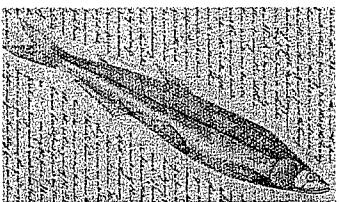


SACAGAWEA

by Andrew Matthews



"[Sacagawea] recognized the point of a high plain to our right which she informed us was not very distant from the summer retreat of her nation.... She assures us that we shall

either find her people on this river or on the river immediately west of it's

SOURCE,"

— Meriwether Lewis, August 8, 1805

In April 1805, after wintering at Fort Mandan in present-day North Dakota, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark prepared to continue their westward journey. The Corps leaders hoped to trade with the Shoshone Indians for horses to help the expedition cross the Rocky Mountains. But in order to communicate with the Indians, the explorers needed someone who spoke the Shoshone language.

Their interpreter was a young Shoshone woman named Sacagawea. When she was about twelve years old,

Two months after her son, Jean Baptiste, was born, Sacagawea joined the Corps of Discovery as an interpreter.

Sacagawea had been captured and taken away from her family by a raiding Minnetaree Indian party. By the time she was fourteen, Sacagawea was the wife of French trader Toussaint Charbonneau. At sixteen, she was the mother of a two-month-old son and embarking on the journey of a lifetime. For sixteen months, often with her baby in a **cradleboard** on her back, Sacagawea traveled with the Corps of Discovery.

A **cradleboard** is a frame onto which an infant is secured. A **pirogue** is a flat-bottomed, wooden boat.

Sacagawea was much more than a language bridge between cultures, however.

Without saying a word, her very



presence — and that of her baby — immediately sent a peaceful message to the northwestern native peoples with whom the Corps came in contact.

Sacagawea shared with the men of the Corps her knowledge of where to find berries and roots and how to prepare them. She also taught Lewis that dabbing the cheeks with red paint was a sign of peace among the Shoshone Indians.

Sacagawea impressed the expedition's captains with her presence of mind and courage. One day, windy weather caused the **pirogue** she was in to tilt on its side and fill with water. Sacagawea remained calm with her baby on her back. As important bundles — such as instruments, medicine, and the captains' journals — floated by, she carefully saved them. Lewis honored her by naming a river in Montana for her.


Sacagawea reassured Lewis and Clark with her recognition of landmarks as the Corps got closer to the Shoshone Indians' homelands. When she finally was reunited with her surviving family members, Sacagawea helped make the negotiations for horses and guides proceed smoothly.

Sacagawea's important and valuable role in the expedition has been memorialized numerous times, including in this 1953 sculpture by Henry Lion.

The only female member of the Corps, Sacagawea endured weather extremes (intense heat, constant rain, and bitter cold), low food supplies, annoying bugs, and physically exhausting days just as the men did. And throughout the journey, she also carried and cared for her infant son.

These hardships helped Sacagawea grow from a shy girl into a self-assured woman. When the expedition finally arrived at the Pacific Ocean, Sacagawea spoke up for herself when some of the men set out to look at a whale that had washed ashore. Instead of remaining silent, she expressed her desire to go, too, “to see the great waters” and “the

monstrous fish.” The captains allowed her to join the group, and the sight of the huge whale carcass and enormous waterway surely amazed this young woman who previously had seen only rivers and streams.

No one knows for sure when Sacagawea died. Most historians claim that she passed away while still very young on December 20, 1812. Some believe that she lived on an Indian reservation until her death in 1884. What we know for certain is that Sacagawea was a young explorer of remarkable courage. We remember her today with admiration and awe for her role in the Corps of Discovery. 

