EPISODE 103: SACAGAWEA’S STORY: AN AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

Peter Coyote: Welcome to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition” from PRI, Public Radio International. I’m Peter Coyote. In this hour, we’ll introduce you to the most popular member of the expedition...and it’s not Lewis OR Clark.

[Unidentified voice:] Sacajawea’s hair was neatly braided, her nose was fine and straight, and her skin pure copper like the statue in some old Florentine gallery. Madonna of her race, she had led the way to a new time.

Peter Coyote: Join me as we search for the real identity of the expedition’s Indian companion, after the day’s news.

Optional cutaway for NPR News

Allison Frost: Welcome to this edition of the Latest Tidings, a special feature produced in cooperation with the National Intelligencer. In 1805, celebrating five years as America’s Newspaper. I’m Allison Frost.

We begin with a special report from the front of a daring exploration of the western territories, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. The Corps of Discovery left St. Charles, Missouri to chart the Louisiana Purchase last spring. One might expect that some members of the party would be lost on this kind of mission and there have been a number of personnel changes since their arrival at the Fort Mandan compound. Some members of the expedition have been sent back to St. Louis, but there are four new recruits, including one who becomes the youngest member of the expedition. We sent our correspondent Colin Fogarty to gather the details.

Colin Fogarty: Captain Meriwether Lewis acted as physician for the birth, with the assistance of local midwives, in a Hidatsa village near the Missouri River. The mother is a 16-year-old Shoshone woman. This is her first child. Captain Lewis says Rene Jusseaume, a Canadian trader living in the area, helped with the difficult birth. The boy has been named Jean-Baptiste. The expedition will remain in the vicinity of Fort Mandan until spring, at which time it will continue upriver is search of a water course to the Pacific Ocean. Colin Fogarty, Fort Mandan.

Allison Frost: When our correspondent returned from those cold Northern Plains, we were delighted to find he had spoken to the young Shoshone woman before she gave birth.

“Sacagawea”: [Hidatsa phrase] Among my Hidatsa people, that means, “Hello, friends.”
Allison Frost: Her name is Sacagawea. In this Latest Tidings exclusive, she shares the story of her childhood: how she came to be part of the Hidatsa people. Hidatsa warriors, as she tells it, captured her as a young girl:

“Sacagawea”: Oh, I was 11 years old. We were camped at the Three Rivers. And my girlfriends and I were standing on an island, playing, when we heard the shouts of “Run, Minetares, Minetares!” We knew they were our enemies. We took off running across the water to get to the main side of the river. We ran through the bushes. We tried to hide. But the men, the Minetares, they came on horseback. And they grabbed us, picked us up and put us on the back of their horses, and they took us away.

Allison Frost: But, the young Indian woman tells the Latest Tidings, she came to love her new people.

“Sacagawea”: Well, you know, I learned that growing up with these people was good. And I learned, not only did the women own all the property, and the children belonged to the clan of the mother, but the women have all the power. And that the woman, she never walks next to her husband across the village. She must always walk behind him, and that’s to tell him where to go. [chuckles] Yes, that’s the way it is among them. They had some good ideas. I liked their ideas. They had many stories and many things like that.

Allison Frost: That was Sacagawea, sharing her story in a Latest Tidings exclusive interview. It is thought she will help her husband and assist in guiding the Corps of the Discovery when the party sets out this spring to continue exploring the newest territory of the United States.

And in the latest news from the world of art and culture, German composer Ludwig von Beethoven is putting the finishing touches on his third symphony. Rob Manning reports from Vienna that Beethoven is reworking some aspects of the score after a semi-public premier.

Rob Manning: Revisions are still taking place this month, as Beethoven wrestles with a symphony he’s now calling “Eroica.” Beethoven deleted reference to Napoleon Bonaparte last year and has since added mention of his patron, Austrian Prince Lobkowitz, all this after Napoleon crowned himself emperor and escalated the war with Austria. Meantime, Beethoven’s confidant, Stephan von Brunning, says the famous composer is losing a battle of his own, with deafness. Beethoven was reportedly frustrated at a recent rehearsal when he could not hear the winds. The long awaited third symphony is expected to have its public premier in April. I’m Rob Manning.

Allison Frost: And that musical note brings this edition of the Latest Tidings to a close. I’m Allison Frost. Our program is produced in cooperation with the National Intelligencer, celebrating five years as America’s Newspaper, since 1800.

[Program theme music]

Peter Coyote: Most of us have grown up with the common myth that the only woman who accompanied Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to the Pacific Ocean was an Indian princess, who guided and saved the expedition.

Clay Jenkinson: Peter, she wasn’t a princess. She wasn’t a guide, and she didn’t save the expedition.

[Theme music continues]

Peter Coyote: The Lewis and Clark Expedition left St. Charles, Missouri on May 14, 1804 and traveled 7,689 miles to the Pacific Ocean and back again. The trip took more than 28 months. The expedition was President Jefferson’s
brainchild, commanded by his friend and protégé Meriwether Lewis and his old Army friend, William Clark. It is considered the most successful exploration in American history.

Our focus in this hour is one of the most famous Indian women in American history, one whose name is attached to mountains, streams, parks and schools across the West.

