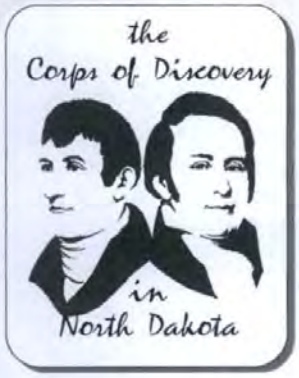


Part Six: Putting Jefferson's Plan into Action, 1804-1805

The Winter of Diplomacy

by
Gregory S. Camp, Ph.D.

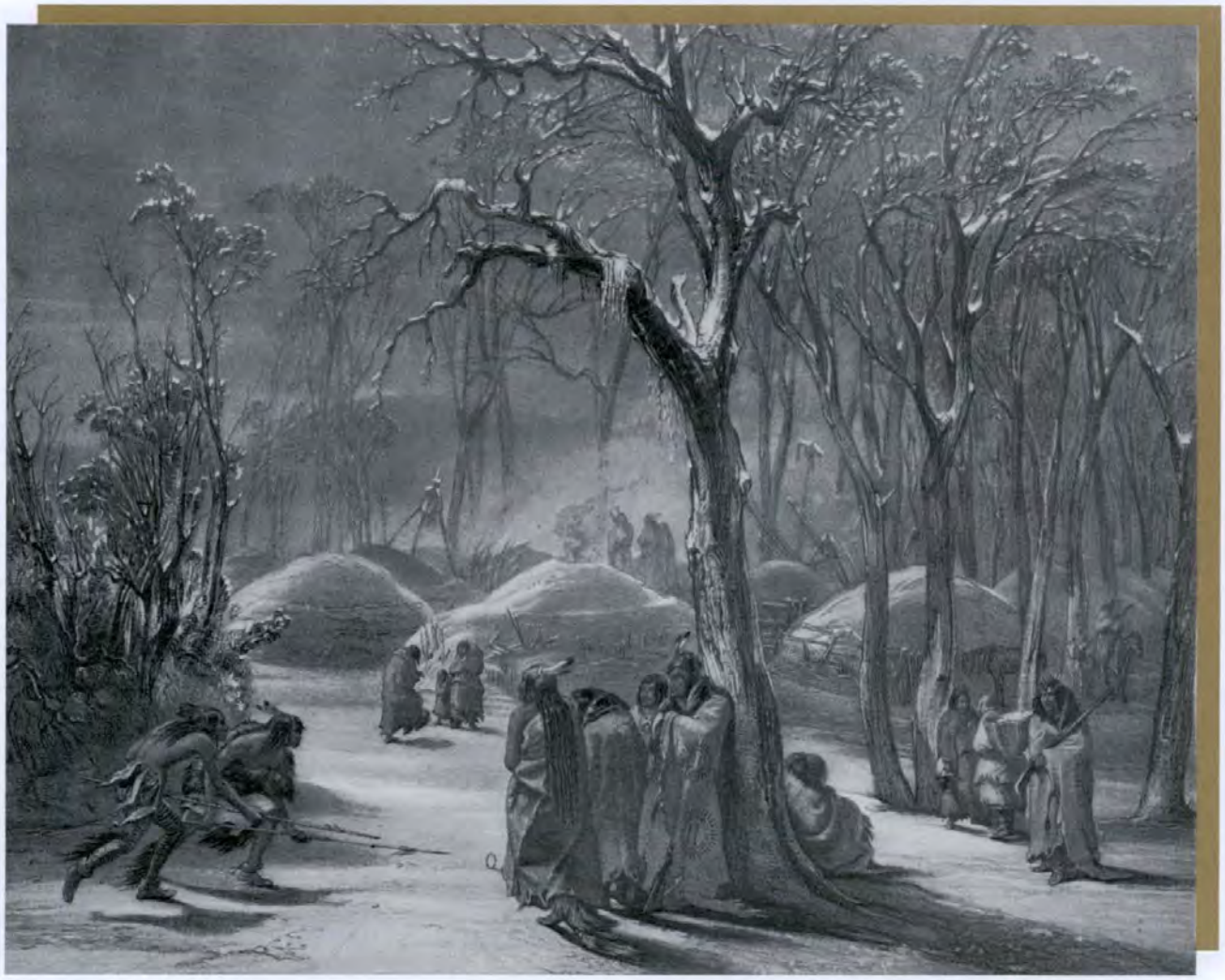
As winter set in at the Knife River villages and temperatures dropped to levels members of the Corps of Discovery had never imagined possible, the explorers turned their attention to more sedentary pursuits.[1] Construction of Fort Mandan was completed in late November 1804, after which the Americans were free to spend more time with their Mandan and Hidasta hosts, as well as make plans for their continued trip west in search of a water route to the Pacific Ocean. To judge from the journals that were kept, it was a time of both challenge and wonder for the expedition. In the midst of enduring the cold, they found themselves more fully introduced to a world far different from the one they had left behind. But though the Corps of Discovery would spend five months at the Knife River villages, they needed more time there to assimilate the importance of the local people, their culture, and their soon-to-disappear way of life.

