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## Lewis and Clark and their Neighbors at Fort Mandan

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When Lewis and Clark reached the Mandans it was late fall: the trees had changed and cold northern winds were on their way, bearing with them great flocks of ducks and geese on their way south. Mandans swarmed out of their homes and clustered on the rim of the high riverbank as the Corps of Discovery beached their craft. They stepped on shore near the base of the rocky ledge along the bank below their first village, that of Big White, or Sheheke-shote.

Lewis and Clark's initial plan in St. Louis had been to spend the winter near the source of the Missouri River. As summer passed, however, they had only gone as far as modern Sioux City, Iowa. From there, Jefferson was told that the expedition expected to winter among the Mandans (Jackson 1962: 218-19), for it was obvious that reaching the Rocky Mountains that fall was impossible. A location near the Mandans would be ideal for a winter post. Had the Corps wintered alone they would have had a wretched time, and perhaps starved, if indeed they survived at all.

By Christmas, an observer high over the landscape would have seen the Corps of Discovery's newly-erected fort just downstream from five Native American towns clustered around the mouth of the Knife River, some seventy river miles above Bismarck, the modern capital of North Dakota. During the coming winter, Indian residents would interact with a dual alien culture, one that had two different agendas: that of the exploratory party of Americans, and that of the Canadian traders who were there to obtain furs. Indeed, seven employees of the competing North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company were visiting these Indians. Thus, three voices may be heard in the interactions between them that followed. We have detailed views of the events that winter from the journals of the Corps of Discovery, and, fortunately, accounts by two of the North West Company traders, but the Indian voice has been muted, though not stilled, by time.

At the time of Lewis and Clark there were two Mandan communities, both of them near the three towns of the closely related Hidatsa Indians. The first Mandan village was on the south side of the river (Mitutanka) and the other was on the north bank opposite it (Ruptare), just downstream from the mouth of the

Knife River. These villages are known today as Deapolis and Black Cat, respectively, and in Lewis and Clark's time they were under the leadership of two renowned chiefs, Big White, or Sheheke, and Black Cat, or Posecopsahe.

The three Hidatsa villages were upstream, at the mouth of the Knife River. The Awaxawi Hidatsas (also known as the Amahami, or Shoe Indians) lived in a small village at the mouth of the Knife River. This small but aggressive Hidatsa group was distinguished from the other Hidatsas because of its slightly different dialect and lifestyle. The middle town lay on the south bank of the Knife a mile from its confluence with the Missouri. It was occupied by Awatixa Hidatsa (also called the Minitarees) and is known today as the Sakakawea site. Its modern name came from the fact it was the home of Toussaint Charbonneau and Sacagawea. Big Hidatsa was the most northern, and largest, community: it was occupied by the Hidatsa Proper and lay on the north bank of the Knife River. Today, the latter two villages are part of the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, a unit of the National Park Service. Since the combined villages had a population of almost 6,000 individuals, they were far larger than the combined residents of St. Louis and Washington, D.C.

The Corps of Discovery reached the lower Mandan village on October 26. After scouting the neighborhood for a location having enough timber to build a fort, a site was chosen a few miles downstream and across the Missouri River from Big White's village. A location near the Mandans had many advantages, both practical and strategic. Practical, because they had access to the garden produce of the Mandans; and strategic, because this was where British merchants from Canada were trading on the Missouri River. Lewis and Clark's presence would introduce American sovereignty and prestige to the Indians and the British traders alike.

Construction on their fort began on November 2. The men of the Corps moved into the structure on November 16, but for whatever reason, the captains slept on the keelboat until November 20. The fort was completed by Christmas eve — in 53 days. Indian visitors were surprised at the speed with which the men cut and shaped its timbers, and erected the structure. The captains named the fort in honor of their “friendly neighbours” during festivities on Christmas day (Lewis in Jackson 1962: 222).

Fort Mandan was not a solitary building set on the riverbank. Sgt. Ordway is the only one to tell us of sanitary facilities. A latrine was dug 100 yards from the fort, “to keep the place healthy.” This is an astonishingly long distance considering the North Dakota winters: surely they had no idea of the severity of the local temperatures to come (Ordway in Moulton 9: 94).

Two outbuildings were erected nearby: on November 16 they “raised a provision & Smoak house” measuring 14 by 24 feet (Ordway in Moulton 9: 96-97); a few

days later it received its first consignment of meat, which was suspended on poles. A second structure was a hut of some sort erected for the French boatmen, who were not housed in the fort itself (Clark in Moulton 3: 286). Jousseume and Charbonneau and their wives may not have lived in the fort either, but in their own quarters (in a tipi, or a cabin), apparently 60 yards from the fort (Clark in Moulton 3: 239), though we do not know whether this was a temporary or a permanent arrangement. The latrine was “above,” or west, of the fort; the location of the other two dwellings is problematical, but it would make sense that they were on the side of the fort nearest the latrine.

