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E X P L O R A T I O N S

Sacagawea, Sakakawea, Sakagawea,
or Sacajawea?

And her son Jean Baptiste s Gravesite

By Herbert K. Beal



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or Sacajawea.**

Among the Emory and Ruth Strong collection of documents and correspondence, there is a file devoted to the only woman member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and her son Jean Baptiste Charbonneau. To be more specific, its contents primarily concern two issues: 1) the dispute over the origin, meaning, pronunciation, and spelling of her name; and 2) the location, marking and preservation of her son's gravesite. These are subjects in which the Strongs-Ruth in particular-had a keen interest and had something to contribute in search of the truth.

Lewis and Clark's tendency to use variant and inconsistent spellings in their journals is well known if not legendary. In recording the name of the Shoshoni woman who accompanied the expedition, they used at least eight different phonetic spellings of her name, such as: "Sah-ca-gah-we-a", or "Sah-ca-gah-we-ah," or "Sah-ca-h-gar-weah", each pronounced "sah KAH gah WEE ah." Not surprisingly, these and their other phonetic spellings differ mostly in small details. But in one respect they are all consistent in indicating that the third syllable is always pronounced with a hard "g" sound. This is one of several reasons for the current preference among nearly all historian scholars for the spelling "Sacagawea," as opposed to the more popularized "Sacajawea"

(pronounced SAK ah jah wee ah).

The late Irving W. Anderson, past secretary (1973-79) and president (1980-81) of The Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, was noted for his relentless efforts to track down the truth or falseness behind this and other sometimes arcane facets of the expedition's history and personnel. This is relevant to the present discussion because among the contents of the Strongs' Sacagawea-Baptiste file there are two handwritten letters addressed to the Strongs by Irving Anderson. One letter, dated August 30, 1974, mentions an accompanying black-and-white photograph of the "Charbonneau gravesite at Danner." The other letter, of April 15, 1976, opens by stating: "At long last I am returning your Sacagawea file. I have kept digging into it from time to time, as you have kept good notes on some of the more obscure references concerning both Sacagawea and Baptiste." These notes consist of many pages of extracts taken from the Lewis and Clark journals that mention Sacagawea or Baptiste. They appear to be in Ruth's handwriting and copied from the Thwaites edition. There is also an extract of the meeting minutes of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names for February 8, 1979, which includes a succinct but informative discussion of "the background of the name Sacagawea."

Confusion surrounding the pronunciation and spelling of this Shoshoni woman's name stemmed in part from the assumption that it was of Shoshoni origin. This view was advocated vigorously by Grace Raymond Hebard in her biography *Sacajawea, A*

Guide and Interpreter of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, published in 1933. She argued that the name "Sacajawea" was based on three Shoshoni words: *sac* meaning boat, canoe, or raft; a meaning *the*; and *ja we* meaning launcher; combined they become *sac a ja we*, meaning canoe launcher or boat pusher. Lewis and Clark sometimes referred to their Shoshoni interpreter by names or in ways other than her native name, such as: "Indian squar," "Indian woman," "Snake woman," or "Bird woman." Lewis believed that the meaning of her native name in English was Bird Woman, a fact confirmed by her husband, Toussaint Charbonneau. This pointed to the likelihood that the name Sacagawea was not derived from her native Shoshoni language but that of her captors, the Hidatsa of present-day North Dakota. It is a compelling thesis when one considers that the Hidatsa word for bird is *sacaga* and for woman is *wea*.

Shortly before his death in August 1999, Anderson co-authored with Blanche Schroer an article entitled "Sacagawea: Her Name and Her Destiny," (published in *We Proceeded On, The Official Publication of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation*, November 1999). Their article marshaled virtually all of the most persuasive evidence indicating the Hidatsa origin of Sacagawea's name and its appropriate spelling and pronunciation. Schroer, now deceased, was a respected Wyoming writer and scholar, author of two important studies of the Bird Woman's life and name: "Sacagawea: The Legend and the Truth," (in *Wyoming*, Dec./Jan., 1977-



Drawing of Sacagawea with Lewis and Clark.

