

## THE WONDERFUL WASCO BASKET, LEWIS AND CLARK'S ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY

By Mary D. Schlick



Lewis and Clark returned to the east with this finely twined Wasco-style bag acquired along the Columbia from the "Pishquillpah," a group they identified as living across from the mouth of the Deschutes River on the north bank. The explorers were on this part of the river in October 1805 and April 1806. (H11.5 in., H 6 in. Photo by Hillel Burger. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, cat. no. 99-12-10/53160.)

A long time ago, before the newcomers came, a woman who lived along the Middle Columbia River near the place where it cuts through the Cascade Mountains wove a beautiful bag of Indian hemp and grass.

It was winter, the time to bring out the images from her mind's eye and weave them into soft baskets. She would need these gathering bags when the bitterroot first pokes its green fingers toward the sun, and the lacy leaves of the wild parsleys announce the digging time.

Winter offered time to work into her weaving images of the creatures that were part of her life. There would be grandchildren close to fetch water and keep the fire going in the family's snug home of cedar planks, and to watch and learn from her. As she twined her basket, she told stories of the condor that hovered overhead and caused lightning when it spat, and of the brave sturgeon that no matter what wounds it might receive it would not succumb. She told of elk and deer, and frog who made five leaps to reach the moon, and she told of the

ancestors, the “Old Ones,” and of the generations yet unborn.

Winter was the time to carry on these arts of her people. The time to build the intricate designs stitch by stitch, twining with wefts of grass she'd gathered in the mountains and knee-spun warps of silken fibers from the giant dogbane. Known as Indian hemp, the dogbane plant resisted insects, important in a food-gathering bag. An elder had explained how his people found such perfect materials: *“All things that spoke in the right manner,”* he said, *“the Creator allowed to thrive.”* The winter season offered time to create beautiful and necessary objects for use by the weaver's family. These would be passed along with heirlooms from earlier generations to her descendants yet to come.

The old ones had predicted that “men with hair on their faces” would come down the river in canoes. But the woman could not know that their coming would change the fate of the bag she was weaving, that her bag would not pass through the years to her children's children. Instead, the bag would have a long journey of its own — arriving at last at the nation's oldest public museum to sit on a shelf, its history unknown.

We can be glad about this today, for the fine handwork of this Columbia River weaver proves that neither missionaries' wives nor pioneer women, who did fine needlework, invented the complex designs of the river people. We can prove that the Native people here produced elegant decoration well before the first non-Indians reached this place.

How do we know this? A famous event in U. S. history helps us identify the time, at least, when this one long ago weaver made such a basket.

Through many years of living on the Colville, Warm Springs, and Yakama reservations, I developed a deep appreciation for the skill and artistic talent that went into making the large twined “cornhusk” bags used for storing dried roots and other valuables and their handsome successors, the handbags. However, in 1972, I first saw a pair of the rare root-gathering bags, known as sally bags or Wasco bags, in a Seattle antique shop. Their unusual designs compelled me to find out if they were indigenous to the Native people of the Columbia River or introduced by the newcomers.

I began to read what little I could find about them: A Denver Art Museum leaflet of 1940 said the designs were recent. However, in 1901, British scholar O. M. Dalton wrote that they were of “considerable antiquity” and an “extinct industry.” In 1904, the Frohman Trading Company of Portland claimed in their catalog that “Sally -- the only Wasco successful in making the animated objects on her bag — had died a few years ago.” However, Sally Wahkiacus, who lived on the Klickitat River, was photographed in 1906 holding a “sally” bag she had made. The question remained: Are these amazing designs recent or very old -- at least before the march of settlers across the Oregon Trail?

Long before explorers actually reached the mid-Columbia peoples, European trade goods, along with new



**One type of the Wasco Basket.**

diseases, made their way up the Columbia from ships passing the river's mouth or across the Rockies from the tribes to the east. However, we know that Lewis and Clark were the first non-Indians to enter the Southern Columbia Plateau.