Lewis and Clark were the first known Americans to see the Mandans and Hidatsas, but the two tribes had been subject to European influences, at first indirectly, for more than a century and a half. Trade goods began arriving in their villages through intertribal trade by about 1650, and direct trade with Europeans began following the arrival from Canada of the Sieur La Vérendrye in 1738. By 1785 traders from Canada were regular visitors and residents in their communities. The villages remained magnets for European traders, as well as for intertribal trade, until the mid-1800s.

Mandan technology began to change as metal items began to replace stone, bone, and pottery ones, but more profound changes were initiated by the arrival of horses and guns. Horses began to appear in the mid-1700s, and by the end of the century guns were introduced by Canadian traders. John C. Ewers (1968b) long ago pointed out that it was here that the frontier of the gun met that of the horse. Spaniards in the Southwest prohibited Indians from obtaining guns, while Canadians were happy to provide them. Horses, however, were introduced to the Mandans from the Southwest by intertribal trade. These animals were in short supply in the Northern Plains, for Canadian and St. Louis fur traders reached this area from Canada after a long voyage in a canoe or boat — that is, in vessels that entirely precluded the importation of horses of any size.

The Mandans were scarcely pristine in other ways. Once they had lived in perhaps nine large villages near modern Bismarck. Devastating attacks of smallpox, combined with attacks by the Sioux, had reduced their population in the mid-1700s of perhaps 9,000 people to only two villages containing about 1,500 individuals (Wood and Irwin 2001: 352). After 1781, the broken remnants of the Mandans moved upriver and settled near their neighbors, the Hidatsas. Previously, the Mandans had been power brokers on the Northern Plains, but now they were surrounded by the Sioux and largely at their mercy.

Despite population losses, the Mandan and Hidatsa villages remained important in the regional intertribal trade. Every fall, nomadic Plains Indians came to their villages with products of the hunt to exchange for the corn these village peoples grew in their extensive gardens. As European and, later, American goods began trickling into this system, horses from the south and guns from the north passed

through the Mandan and Hidatsa trade centers. The two tribes, diminished in size as they were, nonetheless became wealthy through this trade, sometimes exacting a 100-percent markup on goods as they passed through their hands.

It is no exaggeration that the Mandan and Hidatsa villages are sometimes called the “Wal-Mart” of the Northern Plains, for they were depots of goods drawn from the many horse nomads that occupied thousands of square miles around them. When white traders began visiting their villages after the middle 1700s, the trade in guns and other European goods began to be taken over by free traders and by agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company, arriving from the Assiniboine River valley. No significant trade with agents and companies originating in St. Louis began until after the Louisiana Purchase: Lewis and Clark were the bellwethers of that trade.

The ranking chiefs of the the Mandan villages, Black Cat and Big White, were frequent visitors at Fort Mandan, undeterred by the usually bitter cold — often 20 or more degrees below zero. They sometimes spent the night in the fort, and reciprocated by entertaining members of the Corps in their villages. Some of the enlisted men were, indeed, invited to participate as elders in the buffalo-calling ceremony, a ritual in which the wives of younger men surrendered themselves to the elders. This was not promiscuity, but a means of transferring power from older men to younger ones through the medium of their wives. But less ceremonial relations with the women also were common, and the captains often commented on the presence of “venereal complaints” among the enlisted men.

Meat became increasingly difficult to obtain as the winter wore on, but John Shields and Alexander Willard, the Corps’ blacksmiths, were helpful providers. They made battle axes and mended iron tools for the Mandans, and received corn in exchange. One Hidatsa chief told trader Charles Mackenzie that “there are only two sensible men among them — the worker of Iron, and the mender of Guns” (Wood and Thiessen 1985: 233).

The Corps spent Christmas in high spirits, but without the inevitable Indian guests (they had been told to stay away, for it was a great “medicine day”). The day passed in toasts, singing, firing of guns, and dancing with one another. On New Year’s Day, Sgt. Ordway and fifteen of the party went, at the Mandans’ request, to Big White’s village to dance. They took a fiddle, a tambourine, and a sounding horn. Francois Rivet danced on his hands, and everyone danced around him. The Mandans were so pleased at their performance they gave them corn and buffalo robes. The men continued to dance in different lodges until late afternoon (Ordway in Moulton, 9: 107).

More than pleasantries and goods were exchanged. Mutual trust and dependence grew when the captains offered to assist the Mandans in the event of a Sioux

attack, and the Mandans helped pursue a Sioux party that had stolen some horses from the Americans. There was also reciprocal socializing.

There were less cordial relations between the Corps and the Hidatsas. One Eye (Le Borgne), chief of the principal Hidatsa village, visited Fort Mandan only once following an initial council, and Lewis made only one visit to the Hidatsas. Relations must not have been uniformly bad, however, for in 1832 Black Moccasin, chief of the middle Hidatsa village, told George Catlin of his regard for the captains, "Long Knife" and "Red Hair," and asked Catlin to relay some dispatches to Clark on his return to St. Louis (Catlin 1965, I:187).

