



Lewis & Clark

in Columbia River Country

PRIMARY SOURCE: NORTHWEST CHIEFS

Excerpts from the Journals of the Corps of Discovery

As you read the following accounts, think about what qualities Lewis and Clark note and record. How might these qualities reflect the values of the people for whom these chiefs are responsible?

The Corps spent more time with the Nez Perce, who live at the east edge of the Columbia Basin, and the Chinook and Clatsop bands, who live at the Pacific coast. Because of this, you can read about more leaders of these tribes than of the many groups which lived in-between.

Learn about these chiefs through the eyes and words of Lewis and Clark.

Chief Coboway of the Clatsops

Throughout their winter stay at Fort Clatsop, the Corps enjoyed the company of a man whom they often referred to as Comowool. According to his descendants (Basch 2002), his name was actually Coboway. This Clatsop Chief visited the fort often to trade with the party. The Captains had many struggles with the Clatsops over the course of the winter that strained their relationship. Given the time spent in this Chief's territory, it is unfortunate that so little was recorded about him and his leadership characteristics.

On December 12th, 1805, Lewis and Clark met Chief Coboway for the first time. Clark wrote:

Those Indians appear well disposed we gave a Medal to the principal Chief named Con-ny-au or Com mo-wol and treated those with him with as much attention as we could...

(Clark, from Moulton V.6, 123)

On December 27th the Chief and his party presented a gift of food to the Corps. Clark wrote:

In the evening Co-mo wool the Chief and 5 men of the Clat Sop nation they presented us a root which resembles the licquirish in Size and taste, which they roste like a potato which they Call Cul ho-mo, also a black root which is cured in a kill like the pash-a-co above; this root has a Sweet taste and the natives are verry fond of it-- they Call this root Shaw-na-tâ-que. also a dried berry about the size of a Chery which they Call Shele well all those roots those Indians value highly and give them verry Spearingly.

(Clark, from Moulton V.6, 139)

On January 3rd, Lewis reported on Chief Coboway visiting the Fort to trade:

At 11 A. M. we were visited by our near neighbours, Chief or Tiá, Co-mo-wool; alias Conia and six Clatsops. they brought for sale

some roots and buries and three dogs also a small quantity of fresh blubber. this blubber they informed us that they had obtained from their neighbours the Callamucks who inhabit the coast to the S. E. near whose vilage a whale had recently perished. this blubber the Indians eat and esteeme it excellent food.

(Lewis, from Moulton V.6, 162)

On January 4th, Lewis gave more information about the character of Coboway and the Clatsops:

Comowooll and the Clatsops who visited us yesterday left us in the evening. These people the Chinooks and others residing in this neighbourhood and speaking the same language have been very friendly to us; they appear to be a mild inoffensive people but will pilfer if they have an oportuny to do so where they conceive themselves not liable to detection. they are great higlers in trade and if they conceive you anxious to purchase will be a whole day bargaining for a handfull of roots; this I should have thought proceeded from their want of knowledge of the comparitive value of articles of merchandize and the fear of being cheated...

(Lewis, from Moulton V.6, 164)

Chief Comcomly of the Chinook

Chief Comcomly is mentioned many times in the Lewis and Clark journals and those of other early traders on the coast. This one-eyed Chief had become head Chief of the Chinook by the time the Corps arrived in late 1805. He kept this position until 1824. Then, when he was sixty years old, he gave his name and the chieftainship to his son Shalapau.

On November 17th, 1805, as the party struggled to complete the last stretch of their journey down the Columbia, they met Chief Comcomly. On that day William Clark wrote:

... at half past 1 oClock Capt. Lewis and his Party returned haveing around passd. Point Disapointment and Some distance on the main Ocian to the N W. Several Indians followed him & Soon after a canoe with wapto roots, & (Lickorish) [ML: Liquorice] boiled, which they gave as presents, in return for which we gave more than the worth to Satisfy them a bad practice to receive a present of Indians, as they are never Satisfied in return. our hunters killed 3 Deer & th fowler 2 Ducks & 4 brant I Surveyed a little on the corse & made Some observns. The Chief of the nation below us Came up to See us the name of the nation is (Chin-noo) Chin-nook and is noumerous live principally on fish roots a flew Elk and fowls. they are well armed with good Fusees.

(Clark, from Moulton V.6, 60)

Chief Tahcum of the Chinook

Chief Tahcum, or Taucum (Stockum), was noted as first Chief of the Chinook in 1795 and continued as a Chief at least until 1812. Although Lewis and Clark only saw this Chief on one occasion, they left a more complete description of his physical appearance than for the two Chiefs with which they spent more time.

