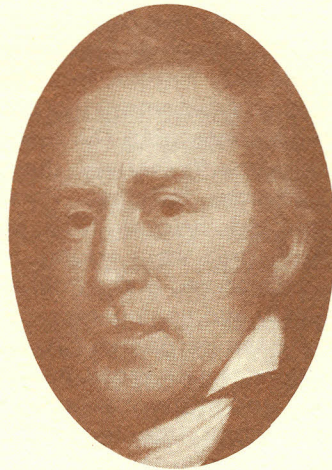
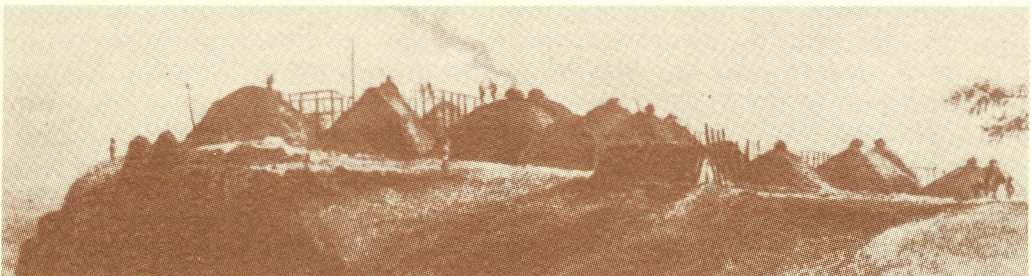


## Corps of Discovery



### Lewis & Clark Among the Earthlodge People



The three Hidatsa and two Mandan Indian villages near the mouth of the Knife River, in what is today North Dakota, played an important role in the success of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the expansion of the United States into the Western territories. During the winter of 1804-05, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark interviewed many of the villagers concerning the route to the Rocky Mountains and beyond. Information gathered during these interviews gave the explorers some idea of what they could expect as they traveled west.

The Corps of Discovery of the Northwest, better known as the LEWIS AND CLARK EXPEDITION, was the brainchild of Thomas Jefferson. Even before he became president, Jefferson had planned an expedition into the Western territories of North America. The goals of such an expedition were multi-fold. Jefferson felt there was potential for the fledgling United States of America to become a continental power, with control from the Atlantic to the Pacific. A huge tract, some 820,000 square miles of land, known as Louisiana, was being purchased by the United States from France. Not only France, but Great Britain and Spain had some claim to the territory; thus an exploratory trip into Louisiana became necessary, not only to gather information concerning the resources and residents, but also to explain to those residents, primarily Natives, that control had been turned over to the "Great White Father," Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States of America.

William Clark, born in 1770, in Virginia, was four years the senior to Meriwether Lewis. Both men were young, intelligent, adventurous, resourceful, courageous leaders. Both served in the militia and the regular army and were able to make decisions quickly and usually correctly. These similarities in character were contrasted by opposite temperments. Clark was practical, even-tempered, outward and easily able to converse with those around him, while Lewis, on the other hand, was romantic, moody and introverted even to the point of depression. These similarities and differences complimented each other giving the expedition solid leadership throughout the journey.

On June 20th, 1803, President Jefferson signed to instructions which were to direct the efforts of the expedition. These instructions read in part:

*"To Meriwether Lewis, Esquire, Captain of the First Regiment of Infantry of the United States of America . . . the object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River, and such principal streams of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado, or any other river, may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across the continent, for the purposes of commerce. Beginning at the mouth of the Missouri, you will take observations of latitude and longitude at all remarkable points on the river and at the mouths of rivers . . . Several copies of these, as well as of your other notes, should be made at leisure times . . . A further guard would be, that one of these copies be on the cuticular membranes of the paper-birch, as less liable to injury from damp than common paper."*

Jefferson's instructions continue, saying:

*"The commerce which may be carried on with the people inhabiting the line you will pursue, renders a knowledge of these people important. You will therefore endeavor to make yourself acquainted, with the names of the nations and their members; The extent and limits of their possessions; Their relations with other tribes or nations; Their languages, traditions, and monuments; Their ordinary occupations in agriculture, fishing, hunting, war, arts and the implements for these; Their food, clothing, and domestic accommodations; The diseases prevalent among them, and the remedies they use; Moral and physical circumstances which distinguish them from the tribes we know; Peculiarities in their laws, customs, and dispositions; And articles of commerce they may need or furnish, and to what extent. And, considering the interest which every nation has in extending and strengthening the authority of reason and justice among the*

*people around them, it will be useful to acquire what knowledge you can of the state of morality, religion, and information among them. Other objects worthy of notice will be: the soil and face of the country, the animals of the country, the remains and accounts of any which may be deemed rare or extinct; The mineral productions of every kind; Volcanic appearances and climate . . ."*

Taking these instructions to heart, Lewis and Clark developed a list of questions which they would ask of those interviewed along the route to the Pacific.

