**Sacagawea**

**820L**

[[pp.2-3]]

**The Significance of Sacagawea**

She is one of the most well-known—and unknown—figures in U.S. history. A river, two lakes, and four mountains are named for her. But no one is sure how to pronounce or spell her name. Every child in the United States learns about Sacagawea (sa-CA-ga-we-a). But what does anyone actually know about her? We know for sure that in 1805 and 1806 she traveled with the Lewis and Clark expedition. She was with them as they explored what would later become North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. We know that she was of the Shoshone people. We also know that she was around 15 when she and her two-month-old infant joined a group of mostly white men whom she had never met before. What little is known of Sacagawea’s life before and during that time is found in the journals of Lewis and Clark. By all accounts, Sacagawea earned their respect and gratitude soon after she set out with them. How did this teenage mother fit in with a group of rough-and-ready soldiers? How did she earn their admiration? Read on as *Kids Discover* explores the life and legends of the Bird Woman.

Has *Kids Discover* misspelled Sacagawea’s name? We are using the official spelling of the U.S. Geographic Names Board, the U.S. National Park Service, and the National Geographic Society, among others. In the original journal entries of expedition members, Sacagawea’s name is spelled many different ways. However, the third syllable always starts with a hard *g* sound, as in *grass*. There is no soft *g* in the language of the Hidatsa, with whom Sacagawea lived just before joining Lewis and Clark. In Hidatsa, *sacaga* means “bird” and *wea* means “woman.” Some North Dakota Hidatsa believe that the name should be spelled *Sakakawea*. For some unknown reason, an edition of the journals published in 1814 changed the spelling to *Sacajawea* and that became the spelling most people used. Many modern Shoshone, the tribe of Sacagawea’s birth, support that spelling. In Shoshone, her name means “boat launcher.”

In 2000, the U.S. Mint introduced the Sacagawea dollar. One side of the coin has an image of Sacagawea and her son, Pomp. People across the nation had nominated 17 American women for the honor of appearing on the coin, including Betsy Ross, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Rosa Parks. However, Sacagawea was the huge favorite. The young woman who posed for the image is of partial Shoshone heritage. It is the first circulating U.S. coin to show an image of a child.

Sacagawea is mentioned some three dozen times in the journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Few of the entries refer to her appearance, her actual words, her personality, or her feelings. She herself didn’t write a journal or any letters. She didn’t leave an oral record of her experiences, either. Here (pictured) is a typical page from the journals.

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**A Child of the Shoshone**

Sacagawea was born around 1790 in the eastern part of what is now Idaho. She was one of the Lemhi Shoshone, or Snake People. They spent much of the year traveling in small groups. Each group consisted of an extended family. For the most part, the Shoshone stayed in the mountains. That’s because whenever they wandered onto the plains, bigger, stronger groups of Crow and Blackfeet attacked them. The Shoshone were mostly peaceful, and because they had no contact with Europeans, they had almost no guns.

The Shoshone were often on the go, searching for food, which was never plentiful. In spring, some hunted deer, antelope, and bear. They also gathered edible berries, nuts, and roots. Other bands fished the Snake River for salmon. By midsummer, groups with horses went east to Montana and Wyoming to hunt buffalo. During the winter, the Shoshone settled in villages and lived off this food.

From about 1700 on, the Shoshone had fine horses. They were probably pintos and Appaloosas that they got from their Nez Percé neighbors, who were known for breeding and training horses. Horses had been brought to America by early Spanish explorers.

Before the Shoshone got horses, they lived in huts of woven grass placed over young trees that they had bent into shape. Their clothing was made of bark. Their containers were woven baskets. Horses made it possible for the Shoshone to hunt buffalo. Then they began to use buffalo skins for making tepees, clothing, and containers.

In the fall of 1800, when Sacagawea was around 10 years old, her group was camped near the three forks of the Missouri River. Suddenly, a band of Hidatsa (also called Minataree) attacked. The Shoshone had bows and arrows, but the Hidatsa had rifles. Sacagawea and others were captured. They were taken back to the Hidatsa villages near present-day Stanton, North Dakota.

Sacagawea probably lived with the family of the warrior who had captured her. His mother and sisters would have taught her basic skills: how to grind corn, dye porcupine quills, and sew clothing out of animal skins.

