountered along the route

There was little difficulty in finding individuals who knew one or more of the Indian languages spoken along the lower Missouri River. French, Spanish, English and American settlers, trappers and traders had interacted with the tribes for years, and it was only natural that some of the frontiersmen married Indian women. The children of mixed white and Indian marriages often spoke the languages of both parents. George Drouillard (pronounced DREW-yar), the son of a French father and Shawnee mother, was one of them. Captain Lewis met Drouillard in Illinois while recruiting at Fort Massac, and recognized that his talents as a scout, hunter and **interpreter** would be most useful, and engaged his services. Lewis met Francois Labiche and Pierre Cruzatte in the Saint Charles and Saint Louis areas, and recruited them into the army as volunteers. Both men were the sons of French fathers and Indian mothers, and both spoke French and Omaha as well as English.

Next to the ability to speak one or more Indian languages, proficiency in French was a decided advantage. French-Canadian traders and trappers had lived among various Indian tribes for decades, and the expedition was sure to encounter a number of them along the way. Although he could not speak an Indian language, Private John Baptiste Lapage could translate French and English. Having him along gave Lewis and Clark one additional man who could speak to the traders' language, which was sure to prove helpful when they met a Frenchman who spoke the language of his hosts.

The Indian nations on the Great Plains had also developed a commonly understood means of communication based on "sign language" in order to facilitate trading between the various tribes. Fortunately, the engagé Drouillard and, to a lesser extent, Private Cruzatte were conversant in the sign language of the plains Indians. When Clark recruited the volunteers who became known as the "Nine young men of Kentucky," it is likely that Private George Gibson was enlisted, at least in part, for his ability to "talk in signs." When the ability to communicate verbally was unavailable, the officers of the expedition could rely on "sign talking" as a last resort.

As the expedition made its way up the Missouri River in June of 1804, Captains Lewis and Clark sought councils with the leaders of the tribes through whose territory they were going to pass. Anticipating contact with the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota, or Great Sioux Nation, the captains realized Cruzatte possessed only a limited command at best, or only a few simple words and phrases at worst, of a Siouan dialect. While Cruzatte might prove helpful in establishing an initial rapport, serious communication would have to rely solely on Drouillard's proficiency with the tedious process of "hand talking."

Luckily, the corps encountered a party of French trappers heading down the river toward St. Louis. As the two groups paused to exchange news and information, Lewis and Clark made the acquaintance of a Frenchman named Pierre Dorion. Married to a Sioux woman, Dorion had lived among the Yankton and other bands for about two decades, and was highly conversant in their language. Realizing a man of his talents could be useful, Captain Lewis quickly engaged Dorion in the employ of the U.S. government to assist him in explaining President Thomas Jefferson's Indian policies and assuring the tribes of the corps' peaceful intentions. Instead of accompanying the expedition further west, however, Lewis desired that he provide those services while living among his wife's people.[1]

By late July 1804, Lewis and Clark were eager to convene their first meeting with representatives from one or more of the Oto, Missouri, Omaha, and Ponca, or Pawnee, nations along the "middle reach" of the Missouri. Several attempts were made to locate and invite tribal leaders, but without success. On July 23, Drouillard and Cruzatte went out to make contact with either the Pawnee or Otoes, and after five days of searching, only found the major town of the Oto deserted. While out on the prairie hunting game on July 28, Drouillard chanced to meet a lone Missouri Indian, and the warrior accepted the scout's invitation to accompany him back to camp. The corps' two officers learned that most of the man's tribe, now reduced in numbers due to smallpox, were living with the Oto, and that most of both peoples were participating in a buffalo hunt. The Indian said he could, however, take someone from the expedition to where those who remained in the area were lodged.[2]

