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Sacagawea

By: Ava Tempelaere

The young Shoshone girl who was essential to the success of the Corps of Discovery, but used for her abilities and not her intrinsic worth

Sacagawea translates to “bird woman” or “to carry a burden” in the Shoshone language. Whoever her parents were, they named her accurately. Sacagawea was 16 or 17 when she embarked on Thomas Jefferson’s Lewis and Clark Expedition, carrying her newborn child on her back the entire way. She was the only woman of 33 men. She was not able to actively make decisions about her life’s direction and she was used for what she could provide to others, rather than respected for her intrinsic worth. Sacagawea is a truly astonishing Shoshone woman and hero, a great role model to all people today.

Sacagawea was born in 1788 or 1789; the exact date is unknown. She was born in the Western Rocky Mountains to Shoshone parents.

At 10 or 11, Sacagawea traveled with her people across the Rockies and to a place known as Three Forks, between the modern towns of Butte and Bozeman. It was called this because of the three rivers that joined together to form the headwaters of the Missouri River.

While the Shoshone people were camping at the Three Forks, they were attacked by Minnetaree warriors carrying guns. Sacagawea later told Clark that the Shoshone braves, outnumbered and gunless, fled on horseback.

The women and children had been berry picking and also ran. Sacagawea was captured by the Minnetaree while fleeing across a river.

It is not known how long Sacagawea was held captive by the Minnetaree, but she was eventually bought or won from the Minnetaree chief by Toussaint Charbonneau, who made her be one of his wives. Charbonneau was a CanadianFrench interpreter and fur trader. He was three times older than Sacagawea.

About the same time that Sacagawea was being held captive at the Minnetaree camp, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, also known as the Corps of Discovery, was being planned by Thomas Jefferson. Before Jefferson was elected, he had made several plans like the Lewis and Clark Expedition, but because he had just been a citizen, nothing came of it. As president, Jefferson could enforce it. He wrote to congress secretly, asking for \$25,000 “for the purpose of extending the external commerce of the United States,” Congress approved and gave him the money to launch the Corps of Discovery.

The value of the Expedition was raised when Jefferson’s negotiations with France for the Louisiana Territory were successful. The Louisiana Territory was then initiated into the United States, for the price of \$16,000,000.

At the time, Meriwether Lewis was the president’s secretary and was appointed to colead the Expedition. He also got to choose the other coleader. He chose General William Clark. The two had become friends while in the army in the 1790s. Lewis believed that Clark had the experience and the wits to help him lead the colonizers. Along with that, Clark could sketch maps for the journals that

Jefferson wanted to record the Expedition in. Lewis contacted Clark, and he agreed to join.

To find others suitable to join, Clark hosted a training camp in the winter of 1803-04. Lewis needed knowledge in zoology, natural history, mineralogy and astronomy to help guide the colonizers. He had minimal knowledge on all of them, so Jefferson hired 3 college professors to educate him for the journey. Lewis was also responsible for purchasing the supplies and handling the money.

On May 14th, after much planning and preparation, the Corps of Discovery set off at last, beginning the hard row upstream the Missouri River. There were three boats, two captains, forty-three men, and Lewis' Newfoundland dog, Scannon, who could bring his master wild ducks and squirrels to eat, and whose barks could scare away bears.

Lewis and Clark stopped at a place near what is now Bismark, North Dakota, the land of the Mandans, for the winter. Toussaint Charbonneau had heard of the Expedition and came down from the north with two of his Shoshone wives. One was about 16 and the other 18. The 16 year old wife was Sacagawea. She was close to giving birth to her first child.

On February 11th, 1805, Sacagawea went into labor. The baby was slow to come, probably due to the fact that its mother was 16 years old, and Sacagawea was in much pain. Then, the French man Jussome, who was with the Corps, suggested that Sacagawea be given some of a rattlesnake's rattle to ease her pain and have the child delivered quicker. Captain Lewis happened to have a rattle, but he was skeptical of Jussome's plan. Curious to see if it would work or not, Lewis

gave the rattle to Jussome, who broke it into small pieces and gave them to Sacagawea. Ten minutes after, her baby was born. He was named Jean Baptiste Charbonneau. Lewis nicknamed him “Pomp”.

