

PART I:  
The Expedition



# Jefferson's Dream

WE know little about Sacagawea's early life and childhood. She was probably born in either 1788 or 1789 to Shoshone parents living in the western Rocky Mountains.\* While still a small child she had been promised in marriage by her father, who probably received horses or mules in return for her hand. Had events not intervened, she undoubtedly would have followed Shoshone custom and, when she reached the age of thirteen or fourteen, she would have joined the man who was to be her husband. He, in turn, would have then given her father a similar number of horses or mules.

At the age of ten or eleven, Sacagawea traveled eastward with her family and the rest of their band across the Rockies to the area known as Three Forks. There, between what are now the towns of Butte and Bozeman, Montana, three rivers join to form the headwaters of the 2,700 mile long Missouri River.

While Sacagawea's band was camped at Three Forks, it was attacked by a group of gun-bearing Minnetaree (Minnie-tah-ree) warriors on horseback. Sacagawea would later tell Captain Meriwether Lewis how the Shoshone braves, outnumbered and without guns, "mounted their horses and fled as soon as the attack began. The women and children, who had

\*A monument now stands near the place where it is thought that she was born—in eastern Idaho, a few miles southeast of the town of Salmon.

been berry-picking, dispersed, and Sacagawea, as she was crossing a shoal place, was overtaken in the middle of the river by her pursuers.”

It is not known how long Sacagawea lived as a captive of the Minnetarees. Eventually, however, she became the wife of Toussaint Charbonneau, a French-Canadian interpreter who either bought her or won her from the Minnetaree chief.

Sacagawea could not have known, of course, but at the same time she was beginning her captivity with the Minnetarees, the expedition which would give her name historical significance was being planned. The idea for the exploration of the land between the Mississippi and Columbia Rivers was born in the mind of Thomas Jefferson. A man of restless intelligence, he had always been intensely curious about plants and about animals of the past and present. He felt that it was important to the young United States to know about the unexplored territory—its geography, its fossils and minerals, the life and languages of the Indians living there, and especially about the fur trade, most of which was then conducted and controlled by the British.

Jefferson began laying plans for an expedition as he was about to be inaugurated.<sup>1</sup> As a private citizen, he had made such plans several times, but nothing had come of them. Now as President he felt he would succeed in financing and launching such an expedition. He began by writing to a Virginia friend and neighbor—Meriwether Lewis. Lewis had wanted to join Jefferson's unsuccessful exploration attempt of 1792 but had not been accepted because of his youth.<sup>2</sup> Jefferson knew that Lewis, now in the army, had matured since the earlier attempt. He had become a captain in 1797 and had spent time among the Indians west of Virginia. Jefferson asked the young man to be his private secretary, largely because of his “knowledge of the western country.” Lewis, in accepting the position, understood the new President's meaning: “the western exploration scheme again! Disguised, of course.”

Jefferson now set about acquiring the money needed to outfit and to man an expeditionary force. Since his last un-

successful attempt, he had learned all that he could about the area to be explored. Early in 1803, the President wrote a secret message to Congress in which he emphasized the financial advantages of fur trade with the Indians and asked for an appropriation of \$2500 "for the purpose of extending the external commerce of the United States," searching out a land route to the Pacific, strengthening American claims to Oregon territory, and gathering information about the Indians and the country of the far west. Congress approved the plan and appropriated the money.

The value of Jefferson's proposed Expedition was greatly enhanced when secret negotiations with France for the purchase of the Louisiana Territory were surprisingly and successfully concluded. Originally, Jefferson had directed his representatives to approach the French with an offer to buy *part* of the Territory, but on October 31, 1803, a treaty was ratified that brought into the United States *all* of the huge area watered by the Missouri River and its tributaries for the bargain price of \$16,000,000. In a single stroke, Jefferson had doubled the physical size of the United States and increased the importance of the Expedition which would survey the newly acquired lands.

The President now turned his attention to the details of the Expedition itself. He asked his secretary to choose a companion to share the responsibilities of leadership with him. The first person Lewis thought of was Lieutenant William Clark. The two men had become friends in the 1790s while in the army, dealing with Indians along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. "Billy" Clark, Lewis believed, had the knowledge, experience, and personality needed by a leader on a journey through the wilderness. Added to these qualities were his abilities to sketch and make maps for the journals that the President wanted to keep as a record of their observations.

Excited by the letter from Lewis, Clark consulted his brother, General George Rogers Clark, who was eighteen years his senior. The general urged him to accept the invitation and Clark did so,<sup>3</sup> pleasing both Lewis and Jefferson, who had known the Clarks in Virginia before they moved to Kentucky. The choice of Clark proved to be a wise

one; during seventeen months of unusually close companionship and of hardships probably beyond imagination today, the leaders disagreed on nothing more important than the taste of dog meat and the necessity of salt in the diet.

Clark's first duty was to recruit men for the Expedition—in Lewis' words: "some good hunters, stout, healthy, unmarried young men, accustomed to the woods and capable of bearing bodily fatigue to a pretty considerable degree." The exploring party would also need carpenters, blacksmiths, and interpreters. At least a hundred young men volunteered to join, but some were weeded out almost at once. Others were found unsuitable during Clark's training of them in the winter of 1803–04. The training camp was across the river from St. Louis, which was to be the starting point of the Expedition up the Missouri.

