

# Sacagawea, Bird Woman of the Expedition

By: Stuart Wier

“What is reliably known about Sacagawea makes for only a brief sketch.” - James P. Ronda

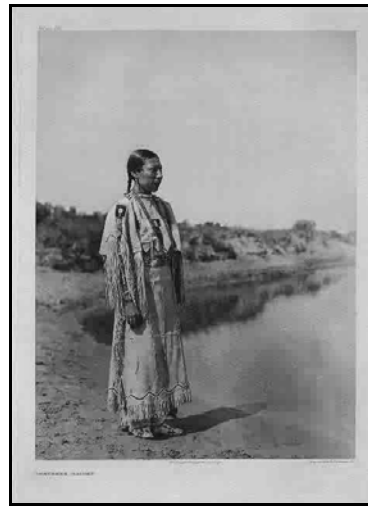
Sacagawea was raised among the Agui-Dika Shoshone of western Montana and eastern Idaho. Sometime in the fall of 1800, when she was about 12 years old, she was camped with her band near the Three Forks. Women went out to pick berries. The band was attacked by a Hidatsa raiding party who killed several Shoshone and took prisoners, four boys and several women. They returned by horse to the Hidatsa villages at the junction of the Knife and Missouri rivers, about 500 miles away. Sometime before the fall of 1804, Sacagawea was obtained for a wife by Toussaint Charbonneau, himself a French Canadian trader living among the Hidatsa and having a connection to the British North West company. Charbonneau and Sacagawea lived in the Awatixa Hidatsa earth lodge village of Metaharta.

Lewis and Clark first met Charbonneau when he came to offer his services as a translator to the captains. They engaged him and his wife, both as interpreters since she spoke Shoshone. There was some expectation that the explorers would meet the Shoshone the next summer. The Shoshone, also called Snakes, were known as horse breeders of the mountains, and the explorers were planning to trade for horses. This proved to be the case: horses were essential for crossing the Rockies. Charbonneau did not speak Shoshone, nor English for that matter.

Sacagawea gave birth to Jean Baptiste Charbonneau on Feb. 11, 1805, with some assistance from Lewis who administered four rattlesnake rattles crushed in water, a recipe for difficult labor recommended by another French trader in the camp.

During the trip to the Pacific and return, Sacagawea participated fully in the expedition and was involved in several adventures, including rescuing important equipment washing out of a swamped pirogue, surviving a flash flood, and traveling with Clark to see the giant whale. She was seriously ill at the portage around the falls of the Missouri. The captains tried most every medical treatment they knew and she recovered, perhaps despite their treatments, or perhaps aided by mineral waters offered by Lewis.

Clark said, her particular value was as an “interpretriss,” with the Shoshone, and with the Flatheads, Nez Perce, and Walulas, via Shoshone prisoner intermediaries. She was not regarded as a guide and did not serve as one, except briefly in the area around Three Forks. “For most of the transcontinental journey Sacagawea was seeing country as new to her as it was new to the captains” (Ronda). She had never crossed the Rockies, or been on much of the Missouri, before the expedition. She apparently aided the party's peace-



**This photograph  
by Edward Curtis  
(1868-1952)  
is used only to  
portray what  
Sacagawea might  
have looked like  
while accompany-  
ing Lewis & Clark.**

ful mission and meetings with the natives: “The Wife of Shabono our interpreter, we find reconciles all the Indians, as to our friendly intentions. A woman with a party of men is a token of peace” (Clark). She also improved their meat-centered diet by finding prairie turnips, wild artichokes, wild licorice, Indian breadroot, and other vegetables, roots, and berries.

Sacagawea, Charbonneau, and their son, called Pompey by Clark, returned to Metaharta on August 18, 1806, when Baptiste was a year and six months old. A few days later Clark wrote a personal letter to Charbonneau offering to set him up in any of several businesses, and to keep Baptiste in St. Louis, when he was old enough, for the best of white men's education. Clark ended the letter “with anxious expectations of seeing my little dancing boy Baptieste I shall remain your Friend.”

In the summer of 1811 Sacagawea and her family did travel to St. Louis to leave Baptiste in Clark's care. On the return journey up the Missouri on a keelboat, another traveler named Henry Brackenbridge wrote the last known description of Sacagawea when she was alive, and the only description following the expedition. “We had on board a Frenchman named Charbonneau, with his wife, an Indian woman of the Snake nation. The woman, a good creature, of a mild and gentle disposition, greatly attached to the whites, whose manners and dress she tries to imitate.”

