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SACAJAWEA'S HIDATSA NAME

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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.

Before Nicholas Biddle decided to refer to her as Sacajawea in an 1814 publication of Lewis and Clark's journals, she did not have a widely accepted English name. When Lewis and Clark--or even her husband, Toussaint Charbonneau--asked her what her name was and what it meant, she had no way of giving them an adequate response. A Northern Shoshoni, she could explain her name in her own language, but they had no idea what she was talking about. So she had to translate her name into Hidatsa--a language she and her husband could employ for conversation. Hidatsa was a foreign language that resembles neither English or French or Shoshoni, but they had no other option. They each had at least some knowledge of Hidatsa. Through that medium, her translation of a Shoshoni term for bird woman was passed off as her name. So Charbonneau reported in French that it meant Bird Woman (which was doubtless accurate), and his explanation--including a garbled version of an Hidatsa word--finally was rendered in English. After almost a decade, Biddle gave it a variant English form that came into general use.

All of that clumsy transaction corresponds to an awkward situation that would have arisen if another expedition member--Joseph Whitehouse--had needed and tried to explain his name to a Russian investigator who had to pass it on to another Russian

interpreter who had an Arabic wife with whom he could communicate only in Chinese. Then after all that effort produced a garbled version of a white house, a later argument developed over an appropriate way to refer to his name in Chinese. Whitehouse, however, might have preferred to retain his own name rather than to have it converted into some dubious foreign equivalent.

For practical literary purposes, any English version of Nicholas Biddle's Sacajawea interpretation is bound to be inexact. Norman Bowers, a competent linguist who has specialized in Hidatsa, has established that sa kaa ka wiiya (a highly simplified transcription of words that still can be recognized as a term for bird woman, which still cannot be pronounced correctly in an Anglicized version) has survived as a source from which Sacajawea was derived. Lewis and Clark clearly encountered a highly complex situation in which they could provide only an inaccurate English approximation of a Hidatsa translation of a Shoshoni name for something like bird woman. They did what they could in a time in which modern linguistic analysis remained undeveloped. Any number of additional serious problems remain in dealing with Sacajawea's actual Shoshoni name which certainly is speculative, but presumably related to "Bird Woman." After Biddle finally adapted some English variants from their Hidatsa derivation and got Sacajawea accepted as an English name, any further meddling with that outcome really is useless.

(This information has not been edited.)