(Woman’s voice:) Sacajawea Park, Billings, Montana...Sacajawea School, Vancouver, Washington...Sacajawea School, Great Falls, Montana...(fade)

Peter Coyote: Those tributes burnish a reputation built on a surprisingly sparse written history. Joining me is Clay Jenkinson, our guide for this story. Clay is the humanities scholar-in-residence at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. So Clay, what do we know about this woman?

Clay Jenkinson: There are only about a dozen incidents involving this woman in the course of the journals of the expedition. She’s mentioned a couple of dozen times. There were two significant boating accidents, one nearly fatal. She had a baby, of course, at Fort Mandan. At some point, she was made to trade her blue beaded belt so that Lewis and Clark could get items they wished to obtain from Indians in what is now Oregon. She helped to feed the expedition—at least to supplement their otherwise all-meat diet. On the way back, she even guided Clark a little bit. But beyond that we know almost nothing. I suggest that we allow the journal keepers themselves to give us their observations about those key moments for this woman.

About five oclock this evening one of the wives of Charbono was delivered of a fine boy. it is worthy of remark that this was the first child which this woman had bore and as is common in such cases her labour was tedious and the pain violent....
Meriwether Lewis, February 11, 1805

...about five miles above the mouth of shell river a handsome river of about fifty yards in width discharged itself into the shell river on the Stard. or upper side; this stream we called Sah-ca-gar me-ah or bird woman's River, after our interpreter the Snake woman.
Meriwether Lewis, May 20, 1805

our Indian woman Sick & low Spirited I gave her the bark & apply it exteranaly to her region which revived her much.
William Clark, June 15, 1805

The Indian woman is recovering fast she set up the greater part of the day and walked out for the first time since she arrived here; she eats hartily and is free from fever or pain. I continue same course of medecine and regimen except that I added one doze of 15 drop of the oil of vitriol today about noon.
Meriwether Lewis, June 18, 1805

I checked our interpreter for strikeing his woman at their dinner.
William Clark, August 14, 1805

...as Soon as they Saw the Squar wife of the interpreters they pointed to her and informed those who continued yet in the Same position I found them, they immediately all came out and appeared to assume new life, the sight of This Indian woman, wife to one of our interprs. confirmed those people of our friendly intentions, as no woman ever accompanies a war party of Indians in this quarter.
William Clark, October 19, 1805

One of the natives here had a robe of sea-otter skins, of the finest fun I ever saw; which the Commanding Officers wanted very much, and offered two blankets for it, which the owner refused, and said he would not take five. He wanted beads of a blue colour, of which we had none, but some that were on a belt belonging to our interpreter’s squaw; so they gave him the belt for the skins.

Patrick Gass, November 21, 1805

The last evening Shabono and his Indian woman was very impatient to be permitted to go with me, and was there fore indulged; She observed that she had traveled a long way with us to See the great waters, and that now that monstrous fish was also to be Seen, She thought it verry hard that she Could not be permitted to See either (She had never yet been to the Oci-an).

William Clark, January 6, 1806

Peter Coyote: Wait a minute. What did Lewis call her?

[Meriwether Lewis:] This stream we called Sah-ca-gar me-ah or bird woman’s River, after our inter-preter the Snake woman.

Peter Coyote: Is that how we should be pronouncing her name?

[Several different voices: We’re trying to learn the correct way, which is Sac-ah-jaw...Sac-kah...Sacajawea...Saskatchewan?...Sacajawea, Sacagawea...I used to pronounce it Sacajawea, I now pronounce it Sac-ah-jawea...Sacaga-....Sah...Oh shoot, help us out here!”]

Peter Coyote: Yes, Clay, can you help us out? What should we be calling her?

Clay Jenkinson: It’s hard to say. To give you a sense of how powerful opinion is about this, I asked Rose Ann Abrahamson of the Lemhi Shoshone to tell us their version of the story.

Rose Ann Abrahamson: I think that it’s very important to remember that on August 17, 1805, obviously a primary source to identify who she was, Sacajawea herself told Clark in the only way that she could communicate—and that was through the sign language—that she was a Lemhi Shoshone and when she signed to Clark, she signed to him that this was her nation. I think that was the most profound and most historically accurate statement that would lay rest to all claims as to who she was. She is a Lemhi Shoshone. She was given a name at three years of age and the name that was given to her that has been passed down through oral history was SAH-cah-ja-ee-ah. ‘Wea’ is the burden basket and “wea” is referred to as burden and so that’s the second part of her name. The first part, Sa-ca-ja, means “that is.” So in the whole context of the interpretation of her name: “that is her burden.” And this was the name that she was called by our people.

Clay Jenkinson: Different tribes pronounce her name in different ways. We talked to one anthropologist, Sally McBeth of the University of Northern Colorado, who says there is no right or wrong way to pronounce her name.

Sally McBeth: I think I try to be respectful of who I’m talking to, whether it’s the Hidatsa and others who prefer the Sacagawea, or the Shoshone who clearly prefer the Sacajawea pronunciation. I do switch back and forth.
Peter Coyote: So the moment has come to make a choice. What should I say from now on, Clay?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, I think for the purposes of this program, we'll use what has emerged as the national scholarly consensus about her name: Sacagawea (Sah-KAH-gah-wee-uh) though you may hear other pronunciations in the course of this program.