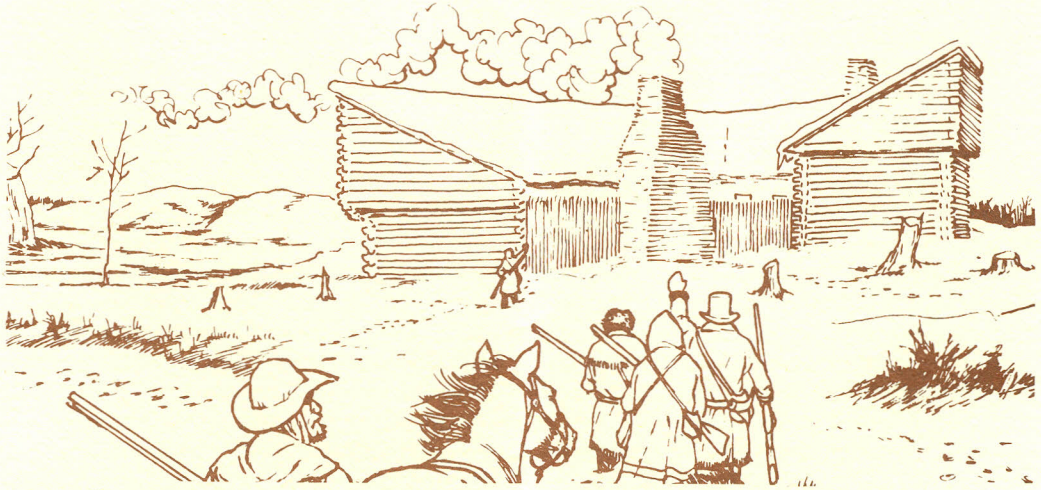
Camp Wood, Illinois, about seventeen miles from St. Louis would become the staging area for the Expedition. The winter of 1803-04 was spent there gathering items to be presented to dignitaries of the tribes encountered, and packing and preparing supplies and materials needed for such an undertaking. The Expedition would proceed up the Missouri River with a fifty-five foot long keelboat and two dugout canoes or pirogues. The keelboat drew three feet of water and was equipped with a large square sail and twenty-two oars. When either of these forms of propulsion could be used, progress upstream was fairly easy. Often, however, the only way progress could be made was with the use of cordelle, a long rope attached to the keelboat. With the cordelle in hand, members of the party walking on shore, would literally drag the boat upstream. With no foot paths to follow, this work was extremely grueling.

Although on a peaceful mission, the expedition was prepared to encounter hostile forces along the way. During the winter at Camp Wood they equipped the bow of the keelboat with a small cannon mounted in a swivel. On her stern, two smaller swivel guns were mounted, as well as one each on the pirogues. Decks, ten feet long in the bow and stern of the keelboat, formed a forecastle and cabin, while the middle was covered with lockers which could be raised to form a breastwork in the event of an attack.

Leaving the staging area at Camp Wood, Monday, May 14, 1804, with a contingent of 42 men, the Expedition quickly began to fall into a routine. The daily distance traveled depended greatly on the weather and terrain encountered. Some days twenty-seven miles might be covered, other days only four or five miles. Camping on islands, whenever possible allowed protection from attack by unfriendly Natives.

On October 26, 1804, the contingent reached what was at that time the greatest concentration of population anywhere on the Missouri River. The five earthlodge villages of Mandan and Hidatsa agriculturalists, near the mouth of the Knife River, comprised an estimated population of 4,400 individuals.





On the second of November, 1804, a site was selected in which the Expedition would spend the winter. In the bottomland along the north side of the Missouri River, about six miles below the mouth of the Knife River, adequate wood was discovered from which to build a fort to house the Expedition. This position was across the Missouri from the lowest village of the Mandans. Thus the shelter was named Fort Mandan to honor their neighbors. The fort was a three-sided structure about fifty-two feet on a side. Two banks of four buildings came together to form an angle, the open side of which was closed by a cottonwood log palisade-wall eighteen feet high. The fort was not completed until Christmas Eve, 1804, due to nearly constant visits by Natives from the nearby villages.

Not only Natives, but also men from the Hudson's Bay and North West Fur Trading Companies came to the fort during the winter. Punctuated by visits from headmen of the Mandan and Hidatsa, and even by leaders of the Assiniboine, Cree and Arikara groups camped nearby, the members of the Expedition suffered little from the usual emotional effects of a severe winter. With recorded temperatures as low as 74° below zero, the physical effects, such as frostbite, were more numerous.

Early in the winter, Lewis and Clark invited a couple of fur traders to join them at Fort Mandan, to serve as interpreters for the many hours of council which were to take place. Rene' Jusseame had been interpreting for the Mandans and Toussaint Charbonneau for the Hidatsa. Charbonneau was of French-Canadian and Santee Sioux decent. As early as the winter of 1793-4, he had served as a trader and interpreter for the North West Company at Pine Fort on the Assiniboine River, some six to nine days march north of the Knife River villages. He came to the Missouri River in 1798 and took up residence in the middle village of the Hidatsa, where he served the North West Company as trader and interpreter.

At the time of Lewis and Clark's arrival, Charbonneau had two wives caring for his lodge. The younger being Sakakawea, a teenage Shoshone girl. Russell Reid, in an article in *North Dakota History*, tells how this Shoshone girl became a resident at the Knife River villages.