Sacagawea’s new life among the Hidatsa was a huge change from her early upbringing. The Shoshone moved their tepees from place to place in search of food. The Hidatsa lived in earth lodges in settled villages. They grew corn and squash. So while the Shoshone sometimes went hungry, the Hidatsa had plenty of food. Also, the Shoshone had no contact with Europeans. But the Hidatsa and neighboring Mandan villages were a gathering spot for Native American and European traders.

Within a few years of arriving at the Hidatsa village, Sacagawea was sold or lost in a gambling wager to Toussaint Charbonneau. He was a French-Canadian trader who had taken more than one young Indian woman as his wife. The marriage was not about love. Charbonneau had the typical fur trader’s attitude toward Indian women: he thought they were very good workers.

[[pp.6-7]]

**The Lewis and Clark Expedition**

When Sacagawea was born, George Washington was president, and the country was just 13 states along the Atlantic Coast. But all that would soon change, and quickly. In 1801, Thomas Jefferson became president. He dreamed of a nation that stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He gave little thought to the Native Americans who had lived on this land for thousands of years. But the European nations that had claimed various parts of the West worried him. He was especially worried about France, which had recently bought from Spain a huge piece of land called Louisiana. The important port of New Orleans was at the southern tip of this land. Jefferson sent a representative to France to try to get the French leader, Napoléon, to sell New Orleans to the United States. Jefferson got way more than he bargained for.

Napoléon wanted to build an empire in Europe and beyond. But he didn’t have the money to do battle in both Europe and America. To Jefferson’s surprise, Napoléon sold New Orleans. He also sold the U.S. all the rest of the Louisiana Territory for $15 million (about four cents per acre). This 1803 purchase doubled the size of the U.S.

It wasn’t only France that worried Jefferson. Spain, Russia, and Britain all claimed territory in the U.S. and Canada. In the summer of 1793, Scotsman Alexander Mackenzie had traveled from central Canada all the way to the Pacific Coast. He claimed the Pacific Northwest for Britain. Jefferson needed to put a U.S. presence in the West, and fast!

Jefferson chose his secretary, Meriwether Lewis, to explore the new territory. Lewis picked William Clark as his co-captain. Lewis and Clark had served together in the army. They put together a group of volunteers and collected the necessary supplies. They planned to sail up the Missouri River as far as possible. Then they would search for a land route to the Pacific. They would make maps and create friendly relations with the Native Americans they met. They also would collect specimens of new animal and plant life, and record their observations.

As the expedition sailed up the Missouri, the group stopped to meet with various groups of Indians. Lewis and Clark asked them to pledge their allegiance to the “Great White Father” in Washington. All went well until they met the aggressive Teton Sioux. Lewis and Clark faced them down by turning the boats’ swivel guns on them. But the exchange taught them a valuable lesson. They needed interpreters who could communicate with Native Americans.

Lewis and Clark decided the expedition should spend the winter months near the friendly Mandan and Hidatsa villages. That is where Sacagawea and Charbonneau made their home.

Corps of Discovery Expedition

On May 14, 1804, the Lewis and Clark expedition set off from Wood River, Missouri. The expedition was officially known as the Corps of Discovery. It had about 40 members. They included Clark’s slave, York, and Lewis’s huge Newfoundland dog, Seaman.

Native Americans Encountered

[[Missouri

Oto

Yankton Sioux

Teton Sioux

Arikara

Mandan

Hidatsa Assiniboin

Crow

Blackfoot

Shoshone

Nez Percé

Walla Walla

Wishram

Clatsop

Tillamook

Chinook]]

[[pp.8-9]]

**Sacagawea Joins the Expedition**

By the fall of 1804, Sacagawea was expecting her first child. But that didn’t stop Charbonneau, a wanderer by nature, from asking Lewis and Clark if they would hire him as an interpreter. He knew Hidatsa and the sign language common among the river tribes. Lewis and Clark signed him right up. When they found out he was married to a Shoshone, they encouraged him to bring her along. They had heard that the Shoshone had fine horses, which they would need later. They figured that seeing Sacagawea would make the Shoshone more open to negotiations. They also believed that any Indians they encountered would view them as peaceful. That’s because war parties never included women.