Sacagawea died on December 20, 1812 at Fort Manuel on the Missouri river in South Dakota. Trader John C. Luttig was there and wrote “this evening the wife of Charbonneau, a Snake Squaw, died of a putrid fever. She was good, and the best woman in the fort, aged about 25 years. She left a fine infant girl.” Luttig took the infant girl, called Lisette, back to St. Louis in May of 1813. Clark became legal guardian of both children shortly thereafter. Note that he accepted Jean Baptiste at an age suitable for school, but Lisette as an infant, due to the death of her mother. Luttig did not record Charbonneau's wife's name, so that record

**“Bird Woman” - Continued on Page 3**

## "Bird Woman" - Continued from Page 2

might be ambiguous. The fact that Luttig took the child to Clark as soon as was practical, and the fact that Clark accepted her, strongly suggests that the infant girl was Sacagawea's.

Where is Sacagawea "buried?" Hidatsa burial practice was to wrap the deceased in buffalo robes and place it on a burial scaffold, (on poles), or on a platform in a tree. Years later a friendly member of her tribe may have recalled her and returned her skull to the ceremonial circle of skulls at Metaharta. The area of Fort Manuel was later washed away by the Missouri, so no location associated with Sacagawea's death or burial remains.

Toussaint Charbonneau was a U.S. government interpreter for many years until 1839. He was engaged by eminent early western travelers, including Stephen H. Long, Prince Paul of Wurttemberg and Prince Maximilian, and was painted by the artist Karl Bodmer in a group scene around 1833. No likeness of Sacagawea of any kind exists.

Lisette died in St. Louis on June 15 or 16, 1832, age 21, after receiving last rites. She was buried at the Old Cathedral. There is no record that she was married or had children.

Jean Baptiste Charbonneau lived a long and adventurous life. He was educated in St. Louis. In the spring of 1823, now eighteen, he met Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wurttemberg, a traveling dignitary from Germany. They became friends, took a steamboat to New Orleans, and sailed to Europe. Jean Baptiste spent the next six years traveling in Europe and North Africa with the Duke. He learned to speak German, and also knew English, Hidatsa, and French. He returned to the west in 1829. He became a guide, for John C Fremont among others. He was a mountain man, California forty-niner, and magistrate. He died in 1866 at age 61 on the trail to a gold strike in Montana, and is buried in eastern Oregon with a suitable monument built in part with a LCTHF chapter initiative.

The pronunciation of Sacagawea is a common question. The captains occasionally wrote her name in the journals, and both spelled it phonetically as "Sah-kah-gar-we-a" or similar, always with a hard g (see Lewis 5/20/1805 and 6/10/05; Clark 4/7/1805 and 6/10/05). Lewis gave the translation "Bird Woman" which is the translation of the Hidatsa name Sacagawea, and that form is generally accepted now by historians who have considered the matter. Sacagawea transliterates the Hidatsa sounds which may have been spoken something like Ts'kakawea or T'sakakamea; Clark once spelled her name ending in "mea" in place of "wea." There is a Shoshone word Sacajawea, meaning "boat launcher" or "boat pusher." The spelling "Sacajawea" first appeared in Nicholas Biddle's 1814 edition of the captain's journals; it might be a misprint. Biddle read the original manuscript

journals, discussed them with Clark, and noted in them corrections and additions supplied by Clark. The Indian woman's name is nowhere altered from the original entries. There is no "je" sound in Hidatsa. Whether her name as a child was the Shoshone Sacajawea, and was later changed to Hidatsa Sacagawea as an adult, or whether Sacagawea was a new Hidatsa name, we cannot say. We do know she was a fully vested Hidatsa woman when she met the explorers, so a Hidatsa name is not unreasonable. All the evidence from the journals - which is all we have - uses the Hidatsa name Bird Woman.

**Copyright © Stuart Wier 2006. Reproduction prohibited without written permission from the author.**

Sources:

Irving Anderson, "Probing the Riddle of the Bird Woman," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 23 (1973): pp. 2-17.

Irving Anderson, "A Charbonneau Family Portrait," *American West* 17 (1980), pp.4-13, 63-64.

William Clark, letter to Toussaint Charbonneau, August 20 1806, in Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and Related Documents, 1783-1854*, 2 volumes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968), Vol. 1, pp. 315-316.

Harold P. Howard, *Sacagawea* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1971)

Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 13 volumes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983-2001), Vol. 3, pp. 228-229n; p. 291n.

James Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp. 256-259. An excellent brief review by a top expedition historians.

Blanche Schrorer, "Boat-Pusher or Bird Woman?" *Annals of Wyoming* 52 (1980), pp. 46-54.

---

Field Notes gratefully thanks Stuart Wier, 7350 Coronado Court, Boulder, Colorado 80303 for his permission to use this article.

History & history programs  
<<http://home.earthlink.net/~swier/LHSW.html>>  
Lewis and Clark Expedition: Sources of Information  
<<http://home.earthlink.net/~swier/CorpsOfDiscovery.html>>

---