John C. Ewers (1968a: 50) speculated that this coolness was likely the product of rumors by North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company men, who were frequent visitors in the Hidatsa villages. The Hudson's Bay Company men operated out of Brandon House on the Assiniboine River. North West Company employee Francois Larocque visited the fort to ask if he could accompany the expedition to the west coast, but he was told instead not to give flags or medals to the Indians of the newly acquired territory of the United States. Larocque had to have known that the possibility of a foreign national being allowed to accompany an American army long-range patrol (to use modern parlance), was out of the question.

It has often been noted that there is no indication of any strife between the captains. The enlisted men, also, even when confined by the weather to Fort Mandan, displayed no recorded sign of tension, or the symptoms of "cabin fever" we might have expected. Leaving the fort was an open invitation to frostbite, with temperatures often hovering at forty degrees below zero. Indeed, on December 29, a temperature of only nine degrees below zero was "not considered Cold" (Clark in Moulton 3: 263). After four months of close association in the fort, Clark was able to say that

all the party in high Spirits they pass but few nights without amusing themselves dancing[,] possessing perfect harmony and good understanding towards each other (Moulton 3: 323-24, for March 31, 1805).

Lewis also was to say that "not a whisper of discontent or murmur is to be heard among them, but all act in unison, and with the most perfect harmony" (Jackson 1962: 224-225).

These quotes reinforce the sense of camaraderie that developed early in the expedition. When the Missouri River passage was less than a month old, near today's Jefferson City, Missouri, Sgt. Ordway was at the rudder when it passed beneath a tree and the mast snapped off. This event is recorded only in Ordway's journal: no other expeditionary account places the blame for this event on an individual (Ordway in Moulton 9: 9).

President Jefferson had asked for the Corps to return to Washington a few influential Indian chiefs to visit him. Clark was successful in recruiting only one such individual: Big White, but only after he was persuaded to go by a French trader, René Jusseume. The Mandans were afraid of being killed by the Sioux, but in retrospect Big White's greatest problem was getting back: later hostilities with the Sioux downriver kept him from returning home for three years.

Toussaint Charbonneau had two Shoshone wives in the Hidatsa village where he lived. The Hidatsas often carried away slaves when they raided the Shoshones in the Rocky Mountains, and the Frenchman had purchased the girls from their captors. One of the women of course was Sacagawea, the Bird Woman. She was a Lemhi Shoshone, born about 1788. As Lewis and Clark left the Mandans, she was about 18 years of age; her son, eight weeks old. James Willard Schultz alleges, on the basis of informants at Fort Clark, years later (including the daughter of Mato-Topo), that the other wife's name was Otter Woman, who "died shortly after the return of the expedition" (Schultz 1918: 130, 205). Both wives wintered at, or near, Fort Mandan with Charbonneau. Originally, both women were to accompany the expedition but, ultimately, only Sacagawea did so (Moulton 3: 328, n3). Sacagawea died at Fort Manuel, South Dakota, in December, 1812, while she was living there with Charbonneau.

When Sacagawea was captured by the Hidatsas yet another woman of her tribe was carried back to the Missouri River, a woman named Pop-pank, or Jumping Fish (Rees 1958: 4, 9; Schultz 1918). She must have been older than Sacagawea, for she escaped and successfully trekked back to her people. She recognized Sacagawea when she re-appeared with the Corps of Discovery (Clark in Moulton - 5:109).

Prophetically, on April 7, 1805, the day of their departure from Fort Mandan, Lewis wrote that

This little fleet altho' not quite as respectable as those of Columbus or Capt. Cook were still viewed by us with as much pleasure as those deservedly famed adventurer ever beheld theirs; and I dare say with quite as much anxiety for their safety and preservation. ... we were about to penetrate a country ... on which the foot of civilized man had never trodden; the good or evil it had in store for us was for experiment yet to determine.... (Lewis in Moulton, vol. 4: 9, for April 7, 1805)

The men of course made it home, the goal of the expedition— a failure: they had not found the economical route to the Pacific that Jefferson had sought. But Enlightenment knowledge had been immensely expanded. However, the overall good and evil of the expedition itself remains a topic for debate.

In closing, I shall change gears drastically. Paleoclimatologists tell us that Lewis and Clark were in the northern Plains during a droughty period that spanned the years just before 1800 and later. If we analyze the climatic data in their journals (and in other approximately contemporary ones), we also learn that the winters

during this time (particularly Januarys) were colder than those today. The reason? A cold period that paleoclimatologists call the Little Ice Age took place between about 1550 and 1850 (Grove 1988), and Lewis and Clark entered the northern plains as it was in its waning stages.

So their journals provide valuable information on this time and place that otherwise is lacking, and help fill in our knowledge of past climates. Indeed, close analysis of their entries reveals that winter front passages for those years can be compared to modern ones: for example, a synoptic sequence that climatologists call a “back door front” can be recognized in the journals, just as it occurs today on the northern plains (Snyder 1981). The journals therefore contribute important data for past climate change, a necessary step in understanding the background for global warming. So take another look at those journals!

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