(Woman's voice:) Sacajawea Campground, Wind River Range, Wyoming; Lake Sacajawea, Longview, Washington; Sacajawea Peak, Wallowa Range...[fades]

Clay Jenkinson: By the way, our earlier review of Sacagawea's life left out one of the most significant events from the expedition: a boat accident that occurred in May of 1805. The white boat, or pirogue, nearly was overset by a sudden squall of wind. Charbonneau was at the helm and he panicked. Sacagawea showed courage and good sense and helped to save some of the smaller and lighter articles that were floating out of the boat. Some people believe she might even have saved some of the journals of the expedition. Meriwether Lewis who up to this point had recognized her presence but hadn't really registered her possible importance begins to pay attention to Sacagawea.

He writes about her for the first time:

*The Indian woman to whom I ascribe equal fortitude and resolution with any person on board at the time of the accident caught and preserved most of the light articles which were washed overboard.*
*Meriwether Lewis, May 16, 1805*

Clay Jenkinson: And it was less than a week later that Lewis named a river after her.

Peter Coyote: James Ronda, the outstanding Lewis and Clark scholar and author of “Lewis and Clark Among the Indians” says this is a defining moment for her.

James Ronda: She put herself and her child in harm’s way to rescue the expedition’s books and papers on the upper Missouri. That was an act of courage and of desperation, and an act in which she said, “I understand that these things are of value to you. I’m not quite sure what they are, but they are of value to you and I will put myself in harm’s way in order to save them.”

Harry Fritz: I think her role is critical. That’s why I think it’s one of the key decisions that Lewis and Clark made on the entire expedition and they say plainly in the journals that she is our only hope for a friendly introduction to the Shoshone Indians.

Laura McCall: In modern parlance, she was a great team player. She gathered food throughout the journey, supplementing the men’s all-meat diet with roots, vegetables, fruit, thereby preventing scurvy. When they’re starving in the mountains, her food gathering skills are absolutely indispensable.

Dayton Duncan: Clark mentions that Sacagawea actually in one moment actually guided them across what is now called Bozeman Pass, ironically named for a white explorer who not only came 50 years after Lewis and Clark, but 50-plus years after the Indian woman who pointed it out to the first white explorers. It should be called Sacagawea Pass.
Stephen Dow Beckham: Importantly, Sacagawea was an interpreter and through a chain of communication working with her husband and others in the Corps of Discovery, she opened windows or vistas to the landscapes and the peoples that would not have been afforded otherwise.

Sally McBeth: I quite often envision her as being told by Lewis and/or Clark to hold her baby out in front of her to clearly indicate that this wasn’t a war party.

Peter Coyote: We just heard from Sally McBeth; Stephen Dow Beckham, who is a professor of history at Lewis & Clark College in Portland; Lewis and Clark expert Dayton Duncan; Laura McCall from Metropolitan State College in Denver; and University of Montana history professor Harry Fritz.

Clay Jenkinson: But the always-interesting Jim Ronda reminds us that there’s something else we have to keep in mind here:

James Ronda: One of the best things that you can say about her is that Sacagawea was a full member of this traveling community. She’s a full member of the traveling community. Now what does “full member” mean? It means she made all of the marches, all of the journeys, all of the paddling, all of the struggles, all of the adventures, all of the pain, all of the agony, all of the excitement, all of the seeing of the whale, all of the boredom. She’s a full member of the traveling community, a full member of what we now call the Corps of Discovery. I think it’s one of the most important things to say about her. She’s not a marginal figure. She not only makes the journey possible, she makes the journey.

Peter Coyote: Let’s test your knowledge of the Lewis and Clark Expedition before we go on: if all we know about Sacagawea is based on a handful of journal passages, who created the modern myth? Find out later in our program, as we learn more about her.

And coming up next: imagining the voice of our silent hero.

[Child’s voice:] “Help,” screamed Charbonneau, “Help, I can’t swim!”
“Sit down!,” yelled Captain Lewis from the shore.
I knew Charbonneau was very afraid, so I did what I had to do.

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. You’re listening to “Unfinished Journey” on PRI.

[Program Break: The Makoché Masters “People of the Willows” (Makoché Music MM0191D)]

(Woman’s voice:) Sacajawea Hotel, Three Forks, Montana...Lake Sakakawea, North Dakota...Sacajawea Peak, Lost River Range, Idaho.... (fade)

Peter Coyote: We may not know much about her from recorded history, but what there is in the written record has sparked the imagination of a host of Sacagawea re-enactors.

(Jeanne Eder:) [Speaks phrase in Hidatsa] Among my Hidatsa people, that means, “Hello, friends...”

(Nilima Mehta:) Hello, my name is Sacagawea. I am a guide, interpreter, mother, friend...
(Jeanne Eder:) It came to pass that I was going to go with Charbonneau to that big water to the west. You know some people say why did you go all that way, it’s so far, you were just a young woman with a child.

(Joyce Badgley Hunsaker:) I did not want to go, but my husband said, “No! A woman carrying a child shows all at a glance this is a party of peace, not a party of war!”

(Nilima Mehta:) “Help!,” screamed Charbonneau. “Help, I can't swim.”

“Sit down!,” yelled Captain Lewis from the shore.

I knew Charbonneau was very afraid so I did what I had to do. I jumped into the water and grabbed anything that was floating away...