As November 1804 wore on, it became apparent to Lewis and Clark that they still lacked a basic understanding of intertribal relations not just at Knife River, but in the entire region they intended to explore the following spring. While the captains succeeded in obtaining Mandan promises to maintain peace in the area, it was clear that such assurances were contingent on factors outside the control of either the Mandan leaders or their American visitors. A November 30 report that a combined Sioux and Arikara war party had attacked and killed a few Mandans served only to underscore the difficulties the outsiders would face in implementing their president's agenda.

Seeking to maintain some semblance of American support among the Mandans, William Clark organized a troop to chase down the attackers, only to meet with skepticism and a rebuff from the aggrieved tribe. Clark got an earful from the Mandans, who suggested that the Americans were trying to inject themselves into affairs that were none of their concern, and that the initial American request for peace with the Arikaras had been based on poor judgement.[2] Fortunately for the Corps of Discovery, the Mandans' anger was tempered with a fair degree of understanding and patience. Just a week later the two groups engaged in a joint bison hunt that was nothing short of a delight to Meriwether Lewis. The Americans bagged nearly a dozen bison, and witnessed with amazement the skill of the Mandan hunters as they operated in temperatures dangerously below zero. Lewis, for his part, stayed outdoors overnight and wrote of the bounty of bison the hunt had produced. If such hunts augured success in the diplomatic sphere, however, it was yet to be proven.

Diplomatic difficulties aside, a genuine friendship blossomed between the Americans and the Mandans. As historian James Ronda rightly points out, the expedition's five-month stay on the northern plains was not one of isolation, nor even of separation, from their hosts. Unlike later white settlers who simply endured the long winters in hopes of a kind spring, the Corps of Discovery, down to the most humble participant, enjoyed a great deal of fellowship with their new neighbors. Visitation was common, and with the completion of Fort Mandan a regular, almost daily experience.[3] Any initial apprehensions appear to have dissipated by the beginning of November, resulting in much freer communication between the two groups. After all, each side was equally curious about the other.

To the Mandan and Hidatsa people, the Americans were a continual source of wonder, mystery, and even humor.



WINTER VILLAGE OF THE MANITARIES

Winter Village of the Manitaries, by Karl Bodmer, from Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America* (1906 edition). Bodmer accompanied Prince Maximilian on his 1833-1834 journey up the Missouri River. While the Mandans immediately befriended the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the more powerful Hidatsas (or Manitaries) remained skeptical of the Americans' intentions.

Particularly fascinating to the locals were Fort Mandan, the outsized keelboat, and York, Clark's Negro slave. The explorers' scientific instruments, weapons, and general supplies were also of interest. While Lewis was reluctant to say much about Jefferson's diplomatic and expansionist intentions to the Mandans and Hidatsas, he openly exhibited the expedition's hardware, perhaps hoping thereby to impress his hosts with American technological prowess.[4] In any event, it was a time of much cross-cultural sharing and learning. As for the frequent visitations begun in October, they resulted in many an overnight stay at Fort Mandan. This occasionally became something of a challenge to the Americans. As described in the journals, warmer temperatures usually meant an increase in the number of Indians who stopped by. A slight improvement in the weather at the end of December, for example, predictably brought considerable numbers to the fort's door. But if these neighborly encounters were more than an occasional nuisance, it is not apparent from the writings of the participants.[5]

The Corps of Discovery enjoyed a great deal of fellowship with their new neighbors.