Sacagawea and Charbonneau moved into Fort Mandan with the rest of the Corps. On February 11, 1805, Sacagawea went into a long, difficult labor. A local interpreter gave Lewis a remedy that used a rattlesnake’s rattle to make the birth easier. Lewis tore off two rings from a rattle. He pounded them into a powder. Then he mixed the powder with water. Minutes after drinking it, Sacagawea gave birth to a boy, whom Charbonneau named Jean Baptiste. She called him Pomp, which means “first born” in Shoshone.

On April 7, the Corps of Discovery, which now numbered 33 people, left Fort Mandan. Most people think that Sacagawea guided the Corps west. That’s not true. It wasn’t until the expedition got near her home that Sacagawea recognized landmarks. However, she contributed to the group’s success. Within a few days, she had shown her usefulness by gathering wild artichokes for food. During the whole journey, she played a big part in supplying food for the group.

A little over a month into the journey, Sacagawea showed the courage and clear thinking that won her the praise of the expedition members. On May 14, Charbonneau was at the helm of one of the sailboats. Sacagawea and Pomp were passengers. When a sudden storm came up, the boat tipped over and began to fill with water. Charbonneau froze, because he wasn’t good in emergencies. One of the other men threatened to shoot him if he didn’t get the boat straightened out. Meanwhile, Sacagawea grabbed some of the expedition’s valuable supplies (instruments, books, clothing) that were wrapped in waterproof packets. She pulled them out of the water. Without her quick thinking, the expedition could have been in real trouble.

Check It Out!

Sacagawea faced the same dangers and difficulties as everyone else—and she did it while having full care of a baby. How did she carry her son on the journey?

Answer: This is a trick question. If she used the Shoshone method of carrying a baby, she carried him in a cradleboard, which was a piece of wood strapped to her back. If she used the Hidatsa method, she carried him on her back, held close in a shawl or blanket. No one knows for sure which method Sacagawea used.

What did Clark and Lewis think of Sacagawea? Clark’s journal entries show he liked her a lot. He gave her the nickname Janey (possibly from *jane*, which was army slang for “girl”) and called her “uncomplaining.” Mostly, the two captains referred to her usefulness, her alertness, and her hard work. They never wrote a word of complaint about her.

Lewis and Clark never described Sacagawea’s appearance. Lewis did write some general remarks about what the Shoshone looked like. This modern-day interpretation by Michael Haynes is based on Lewis’s remarks. It’s also based on what is known about Plains tribes of the time.

The part in Sacagawea’s hair is colored with red vermilion (mercuric sulfide). Plains women of the time considered this a mark of beauty.

The belt is decorated with blue beads, a popular trade item, and porcupine quills. The quill pattern pictured here was copied from a Hidatsa robe. Native North Americans are the only people in the world to create an art form using porcupine quills. Quills are washed and dyed. Then they are softened in the mouth. They are pulled between the teeth to flatten them.

An awl case hangs from Sacagawea’s belt. An awl is a small pointed tool used for making holes or marking surfaces. The case is decorated with porcupine quillwork. It is fringed with dyed horsehair, shells, and leather wrapped in quills.

By Sacagawea’s side is a cradleboard, which is what Shoshone women used to carry babies. Hidatsa women generally carried their babies in shawls wrapped around them. However, sometimes they used a cradleboard.

Sacagawea is holding a rake made from wood and a deer’s antler. She would have learned farming skills from the Hidatsa women she was brought to live with. They were experienced farmers who used rakes like this.

The garment is made of two deerskins. The yoke, or top part, is painted gold, outlined with deer fur, and ornamented with a deer tail. Back then, this was a typical work garment.

[[pp.10-11]]

**Geared Up & Ready to Go!**

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In Sacagawea’s hand is a rake made from wood and a deer’s antler. Sacagawea would have learned farming techniques from the Hidasta women she was brought to live with. Experienced farmers, Hidasta women used rakes such as this one.

The garment is made of two deerskins. The yoke, or top part, is painted gold, outlined with deer fur, and ornamented with a deer tail. This is a typical work garment of the period.

The part is Sacagawea’s hair is colored with red vermillion (the mineral mercuric sulfide). Plains women of the time considered this a mark of beauty.