Peter Coyote: We heard from Jeanne Eder, Joyce Badgley Hunsaker, and teen-age Chautauquan Nilima Mehta of Reno, Nevada. Clay, if we already know that there’s little written about her, isn’t much of what we just heard simply conjecture?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, it is. In fact, much of it frankly is fictional. If we only said what we know about Sacagawea, we wouldn’t say much at all. Most of what we know about this woman is synthetic or conjectural. And all re-enactors have to make up a good deal of what we take to be her life story. She didn’t keep a journal. She’s never directly recorded in any way in the expedition’s documents. Nobody ever in fact even describes her. She is, however, quoted indirectly once, and it occurred out on the West coast when there was a sightseeing expedition.

The Indian woman was very importunate to be permitted to go, and was therefore indulged. She observed that she had traveled a long way with us to see the great waters, and that now that monstrous fish was also to be seen, she thought it very hard she could not be permitted to see either.

Meriwether Lewis, January 6, 1806.

Peter Coyote: Clay, tell us more about the meaning behind that passage.

Clay Jenkinson: Well, it’s a marvelous passage. It’s as close as we will ever get to a direct quotation by Sacagawea. You can hear, in a sense, her voice in the phrase “great waters” and “monstrous fish.” Keep in mind this was coming through translators. But both captains write about this incident. Both of them, I think, were a little bit surprised that she asserted herself on the West coast. And both of them, you can sort of tell from the journals, were impressed by the will of this woman. This is one of most significant, albeit small, passages in the 13 volumes of the journals of Lewis and Clark.

Peter Coyote: It is difficult to envision what it must have been like: one woman...with a group of men...on a cross-country journey. Fortunately, we do know enough about the conditions on the journey to glimpse some of the challenges Sacagawea faced. This is Roberta Conner, director of the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute near Pendleton, Oregon:

Roberta Conner: She is a young woman during the expedition. She is a teenager. I think there’s some sexual fantasy in that. She is sturdy. She is a mother and packs a baby and cares for the baby. She is capable, and I am certain endured hardship at the hands of her husband, who was not what we would call a “politically correct gentleman.” And, this young woman had an enormous responsibility. But it, for her, was every day getting up, putting her left foot in front of her right foot, taking care of her baby, taking care of her husband, doing all the things that she had been trained and taught to do by native peoples and every day she got up and did the best she could.
Dayton Duncan: She, from Fort Mandan to the Pacific Ocean and back to Fort Mandan, covered every mile that they did, suffered every hardship that they did, all the while carrying a baby with her. And I like to say it reminds me of what my mom once told me that was said about Ginger Rogers, that she danced every step that Fred Astaire did, only backwards and in high heels.

Peter Coyote: That was Dayton Duncan. Clay, is there anywhere today that we could find someone who might be living in conditions like Sacagawea's?

Clay Jenkinson: Not clear, but possibly on a reservation somewhere in the Americas or in a refugee situation on a long journey, perhaps in the Khyber Pass or in the developing parts of the world. The key is taking care of a child and taking care of the basic rhythms of family life in a somewhat alien environment. That’s, I think, the place you would find today's Sacagawea.

Peter Coyote: We asked correspondent Jennifer Schmidt in South Africa to see if she could find someone whose life echoes Sacagawea's experience.

Jennifer Schmidt: A little girl sits on the floor in front of me. She’s crying. Her mother squats nearby, washing the morning’s dishes in a plastic tub. When the child’s cries intensify, she pulls the toddler onto her back, and secures her there with a tattered blue towel. The child quiets almost immediately. The girl, Siphosetu, will stay this way, strapped tightly to her mother’s back for much of this hot day.

Nokwando Hojana (through translator): My name is Nokwando Hojana. I live at Imbonque in Umtata. I have six kids. And my youngest is one year, two months old. And she’s the one I carry on my back all the time.

Jennifer Schmidt: Nokwando is Xhosa, one of the dominant tribes in South Africa. She speaks no English. She lives in Imbonque, a rural settlement in one of the poorest parts of South Africa. The rhythm of life here is slow but relentless. Nokwando is illiterate and makes no written record of her days. From what I can tell, they simply unfold in a long series of chores.

Nokwando Hojana (through translator): In the morning, I wake up, I cook the porridge. I wash the kids so they can go to school. I wash the dishes and then I clean the floor. I go and get some water and I bake the bread.

Jennifer Schmidt: In most of Africa, women’s work is clearly defined, much as it was in Sacagawea’s time. Women do cooking and washing and wood gathering. They care for the children and the home. Men are not expected to help with these chores.

I know that in some ways Nowkando and Sacagawea’s life aren't similar at all. Sacagawea was hardly more than a girl when she trekked across the western United States with Lewis and Clark. Nokwando is 41 years old and lives halfway around the world. But I think Nokwando's life might have been familiar to Sacagawea. Both were raised on hard work, little food, and limited opportunities.

When Nowkando finishes the dishes, she scrubs her family’s threadbare clothes by hand.

While the clothes soak, Nokwando pulls her daughter, Siphosetu, off her back and onto her lap. Nokwando draws a breast from her blouse. The child begins to nurse. We sit quietly, listening to the buzzing of flies. Through the doorway, I can see a large black pig rooting for food scraps and in the distance a herd of white goats moving lazily across the green hills.
Nokwando Hojana (through translator): The sun is burning today.