On February 20th, 1806, while wintering at Fort Clatsop, the Corps came into contact with Chief Tahcum. Meriwether Lewis wrote:

This forenoon we were visited by Tâh-cum a principal Chief of the Chinooks and 25 men of his nation. We had never seen this Chief before he is a good looking man of about 50 years of age reather larger in statue than most of his nation; as he came on a friendly visit we gave himself and party some thing to eat and plyed them plentifully with smoke. we gave this Chief a small medal with which he seemed much gratified. in the evening at sunset we desired them to depart as is our custom and closed our gates. we never suffer parties of such number to remain within the fort all night; for

notwithstanding their apparent friendly disposition, their great avarice and hope of plunder might induce them to be treacherous.

(Lewis, from Moulton V.6, 330)

Chief Yelleppit of the Walla Wallas

On October 18th, 1805, the captains met the very friendly Chief Yelleppit of the Walla Wallas. They invited the chief to camp with them on the north side of the Columbia River, and he provided them with a basket of mashed berries. Private Cruzatte's fiddle playing around the fire "pleas'd and astonished" the Indians.

Lewis and Clark stayed for several days in late April, 1806. Various presents were exchanged and goods traded, and Clark wrote in his journal:

This morning early Yellept brought a very elegant white horse to our camp and presented him to Capt. C. signifying his wish to get a kettle but on being informed that we had already disposed of every kettle we could possibly spear he said he was content with whatever he thought proper to give him. Capt. C. gave him his sward a hundred balls and powder and some sall articles with which he appeared perfectly satisfied.

Lewis gave Yelleppit a peace medal engraved with a portrait of Thomas Jefferson, to be worn around the neck, and a small American flag. The occasion turned into a party with the Walla Wallas and visiting members of the Yakama tribe singing and dancing well past midnight.

The Captains wished to depart as soon as possible, but the Walla Walla Chief did not want to lend them the canoes right away.

...being anxious to depart we requested the Cheif to furnish us with canoes to pass the river, but he insisted on our remaining with him this day at least, that he would be much pleased if we would conset to remain two or three, but he

would not let us have canoes to leave him today.

Lewis wrote that the Chief had invited some of the Yakamas (also known as the Chym nâp'-pos) for a celebration that evening.

...that he had sent for the Chym nâp'-pos his neighbours to come down and join his people this evening and dance for us. we urged the necessity of our going on immediately in order that we might the sooner return to them with the articles which they wished but this had no effect, he said that the time he asked could not make any considerable difference. I at length urged that there was no wind blowing and that the river was consequently in good order to pass our horses and if he would furnish us with canoes for that purpose we would remain all night at our present encampment, to this proposition he assented and soon produced us a couple of canoes by means of which we passed our horses over the river safely and hubbled them as usual.

Chief Yelleppit got his party, and Sgt. John Ordway wrote in his journal on the morning of April 28, 1806:

the chief called all his people and told them of the medicine... which was a great wonder among them & they were much pleased ... the Indians Sent their women to gether wood or Sticks to See us dance this evening. about 300 of the natives assembled to our Camp we played the fiddle and danced a while the head chief told our officers that they Should be lonesome when we left them and they wished to hear once of our medicine Songs and try to learn it and wished us to learn one of theirs and it would make them glad. So our men Sang 2 Songs which appeared to take great affect on them. they tryed to learn Singing with us with a low voice. the head chief then made a Speech & it was repeated by a warrier that all might hear. then all the Savages men women and children of any Size danced forming a circle round a fire

& jumping up nearly as other Indians, & keep time verry well ... they wished our men to dance with them So we danced among them and they were much pleased, and Said that they would dance day and night untill we return. every fiew minutes one of their warries made a Speech pointing towards the enimy and towards the moon ... which was all repeated by another meddison man with a louder voice as all might hear. the dance continued untill about midnight then the most of them went away peaceable && have behaved verry clever and honest with us as yet, and appear to have a Sincere wish to be at peace and to git acquaintance with us.

Chief Tetoharsky of the Nez Perces

On May 4th, 1806, the Corps met Chief Tetoharsky just before crossing the Snake River at its confluence with the Clearwater River (called the Kooskooske by Lewis and Clark). On that day Meriwether Lewis wrote:

... here we met with Te-toh, ar sky, the youngest of the two Chiefs who accompanied us last fall to the great falls of the Columbia here we also met with our pilot who decended the river with us as far as the Columbia. these indians recommended our passing the river at this place and ascending the Kooskooske on the N. E. side. they said it was nearer and a better rout to the forkes of that river where the twisted hair resided in whose charge we had left our horses; thither they promised to conduct us. we determined to take the advice of the indians and immediatly prepared to pass the river.

(Lewis, from Moulton V.7, 206)

Chief "We-ark-koomt" of the Nez Perces

Among the Nez Perce people, We-ark-koomt is known as Apash Wyakaikt, or Flint Necklace. He gave his name to two others (probably his descendants) who are known as Looking Glass, senior and junior. The younger Looking Glass was one of the leaders of the flight of 1877.