One of the engagé boatmen, a Frenchman known as La Liberteé, or Barter, could speak the Oto language, and was sent back with the Missouri brave to formally invite his tribal leaders to meet in a council on the bluff overlooking the river near the mouth of Boyer Creek, in present-day Nebraska. Two days went by with no word from messenger and the Otoes. Another man was sent to find and hurry them along, but found no trace of La Liberte´ or his traveling companion. Lewis and Clark continued to prepare for the council in the event La Liberte´ got through to deliver the invitation, although it was feared he had lost his way on the prairie. Thankfully, on the evening prior to the scheduled start of the council, August 2, a party of Oto and Missouri Indians arrived. Although no principal chiefs were among the group, there were six lesser chiefs, or headmen, in

the delegation. A Frenchman named Fairfong, who lived among the Oto and Missouri and spoke their languages, accompanied them to the place that came to be known as the "Council Bluff."[3]

Captains Lewis and Clark learned from the Indian delegation that La Liberté had delivered the invitation, but left their village the day before and had not been seen since. As they met in council, Monsieur Fairfong's translated from Oto to French for the headmen, while Drouillard or Cruzatte translated between French and English for the captains. Although the dialog passed between the two parties through two intermediaries speaking three languages, the council was deemed a success. At the end of the meeting, with diplomatic matters attended to, the Indians agreed to help in the search for the missing **interpreter**, but he eluded them. It was soon discovered that La Liberté had deserted rather than accompany the expedition further west. Although briefly apprehended a few days later by a patrol sent out from the corps, La Liberté made his escape and was not heard from again.[4]

For the next two weeks, Lewis and Clark attempted to repeat the success they enjoyed at the Council Bluff with the Omaha and Sioux bands in the area. Accomplishing that goal, however, was complicated by the fact the two tribes were at war with each other. Any attempt to meet in council to explain the policies of the United States with both tribes present required that the captains broker peace talks between them as well. Captain Lewis sent Sergeant John Ordway and five men, including Cruzatte, to find and invite the Omaha to council, but the patrol returned to camp after finding no sign of them. Lewis also sent a three-man patrol accompanied by Dorion in an attempt to locate a band of Sioux, but they also returned without making contact.[5]

Although his original encounter with Dorian had indeed proved fortuitous, Lewis and Clark could not afford to continue relying on chance meetings with trappers familiar with various tribal languages. This was made more evident on September 25, 1804, as they prepared for a council with the Teton Sioux. Captain Clark wrote that they "raised a Flag Staff & made a orning [sic] or Shade on a Sand bar in the mouth of the Teton River, for the purpose of Speeking [sic] with the Indians under." At approximately 11 o'clock in the morning, the "1st. & 2d. Chief came" and shared a meal with the captains. Trying to establish rapport before beginning the council without an **interpreter** must have been difficult. Clark later confided in his Journal, "we feel much at a loss for the want of an **interpreter**," and lamented, "the one we have can Speek [sic] but little." At noon, following the meal, the officers and chiefs opened the council with the peace pipe ceremony, and "after Smokieing [sic] agreeable to the usual Custom, Cap. Lewis proceeded to deliver a Speech which we [were] oblige[d] to Curtail for want of a good **interpreter**."[6]

The problems stemming from the lack of good translation nearly resulted in tragedy when, after the meeting, one of the chiefs became "verry [sic] insolent in words & justures [sic], pretended Drunkenness & staggered up against [Clark]" declaring the expedition could proceed no farther without providing them with sufficient presents. Clark described that the gestures were so threatening in nature, that he drew his sword and signaled the soldiers on the keelboat to prepare for action. When the troops "Showed a Disposition to Defend themselves" and their officer, the chief called off his warriors in observance of an uneasy truce. Clark then ordered all the men on shore, except the two soldiers who spoke the Omaha language, to board the pirogue as he attempted to resolve the controversy. The standoff continued, with Clark trying his best to communicate through inadequate **interpreters**, until Captain Lewis and the rest of the corps

arrived in the other pirogue. Tempers cooled, albeit somewhat uneasily, as the members of the expedition prepared to continue the movement upstream.[7]