Jennifer Schmidt: When Siphosetu finishes nursing, Nokwando puts her down on the floor to play, bare-bottomed. I ask Nokwando why she doesn’t put a diaper on her daughter. She explains that she only uses a diaper when the child is on her back. Otherwise, she simply lets her go naked.

Nokwando Hojana (through translator): I do buy nappies, but they are a little bit expensive. So when I don’t have her on my back, I just let her go to the bathroom on the floor.

Jennifer Schmidt: In the late morning Nokwando begins making bread. I’m struck by how careful she is as she measures out the ingredients. She doesn’t spill even the tiniest amount of flour or yeast. It’s a sign of how precious and scarce food is in this house. Lunch is a simple stew of potato, tomatoes and onion. Nokwando tells me her family will eat a few vegetables and cornmeal today. There’s no money for meat.

By mid-afternoon, the plastic jugs of water in the house are empty. So, Nokwando tightens the towel holding Siphosetu to her back, picks up a large tin pail from the floor and heads down a steep path to the communal tap. When the pail is full, Nokwando hoists it onto her head nonchalantly. I consider it a miraculous act of strength and balance. But as she begins the steep walk back to her hut, she admits it’s not that easy.

Nokwando Hojana (through translator): It is very hard for me to have the baby on the back, I am tired but...a little bit, because it hurts, my back is paining right now.

Jennifer Schmidt: Still the work continues with a familiar rhythm.

Nokwando Hojana (through translator): It is always the same, it’s the same every day. But I’m satisfied with my life.

Jennifer Schmidt: It is a life without a history-making journey, like the one that brought Sacagawea to the Pacific. But Nokwando tells me, somewhat shyly, that she did make one memorable trip. A few years ago, she took the two-day bus ride to Cape Town to visit her brother. She watched as dirt roads changed to tar, as buildings grew from shacks to high rises. She watched the world change. Her journey ended at the shores of southern Atlantic Ocean.

Nokwando Hojana (through translator): My favorite thing about Cape Town is the ocean, the ocean is my favorite place there.

Jennifer Schmidt: I can’t know what Sacagawea thought of the great waters of the Pacific, although journal entries recount her determination to see them. But as I listen to Nokwando, a woman from a dirt village in the heart of South Africa tell of dipping her toes into the biting cold waves of the Atlantic, I can imagine the joy Sacagawea might have felt in that moment. For Nokwando, even the memory is enough to make her smile. In South Africa, I’m Jennifer Schmidt

Peter Coyote: Now I can begin to picture what her life might have been like. It’s a gripping story, but it makes me wonder why a transcontinental military expedition would bring along this extra person who ended up adding a baby to the party along the way.
Clay Jenkinson: That was something probably that Meriwether Lewis had not anticipated. Sacagawea was hired sight unseen on November 4, 1804 at Fort Mandan in what is now North Dakota. She was brought along for one purpose, and one purpose only: to serve as an interpreter with her own people, the Lemhi Shoshone who had the horses that Lewis and Clark knew they would need to cross the Bitterroot Mountains and complete their journey. That was her reason for being on the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Peter Coyote: So what did happen when Sacagawea met with her people?

Clay Jenkinson: It really depends on who you ask. As they approached the country from which she had been captured about five years earlier by a Hidatsa raiding party, Captain Lewis was dismissive of her lack of emotional reaction in returning to her native soil:

_I cannot discover that she shews any immotion of sorrow in recollecting this event, or of joy in being again restored to her native country. If she has enough to eat and a few trinkets to wear I believe she would be perfectly content anywhere._

_Meriwether Lewis, July 28, 1805_

Peter Coyote: So, did she react at all when she arrived in her homeland?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes. I have to say that Meriwether Lewis was blind to this scene. The account we have shows a very emotional response. Lewis was with Sacagawea and the group that made preliminary contact with the Shoshone. William Clark was somewhere else, but here's how he described that meeting after the expedition. He said that Sacagawea...

[William Clark:] ...began to dance, and show every mark of the most extravagant joy, turning round him and pointing to several Indians, whom he now saw advancing on horseback, sucking her fingers at the same time to indicate that they were of her native tribe... she came into the tent, sat down and was beginning to interpret when in the person of Cameahwait she recognized her brother. She instantly jumped up, and ran and embraced him, throwing over him her blanket and weeping profusely....

Peter Coyote: This story about the meeting between Sacagawea and Cameahwait has deep resonance among the Shoshone. Rose Ann Abrahamson is descended from Cameahwait and says it was an extraordinary thing for Sacagawea to interrupt a formal meeting:

Rose Ann Abrahamson: All this hope and all this excitement within, trying to contain that feeling that you have, and knowing that at every turn, you were coming closer and closer to home. And that fight and struggle to do and say what's right so you can come home is very powerful. And then to hear your brother's voice. It's very powerful.