In their journals, Lewis and Clark told of seeing beads and kettles, cloth and other trade goods. I was not interested in these, but in the arts of the local people. I began to search the journals for descriptions and found tantalizing references to "baskets of different sizes," even a clear description of cooking fish in a cedar root basket. I knew from reading Jefferson's

instructions to Lewis that they were to make themselves "acquainted with ordinary occupations in arts, and implements for these (and) food, clothing and domestic accommodations."

Detailed as they were about the people and their lifeways along the Columbia, there was no description of the decoration of implements except in a few examples of stone and wood "curiously carved." Sacagawea may have kept a journal of sorts, a calendar ball or counting-the-days ball like the women on the Plateau once used. If so she probably would tie a reminder knot for the designs on the baskets she

saw. We'll never know about that.

However, Clark left a tantalizing clue in his journal entry for October 21, 1805, as they headed downriver toward the sea. They stopped at a place I identified on his map as near Rock Creek, about 25 miles east of Maryhill Museum. Clark wrote: "Those people received us with great kindness . . . we got . . . a few pound-rod roots fish and acorns."

I've known Rock Creek people over the years. My husband and I attended celery feasts there and weddings in the 1970s. I've returned many times since and began to imagine the scene. The Plateau people always send visitors home with food in some kind of container. Today it would be plastic bags, but in 1805, possibly a basket.

This gave me hope. Lewis and Clark may have returned to the east with a container — not necessarily from there, but from somewhere along the Columbia. Logically, if for roots or acorns, it would be a tightly woven bag, and possibly one of those I photographed at the Smithsonian nearly 30 years ago. But could a twined bag survive the long and arduous journey back to St. Louis? How could I find out?

These men were record keepers. I felt that there must be a list somewhere of the artifacts they carried back to the East. I wrote to Don Jackson, a college friend, and Jefferson historian at the University of Virginia and described my search. Jackson referred me to P. R. Cutright's book, *Lewis and Clark, Pioneering Naturalists*, and his own, *Letters of the*

*Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

Beginning with Cutright, I read that some expedition objects went to Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia. Peale, an early American artist, had a vast collection of natural history objects, which he used in his paintings. The 1776 display of these in the Peale home became the first popular museum in the United States. According to Cutright, the objects probably came to Philadelphia in April of 1807 when Lewis brought his plant specimens to botanist Frederick Pursh. Pursh was to describe and illustrate these for the account Lewis was writing (and never completed) of his travels. Now, at least, I knew that if the bag existed it could have gone to Philadelphia.

Cutright's book included another possible lead. George Catlin, famous for his early 19th century paintings of tribal leaders, reportedly had obtained a number of Indian items from William Clark in St. Louis about 1830. These later went to the Smithsonian. Living in the Washington, D.C., area when I began this research, I arranged to see the Catlin items. The curator brought out a *kápin* (a root-digging tool), but told me that the other items had been destroyed in a fire in a museum storage facility. So that possibility also went up in smoke.

Turning next to Jackson, I found the list I had hoped for, "Peale's Memorandum of Specimens & Artifacts." dated December 1809. Miraculously, there on the list was "A Bag prepared of grass by the Pishquillpahs on the Columbia River." I was astonished! They did bring a

container home with them and, on the Peale list, I knew it had not burned up with the Catlin objects. But what did it look like and did it still exist? And, who were the Pishquihpah?

Again, from Cutright I learned that Peale sold half of his collection to Moses Kimball of the Boston Museum in 1850 and the other part went to P. T. Barnum in New York City. However, everything in Barnum's museum was destroyed in two fires in the 1860s. This cut in half my chances of finding the bag.

My last hope, now, were the items that Moses Kimball bought for the Boston Museum. Cutright reported that Kimball sold them to the Peabody Museum at Harvard in 1899. Were they still there and did they include the basket from the Columbia? It was a long shot.

By coincidence, I had visited the Peabody the year before to examine their small collection of Columbia Plateau "cornhusk" bags for my book on basketry. At the time, I had not thought to look at the distinctive Wasco/Wishxam basketry there.

