

Iron Wills and Men of Leather The story of the Lewis & Clark Expedition By DAVID C. HINZE

York

The members of the Corps of Discovery proved to be a diverse group of people. Perhaps the most unusual participant in the trek across the continent was York, William Clark's slave. Clark inherited York when his father died in 1799, and York became Clark's body servant.

Clark's decision to include York on the journey changed his status immediately. He worked along side the others, carried a gun, was allowed to go off and hunt, and in most situations appears to be treated as an equal with the men of the corps. York possessed tremendous size, standing well over six feet tall and stoutly built.

Clark penned numerous notations about York in his journal. His most descriptive passages concern York's impact on the Natives. Many of the Indians refused to believe his skin color was actually dark and tried to rub the "paint" off York. They were also fascinated by the different feel of York's hair compared to the other white strangers in their camps. York delighted the Indians with his dancing to Cruzette's fiddle, especially during the cold winter months at Ft. Mandan in North Dakota.

He suffered deprivations along with the others on the trip. Twice he came down with serious flu-like symptoms, called colic by Clark, and he suffered serious frostbite at Ft. Mandan. The captains allowed him to vote with the men who in 1805 along the ocean

Although York had opportunities to desert and live with the Indians on the journey back he arrived in St. Louis in 1806 with the rest of the corps. The others received double pay as a reward for their service; perhaps York believed he would gain his freedom for his efforts.

It was not to be. Clark quickly readjusted to the slave owner mentality, but York had difficulty readjusting to slavery after tasting freedom for over two years. While Clark traveled widely to follow up on the success of the journey, York was sent to Clark's brother in Louisville, Kentucky. There York hired himself out as a teamster and gave the money to the Clark family. He also fell in love and married.

By 1809 the master-slave relationship between Clark and York had soured. Clark noted with frustration to a friend, "He [York] has got such a notion about freedom [during the expedition] I scarcely expect him to be of Service to me again." In 1812 York received his freedom and supposedly returned to Louisville. York's story demonstrates how temporarily gaining your freedom makes you hunger for it all the more when it is removed. Clark's attitudes on slavery were the norm for the time period. His error was not seeing how the expedition had changed him forever, and dramatically changed his servant as well.

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