

Communicating with Indians during the Expedition

[submitted by Dale Dufour – October 25, 2018]

A major challenge during the expedition was communicating with the Indians of the more than two dozen Tribes they met along their way to the Pacific Coast. Neither Lewis nor Clark spoke any of their languages. Different Tribes spoke different languages, and not all could understand sign language.

Two interpreters were hired on a permanent basis, George Drouillard and Toussaint Charbonneau. Drouillard, whose specialty was sign language of the Plains Indians, was not of much use as an interpreter once they were west of the Plains. Charbonneau, who lived among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, was married to a Shoshone. And, Private George Gibson had some understanding of sign language, which was also of help.

The expedition also met several “on-site” interpreters including Pierre Dorion, a trader who knew French, English, and the language of the Yankton Sioux. The Otoe and Missouri Indians, the first Tribes met, were accompanied by a French trader known as Fairfong, who acted as their interpreter.

When the expedition met the Teton Sioux, Drouillard’s sign language was ineffective, and Cruzatte knew only a few words of their language.

Pierre-Antoine Tabeau and Joseph Gravelines, traders they met at the villages of the Arikara Indians, knew the Arikara and Sioux languages. Gravelines served as interpreter there and later met up with the expedition at Fort Mandan. He almost joined the westward journey but ended up piloted the keelboat back down the Missouri in 1805.

Lewis and Clark met and hired Rene Jessaume and Toussaint Charbonneau at Fort Mandan. Both lived among the Mandan and Hidatsa. Jessaume translated for them during a council in 1805 and again when they returned in 1806. Charbonneau, having the Shoshone wife Sacajawea, was hired to accompany them westward.

A “chain of interpretation” first began when they met the Shoshone. Sacajawea translated Shoshone into Hidatsa; Charbonneau from Hidatsa to French; Francois Labiche (and occasionally Cruzatte or Drouillard) from French to English. Then the “chain” was reversed.

A Shoshone boy was with the Flathead Indians when expedition met them at the head of the Bitterroot Valley, and the boy spoke their language. Thus, another link added to the “chain” there.

The Nez Perce understood Drouillard’s sign language well enough to communicate. Twisted Hair and Tetoharsky, Nez Perce Chiefs who could talk with Chiefs of other Tribes, accompanied the expedition down the upper portion of the Columbia River.

Communication with the Chinook Indians on the Pacific Coast was difficult as they had little understanding of Drouillard’s sign language.

While the expedition was with the Walla Walla Indians in 1806, a Shoshone woman prisoner with the Tribe was added to the “chain of interpretation”. And when they

returned to the Nez Perce, they too had a Shoshone prisoner who was added to the “chain”.

And, while exploring the Marias River drainage and meeting up with the Blackfeet, the Indians had difficulty at first understanding Lewis. Then Drouillard rejoined them and they could communicate through sign language.

Bibliography: *Encyclopedia of the Lewis & Clark Expedition*, by Elin Woodger and Brandon Toropov; *Lewis & Clark Among the Indians*, by James P. Ronda; and, *The Lewis and Clark Expedition Day by Day*, by Gary E Moulton.