In the meantime, the services of an **interpreter** prevented the tense situation from growing even worse. Two weeks before meeting with Lewis and Clark, the Teton Sioux had attacked an Omaha village, and took forty-eight women and children captive. In keeping with their diplomatic mission, the captains secured the Tetons' agreement to deliver their captives to Dorian, who was living with the Yankton tribe of Sioux, and he would see to their return home. Speaking in their own language, the Omaha prisoners warned Private Cruzatte that the Tetons intended to stop and rob the members of the expedition before allowing them to proceed upstream. Although the captains prevailed in convincing the angry chief to let the boats proceed peacefully, the soldiers of the corps were prepared to resist any hostile act with force.[8]

On October 8, 1804, at the mouth of what is now called the Grand River, Captain Lewis went ashore "with 2 **interpreter**s & 2 men" to visit an Arikara village. While they were gone, Captain Clark "formed a Camp of the French [engagés] & the guard on Shore, with one Sentinel on board the boat at anchor … all things arranged for Peace or War." The camp was then approached by a pirogue piloted by several Frenchmen, two of whom were traders named Joseph Gravelines (or who Clark called "Gavellin") and Antoine Tabeau. Lewis described Gravelines as "a man well versed in the language of this nation," and familiar with the Arikara country and society.

While meeting Monsieur Gravelines was certainly fortunate, it again accentuated the problem of communicating with the Indians. Gravelines and Tabeau explained that the Arikara had once been members of ten different tribes formerly related to the Pawnees, but had since separated. Because of losses in war and from disease, their numbers were reduced until they decided to join together for mutual protection. As a result, there was no one language common to all the bands, so people of different villages "do not understand all the words of the others." Without someone like Gravelines and Tabeau to interpret for them, Lewis and Clark could not have met in a successful and productive council with the Arikaras.[9]

The expedition proceeded into the area populated by the Mandan and Hidatsa, the latter also called the Minatare, Indians in what is now North Dakota. The good relations and trust Lewis and Clark established with the Arikara through the strength of their **interpreters**' skills carried with them into the meeting with the Mandans on October 24, 1804. On the first encounter with "one of the Grand Chiefs" of that tribe, both the chief of the Arikara who accompanied them and Lewis and Clark, were received "with great Cordiality & serimony [sic]," and invited them to smoke the peace pipe. Their host then took Lewis and the two **interpreter**s to visit the lodges of the chief at the principal village of the tribe.

Three days later, after they were comfortably among the people, Lewis and Clark met another French trader employed by the North West Company. René Jessaume lived with his Indian wife and children in the chief's village, and he offered his services an **interpreter** as long as they remained among the Mandan and the neighboring Hidasta. After visiting all the villages, Lewis and Clark got to the business of holding a council to broker a peace between the Arikara and the Mandans. Jussaume was able to help the captains prepare for the meeting by providing them with information about the personalities of the various chiefs and tribal politics.[10]

Arriving at the corps' camp on October 27, the council got down to business the next morning, Sunday, October 28. The grand council brought Captains Lewis and Clark together with the chiefs of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara nations, and over the next two days, Jussaume translated the captains' message promoting intertribal peace, and encouraging good relations and commerce with the United States. After the meeting concluded, the Mandans adjourned to consult among their village chiefs. They returned to the council fire to meet with Lewis and Clark on November 1, and announced, "They would make peace with the Ricares (Arikaras)."[11]

The next day, the captains having decided to proceed no further up the Missouri River before the onset of winter, the members of the expedition pitched tents, cut trees and began to build winter quarters. One of the huts was prepared for Jussaume and his wife and child, so he could be on hand whenever the officers required his services as a translator. Early in their stay, Jessaume had introduced the officers to other North West Company traders living with nearby Mandan and Hidatsa villages, further helping to facilitate their communications as the corps prepared for its winter encampment. Through these **interpreters**, Lewis and Clark learned that in their raids against enemy Indian tribes, Hidatsa warriors had traveled west on the very route the expedition would be taking in the spring.

