

Sacagawea: interpreter and guide.(to Lewis and Clark)

by Ann Jordan

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Sacagawea was 16 years old and the mother of a tiny baby when she set out with the Lewis and Clark expedition. Sacagawea and her husband acted as interpreters to help the expedition communicate with the American Indians they met. She was the only woman in the group of more than 30 men.

Sacagawea was a Shoshone from the western mountains, but she had been captured and brought to the plains when she was about 12 years old. The skills Sacagawea learned as a young Shoshone made her a valuable addition to the expedition. She knew which plants were safe to eat. When cactus thorns ripped the men's moccasins, and branches tore their clothing, Sacagawea tanned animal skins and used the leather to make new moccasins and to patch shirts and breeches. The Indians they encountered knew they were peaceful because war parties did not travel with women and children.

Upon reaching Shoshone lands, Sacagawea was reunited with her brother, now a Shoshone chief. Because of Sacagawea, he was willing to sell horses to the explorers for carrying their supplies across the Rocky Mountains.

Sacagawea's strength and courage helped her survive the hardships of the trip. She faced grizzly bears and rattlesnakes. At times, she was near starvation from lack of food. Once a storm turned over a boat in which she was riding. Some of the men panicked, but Sacagawea stayed calm. Sitting in water up to her waist with her baby strapped to her back, she grabbed the bundles of journals, medicines, and supplies that were floating away and hauled them back into the boat.

Sacagawea's great adventure lasted for 16 months. When it was over, she had traveled across approximately one-third of what is now the United States--not once, but twice.