Lewis and Clark needed horses to cross the Rocky Mountains, and soon learned that the natives with horses who lived closest to the Rockies were the Shoshone. To trade horses they would need someone who could speak Shoshone. Sacagawea could. Lewis and Clark needed Sacagawea, so although they neither liked or respected him, Lewis and Clark asked Charbonneau to join the Expedition, making sure that he would bring Sacagawea along. Charbonneau excepted excitedly.

It was about the middle of March when Charbonneau got cold feet. He said that he’d go only if he had special exceptions; two of which being that he didn’t have to follow orders from the captains and that he could return whenever he wanted. The captains declined, appalled. A few days later, Charbonneau apologized and said that he’d do the same things as the rest of the men.

So on April 7th, 1805, the Corps of Discovery left the Mandans and paddled up the Missouri River with three additions to their party: Charbonneau, Sacagawea, and little Jean Baptiste, nearly two months old, riding in a cradle board on his mother’s back.

Although it is a common misconception that Sacagawea guided the Expedition, she did not. However, she was helpful in many other ways. She could find food when no one else could. She stayed calm in times when others panicked. The fact that she was simply there was calming to

other tribes along the way, giving them reason to believe that the Expedition was not there to start war. May 14th was warm and sunny, so pleasant that Lewis and Clark left the boats and walked along the riverbank, leaving Charbonneau at the rudder. Charbonneau could not swim, was not experienced with sailing, and was “perhaps the most timid waterman in the world.” The boat was carrying medicines, books, and the captains’ journals; all of which were supplies of great value to the colonizers. The boat was also carrying at least two other men besides Charbonneau who couldn’t swim.

A sudden gust of strong wind hit the boat and tipped it nearly over. The boat was quickly filling with water. Charbonneau panicked and let go of the rudder, paying no attention to the shouted commands of the captains from the shore and the instructions of the other men. Finally, one of the men, Cruzat, had had enough. Cruzat threatened to shoot Charbonneau “if he did not take hold of the rudder and do his duty.”

With some difficulty, the men eventually got the boat upright again. The damage had been done, though; and the boat was filled nearly all the way with water. Two of the men begin to bail, and others begin to row the boat towards shore. While this was happening, Sacagawea calmly leaped over the side of the boat and collected nearly everything that had been washed overboard.

On June 10th, Sacagawea fell very ill. Lewis left the very next day with four men to scout out the area around the Great Falls of the Missouri River. Clark

attended to Sacagawea and on June 14th, he reported that her case was dangerous. He had her eat bark and placed it on her body, believing that it would help to heal her. Despite his attempts, Sacagawea became worse. On June 15th she became depressed and refused to take her medicine, and Charbonneau petitioned to return. When Lewis returned, he found Sacagawea extremely ill and immobile. Lewis worried not only about Sacagawea, but about little Jean Baptiste, and the Expedition. If Sacagawea died, who would take care of her child? If Sacagawea died, how would the Expedition communicate and trade with the Shoshone people? If they could not get horses, they would have to cross the Rocky Mountains on foot. A great part of the Expedition laid on her shoulders, along with her child. They needed Sacagawea.

Lewis gave Sacagawea water from a spring he had found. He believed it contained sulfur and iron, much like one he knew of back home in Virginia. Lewis later reported that Sacagawea had “found great relief from the mineral water.” He decided that the Expedition would stay close to the spring so Sacagawea could recover.

With the help of the mineral water, Sacagawea got better and soon begin to eat buffalo meat and soup made from it. Then one day, Charbonneau gave her white apples and dried fish, and the fever and pain returned. But on June 24th, Lewis reported that Sacagawea had recovered from the fever. The Corps of Discovery could set off once again.

Once during the Expedition, Clark, Charbonneau and Sacagawea, carrying little Baptiste, were walking through a dry riverbed when Clark spotted a

dark rain cloud moving rapidly towards them. Suddenly, a huge storm struck, and before they had gotten out of the ravine, the water was up to their waists. It was a huge flash flood. Sacagawea had just enough time to grab Jean before the cradle board, carrying his bedding and some of his clothes, was swept away in the rapid current. Clark scrambled up the side of the rocks as the water filled the ravine, pushing Sacagawea and Jean in front of him. Charbonneau tried to help but was paralyzed by fear. Sacagawea and her baby had nearly drowned.