1978); and “Boat Pusher or Bird Woman? Sacagawea or Sacajawea?” (in *Annals of Wyoming*, Spring 1980). Anderson and Schroer, citing an 1877 dictionary titled *Ethnology and Philology of the Hidatsa Indians*, compiled by U. S. Army Surgeon, Dr. Washington Matthews, “explained that

there is no ‘j’ included in the Hidatsa alphabet, and that ‘g’ is pronounced as a hard ‘g.’” Anderson and Schoer concluded “that the Shoshoni Indian woman’s name has been decisively treated by the disciplines of orthography, etymology and philology, with the effect of formally establishing the

Sacagawea spelling and pronunciation [sah KAH gah WEE ah].”

Anderson and Schroer were hopeful that this would end or at least quiet the debate. And to a large extent it has. As early as 1910, the Bureau of American Ethnology had already standardized use of the Sacagawea spelling in its publications. More recently, other agencies or organizations such as the U.S. Geographic Names Board, U. S. National Park Service, and the National Geographic Society have adopted use of the Sacagawea form. However, the Sacajawea spelling and pronunciation is so widespread in the popular mind-especially in the western United States-that the wholesale retroactive name change of numerous lakes, rivers, peaks, and other such geographic features is no trivial matter. There are also two other variant spellings that have some claim to legitimacy: Sakakawea and Sakagawea (pronounced sah KAH KAH wee ah). The substitution of “k” for both “c” and “g”, or of “k” for the “c” only, have been proposed as more closely approximating the spoken sound of the Hidatsa language. As for the meaning of the name, supporters of the last two alternative spellings agree that it is derived from Hidatsa and means Bird Woman. One of the more curious aspect of this controversy is the North Dakota legislature’s approval of a law requiring the Sakakawea spelling be used in all State publications and names of geographic features in that state.

To what extent the Strong’s Sacagawea-Baptiste file figured in Irving Anderson’s research and thinking about the spelling and pronuncia-

tion of the expedition’s Shoshoni interpreter’s name is difficult to say. But Anderson’s letter returning the file suggests it likely was of some assistance.

Moving on to the question of where Sacagawea’s son Jean Baptiste was buried and what had transpired in his post-Corps-of-Discovery life, it is well documented that William Clark took young Baptiste (whom he had nicknamed Pomp) under his protection. Clark saw to it that the boy received a formal education at St. Louis. And as a youth he was befriended by a German nobleman, Prince Paul Wilhelm of Württemberg, who was visiting the Louisiana Territory in 1824 as a naturalist or scientific observer. Clark consented to let Baptiste travel to Germany with the prince to further the youth’s education in European culture and languages, including French, German, and Spanish, to supplement the English and several Native American languages of which he already had command or acquaintance. Upon returning to America, Baptiste decided to enter the frontier as a guide and interpreter-arguably the best educated and most widely traveled of his peers. He made the acquaintance of many figures among the mountain men and other personalities of the fur trade era in the Rocky Mountains, including: Jim Bridger, Nathaniel Wyeth, John C. Frémont, Jim Beckworth, and Joe Meek, to name a few.

There is an incident, recorded in Nathaniel Wyeth’s “Journal of his First Expedition to the Oregon Country,” in which Baptiste seems to have been

involved.

It began at the end of July, 1833, somewhere in the vicinity of the Wind River Range of western Wyoming. Wyeth wrote in his July 31 journal entry that he and his men “found a party of 4 whites who have lost their horses and one of them wounded in the head with a Ball and in the body with an arrow very badly.” The victims believed their attackers were a small band of Snake (Shoshoni) Indians—an identity at first doubted by Wyeth. But by morning the next day, August 1, he had a different opinion: “On farther inquiry I changed my opinion expressed above in regard to the Indians who stole the horses. I think they were 15 Snakes who left our camp at Green River a few days before we left that place.” Wyeth would also learn from the victims the harrowing details of what happened.