*A "Hidatsa war party attacked the Shoshone at Three Forks, Montana, kill-*

*ing four men, four women and a number of boys. Several girls and boys, including Sakakawea were taken prisoner by the Hidatsa and as was customary some of them were accepted as members of the tribe after living in the Hidatsa village for a time. According to the Original Journals of Lewis and Clark, Sakakawea was captured in 1800 and it is believed that she was at this time about 12 years of age. Some time after her arrival at the Hidatsa villages she was acquired by Toussaint Charbonneau . . . and was later taken by him as a wife."*

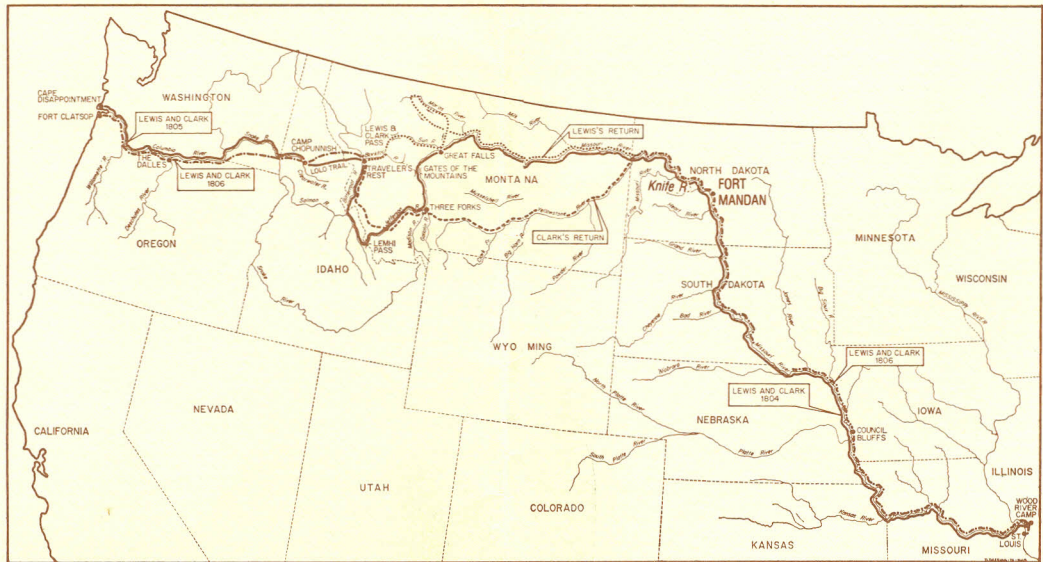
Feeling that Sakakawea could be helpful to the Expedition, because of her familiarity with the people and places to be encountered on the journey West, Lewis and Clark enlisted Charbonneau, accompanied by Sakakawea and their infant son, Jean Baptiste, called affectionately, "my little Pomp," by Captain Clark. Although mentioned only occasionally in the Expedition records, Sakakawea's assistance on the journey proved invaluable. Her familiarity with the Shoshone language and people living in what is now Montana, helped the Expedition acquire horses for the arduous crossing of the Rocky Mountains. On another occasion a canoe started to take on water. The quick actions of Sakakawea saved much of the light cargo including a portion of the Captains' Journals. Her skill in finding plants and gathering and preparing roots to supplement short rations helped keep spirits up during the journey. A woman with a baby traveling with a group of unfamiliar men gave the Expedition an air of peace in the eyes of the Natives encountered along the trail. These things and Charbonneau's skills as a cook assisted in making the Expedition a success.

The Natives living near the Knife River saw Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery members differently than they did the men who came to their villages to trade. The Expedition leaders seemed aloof . . . They built a fort away from the villages, operated in military fashion and moved their interpreters and their families from the villages right into the Fort. One of the Hidatsa headmen commented that the only two men of value in the contingent were the blacksmith and gunsmith, who they kept occupied making hatchets and repairing guns. On one occasion during their stay at Fort Mandan, the village across the river was threatened by a hostile band of Sioux. Clark, hearing of the danger, thought he could closer ally the Mandans by turning out his men for the upcoming battle. Using military strategy, he hastily deployed men around the village. This quick action was misunderstood by those in the village. After the initial confusion, although the battle never materialized, this quick action did ally the Mandans further with the Corps.

By supplying corn for winter rations and much needed information about the upper reaches of the Missouri River, the five villages near the mouth of the Knife River played an important role in the success of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the expansion into the American West.

As warm weather came to the Missouri in the spring of 1805, the spirits of the crew heightened and preparations were made to progress toward the Pacific Ocean. After the grueling, yet successful trip to the Pacific Coast and back, the Expeditions returned to the five villages in August 1806. Clark wrote on August 17, 1806, "We also took leave of T. Chabono, his Snake Indian wife and their child who had accompanied us on our route to the Pacific Ocean in the capacity of interpreter and interpretness."

And with that the Lewis and Clark Expedition made their final visit to the Knife River Indian Villages.



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### **WRITTEN BY**

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