Gaining information from them was very important, and it emphasized that if a Northwest Passage did not exist, they would have to leave their boats and travel over the Bitteroot Mountains, and cross a considerable distance over land to complete their mission. In that eventuality, horses would be essential. After learning that the Shoshone were well supplied with horses, having someone who could speak their language was a priority. Furthermore, a competent translator who spoke the Shoshone language could not only help to obtain horses and guides for the expedition, but would facilitate in communicating the soldiers' peaceful intentions and carrying out their diplomatic mission.[12]

On November 4, which Clark described as "a fine morning," while the men of the corps were busy felling trees to build the stockade and barracks they would name Fort Mandan, Monsieur Toussaint Charbonneau came to inquire if the soldiers were looking to hire one of his talents. Although he could not speak Shoshone, his appearance had a tremendous impact on the conduct of the rest of the expedition. Sacagawea, one of his two wives, was a Shoshone who had been captured by a war party that attacked the group hunters she had accompanied as a young girl. In the custom of most Indian nations, she was adopted into the tribe of her captors and learned their language. Charbonneau offered that Sacagawea would go along to interpret in her native language through their common use of Hidatsa, as part of the contract hiring him. She was pregnant when Charbonneau offered her services, but he insisted that the baby would be soon born, and that both mother and child would be ready to travel by the spring. On March 11, 1805, Clark formally engaged Charbonneau, and enlisted him "as an **interpreter** through his wife."[13]

Even with that formality out of the way, the problem of communicating with the Shoshone was not completely solved. While Charbonneau could speak Hidatsa, he could not speak English. Neither of the captains was conversant in French. In order to communicate with their **interpreter**, the officers ironically had to call upon Private Francois Labiche, who spoke both French and English. By April 7, 1805, "every arrangement necessary" for the corps' departure to complete its mission was complete. On breaking camp, a detachment of six soldiers commanded by Corporal Richard Warfington, along with the discharged French engagé boatmen, began their return trip to

Saint Louis aboard the keelboat. The Arikara chief and the **interpreters** Gravelines and Tabeau, all of whom had spent the winter at Fort Mandan, accompanied them as far as the chief's town. At the same time the "return party" headed downstream, Captains Lewis and Clark led the thirty-three members of "permanent party" up the Missouri on the two pirogues and six canoes.[12]

On August 12, 1805, Captain Lewis, Drouillard and two of the men were scouting about seventy-five miles in advance of the main body, crossing the Continental Divide at what today is called Lemhi Pass. When the expedition reached Shoshone territory, they began seeking members of that tribe in order to obtain horses. Two days later, they encountered a group of Shoshones, and used Drouillard's sign language skills to make the first contact. Lewis's journal entry for October 14 read, "The means I had of communicating with these people was by way of Drewyer [Drouillard] who understood perfectly the common language of jesticulation [sic] or signs which seems to be universally understood by all the Nations we have yet seen. It is true that this language is imperfect and liable to error but is much less so than would be expected. The strong parts of the ideas are seldom mistaken."[14]

When the main body caught up, the Shoshone proved to be not only is from Sacagawea's band, but their leader and chief warrior Cameahwait was actually her brother. On August 17, after being separated for five years, Sacagawea and Cameahwait met in joyful reunion. Although the event made the acquisition of horses easier for Lewis and Clark, communicating their intentions was still a complicated matter. The two officers' messages had to pass through three **interpreters** to reach the Shoshone chief. First, Lewis or Clark spoke to Labiche in **English**. Labiche passed the message to Charbonneau in **French**. Charbonneau repeated it to Sacagawea in **Hidatsa**, and Sacagawea then translated the message into **Shoshone** for her brother. Then, the process was reversed.[15]

Less than a month later, on Wednesday, September 4, 1805, the Corps of Discovery encountered a party from those the Shoshone called the Tushepau, otherwise known as the Salish or Flathead nation. Their people lived in a village of thirty-three lodges with a population of four hundred, including eighty warriors. According to Clark, members of the Corps, "found them friendly." When the captains invited the chiefs and warriors for a council, Clark noted that they "Spoke to them (with much difficulty as what we Said had to pass through Several languages before it got to theirs…"[16] The methods of interpretation between Indian nations and the Corps of Discovery were repeated with every encounter, albeit with some variation given the peculiarities of the languages involved.