The belt is decorated with both blue beads, a popular trade item, and porcupine quills (in a pattern copied from a Hidasta robe). Native North Americans are the only people in the world to create an art form using porcupine quills. Quills are washed and dyed. Then they are softened in the mouth and drawn through the teeth to flatten them.

An awl case hangs from Sacagawea’s belt. (An awl is a small pointed tool used for making holes or marking surfaces.) The case is decorated with porcupine quillwork. It is fringed with dyed horsehair, shells, and leather wrapped in quills.

By Sacagawea’s side is a cradleboard, the method used by Shoshone women to carry babies. Hidasta women generally carried their babies in shawls wrapped around them, although they sometimes used a cradleboard.

[[pp.12-13]]

Reunion with the Shoshone

During the summer of 1805, Lewis and Clark were desperate to find the Shoshone. They needed to buy horses to get them over the Rocky Mountains before winter. On July 22, Sacagawea began to recognize landmarks. She told the captains that up ahead were the three forks of the Missouri, where three smaller rivers come together to form the Missouri. This news made the group happy. A few days later, they reached the three forks. Sacagawea told them this was where her people had been camped when she was kidnapped by the Hidatsa. Lewis wrote in his journal, “She does not... show any distress at these recollections, or any joy at the prospect of being restored to her country.” He would soon see how wrong he was.

The Corps of Discovery left Fort Mandan on April 7. They didn’t see another human being until August 11. That’s when Lewis led a scouting party that spotted a lone Shoshone on horseback. But the horseman rode off, probably in fear. Lewis was unable to make contact with him.

On August 15, Sacagawea, Charbonneau, and Clark were walking through high grass. Suddenly, Sacagawea began to jump up and down, dancing with joy. She pointed to approaching Indians and sucked her fingers. That was a sign that they were her people.

Lewis and Clark quickly set up a meeting with the chief, Cameahwait, and asked Sacagawea to help translate. As she began translating the words of the Shoshone leader, she kept staring at him. Finally, she realized that he was her brother. She ran over to hug him, throwing a blanket around him and crying uncontrollably.

It is amazing that Lewis and Clark were able to communicate at all with the Shoshone, since every spoken word had to go through a chain of interpreters. Lewis and Clark spoke English to one of their men, Labiche. He translated their words into French for Charbonneau, who spoke in Hidatsa to Sacagawea. She then translated the words into Shoshone. When the Shoshone replied, the process had to be done again, but in reverse. The expedition got the horses they needed. But there was still a lot of hard traveling to do before they reached the Pacific Ocean.

Cameahwait told Sacagawea that most of her family was dead. Only two brothers and her oldest sister’s child were alive. Sacagawea immediately adopted the little boy. Cameahwait enjoyed a piece of dried squash the expedition brought from the Mandans and a lump of sugar Sacagawea had saved for a treat.

Sacagawea was successful in getting the Shoshone to trade horses to the Corps and to provide guides. Why did she go on with the journey instead of staying with her people? Perhaps she went out of loyalty to the Corps. Or perhaps she was caught up in the spirit of discovery. All we know for sure is that when Lewis and Clark left the Shoshone, Sacagawea went with them.

[[pp.14-15]]

The Expedition Reaches the Pacific Coast

On November 8, 1805, the expedition reached the Pacific Ocean and began scouting for a place to spend the winter. Should they stay near the coast? Or should they move back up the Columbia River? Which side of the river should they camp on? Sacagawea, ever the provider, wanted to settle where there was plenty of *wapatoo*, an edible root. At one point, the captains took a vote. Sacagawea got a vote too, as did York, Clark’s slave. It was the first time in American history that an enslaved person and a woman had voted. It would be a long time before that happened again. Eventually, the Corps built Fort Clatsop on a small tributary of the Columbia River. The group stayed there until March 23, 1806.

Sacagawea continued to prove her usefulness. After the men killed an elk for food, she showed them how to make grease by boiling the bones.

Different groups of Native Americans came to Fort Clatsop to trade. A Chinook woman brought an elegant robe made of sea otter pelts. Lewis and Clark wanted the robe. However, the woman would only take blue beads in exchange, and there were none left. To help the captains buy the robe, Sacagawea gave them her belt of blue beads. In return, they gave her a blue cloth coat.

