

Erica Funkhouser: American Poet, Professor at MIT

Who is she? She's, I think Sacagawea is, in order to understand her we have, we have to kind of go back and use our sense of who she was in history, where who her tribal people were, because we have no information about her as an individual. She never wrote anything down, as far as I know. I believe she didn't know how to write. And I think that we, in order to understand who she was, we have to sort of make a series of imaginative leaps to try and understand, first of all, what it is to be a young Shoshoni, to be a Shoshoni, living among the Minitari. You know, she hadn't been among her own people for probably five or six years by the time that she ran into Lewis and Clark. She was very young. She was probably fourteen. She'd been traded back and forth between different Minitari braves apparently, before she was won by Charbonneau in a gamble, in a game, in a gamble really. He won her from, to, from another, he won her from another Minitari brave in the, in this gamble and, and he also at that time, when he had, when he won her, he'd already had another wife, so I think she was his second common-law wife. And she was fourteen. Within a few months she was pregnant.

When Lewis and Clark hired Toussaint Charbonneau, Sacagawea's husband, were they hiring him or her?

The way I understand it, when Lewis and Clark met Charbonneau, they didn't, he didn't appeal to them personally. They didn't like him very much. But they knew that they, that they, they knew that his wife could speak Shoshoni as well as Minitari as well as French. And they knew that, that they needed to get horses from the Shoshoni in order to make the crossing over the Rockies, over the Bitterroots, and the Shoshoni were the Indians living closest to the Bitterroots, and they were already well known as horsemen. So they really wanted someone who could speak Shoshoni.

What kind of role did Sacagawea play in the expedition?

I think in order to understand her roll in the expedition, it's important to try and think about the dailyness of the expedition. I mean, when we think about expeditions, especially one that is this long and this extensive, we think of it as this massive journey, of just traveling every day, packing up and moving and going forward and trying to figure out where they were going and how they would get there and what they would eat, you know, that kind of thing, and I think in, in the very daily ways, Sacagawea played an important role, not as a guide as she's been mythologized into, but as a person who could read the landscape fairly well. I think she could read rivers. She could read a valley, you know. She had a sense of what the landscape said about direction and where they, where they were going. She had some, she had, she had some sense of what could be eaten along the way. Apparently she showed Clark how to dig up onions some pl., at some point along the way. She understood, knew about camas root which is a root that they ate quite a lot of in the expedition. She was, she was good at looking for food.

Gerard Baker

Tell us about her

OK, Sacagawea, and I'm gonna repeat that pronunciation, it's SaKagawea, not Sashcawea. Sacagawea being a Hidatsa term meaning "Birdwoman." Sacagawea, we know of two different theories, the modern theory or the theory that most people believe, that she was a Shoshoni. She was captured by the Hidatsa in a war raid, they were war party, which was common. They would capture the women and children. And not necessarily make slaves out of them, but take them into the tribe and marry them and they would live with them. Well, we all know that story. The Hidatsa side, the Hidatsa story to that is that Sacagawea was actually Hidatsa. She was, she was born in a village, in a Little Missouri River, village by the name of ??? or Night Walkers Butte. Pardon me. And she was, she was captured by the Shoshoni when the, when the young men went away to hunt, the Shoshoni came and captured her, her brother, some other kids, and some women, took them back to Shoshoni country. And while she was there, she was old enough, she had been captured when she was old enough to understand that she wasn't from the Shoshonis, that she wasn't from that village. And so she would get very lonesome, and for a number of time she would go out in the evenings, and she would look to the east, look towards her village and cry, and miss her people and so forth. Well this old lady finally got there and noticed that, and this old lady came and told her, "You know, I've been watching you for a long time. And I know you miss your people and you don't belong here, you belong back with your people." And so she said, "You come out here tomorrow night and you watch to the east, and whatever shows up, you follow that, and it will take you back to your people." Well, what showed up the night after that was the wolf, and so the wolves brought her back to the Hidatsa. And when she was getting ready to go, she went and told her brother, who was gonna be the leader and all of the Shoshoni and she asked him to go with them, "We're gonna go home." And he said, "You know, I'm not from there. I was, I might have been captured there, but I was raised here and I don't know anybody but these people, these are my people." That's why he stayed and that's why they had contacts that way. And the, so she went back.

William Least Heat-Moon: Travel Writer and Historian

Sacagawea probably is the most romantic figure of the expedition, it's truly remarkable that this teenager carrying an infant could make so much of the trip. I do think that there's a great deal of romanticizing of Sacagawea and idealizing her which has probably distorted her role in the expedition. Clearly, she was able to direct them topographically at certain key moments to help them along and it was truly a stroke of luck that when they got on the other side of Lemhi pass came down the western side of the Continental Divide that she ran into her people again and to her great surprise, her brother was now the chief. They needed horses at this point, Lewis and Clark needed horses at this point and here is the sister of a tribal leader who can help them get horses. Without those horses who knows what would have happened to that expedition. That was that was very much luck. But, beyond that, so many of the statues of Sacagawea now, it's hard to find in this country a statue of Lewis and Clark but what she wasn't there also, and typically, she has her hand thrust out, pointing the way. I think, I think that happened only occasionally. Perhaps her most important function is one that sometimes we don't realize and that is by carrying a woman along, especially a woman who was carrying an infant, said to tribes this is not a party that is out for aggressive reasons. This is not a war party. The Corps of Expedition is here doing something other than fighting because you don't carry warpa, in war parties you do not carry a woman with an infant. So she was a living white flag, so to speak as they as they moved along. She was a sign of peace, better than anything they could have found.

What Happened to Sacagawea?

Jim Ronda: Historian who has published books about Lewis and Clarke

Sacagawea came back to St. Louis a citizen of the West and someone who had citizenship no place. Where does she belong? Where is her home? Does she belong at a Hidatsa village? Does she belong with her Shoshoni relatives? Does she belong back at Fort Clatsop? Can she ever belong in St. Louis? If ever there was a person in the expedition's history who was displaced, who was person out of time, person out of the world, person who belonged nowhere, it's Sacagawea. Where's where is her home? One of the last glimpses that we have of her is in 1811 when a traveler described her as a woman wearing the cast off clothing of white women, drifting through life in St. Louis, seemingly alone, having given up her children to the care of William Clark. Where does she belong? An orphan in a world made by the expedition. A woman alone, a woman wearing the cast off clothing of others.