Relations within the Corps of Discovery also remained good throughout the winter. One has only to peruse the journals of fur traders on the northern plains to find out that this was not always the case. Hudson's Bay Company, North West Company, and independent traders often spent their winters in what historian Stephen Ambrose calls a state of "semi-hibernation," which frequently produced ill

tempers. Fortunately for the members of the expedition, the discipline and work regimen that the captains maintained were sufficient to keep such problems to a minimum. Lewis and Clark had undoubtedly learned a lesson here from the previous winter's camp at Wood River, during which several altercations had occurred. To prevent such incidents born of boredom, this time around they made sure that regular army drills, guard duty, and inspections continued throughout the winter.[6]

Though the newcomers and their hosts interacted almost constantly, there were also occasions when the Corps of Discovery informed the Mandans and Hidatsas that they were not to be visited. One such time was Christmas, during which the Knife River Indians were told that a special ceremony was being held that was open only to whites. If the locals were offended by this exclusion, they did not show it. Indeed, the ensuing 1805 New Year's celebration—replete with music provided by a number of expedition members—was held at the lower Mandan village. It was here that York, in attendance with William Clark, impressed the Mandans yet again. York's color and physical size were ever a source of amazement to the locals, and this time he apparently left them wowed that so large a man could also be so agile. The following day Lewis took a contingent with him to the second Mandan village, where similar merrymaking took place.[7] Thus from January first until the fifth there was something of a non-stop party, with the last three nights spent watching the Mandans dance and share stories.

One rite that particularly caught the Americans' attention involved a Mandan man offering up his wife to an elder in hopes of bringing about abundant and successful bison hunting. The younger husband apparently believed that the offering would transfer the elder's hunting abilities to himself. This rite was also practiced with members of the Corps of Discovery, all of whom were considered to possess great power or "medicine."[8]

From January first until the fifth there was something of a non-stop party.

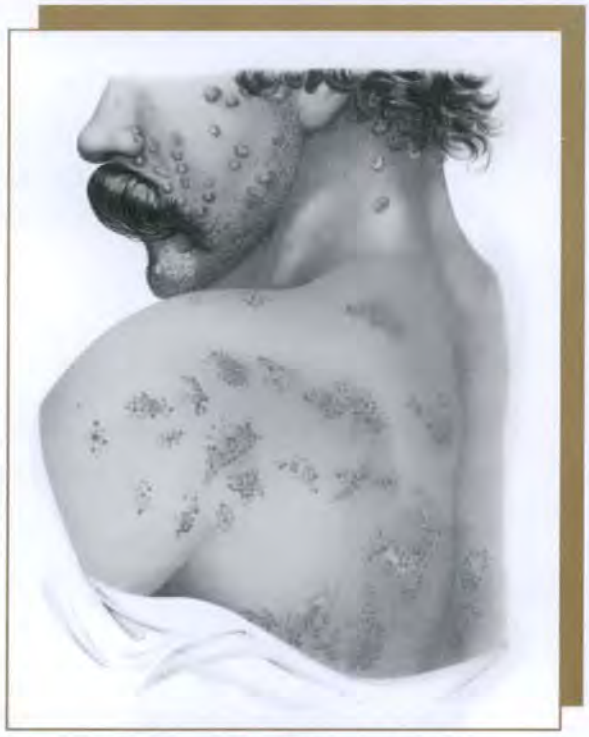
Not all of the sexual interactions between members of the Corps of Discovery and their Mandan hosts were positive. On one occasion, a quarrel between a Mandan couple led to the husband's charge that expedition member John Ordway had slept with his wife. Clark tried to quell the man's anger, and Ordway himself denied any such involvement other than when the husband had offered his wife as part of a ritual. The altercation was apparently settled when Clark ordered Ordway to provide some trade goods to the aggrieved husband to help soften the alleged wrongdoing. In writing about the matter, Clark indicated that his men would not engage in such behavior if they knew the woman in question to be married. Whether this was wishful thinking on Clark's part or merely his way of turning a blind eye is unknown. Frequent sexual liaisons between the Americans and their Mandan hosts continued, though the captains threatened punishment for sleeping with a married woman. How this

Courtesy of the artist

Hidatsa Chief Le Borgne Meets York, by Vern Erickson, 2002. **The size, strength, and skin color of Clark's African-American slave made him a continual source of fascination to Native Americans.**

was enforced is anything but clear.[9]

