



Heartily Tired of the National Hug: Why Sacagawea Deserves a Day Off

By Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs

For starters, I take issue with those who say Sacagawea has emerged the winner in the Bicentennial Idol sweepstakes. I see the winner of that contest as William Clark who, after 200 years of being in Lewis's shadow, finally achieved the recognition he deserved in the form of two new scholarly biographies of his life and who had his own conference in Billings in July 2006.



What would she think of us 200 years later meeting in Bismarck to understand what her life meant to the history of the United States? How come she gets left holding the bag for a laundry list of interest groups even to this day? Empire builders; white apologists; feminists; Christians; tribal, federal, state, and local governments, and even the United States Mint seem to have ulterior motives when it comes to the way they seek to use her memory.

Why do we want her as our poster girl for causes and interests from A to Z? I am surprised People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals haven't yet dragged her image into a campaign. Tradition has it that, even though she was famished, she passed on eating dog.

Sacagawea has more statues erected in her honor than any other woman, not to mention the rivers, streams, peaks, lakes, hot springs, and mountains that also bear her name, along with countless schools, a constellation, a navy ship, a plane, plazas, a scenic byway, hotels, books, DVDs, a stamp, a coin, a candy bar, and a perfume. She has her own brand of decaffeinated coffee with a label that shows her smiling and winking while holding a cup of hot coffee over the tag line, "Worth the journey." I understand she was recently given her own hazelnut and that somewhere in Washington is the Sacagawea Industrial Park. But do any of these "honors" celebrate the real woman or are they all monuments to someone who never existed, to someone who might rightly be labeled pure fiction?

After years of molding and imagining her character, isn't it time we gave Sacagawea her own holiday—and by this I do not mean a day off from work or school for us, but a day off for her.

On National Sacagawea Day we would relieve her of the burdens we have foisted upon her for no other fault than that her story is inspiring. Let's relieve her of the burden of being a national icon. Let's give her credit for being who she was, not who we want her to be. No pointy-fingered statues, no currency, no postage stamp, no hazelnut, and certainly no industrial park to represent. Let's set her free from the burden of our collective fantasies.

Who was she really? What do we know about her? Why do we care about her so much?

As for what we do know, there are a handful of descriptions, mainly from Clark, who said she was lighter in skin color than Charbonneau's other wife, that she was particularly "useful," and that her patience was truly admirable. Lewis once said he ascribed equal fortitude and resolution to her in an emergency, and named a river in her honor. We know her first experience with childbirth was long and tedious and that she preferred wintering where the potas (wapato) roots grew. We know she insisted on being allowed to go with the party to see the ocean and the whale beached there. In present-day Montana, near Bozeman, Clark called her "the Indian woman who has been of great service to me as a pilot through this country." And Henry Breckenridge, who traveled with the Charbonneaus when they returned to the Knife River villages in 1811, said she was "a good creature of a mild and gentle disposition." At the end of the expedition Clark said, in a letter to Charbonneau, "your woman who accompanied you that long, dangerous, and fatiguing rout deserved a greater reward."

Many see her role as insignificant, certainly not historically relevant, and nowhere near the girl-guide portrayed in popular literature. I think of her as a young woman who saw her place as being by her husband's side. Even after some five years' absence followed by a dramatic reunion with her family and tribe of origin, her allegiance, I think she would say, was more to Charbonneau and their child, Jean Baptiste. The bonds of marriage and parenthood superseded the bonds of tribe or family of birth.

Sacagawea likely never had a day off in her life. She would have been part of the communal labor force of the Hidatsa women whose job it was to plant, harvest, gather, butcher, tan, sew, and maintain the earth lodge. I imagine she was adroit at all of these tasks and friendly enough with the other women that she would even stand up for one, once, when she needed defending.

If we could have spent a day with Sacagawea in her Knife River village, I think we would see how clean, orderly, and organized their lives were. The women maintained the crops and passed down the right to plant in certain areas through their daughters. Because the area around the Mandan villages during Sacagawea's lifetime was able to produce a surplus of corn, the Mandan-Hidatsa had a prominent place in the local economy. When it came to actual physical labor, the women contributed more than their share, but they owned the fruits of their labors as well. As Virginia Roberts Peters points out in her book, *Women of the Earth Lodges*, these women worked from sunup to sundown because they had few laborsaving devices. They processed food, clothing, and shelter for the entire family and took great pride in their work. In Sacagawea's world the women earned and then proudly wore belts and other forms of personal adornment that signified a job well done.

