

The Horses with Lewis and Clark

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The first they knew that their horses were taken was when the fresh light of dawn revealed an empty clearing where 24 horses had been the night before. It was not unusual for the horses to stray a ways grazing the rich grasses of the Yellowstone River valley, or rushing off if they felt the thundering hooves of the great bison herds. But they had heard nothing in the night through the pounding rain of the storm. Sgt. Nathaniel Pryor, 32, William Clark's right hand man in the Corps of Discovery, got a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The day before, July 24, 1806, Pryor and the three men in his charge, Privates Hugh Hall, George Shannon and Richard Windsor, had broken off from the main group at the request of Clark. Clark wanted them to move the horses parallel to the river, while he and the rest of the men went downstream in dugouts and rafts. The river was a faster way to travel at times than overland, yet the horses were essential. They were to rendezvous again at Pompey's Pillar in southeastern Montana on the Yellowstone River.

At this time Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery were at the end of one of the most incredible accomplishments of exploration of the 19th century. Charged by Thomas Jefferson to find a way to the Pacific by river, Lewis and Clark and the Corps had traveled more than 8,000 miles in two years over uncharted land. They had mapped their route, collected plant, animal and mineral specimens, recorded weather data, studied native cultures and conducted peaceable diplomatic councils with the tribes; and recorded important observations and scientific data through daily journal entries along the entire route. They had navigated the Missouri, Yellowstone, Clearwater, Snake and Columbia Rivers, crossed the Bitterroot and the Rocky Mountains and reached the Pacific Ocean. All without maps, without knowing what they would encounter, without speaking any of the Indian dialects. The group was heroically courageous, resourceful and faithful, not just to their monumental assignment, but also to each other.

For most of the way, their only guide was a compass, a set of navigational instruments, and most importantly, a Shoshoni woman named Sacagawea. Brought along originally only because she was the wife of Toussaint Charbonneau, a bumbling fur trader who was recruited as an interpreter, Sacagawea turned out to be essential, saving the lives of William and Clark several times over

with her knowledge of language, diplomacy with the many tribes they would encounter, and how to survive winters, build shelters and boats, and find food in the wilderness. Sacagawea gave them valuable information on the country west to the Rockies, her homeland, and served as their interpreter and liaison with the Native Americans. Many times she altered the course of things—when tribes spied the strange group coming towards them, their inclination to attack was allayed when they saw a woman was in the group. Then they knew, they later told the expedition leaders, it was not a war party that approached.

On their way west, Lewis and Clark knew they needed horses to ride, pack off of and pull the keel boats. Asked to arrange a purchase, Sacagawea approached the Shoshoni and Nez Perce tribes that she knew. Lewis and Clark knew nothing of the way Indians trained and kept horses. And so they did not know that Sacagawea, in her competence and interest for the group, arranged for them to get 52 of the *best* horses from the Shoshoni and Nez Perce, who had spent years doing selective breeding until they had a fine line of tough, colorful horses, Appaloosas.

Sacagawea's people, the Shoshoni, and their neighbors to the west, the Nez Perce, were superb, talented horsemen. They were the first practitioners on this continent of natural horsemanship, treating the animals with respect, understanding, and a certain amount of reverence. For good reason—horses gave Indians a great advantage when moving camp, hunting or going to war, one that they did not have before. Horses could mean the difference between survival for a tribe, or not.

Each adult male in these tribes had at least three types of horses, all extensively trained. He had a Family Horse, usually a quiet, docile mare trained to pull a travois and carry a woman and children. He had a Buffalo Horse, usually a strong, fast, fearless male horse, a gelding or stallion, who was trained to ride into the middle of a thundering herd of bison and, with only leg and voice commands, maneuver into place so that his rider could get a lung shot with bow and arrow. And finally, he had an impressive War Horse, a big, robust, forward-going male horse, usually a stallion, who was trained to rush into any battle no matter how fearsome and strike with his front hoof on command and kill a man on the ground. Thus, a warrior, rendered weaponless, could

dispatch of an enemy with nothing left but his horse. Both the Buffalo Horse and War Horse were also trained to come back to his rider with a natural signal such as a bird call should his rider hit the ground.