For part of the journey back, the group split in two. Lewis led one party. Clark led the other, which included Sacagawea and her family. When Clark’s party got to the Yellowstone River, Sacagawea recommended a way through the mountains (now called Bozeman Pass). Clark later wrote, “The Indian woman... has been of great service to me as a pilot through this country.”

On July 25, 1806, Clark was east of present-day Billings, Montana. He saw a sandstone formation on which Native Americans had scratched the figures of animals and other objects. Clark named the rock Pompey’s Tower, in honor of Sacagawea’s son. Clark carved his own name and the date on a path leading to the top. The words can still be seen.

Life at Fort Clatsop became boring. But the expedition did get a break in the routine. A visiting group of Native Americans told them that a whale had washed ashore about 35 miles away. Clark led a group to bring back what could be useful from it. Sacagawea went, too. But only after arguing that she had traveled far to reach the ocean. She felt it was “very hard"—especially now that a “monstrous fish” was visible—that she had not been able to see the ocean.

The two groups reunited on August 12. A few days later, they were back at the Mandan villages. Here, Sacagawea, Charbonneau, and Pomp left the expedition. Clark offered to take Pomp—“a butifull promising child who is 19 months old”—to St. Louis. His parents said the boy was too young to leave his mother. However, they did agree to bring him to Clark in a year so that he could raise the child “in such a manner as I thought proper.”

[[pp.16-17]]

Sacagawea’s Later Years

In August of 1806, William Clark wrote to Toussaint Charbonneau: “Your woman, who accompanied you that long dangerous and fatiguing route to the Pacific Ocean and back, deserved a greater reward for her attention and services on that route than we had in our power to give her.” Clark invited the whole family to come to St. Louis. He repeated his offer to keep Pomp (Jean Baptiste) with him. Clark also said he would see to the boy’s education. A while later, the whole family did journey to St. Louis, where Clark was then Indian Agent for the Louisiana Territory. In October 1810, Charbonneau bought farmland from Clark near St. Louis. However, in the spring of 1811, he became homesick for the plains and his trading life. He sold the land back to Clark. Then he and Sacagawea sailed back up the Missouri. They left Pomp with Clark.

There are two very different stories about Sacagawea’s death. The one that most historians accept was recorded by John Luttig. He was the clerk at Fort Manuel, in what is now South Dakota. On December 20, 1812, Luttig wrote in his journal: “This evening the wife of Charbonneau, a Snake squaw, died of a putrid fever. She was a good and the best woman in the fort, aged about 25 years. She left a fine infant girl.” Luttig later took the infant, named Lisette, to St. Louis. There, in Orphan’s Court, William Clark adopted Lisette and Jean Baptiste Charbonneau on August 11, 1813. If this account is correct, Sacagawea is buried somewhere on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, site of the old Fort Manuel, in present-day South Dakota. Those who dispute this account maintain that Charbonneau had many wives. They say the woman who died was not Sacagawea but another Shoshone.

William Clark paid for Jean Baptiste’s schooling in St. Louis until at least 1820. In 1823, Prince Paul of Württemberg (Germany) met Jean Baptiste on a hunting trip to the United States. Jean Baptiste returned to Europe with the prince. He remained there until 1829, and became fluent in four languages. After that, Jean Baptiste returned to the U.S. and resumed the life of a frontiersman. By all accounts, he was an intelligent, courageous, and skillful guide and hunter. In 1866, he died of pneumonia. He is buried near Danner, Oregon.

The oral tradition of the Shoshone says that Sacagawea wandered all over the West for many years. It says that she had several husbands and children. It also says that she eventually settled at the Wind River Reservation (pictured) in Wyoming with Jean Baptiste and Bazil, her sister’s son, whom she had adopted. This woman was called Porivo. People who met her said that she spoke both English and French. They said she told stories of traveling with Lewis and Clark. These stories included seeing the “big fish” on the ocean shore. They also said that she owned a treasured Jefferson Medal. This woman died on April 9, 1884.

Think Piece!

We will never know exactly how Sacagawea died. That’s partly because the clerk who recorded the death of an Indian woman at Fort Manuel described her only by her relationship to a man. He didn’t describe her by her own name. Which of these two versions of Sacagawea’s death do you like better? Why?

[[pp.18-19]]