While on trips making purchases and gathering information Lewis himself found a few men who would join the Expedition. One who was to prove especially valuable was a French-Canadian named Drouillard, whose name was always spelled "Drewyer" by the explorers. Drouillard was an experienced woodsman and hunter. He also knew the Indians well and, because he was an expert in the sign language, he could communicate somewhat with members of any tribe.

Lewis continued preparing himself intellectually for the Expedition. It was to be a scientific exploration, for which Lewis "had a great mass of accurate observation . . . in Zoology, natural history, mineralogy, and astronomy," wrote Jefferson to a friend. Three college professors in Philadelphia, at the President's request, gave Lewis information that would help make him an intelligent observer and reporter of the wild country and of the Indians. The foremost physician of the nation provided medical instruction and advised him about the medicines he should purchase for the trip. A scientist in nearby Lancaster offered advice about the instruments he should take and told him how he should report the latitude and longitude and the climate of the areas he would observe.

The responsibility of purchasing all the supplies fell to Lewis. He supervised the manufacture of firearms for his

men, purchased medicines, scientific instruments, tools of many kinds, the framework of a collapsible boat, \$2000 worth of gifts for the Indians, twenty barrels of flour and seven barrels of salt. Some of the first matches ever made were given to the Expedition by a French physician. Most of this cargo had to be brought down the Ohio River to the Mississippi.

Early in March 1804, Lewis went from the camp to St. Louis to observe the formal transfer of "the upper Louisiana" from the French flag to the American flag. While there, Lewis obtained all the information he could from the trappers and rivermen he spoke to, some of whom had traveled several hundred miles along the Missouri.

On May 14, 1804, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, also called the Corps of Discovery, began the long struggle of rowing upstream against the stiff current of the Missouri River. There were three boats for the party, which consisted of the two captains, forty-three other men, and Lewis' Newfoundland dog, Scannon, who would bring his master squirrels and wild ducks and whose bark would keep grizzly bears from getting close to camp.

Another possession that proved to be of value to the success of the Expedition was Cruzat's violin. Captain Lewis wrote in his journal on June 25, 1805, "Such as were able to shake a foot amused themselves in dancing on the green to the music of the violin which Cruzatte plays extremely well."

His music gave pleasure not only to the explorers but also to hundreds of Indians who had never before heard a violin. "Our favorite entertainment for the Indians [is] the violin." Again and again, a captain reported that a great many Indians came to see them at their camp. After business matters had been discussed, with the help of Drouillard, Cruzat's violin "was produced and our men danced, to the great delight of the Indians, who remained with us until a late hour."

In the instructions that President Jefferson wrote for Captain Lewis, two of the longest parts are concerned with the Indians. One begins: "In all your dealings with the natives, treat them in the most friendly and conciliatory manner which their conduct will admit. . . ." The President

realized that it was impossible for them to foresee how they would be "received by those, whether with hospitality or hostility. . . ." Before the explorers stopped for the winter, they had experienced both.

Captains Lewis and Clark recorded much information about each of the tribes they talked with, some of it amusing. The Indians were fascinated by York, Captain Clark's black servant, the first black person the Indians had ever seen and the first person with kinky hair. They examined him from head to foot; a few even rubbed his skin to see if the color would come off. Pleased with the attention, York told the Indians he was a wild animal, and that Clark had captured and tamed him.

During the last week of October, more and more Indians flocked to the bluffs above the river and to the shore to watch the strangers pass by; some came to their camp in the evenings when, around the fire, the white men square danced with each other to the Indians' great amusement. The Indians who visited the explorers were either Mandans, who lived along the Missouri, or Minnetarees, who lived along the Knife River, which flows from the west into the Missouri. The two tribes were on friendly terms with each other and were used to doing business with white traders.

In a village of a tribe near the Mandans, the Expedition met a French-Canadian, René Jussome, who had lived with Indians for fifteen years and spoke the Mandan language fairly well. Lewis and Clark engaged him as their interpreter, and from him learned a good deal about the people around him. Jussome was married to a Minnetaree woman, and he soon brought her and their children to live with the explorers.

On November 2 Captain Clark found a good wooded site for winter quarters, near what is now Bismarck, North Dakota, in the land of the Mandans. Once they had set up camp, Indian men, women and children flocked to visit, some even staying all night. For a few days, Lewis, Clark, and Drouillard were kept busy by both informal conversations and formal council meetings with the Mandan chiefs and the elders of the villages. Peace was assured by speeches and by ritual smoking of the peace pipe. The captains emphasized

the importance of trade for both their people and the Indians. Gifts were received as well as given. The explorers appreciated the bushels of corn brought to them by the Indian women and, later, the half of a buffalo and about 165 pounds of "fine meat" brought to them by the men. Among other gifts, the Mandans received an iron corn mill, which amazed them by the speed with which it ground corn into meal.

In preparation for winter, the explorers began to fell trees for log cabins, but it became so cold by the middle of November that they moved in before the cabins were really completed. During the construction, many Indians came to watch and let their horses graze nearby.

Among the visitors on November 11, wrote Captain Clark in his journal, were two Indian girls who were known among the Minnetarees as the "Snake" (Shoshone) wives of Toussaint Charbonneau, a French-Canadian born in Montreal, and an interpreter for the traders and Indians of the area.\* One of the two Shoshone wives is not mentioned again in either Clark's or Lewis's journal. The other was Sacagawea.

\*On Christmas Day of 1804, Sergeant Gass and Private Joseph Whitehouse wrote that the only females at their dance were the three wives "to our interpreter, who took no part except the amusement of looking on."