

#10- Who Was Sacagawea?

2005



Greetings and welcome back from the long holiday weekend- With all the hoopla surrounding the 200th anniversary of the Lewis & Clark "Corps of Discovery", renewed attention is being given to the one person without whom the expedition could not have succeeded - a teenaged Shoshone mother named Sacagawea. There are debated alternative spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of her name. See:

<http://www.billingsgazette.com/index.php?display=rednews/2002/10/29/build/local/sakakawea.inc>

Although born Shoshone, she was captured by the Hidatsa people at about age 10 and raised as one of them, so both tribes claim relation to her. In 2003, North Dakota erected a statue of her in the United States Capitol building rotunda, the first American Indian woman to hold such an honor. The following article provides more information on the statue dedication as well as Sacagawea herself:

Native woman receives long overdue recognition Friday, October 17, 2003

<http://www.indianz.com/News/archives/002050.asp>

It's not every day that one of Indian Country's most prominent tribal leaders will command a horseback parade in the nation's capital. Or that some of the biggest names in politics will come together in one room for a single purpose. Or that the governor of a Western state will wear a ribbon shirt.

But an Indian woman whose participation in the Lewis and Clark expedition has endured for two centuries brought these forces together for a long-overdue ceremony in her honor. Sakakawea, known as Bird Woman to the Hidatsa people of what is now North Dakota, became the first Native woman to be represented in the National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol yesterday.

"All of America can know of her contributions for time immemorial," Tex Hall, chairman of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, told the cheering crowd.

Hall was one of several speakers who highlighted Sakakawea's achievements at the hour-long event. Although only a teenager, the Shoshone woman joined the Corps of Discovery in 1804 and provided assistance to the 33 men whose journey to the West heralded the expansion of the United States.

"Across the Plains, up the river and over the mountains, Sakakawea did everything those 33 men did during this challenging trip but she did it with a baby on her back," said Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.).

Sakakawea was "a trailblazer in every sense of the word," said Rep. Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic House leader from California. Her presence was a calming factor to other tribes the mission encountered on the way to the Pacific Ocean.

"As the only woman and mother of the group, she was a messenger of peace," she said.

She provided translation services, helped locate edible plants and saved records of the expedition from destruction. "It was Sakakawea who served an indispensable role," said Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-N.D.)

Yet as a woman and a Native person, she was never recognized during her lifetime for her role. Her husband, a trader named Toussaint Charbonneau, was given \$500 and 320 acres of land for his participation. Sakakawea died several years after the expedition ended in 1806.

But without Sakakawea, America's understanding would have suffered, said Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.). "There is much we don't know about Sakakawea but there is far more we do know about America because of her," he said.

"This statue does not retire America's debt to Sakakawea," he added, "but it is surely our highest honor."

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), the only physician in the Senate, marveled at the struggles Sakakawea endured, including the birth of her son on a sub-zero day in February of 1805. Her labor was induced by a mixture composed of rattlesnake rattles. Four months later, she nearly died and was nursed back to health through a combination of blood-letting and a bark treatment.

"In my professional opinion, not as a senator but as a physician, anyone who can survive a deadly illness and childbirth," he said, "deserves that composed, determined, courageous and strong characterization."

The ceremony was attended by dozens of members of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, who traveled from North Dakota and other parts of the country. The tribe erected four teepees by the reflecting pool of the U.S. Capitol building to promote the tribe and Sakakawea, the spelling preferred in the state. Sakakawea was born into the Shoshone tribe.

Hall, who also serves as president of the National Congress of American Indians, led the horseback parade from an area near the Washington Monument, down the National Mall and onto the U.S. Capitol. He welcomed visitors to the teepee camp, where tribal members performed dances before the statue dedication ceremony.

North Dakota Gov. John Hoeven (R) and Pomeroy, the state's only member of the U.S. House, joined Hall in the procession. They were followed on foot by veterans and a group of men, women and children.

The 11-foot statue of Sakakawea isn't the only Native American in the National Statuary Hall. In September 2000, Wyoming added Shoshone Chief Washakie, who negotiated an historic treaty in the late 1800s. Each state is allowed two choices.

New Mexico and Nevada will be adding their second statues and both will be represented by Native Americans. New Mexico's choice is Popay, a San Juan Pueblo man who led a revolt against the Spaniards in 1680. Nevada's is Sarah Winnemucca, a Paiute woman who fought for Indian rights in the late 1800s.

Relevant Links:

Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation - <http://www.mhanation.com> North Dakota Historical Society -

<http://www.state.nd.us/hist> Journey of Sacajawea - <http://www.idahoptv.org/lc/sacagawea>

Discovering Lewis & Clark - <http://www.lewis-clark.org> National Statuary Hall Collection Sorted by Names -

http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/nsh/nsh_names.htm