The Role of INDIAN WOMEN

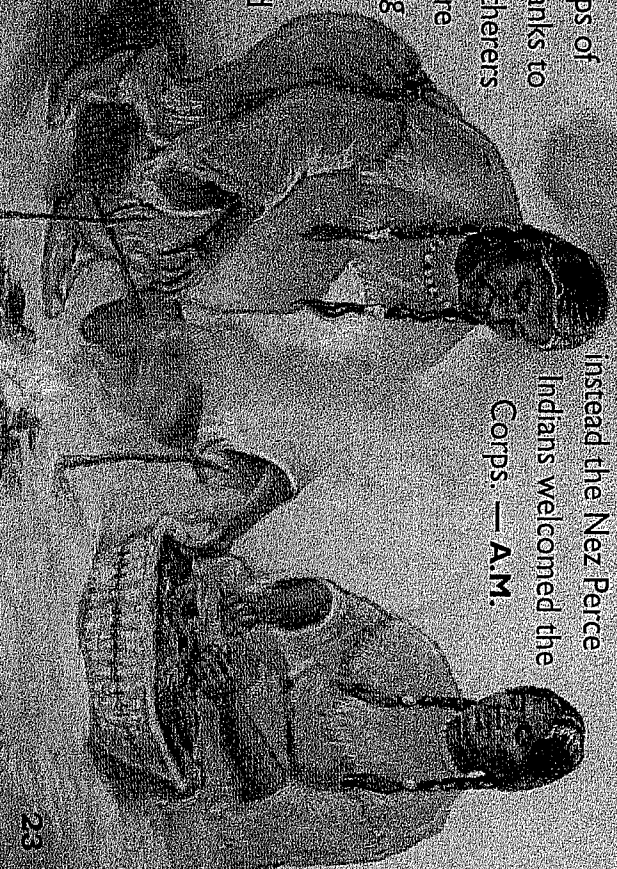
Illustrated by Doug Van Fleet

A s remarkable as Sacagawea's story is, it is important to keep in mind the role of all the American Indian women who came in contact with the Corps of Discovery. Whenever the Corps of Discovery was fed by Indian tribes, it was thanks to many women's labor. As the planters and gatherers of the groups, caring for crops, knowing where to get food in the outlying land, and preparing food were women's work.

One story is told of how an old Nez Perce woman named Wattuweis intervened in behalf of the Corps. As the expedition made its way through present-day Idaho, the Nez Perce Indians considered killing the well-armed and strange-looking

explorers. But the old woman, whose life once had been saved by white men, prevented the attack. In doing so, the earlier kindness was repaid, and

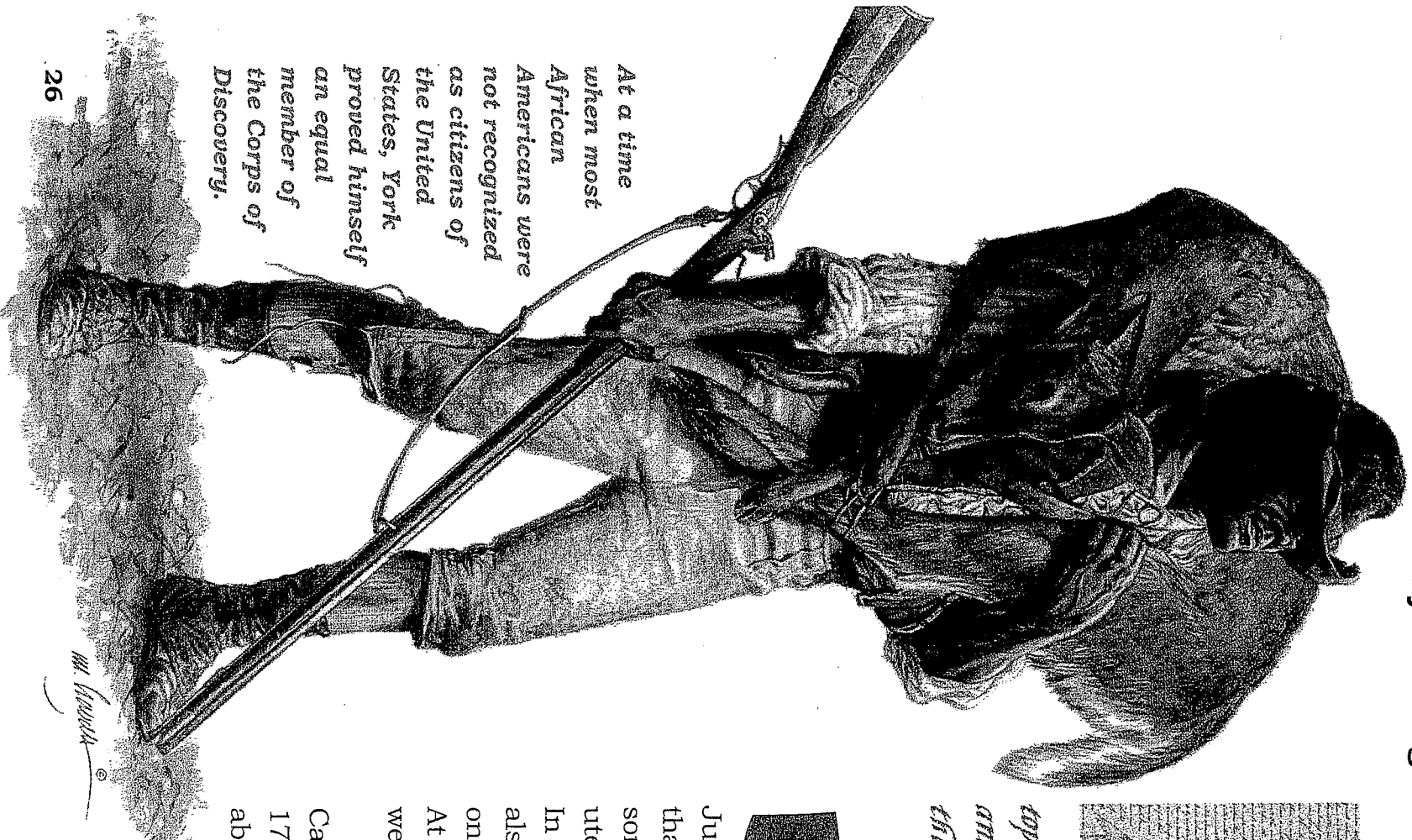
instead the Nez Perce Indians welcomed the Corps. — A.M.