If *medicine* meant spiritual power to the Mandans and Hidatsas, it signified something quite different to the Corps of Discovery. Throughout the winter Lewis found himself practicing the skills he had learned from Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia both on his own men and on a few Indians. The captain treated everything from infections to frostbite (the latter was by far the most common ailment), and his services were in demand. After frostbite, the most frequently reported affliction among the Corps of Discovery was syphilis. At the time the disease was treated with a form of mercury, a dangerous antidote that could produce dementia as a side effect. While no mercury-induced dementia was reported among the members of the expedition, Lewis was cognizant of the risk and undoubtably concerned about it, given his attention to detail. The actual number of syphilis treatments is not known, though it appears that the disease was rampant among the men. Curiously, neither Lewis nor Clark report having taken the treatment themselves.[10]



"Syphilide back and face," from *Atlas of Skin and Venereal Diseases*, by Prince A. Morrow, A.M., M.D. (1889). After frostbite, syphilis was the most frequently reported affliction among the Corps of Discovery during the winter at Fort Mandan.

Modern readers often wonder at the primitive nature of medicine in Lewis and Clark's day. One needs to remember that in early nineteenth-century America, and especially on the frontier, the comforts afforded by modern medicine were almost wholly absent. Bleeding those ill in the belief that it would "draw off" the ailment was common, as was the application of such remedies as mercury. Add to this Lewis's prodigious use of "Rush's Pills"—a powerful laxative prescribed for most every illness—and it is all the more amazing that the Corps of Discovery lost only one man along the way. Needless to say, Lewis's patients would not always have relished the treatments they received.[11]

Lewis's most famous patient was Sakakawea. Pregnant at the time they met, Sakakawea gave birth to her first child on February 11. By Lewis's account it was a difficult birth, and its successful outcome depended on some unconventional practices. Worried that the young woman might not make it through delivery, Lewis asked fur trader René Jessaume whether any traditional methods might be used. The fur trader's advice—which was foolproof, to his knowledge—was to give Sakakawea a portion of a rattlesnake's rattle crushed and mixed with water. Doubtless Lewis was skeptical about such a remedy, but to his surprise it seemed to work. Sakakawea gave birth to a healthy Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, who was later nicknamed "Pomp" by William Clark.[12]

The child's father, Toussaint Charbonneau, had by now realized the value of his young wife to the expedition in their planned trip west into Shoshone country. Sakakawea's ability to translate, her knowledge of Shoshone culture, and her family ties in the West would potentially prove pivotal to the Corps of Discovery's success once they reached the Rocky Mountains. As Ambrose accurately asserts, it was a realization on which Charbonneau was sure to attempt to capitalize.[13] Although the trader at first tried unsuccessfully to procure a position for himself with the expedition at an unreasonable price, he did come around in time to be included in the venture. He may have been so persuaded when Lewis considered replacing him with Joseph Gravelines, a trader who had spent more than a decade among the Arikaras. Whatever the reason for the change of heart, Charbonneau apparently made his peace (if only temporarily) with the captains, and was hired to accompany the

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Nineteenth-century bleeding apparatus. The metal scarificator on the right, with its thin retractable blades, was used to slice the patient's flesh. The glass vials were heated and then placed over the cuts; the slight vacuum created as the vials cooled drew the blood. Bleeding was thought to draw off an ailment by removing "evil humors" from the patient.

expedition west. Lewis and Clark's undoubted asking price was that he brought along Sakakawea.

In the meantime, there was still the problem of feeding the Corps of Discovery when bison herds were not present. Given that each man in the expedition consumed perhaps as much as five to six thousand calories a day, it was a source of real concern. In a fortunate turn of events, some unlikely providers emerged among the expedition. The blacksmith, Private John Shields, turned out to be a significant draw when it came to trade with the Mandans and Hidatsas. The smith's metalworking skills were prized by the locals, and his labor was soon in demand. Arrowheads cut from an old stove immediately attracted the Mandans' attention, as did the repairs he made to their metal tools. The hottest commodities, however, were some truly odd-looking weapons—"axes," for lack of a better word—that Shields shaped for the Mandans. These weapons were clumsy—replicas feel top-heavy to anyone who handles them—but they were an immediate hit, and the smith set to work producing as many as the local market would bear. Shields traded his services for corn, and the supplies he procured proved sufficient to keep the Americans fed during the cold winter months. Lewis, surprised and delighted by this turn of events, showered praise on the smith for his ingenuity. Private Shields was later astonished when he found some of these same axes among the Nez Perce on the western side of the Rocky Mountains.[14]

Each man in the expedition consumed as much as five to six thousand calories a day.