On May 3rd, 1806, the Corps met Apash Wyakaikt when travelling up Pataha Creek in Garfield County, Washington. Meriwether Lewis wrote:

... here we met with We-ark-koomt whom we have usually distinguished by the name of the bighorn Chief from the circumstance of his always wearing a horn of that animal suspended by a cord to he left arm. he is the 1st Chief of a large band of the Chopunnish nation. he had 10 of his young men with him. this man went down Lewis's river by land as we decended it by water last fall quite to the Columbia and I believe was very instrumental in procuring us a hospitable and friendly reception among the natives. he had now come a considerable distance to meet us.

(Lewis, from Moulton V.7, 202)

Chief Cut Nose of the Nez Perces

On May 5th, 1806, the Corps met Chief Cut Nose. They had set up camp at Colter's Creek, just east of the Clearwater and Snake River confluence and the Washington state line. The party "arrived here extreemly hungry and much fatigued," but had difficulty procuring food from the Chopunnish people. Lewis had had a bad day and was probably in a pretty foul mood when he wrote:

This is the residence of one of 4 principal Cheifs of the nation whom they call Neesh-ne,-park-ke-ook or the cut nose from the circumstance of his nose being cut by the snake Indians with a launce in battle. to this man we gave a medal of the small size with the likeness of the President. he may be a great Chief but his countenance has but little intelligence and his influence among his people seems but inconsiderable.

(Lewis, from Moulton V.7, 211)

Chief Cut Nose continued to play a prominent role in the fur trade for three decades following the visit of Lewis and Clark.

Chief Twisted Hair of the Nez Perce

The Nez Perce name for the Chief who Lewis and Clark called Twisted Hair is Walamottinin. In Nez Perce the name refers to carelessly tied hair. He was the brother of another leader, We-ark-koomt, otherwise known as Flint Necklace.

William Clark first learned of Chief Twisted Hair on September 21st, 1805 after his difficult passage over the Bitterroot Mountains. Relying on directions given to him by another Chief, Clark reached Twisted Hair's village late that night. Located on the Clearwater River's "Fishing Island", the spot was ideal for salmon fishing. Clark wrote:

A fine morning Sent out all the hunters in different directions to hunt deer, I myself delayd with the Chief to prevent Suspission and to Collect by Signs as much information as possible about the river and Countrey in advance. The Chief drew me a kind of chart of the river, and informed me that a greater Chief than himself was fishing at the river half a days march from his village called the twisted hare, ... we did not arrive at the Camp of the Twisted hare but oppost, untill half past 11 oClock P M. found at the Camp five Squars & 3 Children. my guide called to the Chief who was Encamped with 1 others on a Small Island in the river, he Soon joint me, I found him a Chearfull man with apparant Siencerity, I gave him a medal and Smoked untill 1 oClock a. m. and went to Sleep...
(Clark, from Moulton V.5, 226-7)

The following day, Lewis and the rest of the party arrived at Twisted Hair's village. Lewis described it in his journal:

...on our approach to the village which consisted of eighteen lodges most of the women fled to the neighbouring woods on horseback with their children, a circumstance I did not expect as Capt. Clark had previously been with them and informed them of our pacific intentions towards them and also the time at which we should most

probably arrive. the men seemed but little concerned, and several of them came to meet us at a short distance from their lodges unarmed.

(Lewis, from Moulton V.5, 229)

The party was in desperate need of rest, nourishment and directions. Clark wrote of how Twisted Hair and his people helped them:

I got the Twisted hare to draw the river from his Camp down which he did with great cherfullness on a white Elk Skin, from the 1s fork which is a few seven miles below, to the large fork on whith the So So ne or Snake Indians fish, is South 2 Sleeps; to a large river which falls in on the N W. Side and into which the Clarks river empties itself is 5 Sleeps from the mouth of that river to the falls is 5 Sleeps at the falls he places Establishments of white people and informs that great numbers of Indians reside on all those foks as well as the main river; one other Indian gave me a like account of the Countrey...

(Clark, from Moulton V.5, 229-30)

On September 23rd, the party gave gifts to the Chiefs they had met, including a flag and a shirt to Twisted Hair. Clark then reported that "twisted hare envited Capt Lewis & myself to his lodge which was nothin more than Pine bushes & bark, and gave us Some broiled dried Salmon to eate..." (Clark, from Moulton V.5, 232).

Lewis and Clark met Chief Twisted Hair again on their journey back East. This time the Chief helped them obtain horses. On May 11th, 1806, Clark wrote: "The twisted hair brough Six of our horses all in fine order..." (Clark from Moulton V.7, 244)

The next day, on May 12th, 1806, Lewis reported:

...we are anxious to procure some guides to accompany us on the different routs we mean to take from Travellers rest; for this purpose we have turned our attention to the Twisted hair

who has several sons grown who are well acquainted as well as himself with the various road in those mountains. we invited the old fellow to remove his family and live near us while we remained; he appeared gratified with this expression of our confidence and promised to do so...

(Lewis, from Moulton V.7, 249)