Perhaps to Sacagawea's mind the notion of having the "day off" would mean she was sick or injured. The rest of the time she would have been engaged in the day-to-day chores, rituals, and games that made up Mandan and Hidatsa life. Her situation might have been unique because she was married to a trader and interpreter, but as Harold Howard points out in his biography, *Sacagawea*, marriage to a trader often increased a young native woman's status in the eyes of both Indians and whites. Becoming a mother certainly gave her a new place in the world, and a reason to never give up.

So the concept of a day off as applied to Sacagawea needs a bit broader context. I propose giving her a day off from groups and organizations trying to plant their flagpoles on her heart and etch their allegiances and trademarks onto her forehead. A "Free Sacagawea" march could be held, we could have bumper stickers, and Jack Gladstone—the popular Blackfeet singer/songwriter—could write us an anthem.

We need add nothing to the Sacagawea record—her accomplishments and talents speak for themselves. I, personally, would like her to pardon us for taking away her history as a living, breathing person and substituting for it almost 80 percent myth, legend, and fantasy. Pardon us for casting you as a torchbearer or guilt

William Clark shed light on one of Sacagawea's contributions to the expedition when he wrote of a sudden encounter with a group of Umatillas: "This Indian woman, wife of one of our interprs. confirmed those people of our friendly intentions as no woman ever accompanies a war party of Indians in this quarter."

holder for all kinds of causes of which you had no knowledge or opinion and which, in fact, you might have objected to if given the chance. Forgive us for endlessly debating the spelling and meaning of your name. I imagine if you knew the extent to which that discussion continues you would want to take a long shower. Surely there is more to examine in your life than the origin, meaning, and spelling of your name. Your parents and family knew it and you knew it. Enough said.

I do not assume Sacagawea would object to all of these memorials and accolades. I simply think she would wonder at the sheer variety and number of them.

What would she make of a Beanie Baby named after her, or an American Girl doll, or a candy bar? Or a decaf coffee? On National Sacagawea Day no one could make jokes or ridicule the coin commissioned in her honor. Why should her memory be contaminated by a coin everyone loves to hate? And believe me they do love to hate it; many businesses have resorted to giving it away when the general public seemed unimpressed and refused to use it.

Again, I ask that we reconsider the historical Sacagawea and give her credit for who she was, not for who we want her to be. For example, although in popular culture she is celebrated as a guide, we do not celebrate her greater genius, which would seem to be her memory for landscapes, her skill as a translator, and her ability to harvest foods and read moccasin tracks. In modern times she might have been an engineer or a crime scene investigator with those skills. In her world landmarks told stories, and because of that they stayed fixed in her mind. Think of Beaverhead Rock. She remembered those places because as a young child she would travel with her people looking for bison and roots to harvest. These travels were based around the seasons and the stories associated with each place; the landmarks



Roger Cooke drawing, Washington State Historical Society, Museum Collections



Like Pocahontas and Geronimo, among others, Sacagawea has achieved iconic status in American popular culture. Here are a few of the myriad uses to which she has unknowingly lent her visage and her name, clockwise from upper right: a candy bar, moving van side panel, postage stamp, one-dollar coin, coffee label, license plate, and a c. 1904 perfume.

all told stories, and Sacagawea must have been a very good listener. And when it comes to being the champion observer of the expedition, most folks feel no one holds a candle to Meriwether Lewis. But several times along the way Sacagawea proved she was in his league. She noted where the bark of a tree had been harvested by the natives and knew where to find the hog peanut and ground bean stashes of the meadow mice. She gave Lewis the bitterroot and showed him how to eat it; to Clark she gave the white apple and the fennel root, which he also credited her with finding.