While relations with the Mandans remained relatively constant as the winter wore on, Lewis and Clark knew they still had to make progress with the Hidatsas, the real power brokers in the economic and political world of the northern plains. In January 1805 they received a visit from some Hidatsa leaders—a rarity compared to the frequent comings and goings of the Mandans. Both tribes sent emissaries to Fort Mandan on January 15 in what the captains hoped would lead to a general improvement on the diplomatic front. Such hopes were quickly dashed, however, when it became apparent that tensions between the Mandans and Hidatsas still smoldered. The tribes exchanged charges and countercharges over who was responsible for the trouble

Hunting the Buffalo in Winter, by Seth Eastman, from Henry R. Schoolcraft, LLD, *Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States . . .* (1860). "When the alternate thawing and freezing during the winter months have formed a thick crust upon the deep snows of the far north-west," wrote Schoolcraft, "the buffalo falls an easy victim to the Indian, who glides rapidly over the surface upon his snow-shoes, while the former finds his powers of locomotion almost paralyzed by the breaking of the icy crust beneath his ponderous weight." Many tribes, including the Mandans and Hidatsas, used snowshoes for winter hunting.

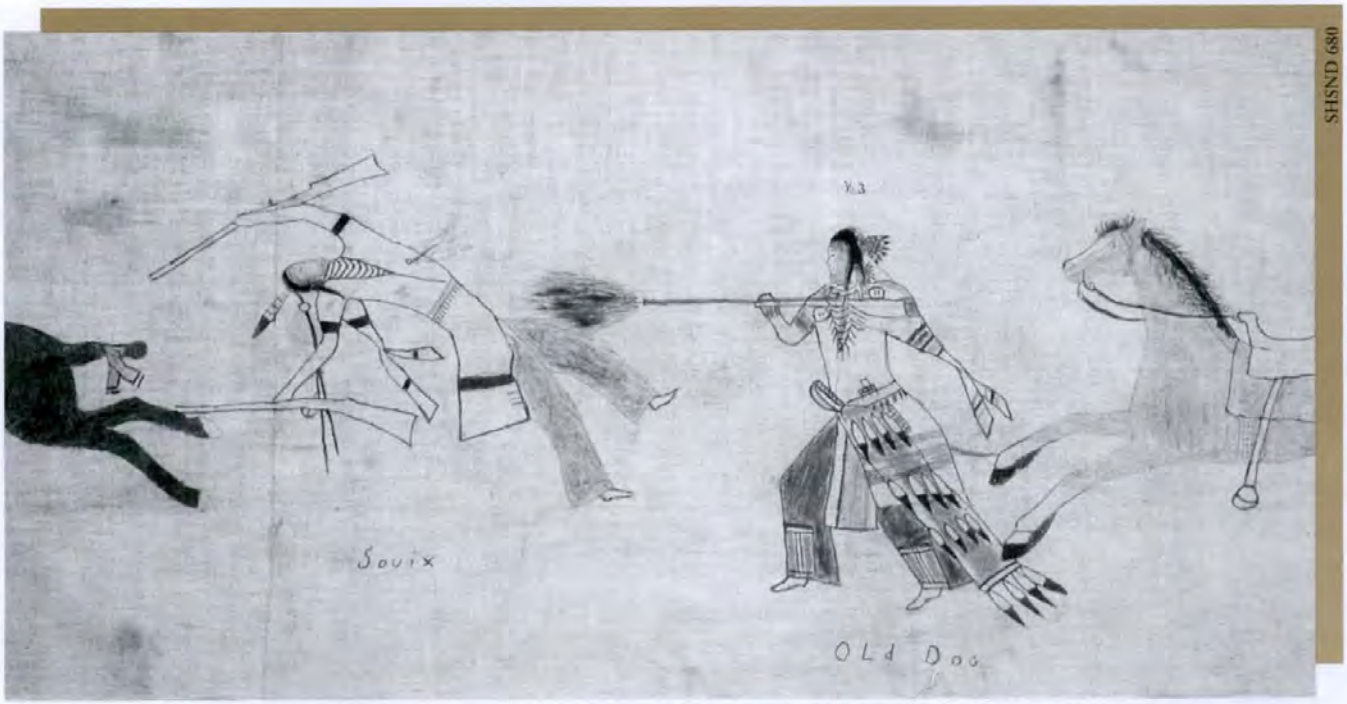
with the Sioux and Arikaras. The Hidatsas also suspected the Mandans of trying to establish themselves with the Americans at the Hidatsas' expense.[15]

