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ORIGINS OF SACAJAWEA'S NAME by Merle W. Wells

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Sacajawea is an English word of Hidatsa language derivation. A great deal of confusion has arisen concerning its origin. No really satisfactory explanation has been substantiated, largely because Lewis and Clark did not offer more than a vague suggestion, referring to her once as a bird woman--whatever that was. For that matter, they generally did not comment upon linguistic origins of other names of members of their expedition either, and no one would have expected them to. They lived in an era when standard spelling of English words was beginning to come into fashion, but their journals (which they did not prepare for scholarly publication) contain considerable variety, including different forms for Sacajawea's name. When a published account of their expedition appeared in 1814, Sacajawea was adopted. This became her English name, although Sacajawea never became aware of that. She did not survive a stay at Fort Manuel in 1812, so she had no opportunity to see that publication. What name she used in 1812 went unrecorded, but it most likely was not Sacajawea anyway.

Whether Sacajawea had any idea at any time that she was referred to by an Hidatsa term for some variety of bird also is unclear and certainly is undocumented. Several problems account for this situation. Shoshoni and Hidatsa personal name practices differ so much from English and French systems that such a problem could not have been explained to her in 1805 or 1806 even if anyone had wanted to. Sacajawea did not speak English or French then, and had to converse with her husband, Toussaint Charbonneau, in Hidatsa--which for her was a foreign language that she may have resented anyway. But Lewis and Clark obtained her identification as something like Sacajawea from an Hidatsa source, in this case sa kaa ka wiiya (a highly simplified transcription provided by Norman Bowers, a thoroughly competent Hidatsa linguist), which still can be recognized as their term for some kind of bird. Lewis and Clark learned of this designation through their Hidatsa interpreter--Sacajawea's French husband, Toussaint Charbonneau. She may or may not have responded to such a name, but transcripts of ordinary conversation to determine that issue are unavailable. Since she could not communicate with expedition members anyway, except through non-verbal means, she would have had a hard time identifying her name in alien conversation that she did not understand. Sacajawea is not a Shoshoni word, and French and English people would have had no way of discerning any Shoshoni

name that she might have used even if they had wanted to.

Charbonneau's source for his wife's name cannot be ascertained. Several options are possible. Sacajawea most likely would have had more than one childhood Shoshoni name, and various bird (as well as animal) names often were used for young Shoshoni children. (She could have suggested a bird name to Charbonneau, which she would have had to have done in Hidatsa, because Charbonneau did not know Shoshoni. But no evidence supports this kind of explanation. It is only a conceivable, but undocumented, possibility.) Or her Hidatsa captors might have employed a crow, hawk, robin, eagle, or similar designation for her. This alternative certainly is credible, but also is undocumented. Charbonneau at least used an Hidatsa form that, he told Lewis and Clark, referred to Bird Woman. Another possibility, about equally plausible, is that Charbonneau named her Bird Woman. That would not have conformed to Shoshoni tradition better than any other explanation, but Charbonneau presumably had not studied Shoshoni tradition. Shoshoni women generally took a new name when they married, and Charbonneau or Sacajawea may have arranged that upon her assignment to Charbonneau. Neither one would have had much incentive to retain a name her Hidatsa captors used, and Sacajawea, in particular might have objected to an alien name. An additional variation is that Sacajawea may have selected some variety of bird without consulting Charbonneau or anyone else. She would have had to tell Charbonneau that in Hidatsa if she did so, but that cannot be verified either. She had at least one or more Hidatsa names, but whether her Hidatsa captors ever called her Sa kaa kaa Wiiya cannot be established. Sacajawea and her Shoshoni people had no term for birds that French and English explorers referred to generically, and such a European language name would be total nonsense in their conception.

A variety of legends, mostly twentieth century, grew up concerning Sacajawea, and some of these dealt with her name. But irresponsible twentieth-century attempts to tamper with a long-established standard English spelling of Sacajawea's name have lacked linguistic merit, although they continue to distort many accounts of her career. If Sacajawea had been an Hidatsa--rather than a Shoshoni--woman, efforts to replace her English name of 1814 with a more accurate Hidatsa form of 1804 might have been more plausible. Unlike large numbers of her people, Sacajawea preferred to settle down in an Anglo-French society after 1806, and certainly wanted to have nothing more to do with her Hidatsa captors. Inflicting a more authentic Hidatsa name upon her scarcely can be defended as an appropriate activity for twentieth-century Lewis and Clark historians.

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