I sent the description of the bag from Jackson's book to Sally Bond, the cataloguer who had helped me during the earlier visit. I asked if anything in the collection answered the description on Peale's list and watched the mail for her reply. It soon arrived:

*"...we do indeed have several specimens from Lewis and Clark via the Boston Museum. However, I can find only one in my records that might be of specific interest to you. Number 99-12-10/53160 is a basket from the Wasco Indians of the*

*Columbia River . . . about 12 inches tall by 7 inches . . . cylindrical in shape . . . twined in dark brown or black and natural, with an overall diamond design (not simple diamonds -- more intricate and varied) which includes small animal representations as well."*

From Bond's description, I could imagine the bag, but I needed a photograph to be certain. Sally referred me a Pennsylvania scholar, Professor Charles Coleman Sellers who, by chance, was working on the Peale items from the Boston Museum collection for a book he was writing on the artist. Sellers confirmed the identification of the bag as from the Lewis and Clark material and enclosed a photocopy. He was as pleased as I was to have information on it.

I could tell by the design and technique that a Wasco or Wishxam woman from the middle Columbia River had made it. By this time, I had photographed many Wasco bags in the Smithsonian and other museums and this was an elegant design. Perfect in form and proportion, the pattern is a sophisticated network of stylized faces from the familiar figures of the Old Ones. The net, I like to think of it as a fishnet, is elaborated with a stepped pattern. On side visible in the photocopy, the weaver has worked a column of small dogs, important animals in Wasco/Wishxam village life, and, incidentally, in the explorers' diet. To understand the pattern, I struggled to reproduce it. Later, my Wasco apprentice Pat Courtney Gold quickly mastered it, and that is as it should be.

The "Basket of twined weaving, Wasco Indians, Columbia River, Oregon" had not caught anyone's attention on the museum's Lewis and Clark records. As a result of our correspondence, Dr. Sellers added to the bag's record: "From the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1803-1806. Entered in the Peale's Museum Accession Book as 'A bag prepared of grass by the Pishquillpahs on the Columbia' " These were the words from Peale's memorandum that had given me hope.

Now, knowing that it existed and what it looked like, I felt certain that the woman who made it came from the region around The Dalles or below, either Wasco (Lewis's *Che-luc-it-te-quar*) from the south side of the river or Wishxam (Clark's *E-chee-lute*), their relatives on the north side of the river.

However, another puzzle presented itself: Lewis and Clark did not receive the bag from the Wascos, but further east, from the Pish-quit-pa people. These upriver people would have spoken a different language from the bag's maker.

I asked the late Yakama leader Watson Totus who these people could be and described the location of the village as shown on Clark's maps. Hearing the name Pish-quit-pa, Watson said, "*Pásxas-pum, the people who live where balsamroot grows.*" These, he told me, were his people from the Satus area up in the Yakima Valley and they traveled seasonally south over the hills to that stretch of

the Columbia to catch and dry fish. "They had two homes," he said, "like the snowbirds."

These upriver Pish-quit-pa people would not have made this basket I knew. They used weaving techniques distinctly different from the Chinookan-speaking Wascos. There are many possible scenarios, but a likely one is that the bag came in a memorial give-away or wedding trade from a Wasco family downriver. The upriver family may have been more willing to let a basket, not of their own making, go off with the expedition.

On October 17, 1805, William Clark wrote in his journal: "Those people appear to live in a State of comaritive happiness: they take a greater share [of] labor of the woman, than is common among [the] tribes, and as I am informed, content with one wife . . . Those people respect the aged with veneration...."

The travelers' writings about this amazing journey establish a picture of a colorful and thriving life for the Native people on the Columbia Plateau — from the Nez Perce, whom the expedition came to know so well, down river to the Cascades of the Columbia. Detailed as the journals were, this one handsome container for roots or other food was never mentioned, but speaks for itself. I thank Lewis and Clark for saving this finely woven and elegantly designed basket that was part of life on the Columbia long before 1805.

It seems ironic that this significant discovery so important in the history of the arts, for Corps of Discovery was purely accidental.