If quarreling between the Mandans and Hidatsas wasn't troubling enough to Lewis and Clark, word of another run-in with a Teton party some twenty-five miles downriver added to the sense of urgency. A small unit that had been sent south to retrieve meat from an earlier hunt had come upon a Dakota raiding party, who proceeded to relieve the Americans of their horses. This grim piece of news, which the detail delivered to the captains upon returning to Fort Mandan, meant that peace was as elusive as ever and that the possibility of warfare with the powerful Dakota bands had to be considered. The Corps of Discovery quickly responded by forming a twenty-five man retaliative party, but the effort drew little interest from the Mandans and Hidatsas, and the Americans failed to find the horse thieves. By the end of February, then, it had become clear that the Tetons could and would do as they pleased, often with Arikara support. This state of affairs, combined with the ongoing Mandan-Hidatsa tensions, left the captains with the harsh realization that they could do little to maintain peace or encourage alliances. Jefferson's Indian policy, it appeared, was unrealistic.[16]

Intertribal peace as Lewis envisioned it was still nothing more than a phantom.

Another cause for concern was a report circulating about the Dakotas' supposed plan to attack the Americans. Word reached Fort Mandan that the Sissetons and some Teton bands intended to make war on the newcomers in the spring; it was even suggested that they meant to wipe out the entire Corps of Discovery. The Dakotas considered American overtures to the Arikaras a threat to their own alliances, and thought American attempts to order the trade on the northern plains to be rank arrogance. These reasons may well have prompted the Dakotas to contemplate a strike, but the story turned out to be mere hearsay. Nonetheless, it certainly made for a watchful winter.[17]

Lewis and Clark's diplomatic efforts in the winter of 1804-1805 were not entirely unsuccessful, as was seen in the growing friendship between the Corps of Discovery and the Mandans. Lewis himself developed a heartfelt respect for Black Cat, writing in his journal about the helpful meetings he had with the Mandan chief. But intertribal peace as Lewis envisioned it was still nothing more than a phantom. With the arrival of spring the Hidatsas again set out against their enemies to the west, notably the Shoshones—the very tribe from whom Lewis hoped to obtain aid. Trade relations, while promising, also were not solidified to the extent that later American visits