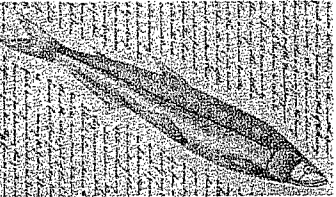
YORK

FROM SLAVE TO CORPS MEMBER

by Ron Craig



At a time when most African Americans were not recognized as citizens of the United States, York proved himself an equal member of the Corps of Discovery.

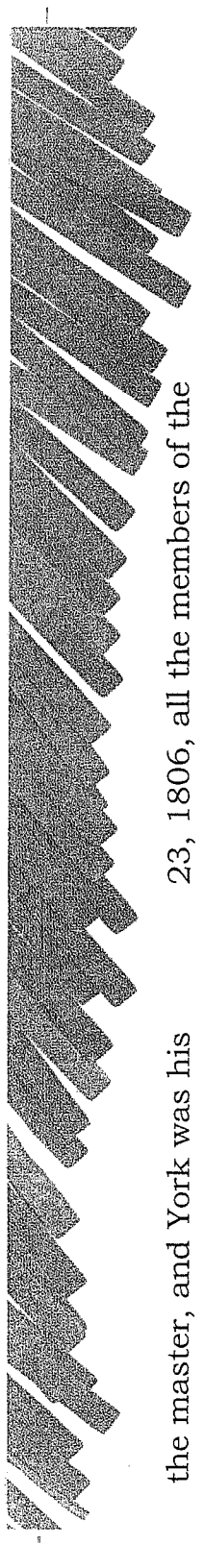


"Those Indians were much astonished at my servant, they never saw a black man before, all flocked around him & examined him from top to toe, he carried on the joke and made himself more torridal than we wished him to be."

— William Clark, October 10, 1804

Upon the death of John Clark — father of the explorer, William — on July 29, 1799, his will indicated that his son would receive personal property, such as plantation utensils, furniture, and livestock. In addition, the will stated: "I also give unto my son William one Negroe man named York." At that time in America, slaves were treated as property.

York was born into slavery in Caroline County, Virginia, in 1772. York and William were about the same age, but as boys and later as men, they were bound by the harsh realities of slavery: William was



the master, and York was his slave.

In a letter dated July 19, 1803, Clark was invited to be co-captain of the Corps of Discovery. Joining him, York became the only African American member of the expedition. His wilderness skills proved equal to those of the other men in the group, and he was one of the few who could swim.

Most of the American Indians west of Fort Mandan in North Dakota had never seen an African American before. York's presence in the Corps turned out to be helpful, though, when the group was negotiating with the Indians. Captain Meriwether Lewis described him as a "monster" to prompt the tribes' curiosity, but the Indians referred to York as "Big Medicine," indicating they respected him and admired his courage.

After enduring many hardships, the Corps reached the mouth of the Columbia River in Washington in mid-November 1805. The captains decided to ask the group's opinion as to where they would set up camp for the winter. Although slaves did not have the right to vote (except in Quaker communities), York became the first recorded African American slave to do so.

When the Corps returned to St. Louis, Missouri, on September

23, 1806, all the members of the expedition — except York — were **compensated** for their services. York was not even permitted to see his wife until months later. His repeated requests for freedom frustrated Clark, who eventually hired out York to a severe master. Clark did not free his slave for another nine years.

Historians are not sure when York died. One story indicates that in an interview with writer Washington Irving in 1832, Clark said that York died of **cholera** on a trip to St. Louis sometime around 1822. Clark supposedly went on to say that York was buried in an unmarked grave. Another tale comes from a report by trapper Zenas Leonard. He stated that a "Negro man" living as a chief among the Crow Indians in 1832 claimed to have traveled with Lewis and Clark.

While many aspects of York's life and the specifics of his death remain uncertain, his participation as a member of the Corps of Discovery gives him a permanent place in American history. York was an African American slave who was able to move beyond his unfortunate lot and make important contributions to the development of the United States. 🧐

Compensated means paid or reimbursed.

Cholera is an infectious disease of the small intestine.

Ron Craig is a filmmaker, author, and lecturer and has produced a number of York and Lewis and Clark presentations.