Perhaps the most complicated translation occurred during the return trip. On April 28, 1806, near confluence of the Walla Walla and Columbia Rivers, the expedition encountered a band from the Walla Walla Indians. Lewis and Clark again initially relied on Drouillard's "hand talking," and the conversation was taking its labored and imperfect course when Sacagawea found someone who could speak her native language. She soon approached the two captains with a Shoshone woman who had been taken captive during a raid by Walla Wallas, not unlike her own experience with the Hidatsa. When the discussion resumed, Lewis and Clark spoke to Labiche in English; who spoke to Charbonneau in French. Charbonneau then relayed the message to Sacagawea in Hidatsa; which was translated to the captive woman in Shoshone, who translated it into Walla Walla for the headmen of that tribe.[17] It was not the last time that Lewis and Clark met in council with Indian leaders, but the "conversation" was probably their most intricate.

Through the course of their mission, Lewis and Clark met numerous times with groups of native peoples. Their ability to communicate enabled them to perform the diplomatic mission they had been given by President Jefferson. That ability also aided them in assisting warring tribes to resolve their conflicts without continued fighting. Most of all, their ability to communicate ensured the survival of the corps' members and the completion of their duty by earning the friendship and the ability to trade with the Indians for needed supplies, food, horses and guides.

Ask almost any American today, who was Lewis and Clark's **interpreter**? Almost always, he or she will answer with the name of "Sacagawea." She is rightly given credit for the rapport she brought to encounters with Indian sachems and headmen, particularly among her native Shoshone. Her ability to translate her native language into Hidatsa was the key to negotiating with both her own people and the Walla Walla. But let us not forget that without her husband Toussaint Charbonneau to translate Hidatsa into French, the value of her contribution would have quickly diminished.

The other traders that were met and employed along the way, Pierre Dorion, Fairfong, Rene–Jessaume, Joseph Gravelines and Antoine Tabeau, were equally important in communicating with numerous Indian nations. But as in the case of Sacagawea, their contributions would have all meant little without Privates Francois Labiche and Pierre Cruzatte translating French, and Omaha, into English. Finally, let us not forget the abilities of Private George Gibson and the indispensable George Drouillard for their skill in Indian sign language. Indeed, the Lewis and Clark expedition may have failed completely for "want of a good **interpreter**." Fortunately, the Corps of Discovery had several.

ENDNOTES

1 Gass, Patrick, *The Journals of Patrick Gass, Member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, MacGregor, Carol Lynn, ed. (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1997), 85; Ronda, James P., *Lewis & Clark Among the Indians*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998, 16.

2 Ronda, 17; Gass, 106.

3 Lewis, Meriwether and Clark, William, *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, Bergon, ed. (New York, NY: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1989), 21-23.

4 Ibid, 52, 54 –58.

5 Ibid, 59, 67.

6 Ibid, Ibid, 52.

7 Ibid, 52-53.

8 Ibid, 54-55. 57.

9 Ibid, 61, 63, 67.

10 Ibid, 69-70 72.

11 Ibid, 76

12 Clarke, Charles, *The Men of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 119.

13 Lewis, Meriwether and Clark, William, *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, 77-78, 91.

12 Ibid, 98

14 Ibid, 98

15 Ibid, 275.

16 Ibid, 274-275.

17 Ibid, 396

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http://www.history.army.mil/lc/The%20People/interpreter.htm