Peter Coyote: So we've learned Lewis and Clark believed Sacagawea was born Shoshone, and was captured by the Hidatsa at about the age of eleven. She lived as a Hidatsa woman for the next five or six years before she returned to Shoshone territory with the expedition. But different tribes have their own versions of the story. Gerard Baker, who is Hidatsa and now superintendent of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial, tells the story this way:

Gerard Baker: Of course we have a story that's interpreted different ways but basically it's a story of how Sacagawea and her brother and the rest of the age group of course were there when the men went hunting and left them at this village and the Shoshone came and attacked the village and stole Sacagawea and some other folks and
took them back to Shoshone country. And of course we then have a story, it continues as to how she got back home eventually using the medicine of the wolf. The wolf brought her back. You know, this is the kind of history that I think is open enough that maybe we don't have to conclude that she is this or that. That comes from a non-Indian approach. That comes from an academic approach, I think, when you’ve got to have it on paper. She’s either black or white, yes or no. And I think from an Indian perspective, we can have these stories, if you will, that are all true and gain the best out of them.

N. Scott Momaday: I am Sacagawea of the Shoshone.

Peter Coyote: The distinguished author N. Scott Momaday.

N. Scott Momaday: I am a woman of the Horse People. I am a woman of the people of the mountains. I am a woman who was taken from my people when I was young. I was taken, therefore, I am a woman of the Mandan. I am Bird Woman. When the white men came, I was a girl. I was one of the wives of Charbonneau, a white man, and there was a baby in my belly. I was glad and afraid. Charbonneau said that he was going with the white men. Charbonneau said that I must come with him and with them. I was glad and afraid. I was a captive girl and a young married woman. There was a baby in my belly. They were 30 white men. Charbonneau was a white man. My baby and I were two. Even my baby was half a white man. I was glad and afraid. I remembered the language of the Horse People. The white men wanted me to take them to the Horse People and to speak the Horse People’s language. They wanted me to ask for horses. They were going towards the setting sun. They had much to carry; they needed horses. I had been gone from the Horse People for a long time. I did not know where they were, but I wanted to find them. I wanted to taste the words of my first people in my mouth. I wanted to hear the words I first heard. I was glad and afraid. The white men say I must guide them. They want me to know what I do not know. I’ve never been beyond the mountains, but I try hard to help them. I’m a young woman and I have a baby in my belly. On the hard way, I had respect for the white men. They had much strength and courage. Every day, they had to fight the hard way. Every step of the hard way was a little victory, a little making of the quest and I became a part of it. At night, on the hard ground, I dreamed. I dreamed as a warrior dreams. With these men and with my son, I made a vision quest. I was the woman of the quest. Along the hard way, I began to think of myself as Bird Woman, a warrior and the mother of a warrior. I was nearly proud. I thought of myself in a way that women do not think of themselves. We came to a place where we could not go on. We could not go on without horses, but I had dreamed of finding the Shoshone, my people, and so we found them. I found my brother who had become a chief. We wept together and horses were given to us to carry on the quest. That was a powerful thing and I was powerful in it. The white men said I must have dreamed the horses into being. Maybe it is so.

Peter Coyote: Pulitzer prize-winning author of “House Made of Dawn,” N. Scott Momaday, who like many people has found Sacagawea intriguing.

N. Scott Momaday: I’m in love with her of course. I think that many people are.

Peter Coyote: Coming up next, the journal Sacagawea might have written:

(Sandra Tsing Loh:) Why is it no one irks me more than a certain... Meriwether Lewis?

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. That and more as “Unfinished Journey” continues, on PRI.
(Girl’s voice:)
Sacajawea, sister, friend,
Art thou come again to life!
Will thy bitter sorrows end,
Wanderings, sufferings, toil, and strife.
Oft beneath the pine’s high bough
Frisk’d we, when the sun was bright;
Chas’d the jumping squirrel now;
Caught the fire fly’s flickering light.
Joys of childhood, doubly dear
Now the cares of life intrude:
Sweet remembrance, vivid, clear,
Comfort in my solitude.

Peter Coyote: That poem by Isaac Taylor, which was included in a book titled “For the Amusement and Instruction of Little Tarry-at-Home Travelers,” dates all the way back to 1821 and it is the first poetic treatment of Sacagawea. But for most of the first hundred years after the expedition, she was virtually unknown. So when and how did all the myths most of us grew up with come about?

Donna Barbie: I think that there’s probably one primary person who is responsible for creating the legend that evolved over time and flowered over time and I think that key person is the novelist Eva Emory Dye.

Donna Barbie: She wanted to anticipate the celebration of the centennial year for the Lewis and Clark Expedition and celebrate it by writing a book about the expedition, but she was also looking for a heroine for American womanhood, someone that women could look up to and model their lives after. So she found Sacagawea in the Lewis and Clark journals and she just created this woman from that and she in her diaries is very, very frank about what she did. One of the things that she writes, she says, “Out of a few dry bones I found in the old tales of the trip, I created Sacagawea and made her a living entity.”

Peter Coyote: So now we know the answer to our quiz question: it was Eva Emory Dye who created the mythical character of Sacagawea. Clay, what did Sacagawea mean to America one hundred years ago?

Clay Jenkinson: She came to represent everything from America’s imperial agenda to the fight for women’s suffrage.