In his journal entry for August 1, Wyeth wrote: “Mr. Bridger sent 4 men to this river to look for us viz. Mr. Smith, Thompson, Charboneau a half breed and Evans. Two days before it happened 15 Inds. came to them (Snakes) and after smoking departed[.] [T]he second day after they were gone Thompson having been out hunting [hobbled?] his horse to the others and thought he would sit down by them until it was time to water them and having been on guard much of the time previous fell asleep[.]” When he awoke he was faced with a very unpleasant surprise. Wyeth’s journal entry continues: “raising his [Thompson’s] head and opening his eyes the first thing that presented itself to his sight was the muzzle of a gun in

the hands of an Indian[.] [I]t was immediately discharged and so near his head that the front piece of his cap alone saved his eyes from being put out by the powder[.] [T]he Ball entered the head outside of the eye and breaking the cheek bone passing downward and lodged behind the ear in the neck [T]his stunned him and while insensible an arrow was shot into him on the top of the shoulder . . . the Inds. got 7 horses . . . Charboneau pursued them on foot but wet his gun in crossing a little stream.” Thompson apparently recovered from his wounds; the seven horses, however, were never reclaimed. Such was life in the Rocky Mountain fur trade business.

In all likelihood the person Wyeth described as “Charboneau a half breed” was Baptiste. It is less certain if Wyeth or any of his men knew of the young man’s claim to celebrity. In any event, Baptiste remained a frontier guide, interpreter and fur trader. On July 9, 1843, John C. Frémont, U. S. Army explorer, encountered a certain “Chabonard,”—whom he thought to be a Spaniard—camped on an island in the Platte River, probably somewhere in Nebraska. “Mr. C. received us hospitably.” wrote Frémont, “One of the people was sent to gather mint, with the aid of which he concocted very good julep; and some boiled buffalo tongue, and coffee with the luxury of sugar, were soon set before us.” Mint juleps no less! It could only have been the amiable and urbane Baptiste.

His adventures in the fur trade and as a military scout during the Mexican War eventually brought him to California. In the winter of 1846-1847,

he rode with troops under command of Philip St. George Cooke in the march from Santa Fé, New Mexico, to seize San Diego, California. For a brief time Baptiste held the position of *alcalde* (magistrate) of an Indian community at Mission San Luis Rey de Francia, about thirty-five miles north of San Diego. In 1848, he was drawn into the gold rush fever set off at Sutter's Mill, which eventually led him to the town of Auburn, California, about thirty miles northeast of Sacramento. According to a newspaper account published in the Auburn *Placer Herald*, Baptiste had passed through there early in 1866 on his way to Silver City, Idaho, bound eventually for the Montana gold fields. The same account, which was first uncovered by Clyde H. Porter of Taos, New Mexico, explained that Baptiste had died before reaching Silver City. His death at age 61, variously reported to be from "mountain fever" (Auburn *Placer Herald*) or pneumonia (Silver City *Avalanche*), occurred on May 16, 1866, at Jordan Valley, in a remote corner of southeastern Oregon. He was buried at what was then the Inskip Stage Coach Station.

Two letters in the Strongs' Sacagawea-Baptiste file attest to the involvement of Ruth Beacon (Strong) in early efforts to locate, memorialize and protect Baptiste's gravesite. Both letters are dated June 18, 1959, written by Kenneth W. Duckett, Librarian, Oregon Historical Society. One letter is addressed to Mr. Michael Haggerty, Assistant State Coordinator, Oregon Centennial Commission. The letter opens with: "Recently it was our pleasure to discuss with Mrs. Ruth Beacon

[Strong] the possibility of marking the grave of Sacajawea's child which is located on the Ruby Ranch in Jordan Valley, Oregon." The letter continues, observing that "the Oregon Historical Society has neither the staff nor the finances necessary to mark and to care for individual pioneer graves." It goes on to intimate that the State Coordinator's office of the Oregon Centennial Commission "might have suggestions as to how the local or county committees could take over marking of this grave." The second letter is addressed to Mr. Kirt Skinner, then owner of the ranch where the grave is located. It notes that: "It is hoped that perhaps through Mrs. Beacon's efforts we will be able to do something about marking the grave on the Ruby Ranch." There is a handwritten note added to this letter that reads: "Dear Mrs. Beacon: Thank you again for taking time to come talk to us about this-if the grave is what it is purported to be perhaps this will get something begun on marking it. Thank you again."

It would not be until August 6, 1971, twelve years since Ruth Beacon (Strong) had helped bring it to public attention and 105 years after Baptiste's death, that ceremonies dedicating the Jean Baptiste Charbonneau Gravesite were held. Her role in its recognition and placement on the *National Register of Historic Places* may have largely faded from memory, except for the contents of the file she had assembled, and which is preserved in the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center's collections.