On August 8th, Sacagawea gave everyone hope by recognizing a tall rock called Beaverhead Rock. The rock is still called Beaverhead Rock to this day because of its beaver-like appearance.

Lewis wanted to go ahead with a small band of men and meet the Shoshone. He would proceed to do this the very next day, and so, on August 9th, Lewis, Drouillard, (who was knowledgeable in sign language) Shields and McNeal started westwards on foot to seek out the Shoshone.

Two days after starting, Lewis saw with great delight a native man riding towards him on horseback. The man stopped. Lewis took his blanket out of his knapsack and made what he believed to be “the universal sign of friendship among the Indians” of the Rockies. He tried this sign three additional times but the man still did not move. When Lewis approached him, the man turned, riding away on his horse.

The next morning, the small group stumbled upon a group of three women, one young, one old, and one girl. The younger woman ran. The girl and the old woman were so afraid that they bowed their heads down, as if waiting to

be killed. But Lewis and Clark did not kill them. They treated them kindly, hoping to be taken to the Shoshone village. They gave them beads and mirrors and painted their cheeks red. The women agreed to take them back to their village and their chief.

Lewis and the chief became friends and Lewis convinced the chief to come with him to meet the rest of the Expedition.

Meanwhile, Clark was leading the others towards the Shoshone. Sacagawea was walking along a river when she saw Shoshone warriors riding towards her. She began dancing with joy and sucking her fingers, which was a sign for “these are my people!”

When the Expedition and Sacagawea were taken back to the Shoshone village, she found her dearest friend from her childhood waiting for her. She had escaped from the Minnetaree. She had not seen Sacagawea for five years.

When the captains met with the chief, Sacagawea was to come along also to translate for both parties. When she met the chief, she recognized him as her long lost brother, Cameahwait.

The captains and Chief Cameahwait bartered and finally a deal was made. The colonizers would give the Shoshone battleaxes, knives and clothing. In exchange, the Shoshone would provide horses and guides the colonizers would need to cross the Rocky Mountains.

With the help of the Shoshone guides and horses, the colonizers made it safely across the Rockies and to the ocean. The colonization had been successful,

and now these native territories have been completely settled in. We would know, as we live in them now.

Sacagawea played the unpaid role of expert to her culture and the environment. She did this all while caring for her child, performing tasks dictated by an uninvited culture, and surviving the colonizing expedition through her own resilience.

Sacagawea's life did not end when The Expedition was over. She returned to her home with Charbonneau and Jean Baptiste, joining Charbonneau's other two wives. Charbonneau was paid \$500.33 and 320 acres of land, but Sacagawea was never paid for her many services.

In 1812, one of Charbonneau's wives died at 25. It is controversial whether or not this was Sacagawea. Then, in 1875, a woman in Wyoming claimed to be Sacagawea. She died on 1884. No one knows for sure if Sacagawea died in 1812 or 1884.

Recognizing the power structure that existed when Sacagawea was alive is important when researching her life story. One must ask questions about who is telling her story, where the information is coming from, and how it benefits the teller. It is still difficult, today, to ensure that accurate information is being passed down, because so many indigenous people of this land have been wiped out. Sacagawea, as a colonizer's legend, may be a quaint and lovely story about a female in a powerful position, however, you cannot ignore the racist mentalities that existed then and persist today in the retelling of her story.

It is unjust and completely nonsensical to believe you can use someone as a tool to meet your own goals. Why then, is the story of Sacagawea still, most often told not by her descendants, but by those who benefited from her exploitation?

The answer is, at its simplest, that inequitable power structures still exist and it is our responsibility to seek truth from those on the side not often told. To remain ignorant of stories told by people who have been intentionally left out of telling their own stories contributes to silencing entire cultures. We only know the story of Sacagawea because of her relationship to the expedition. In highlighting Sacagawea's life through the colonizer's lens, we are forgetting the countless indigenous women who also lived with colonizers on their land. We can pretend the silence of indigenous stories means we are hearing truth, but, embracing this silence contributes to the continued colonization. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "There is a time when silence becomes betrayal."

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