Peter Coyote: And how did Eva Emory Dye herself describe Sacagawea? Was Dye at all interested in imperial business?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, apparently she was. Here’s the key passage from her novel:
(Woman’s voice:) Sacajawea, modest princess of the Shoshones, heroine of the great expedition, stood with her babe in arms and smiled upon them from the shore... So had she stood in the Rocky Mountains pointing out the gates. So had she followed the great rivers, navigating the continent. Sacajawea’s hair was neatly braided. Her nose was fine and straight, and her skin pure copper like the statue in some old Florentine gallery. Madonna of her race, she had led the way to a new time. To the hands of this girl, not yet eighteen...(fades)

Peter Coyote: That line “Madonna of her race”, that’s a little over the top! Well, turn-of-the-century romantic novelists shouldn’t have all the fun fictionalizing Sacagawea. We asked modern-day writer and performer Sandra Tsing Loh to imagine what one of Sacagawea’s journals might have sounded like. Here’s her comedic take:

[Sandra Tsing Loh:]
January 6, 1806

Dear Diary:

You and I both know why I am writing today, and yes, contrary to what people think, I can write. Because my people the Shoshones are illiterate, sure, I have had to invent my own alphabet, phoneme system and method of inking while out here on the road, on top of interpreting native languages, charting a new North American water route, digging for roots, rescuing supplies off capsized boats... Gee, what else do I need to do today? Did I mention I’m sick? And nursing?

Anyway, Diary, as you know, I, Sacagawea, have dealt with my share of problem men—Hidatsa raiders, French-Canadian trappers, poachers, robbers, scalpers—name a vice and I have seen it and yet why is it that no one irks me more than a certain Meriwether Lewis?

Meriwether... Lewis. Note that I can get his name right, whereas one year into our journey, he still hasn’t mastered mine. “Sacagawea,” “Sacagawea.” I know it’s a lot of syllables... but I think when your name is Meriwether, looks good to put in that little extra effort.

But no, according to Meriwether Lewis, I am just nothing more than Toussaint Charbonno’s woman. Toussaint Charbonno—there’s a mouthful but no one has a problem with his name. It’s only mine: Sacaja? Sacajawa? No, the one bit of native language Lewis seems to have embraced is the obscure Shoshone word “Yoko Ono,” which means... “intruding wife into band of great men.” It may be my imagination, but often when I am giving directions to Clark, very good directions, I sense Lewis behind me, bitterly murmuring “Yoko Ono. Yoko Ono. Yoko Ono.”

So last July, I confront Lewis and he smoothly says “Oh, Janey,” which is what they call me now—“If not Sacagawea” I pled, “Just say what it means—bird woman.” No, Janey. Anyway. “Janey,” Lewis says. “If you have enough to eat and a few trinkets to wear, I believe you’d be perfectly content anywhere.” Which in bear dialect is known, P.S., as a “compliment of the left paw.”

And I am thinking, Barely 17, I have a 10-month baby, a panicky 47-year-old husband who smells like suet and I am camping with 35 men whose main food group is meat. They don’t know from roughage. They wonder why I am frantically digging for vegetables all the time—hello! It’s because I am downstream of you. Lewis mocks my “trinkets” then gives away the only thing local traders want—my favorite blue-beaded belt.
“Perfectly content,” gloomy Meriwether? Not today, Diary. When Lewis told me about today’s excursion, that’s when I finally let loose, saying: “I have traveled a long way with you to see the great waters, and now that there’s a monstrous fish also to be seen, I think it... it... it is very hard that I cannot be permitted to see it either!”

So, yay, January 1806, I get to see a dead whale. Which may not seem like much, but when you are just another teen from Idaho... that’s pretty rad!

Peter Coyote: Sandra Tsing Loh is a regular public radio commentator, who lives in California. We’ve been all over the map looking at a few of the facts about Sacagawea’s life, trying to imagine what her days must have been like, looking at her from a serious perspective and from a humorous perspective. But in the end, how are we going to decide who she was, what her significance is to the Lewis and Clark story and beyond? Scholar James Ronda says that Sacagawea and Pocahontas— that other Indian woman enshrined in myth—play a special role in our history:

James Ronda: They stand between a native world and a Euro-American world. They are culture brokers. They are bridges that connect one world to another. And in that sense, they become very modern figures. They become what some anthropologists call 110 percent people. They’re people, who live not just in one world but in two or more than two. I think it’s very interesting that Sacagawea did not want to remain among the Lemhi Shoshones but continued on as a part of what was now an adopted community, an adopted extended family, her second adopted family. So here is a person who lived not just in one world, not just in two worlds, but in many worlds: a bridge over troubled waters.

Peter Coyote: We haven’t said much about her life after the expedition. So Clay, what happened to Sacagawea after she returned?

Clay Jenkinson: It’s not certain, but so far as we can tell she lived six years after the return of the expedition in 1806. And during that period we have one brief but tantalizing glimpse at her from the writer Henry Brackenridge, who traveled on a boat with the Charbonneaus up the Missouri River:

> We have on board a Frenchman named Charbonet, with his wife, an Indian woman of the Snake nation, both of whom accompanied Lewis and Clark to the Pacific, and were of great service. The woman, a good creature of mild and gentle disposition, was greatly attached to the whites, whose manners and aims she tried to imitate; but she had become sickly and longed to revisit her native country.
> Henry Brackenridge, 1811

Peter Coyote: Clay, you said six years. Do we have any reliable information about Sacagawea’s death at that time?

