

Name _____ Date _____

Sacagawea

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. When Thomas Jefferson became president in 1801, the country looked very different. The states and territories only went as far west as the Mississippi River. A part of the land west of that had been claimed by France and Spain. The territory all the way to the northwest had not been claimed by anybody. Since nobody had formally explored the land, nobody really knew what was there. But there was a myth among Americans that a body of water connected the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean. This waterway, if it existed, would allow easy trade between the East and West. It was called the Northwest Passage.

Jefferson was both a politician and a scientist. He wanted to send a team to explore the western territories to find trade routes but also just to discover what was there. Jefferson wanted to know about the plants, animals and tribes that lived on the land. In 1803, he asked Congress to approve an expedition through the Northwest. Only months after his request, France offered to sell the United States the land they'd claimed west of the Mississippi for a very low price. The US accepted this deal, called the Louisiana Purchase. Now Jefferson's expedition had another purpose: to explore all the new land the United States had just bought.

Notes

2. Jefferson chose his personal secretary to lead the expedition, a man named Meriwether Lewis. Lewis chose a friend from the army named William Clark to be his co-leader. Together Lewis and Clark put together a band of explorers that would come to be called the Corps of Discovery. The Corps included soldiers, translators and one slave named York.

The Corps set off on May 14, 1804, from a camp near St. Louis. They traveled by canoe up the Missouri River, which was tough. The men used sails, poles, oars and sometimes towed the boats with ropes that they pulled from shore. Later they had to physically carry the boats across land, a process called portaging.

As they traveled, Clark navigated and made hand-drawn maps. Lewis studied flora and fauna—or plants and animals—made drawings, took samples and recorded notes.

3. It was very important for the Corps of Discovery to meet and form friendly relationships with the native tribes who lived along the route. Lewis and Clark made contact with at least 55 native cultural groups in the two years of the expedition. The first tribe they met were the Teton Sioux in present-day South Dakota. They next met the Mandan and Hidatsa nations in modern-day North Dakota.

Meeting the Mandan and Hidatsa nations in the winter of 1804 was very lucky for Lewis and Clark. They needed an interpreter who could help them communicate and trade with the native tribes, especially the Shoshone, who lived further west. They would need to trade for food and horses to travel over land. A French trapper named Toussaint Charbonneau and his wife, a Shoshone woman named Sacagawea, were living with the Hidatsa. Sacagawea spoke Shoshone and Hidatsa. Charbonneau spoke Hidatsa and French. One of the members of the Corps spoke French and English. With all three, Lewis and Clark knew they could communicate with the Shoshone. They asked Charbonneau and Sacagawea to join them in the spring. Sacagawea gave birth to a baby boy in February of 1805. In April she strapped her baby to her back and set out with the Corps of Discovery.

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4. Sacagawea was only 16 or 17 when she set out with the Corps of Discovery. She had been kidnapped from her own people when she was 11. At 14 or 15, she married Charbonneau. Despite being young and having to care for an infant, she impressed Lewis and Clark right away. She had a calm nature and was able to keep her cool under pressure. She knew local edible plants and helped the Corps find food in the forests. Perhaps the most important thing she did was make the Corps seem friendly to the native tribes they encountered. The Corps might have seemed threatening to people they'd never met. But the presence of a woman and a baby was a signal that the group did not want to fight. In these ways, Sacagawea helped make the journey west easier.

Notes

When the Corps reached the border between present-day Montana and Idaho, they needed to find the Shoshone and trade for horses to get over the Rocky Mountains. The first band of Shoshone they encountered were led by Sacagawea's brother Cameahwait. This was quite a coincidence! She hadn't seen him since she was kidnapped at 11. Because of the close relationship between Sacagawea and Cameahwait, Lewis and Clark were able to trade for horses and food.

5. After a difficult trip across the Rocky Mountains, the Corps finally reached the Pacific Ocean on November 25, 1805. Realizing that there was no Northwest Passage, they called the spot Cape Disappointment. The Corps then turned around and headed back east.

Notes

Even though they didn't find the Northwest Passage, the trip was considered a great success. During the expedition, Lewis and Clark mapped the upper Missouri River and took many important notes on fauna and flora. Lewis described at least 120 mammals, birds, reptiles and fish. He recorded at least 182 plant species, 80 of which hadn't been documented by Europeans before. They sent samples back to Washington, including a live black-tailed prairie dog, which lived out the rest of its life at the White House.

The journey had another legacy as well. Lewis and Clark's success brought on the first wave of westward expansion. The United States would continue to push into the west. But as Americans traveled and claimed land to the west, they forced the Native Americans who already lived there off their lands and away from their homes.