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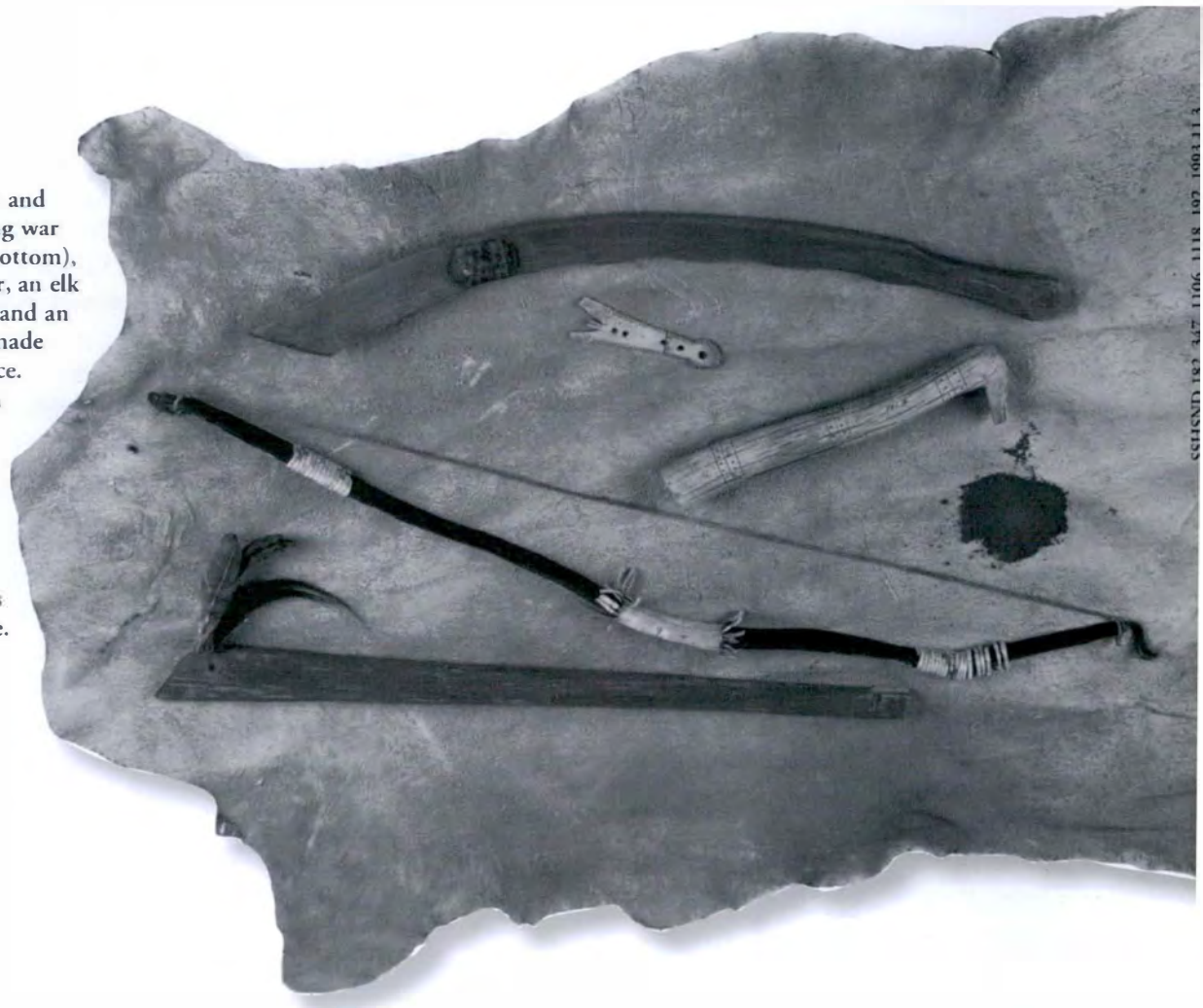
Detail from a Hidatsa pictograph illustrating an 1856 fight with the Sioux. Old Dog's friend Poor Wolf drew this account at Fort Berthold in about 1905. Though the Hidatsas and Sioux (or Dakotas) were traditional enemies, they sometimes traded amicably with each other.



Mandan weapons and tools, including war clubs (top and bottom), a roach spreader, an elk antler flesher, and an elk antler bow made by Wounded Face. The dark splotch on the right is red vermillion pigment, a highly prized trade good which was used to color objects such as these.

would find a unified and open system waiting for them at Knife River. Finally, it is clear that Lewis and Clark needed more time in the Knife River villages to develop a realistic sense of the demands and needs of the people they had been sent to woo. Time, however, was not on their side. As winter began to release its icy grip on the northern plains and the captains looked forward to the continuation of their journey west, it must have been with a mixed sense of accomplishment and failure.

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NOTES

1. For an interesting look at winter conditions at the time, see Arlen Large, "The Weather Observations of Lewis and Clark," *We Proceeded On* 12.2 (May 1986): 6-10 and James Ronda, "A Most Perfect Harmony: Life at Ft. Mandan," *We Proceeded On* 14.4 (November 1988): 4-9.
2. Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 189.
3. Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 98-99; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), vol. 1, 233.
4. Thwaites, vol. 1, 224; Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*, 99.
5. Milo Quaife, ed., *The Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway* (Madison: Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1916), 163-177; Thwaites, vol. 1, 233-240; Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*, 100-101.
6. Ambrose, 191-193.
7. Patrick Gass, *A Journal of the Voyages and Travels of a Corps of Discovery* . . . (1807. Reprint. Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1958), 79-80; Ambrose, 193; Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*, 100-101.
8. Quaife, 174; Ambrose, 195.
9. Quaife, 158; Thwaites, vol. 1, 225.
10. Eldon G. Chuinard, *Only One Man Died: The Medical Aspects of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur Clark Company, 1980), 267-268; Thwaites, vol. 1, 248-250; Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*, 109; Ambrose, 196-197.
11. Ambrose, 197.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 197-199.
14. Ibid., 198-200.
15. Thwaites, vol.1, 249; Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*, 108-109.
16. Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*, 107-109.
17. Ibid., 110-111.