I think she often gets shortchanged in acknowledgement concerning her talents as a mother. The fact that you can't find in the journals a single complaint about an inconsolable infant testifies to her mothering skill. Was there anyone there for her to turn to for advice? She depended on what she had observed in both the Lemhi Shoshone and Hidatsa cultures to know how to care for her son, Jean Batiste. That her son went on to become a highly qualified guide and interpreter in his adult life suggests that she served as a strong role model.

Some people marvel at Sacagawea's endurance; they can't believe that a woman could keep up with a bunch of hardy young soldiers. Well, what if they had a hard time keeping up with her? I think Clark gives her a pat on the back for her endurance when he writes in his letter to Charbonneau that she accompanied him on the long, dangerous, and fatiguing route. But she needs no defenders.

Maybe we stake so many claims on Sacagawea's memory because we want her to be our friend. We want her approval, her glad tidings, her ermine tails, her stale bread, her lump of sugar, her blue-beaded belt. All the gifts she gave, we want to hold close. Imagine if that blue-beaded belt were somehow

found and put on the market today? It might fetch more than the iron boat on eBay!

We want her friendship for the very reason John Luttig noted when she died at Fort Manuel in 1812. "She was a good and the best woman of the fort." Her integrity was intrinsic; she needs no mythology, no statue. From the very beginning of our noticing her in the journals she stands for something without perhaps even knowing it.

Woman. Mother. Wife. Sister. Friend. A woman who was strong, worked hard, and loved her children. None of these things necessarily makes

her a hero, but in a sense it makes her the best kind of hero, one we can recognize and celebrate in ourselves. So let's pull up our claim stakes, pull out our flagpoles, and finally, after all these years, let her have a day off; let her rest in peace, let her lay down all of the burdens collected from sea to shining sea.

There are a few intriguing mysteries about Sacagawea I would like to explore:

How did they get her to give up her belt? It was one of her few and certainly one of her most valued and valuable possessions. Whitehouse tells us that her belt was used in trade for a sea otter robe admired by the captains. Clark tells us she was given a blue cloth coat in return for her belt. Hardly an equitable trade. Perhaps Charbonneau convinced her it would be for the good of the whole party. "Come on honey it will make the captain happy and I promise to get you a better one as soon as we get back to Knife River." I have seen a highly romanticized version of that transaction showing Sacagawea lovingly placing her blue-beaded belt into Clark's hands as she gazed longingly into his eyes. Reality check. I imagine she was less than happy that particular day, and I doubt she appreciated giving up two of her leather suits for a horse later on. I find it interesting that that particular "handsomely dressed sea otter robe" ended up in Lewis's personal effects when he died in Tennessee.

What was her relationship to Lewis? His dismissal of her by saying if she had a few trinkets and some food to eat she could be happy anywhere was no doubt meant as an insult. In some ways it also seems to qualify her as a good soldier. I think their relationship was strained but he did respect her, especially after she saved the "light articles" when the white pirogue nearly capsized in the Missouri River. I think he worried about her when she got sick, but mainly because he knew if she died his chances

of securing horses from the Shoshones would be small. She could not know that in his journal Lewis would refer to her son as "it." I think if she fully understood his implication she would have been highly insulted. Months before at Fort Clatsop Sacagawea gave 24 white weasel tails to Captain Clark, which I read as her casting a vote for the true leader of the expedition at that point. I am not sure he would have credited her with the "instinctual sagacity" he gave the Nez Perce guides, but clearly both captains recognized that she was a walking peace token and, as such, instrumental in the friendly receptions they received. In the end, I doubt she mattered to Lewis in any personal way, but I'm sure he would be willing to admit that she earned her place in history, and he might even admit that she taught him a thing or two.

What was her marriage like? When Sacagawea was ill at the Great Falls, a line in the journals noted, "Charbonneau petitions to return"; meaning, they weren't going to cure her so he wanted to take her back and have the Hidatsa try to save her. This one line says volumes about the way Charbonneau cared for Sacagawea. She was more than a slave or a possession to him and he was, in some sense, desperate to save her. A few days later when she recovered enough to eat and ate too much, Captain Clark blamed Charbonneau. I can see him saying, "Mon Dieu, Captain! She won't listen to me either!"