When Sacagawea arranged to get the horses for the Corps of Discovery, she insisted on the best. Few braves would part with their War Horse, but she was able to negotiate for a fine herd of Buffalo Horses. Not realizing what they had, the men of the Corps immediately put packs on them, wearing sores into their backs, and during the course of the trip, their hooves ground down on rocks so badly that Sacagawea had to show them how to make moccasins for the horses out of buffalo hide.

However, every time a buffalo herd would thunder by, the horses, being trained just such a moment, would take off to join them, packs or not. The rate of attrition in the herd was huge, with a need for constant horse replacement.

Yet the night of July 24th, no herd had stampeded within in the vicinity of Sgt. Pryor's camp. In fact, what had happened was that a storm had rolled in and for much the night thunder and rain had pelted around them. What Pryor did not know was that a group of Crow Indians had taken the opportunity of the storm's noise to slip in and camouflage the sound of 24 horses leaving.

When first light came and Sgt. Pryor discovered them gone, the men began to walk in an ever-widening concentric circle around the camp looking for the horses. It was possible, he thought, that they had merely wandered off grazing. As it widened out, though, after a mile, he discovered tracks that revealed the horses were driven off. Pryor and the other three searched for some time for them, but realized the horses were probably long gone. Discouraged, Pryor, Shannon, Hall and Windsor began walking for Pompey's Pillar, where they hoped to encounter Clark.

But when Pryor didn't show up when he should have, Capt. Clark and his group headed on down the Yellowstone, leaving a day ahead of Pryor. When Pryor arrived at Pompey's Pillar (named for Sacagawea's son), he could see the main group had left the day before and his men set about building bullboats—round boats coated with buffalo hide—in order to catch the expedition. It would take them eleven days to catch up.

The journals of Lewis and Clark record two "horse thefts" during the expedition. What's interesting to note is that the Crow never considered it theft, then or now. According to Lawrence Flatlip, Crow cultural historian for the Western Heritage Center in Billings, horses were plentiful, huge herds ranging on the plains and mountains, and did not belong to anyone. "It would be like

saying, 'That's my elk'," Mr. Flatlip said. "They no more belonged to you than the trees or the beaver did." The other thing to be considered in reading the annals of Lewis and Clark is that, in Crow culture, it was an honor of skillfulness to retrieve a horse. If you could take a horse from a sleeping man, you were a skillful stalker and horseman. If he let it happen, he wasn't. Horse retrieval, and that is the term Mr. Flatlip uses, was so common, that prize horses were kept tethered to the Indian man's wrist with a lanyard as he slept. The brave who cut the lanyard and sneaked away with your horse without you awakening was indeed good. And often had a good laugh on you...

So it was with the 24 horses of the Corps of Discovery. They were easy pickings that night in the storm. The men never woke up and never heard a thing. When Pryor finally caught up with Clark down river, Clark recorded in his journal: "This morning I was informed that Half of the horses were absent. I am apprehensive that the Indians have Stolen our horses, and probably those who had made the Smoke a few days passed towards the S.W."

The loss of the horses was sorely felt. Horses figured greatly into the success of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Clark himself could remember back to the previous winter when snow came early and trapped them in the Bitterroot Mountains. Short of food and with no game to hunt., the Corps had to kill one of the colts on the mares to keep from starving. They named the nearby creek where it happened "Colt Killed Creek." Indeed, like Sacagawea, horses made it possible for Lewis and Clark to survive and succeed at their difficult and all-important mission.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Yellowstone River Floats

Telephone: 406-254-7180

Western Heritage Center

Telephone: 406-256-6850

Nansel Ranch (working cattle ranch with good horses)

Telephone: 406-356-7253).

Ethnobotany Horseback Trail Rides with the Cheyenne Trail Riders on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation

Telephone: 406-784-6150

Custer Country

Website: www.custer.visitmt.com

Telephone: 406-259-4546

Travel Montana

Telephone: 1-800-847-4868

Website: www.lewisandclark.org

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About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.

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