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, I think so. The only documentary evidence we have points to her death at Fort Manuel Lisa on what is now the North Dakota-South Dakota border in December of 1812. That year, a clerk at the fort named John Luttig made this entry into his journal:

> This evening the wife of Charbonneau a Snake squaw, died of a putrid fever she was a good and the best woman in the fort, aged abt 25 years she left a fine infant girl.
> December 20, 1812

Peter Coyote: That sounds pretty definite about where and when she died.
Clay Jenkinson: Perhaps, but Charbonneau had more than one wife and the woman who died at Fort Manuel Lisa is not mentioned by name. And some people believe—and believe firmly—that Sacagawea actually died much, much later on the Wind River Indian Reservation in today’s Wyoming.

Peter Coyote: I’m surprised at how many parts of Sacagawea’s life and achievements are still mysteries to us. It seems that our questions don’t lend themselves to easy answers. Scholars disagree about her life, and American Indians have strong and divergent opinions. We started out talking about the myth of Sacagawea. Clay, in your final thoughts, please take us back to the question of myth now.

Clay Jenkinson: “A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” That’s what Winston Churchill famously called the Soviet Union. But he may as well have been trying to characterize Sacagawea. Sacagawea, or is it Sacajawea, or Sakakawea, or something else entirely, is now the third most important member of the Lewis and Clark mythology. And if the truth be told, she may rank even higher in the nation’s consciousness. And yet, she’s a mystery, a cipher, a Rorschach ink blot, or what the historians might call a “cultural construct.” Somewhere beneath the encrustations of legend, conjecture, fiction, erotic fantasy, politics and American mythology, there stands an actual biological human woman who was born, was captured, was married, gave birth, traveled with an exploring party, went on with her life, and eventually died.

There is a paradox here. What we actually know about Sacagawea is so meager that it wouldn’t fill a passport book. And yet, she has been endlessly written about, and almost all of it is necessarily fiction. That which is factual is controversial in the shouting match sense. Because we know so little and care so much about her, we have been free to project onto Sacagawea whatever suits us at any given moment in American history.

For the suffragists at the time of the centennial of the expedition, Sacagawea was a symbol of the capacity of women, especially white women, an exemplar of pioneer pluck and resourcefulness. For the novelists and romantics of the twentieth century, she was an Indian princess, the savior and guide of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and a love interest for William Clark.

Today, because we are mostly interested in proving to ourselves that we are a truly multicultural people, she tends to be promoted as a sign of cultural diversity. Together with the increasingly prominent York, she stands slightly to the side of the Corps of Discovery, just far enough away to preserve her status as “other” and just close enough to be somehow one of the American family.

Just what Sacagawea’s role will be at the tricentennial is anybody’s guess but you can be sure it will be a positive one. Sacagawea must always be a figure that we can admire. That’s the nature of American mythology. Through all of these cultural permutations, her principal role for white people has been to cheer us up about our national imperial agenda, to lighten the moral burden of the conquest of the Americas, to let us pretend that if this remarkable Indian woman thought our ancestors were okay, the American project can somehow be viewed as benign.

For American Indians, even those who condemn Lewis and Clark as imperialists, Sacagawea still tends to be viewed in a wholly positive light, even though she helped Lewis and Clark blaze a trail that would later be followed by railroads and smallpox and George Armstrong Custer.

To a certain extent, Sacagawea is a distraction who tends to serve as the Indian of the Lewis and Clark story, a celebrity who crowds out the better-documented achievement of Black Cat, Yellepitt, Caboway, Cameahwait, Old Toby, Sheheke and Black Buffalo. The great Lewis and Clark scholar James Ronda deliberately left her out of his seminal book “Lewis and Clark Among the Indians” on the principle that like most larger-than-life figures, she distorts the picture more than she clarifies it.

Well, perhaps you can leave her out of a scholarly treatise, but there is no way you can pry Sacagawea out of the public’s mind. One thing is certain: it is impossible to think of Lewis and Clark at the beginning of the twenty-first century without placing Sacagawea at the center of the story. Without her, the bicentennial would be infinitely less
interesting. In fact, it is possible that in the absence of Sacagawea there would be no Lewis and Clark bicentennial at all.

And yet, the woman who became Sacagawea kept no journal, left behind no documents or known artifacts. We don’t know what she looked like. We quarrel about her tribal affiliation, about her precise achievement on the expedition, and about the time and circumstances of her death. Frankly, we don’t really even know her name. She’s a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Sah-cah-gah-we-ah—make of her what you will. For the Unfinished Journey, I’m Clay Jenkinson.

Peter Coyote: We close with a traditional Mandan melody recorded by ethnomusicologist, Frances Densmore. This recording comes from the State Historical Society of North Dakota-Densmore Collection. It was captured on wax cylinder recording equipment in 1916. The song is called “The Missouri Women,” sung by Scattered Corn. It is perhaps the closest we can come to hearing the sound of Sacagawea’s world.

[“The Missouri Women Song”]

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. This program was produced by Lewis & Clark College and Oregon Public Broadcasting. The producer is Eve Epstein, audio engineer Steven Kray, associate producer Sherry Manning. Original music composed and conducted by Aaron Meyer and Bill Lamb. The executive producers are Clay Jenkinson and Morgan Holm. Major funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding was provided by the National Park Service and the Jonsson Family Foundation. Support for this program also comes from this station and Public Radio International stations and is made possible in part by the PRI program fund whose contributors include the Ford Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. To learn more about this series visit opb.org and click on the “Guide to Lewis and Clark.”