Why didn't Lewis have her with him when he first approached the Shoshones in August 1805? Perhaps because Clark was ailing, but there is no doubt that Lewis wanted to be first; he wanted to be the leader that day. And if Sacagawea had come along, Clark would have been there, too. Lewis wanted to be out in front that day as he often did in times of anticipated "discovery." He did use information gleaned from Sacagawea to ease the fears of the Shoshones he encountered. He repeated the words "tab a boin," which he understood to mean "white man," and in a gesture of peace he learned from Sacagawea, he "painted the tawny cheeks of the women with vermilion." So even though she was not there during that pivotal moment, she did influence the outcome.

What was her favorite part of the trail? After years of considering this, and discussing it with many of her fans, I think it would have had to be on the Yellowstone River. Despite the mosquitoes and worrying that they were going to eat her son alive, I think she enjoyed her leadership role in finding the way to the river over Bozeman Pass. I feel certain Clark would have told her he named Pompey's Pillar for her son, and the fact that Clark carved his name on it must have meant something. Personally, I love that site because it forever links Clark with the Charbonneau family and it says most eloquently that they were his friends.

Could she have died of a broken heart? Regarding the death of Sacagawea in 1812, I have always been curious about that, but not for the obvious reason. My curiosity stems from the proximity of her death to the time of leaving her son in St. Louis with William Clark. As a mother myself, I can think of nothing more gut-wrenching and stress inducing than parting with one's only child. Would that we had an account of their parting. We know

that the two cultures of her life both valued family ties and saw the mother's role as particularly important. Given the circumstances of their time together, it is not unreasonable to assume they shared an extremely close bond. How is it that she was dead in less than a year after leaving him in St. Louis? Brackenridge says she had become sickly and longed to revisit her native country. Having just delivered her second child, her first—her dancing boy—was probably in her final thoughts as she left this world. It makes sense to me, but that is only because I am sentimental about such things, and when you study and write history it is best to leave sentiment at the door. But who wouldn't prefer dying of a broken heart to dying of "putrid fever"?

In the end, I think we cannot help but romanticize Sacagawea. She is simply too unique. We will always want her to be our friend, to hold our flag, to be our symbol. We want to be like her, have her patience, fortitude, and mild manner. Even though it is tempting to think of her getting a reprieve—a National Sacagawea Day Off—there are too many of us, myself included, who can never surrender our personal vision of her. She will continue to mean this to you and that to me, continue to be what someone once called a human Rorschach test, but maybe with opportunities like this conference we can come a little closer to the true woman and what she really means to America.

Clark always wanted to give her a greater reward; in a way, she has it—young people continue to be inspired by her example as each new generation of children discovers her and wants to know more about her. They, too, want to be her friend.

I recently read a story about children portraying their favorite historical characters. Nine-year-old Vanessa Rodriguez spoke of her kinship with her historical figure. "I sort of look like her," she said of Sacagawea. "She can speak many languages and she has a strong heart." The article went on to say that portraying Sacagawea made Vanessa think more about being more patient when she translated English for her Spanish-speaking cousins. Obviously, she has her own version of Sacagawea, and it helps her and gives her strength, just as mine does for me. Last week I was at Beaverhead Rock thinking about her and wondering how she would regard the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial and all of the attention her memory continues to receive. I think she would say, "Go ahead and have your party, play the fiddle, shoot off the fireworks, and raise the glass, but don't forget that I was a real person made of flesh and bone, just like you. I need no extra credit for things I never did. And please, no more pointy-fingered statues!"

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COVER: Bill Holm's paintings reflect his artistic and scholarly interest in Native American culture and his dedication to representing it with accuracy and authenticity in every detail. This Holm painting depicts a Kwakiutl canoe traveling down Vancouver Island's Kingcome Inlet near the mouth of Wakeman Sound sometime in the mid 19th century. Another canoe is seen some distance away. The Sisiutl, a legendary serpent-like creature, is painted on the near canoe. The bowman wears a white Hudson's Bay Company blanket around his waist, but some of the crewmen are wearing cedar bark robes, suggesting that it is early in the trade period. See related story beginning on page 24. (Collection of Don Charnley, courtesy of Bill Holm)