

## THE CHALLENGE TO COMMUNICATE

### Introduction

When Lewis and Clark embarked upon their epic journey in 1804, they knew very little about the people they would encounter along the Missouri River. Even less was known about the tribes of the Columbia. The explorers had no idea of how or by what means those people would communicate.

With the help of interpreters, they were sometimes able to effectively exchange information with the tribes along the way. However, there were many times when their interpreters were not able to help them. Often they had to rely on other methods of communication, such as sign language and drawing.

### Communication Challenges for the Expedition

Communication was generally not a problem as the party traveled up the Missouri River. This is because Frenchmen who knew some of the native languages traveled with them. When the expedition encountered the Teton Sioux, however, they soon "discover our interpreters do not speak the language well." (Clark, from Moulton V.3, 111) William Clark reports that "Cap Lewis proceeded to deliver a speech which we obliged to curtail for want of a good interpreter." (Clark, from Moulton V.3, 128)

At Fort Mandan in North Dakota, their interpreters were two Frenchmen who had been living with the Indians. They hired Touissant Charbonneau and one of his Shoshone wives to interpret for them when they met the Shoshones. The Hidatsa call her Sakakawea, or Bird Woman and the Shoshones call her Sacagawea.

Charles McKenzie was a Canadian trader who observed the Lewis and Clark expedition in the Mandan Country in the spring of 1805. He describes them below:

*The woman who answered the purpose of wife to Charbonneau, was of the Serpent Nation and lately taken prisoner by a war party:- She understood a little Gros Ventres, in which she had to converse with her husband, who was a Canadian, and who did not understand English- A Mulatto, who spoke bad French and worse English served as interpreter to the Captains- So that a single word to be understood by the party required to pass from the Natives to the woman, from the woman to the husband, and from the husband to the Mulatto, from the Mulatto to the Captain.*

(McKenzie, from Wood & Thiessen 238-9)

As Lewis and Clark traveled up the Missouri River, they found themselves with other communication challenges. On August 4th, 1805, Captain Meriwether Lewis explores the Three Forks of the Missouri headwaters:



Close-up of part of the map drawn by William Clark, "Area of the Mouth of the Columbia River, Northern Side" Courtesy of Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

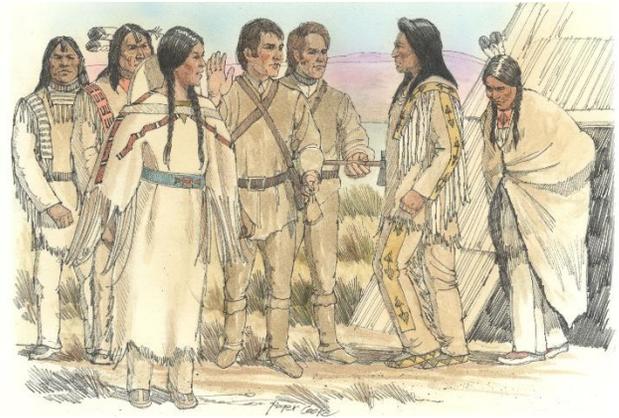
*This is a bold rapid and Clear Stream, it's bed so much broken and obstructed by gravley bars and it's waters so much subdivided by Islands that it appears to me utterly impossible to navigate it with safety. The middle fork is gentle and possesses about 2/3rds as much water as this stream. It's course so far as I can observe it is about S. W., and from the opening of the valley.*

*I beleive it still bears more to the West above it may be safely navigated. It's water is much warmer then the rapid fork and it's water more turbid; from which I conjecture that it has it's sources at a greater distance in the mountains and passes through an opener country than the other. under this impression I wrote a note to Capt Clark, recommending his taking the middle fork povided he should arrive at this place before my return, which I expect will be the day after tomorrow. this note I left on a pole at the forks of the river, and having refreshed ourselves and eat heartily of some venison which we killed this morning we continued our rout up the rapid fork on the Stard side, resolving to pursue this stream untill noon tomorrow and then pass over to the middle fork and come down it to their junctionor untill I meet Capt Clark...*

*...at 4 P.M. they arrived at the confluence of the two rivers where I had left the note. This note had unfortunately been placed on a green pole which the beaver had cut and carried off together with the note; the possibility of such an occurrence never onc occurred to me when I placed it on the green pole. This accident deprived Capt. Clark of any information with ripect to the country and supposing that the rapid fork was most in the direction which it was proper we should pursue, or West, he took that stream and ascended it with much difficulty...*

(Lewis, from Moulton V.5, 41-2)

Even among themselves, communication for the Expedition was no easy task. The challenges that lay ahead were even greater because they didn't know the languages of the people they would meet. How would the Expedition communicate with native people beyond the Mandan villages? How would they communicate if they encountered people other than the Shoshone? These were all questions that the Lewis and Clark Expedition struggled with as they made their way toward the Columbia River Country.



A scene from the Lewis and Clark Expedition, October 19, 1805, shows Lewis, Clark, and Sacagawea meeting a group of four Indians in front of a mat lodge, Washington State Historical Society Collections.

Portions of this article were excerpted from "Miscommunication along the Lewis and Clark Trail" by Sally Thompson.