

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

Teton Confrontation
The warning from the Yankton Sioux was ominous. There would be trouble ahead when the expedition tried to navigate through the lands of the Teton Sioux.

On September 23, 1804 the explorers encountered the Sioux villages along the confluence of the Missouri and Bad River, opposite present day Pierre, South Dakota. The Captains passed the word to the Teton Sioux Chiefs they wanted to meet the following day.

Clark and Lewis realized this was a crucial portion of their journey. The Teton Sioux had dominated the upper Missouri trade for many years. They were well known for their poor treatment of European traders and had demanded a large amount of trade goods as gifts.

Black Buffalo, the Partisan and Buffalo Medicine led the delegation for the Sioux. Each man led a separate band of the three Sioux tribes and controlled an intricate trading system throughout the region. Faced with a growing population the leadership used the trade goods obtained on the river to maintain a secure food supply.

As long as the Teton Sioux dominated the river trade the tribe's position would remain strong. But if the other villages gained access to foreign goods the Sioux position would be weakened.

Early on September 25, the Corps established a rendezvous for the meeting on an island in the Bad River. The lack of an interpreter quickly hindered the gathering.

After a lengthy speech the Captains started to put on a military demonstration for the three chiefs.

Afterwards gifts were handed out, but the explorers ignorance of the delicate political workings of the Sioux caused them to slight the Partisan.

All of a sudden the chiefs complained the gifts were inadequate. Lewis tried to continue the military show, but his attempts to calm the situation failed.

Caught off balance, Clark offered to take the chiefs on a tour of the keelboat, which they accepted. Once on board the Captains decided to break out some whiskey and gave each chief one-fourth of a glass. Quickly the Partisan made his move under the pretense of being drunk.

The Corps decided it was time to take the Chiefs and their followers back to shore on the pirogue.

When the craft landed three young men grabbed the bowline and another locked his arms around the small mast.

The Partisan spoke directly to Clark and jostled him, but Clark pushed back and drew his sword. The men on the keelboat loaded their arms.

Black Buffalo stepped in and ended the confrontation by taking the cable and ordering the Sioux out of the pirogue. Angry words about war were exchanged between Clark and Black Buffalo while tempers flared.

Finally, Black Buffalo eased the situation by asking if the women and children could visit the keelboat. The day ended when Black Buffalo and two of warriors also asked to spend the night on the keelboat.

A sleepless night followed. All Lewis & Clark could do was hope to react to whatever happened the next morning.

Dave Hinze is a professional historian and tour guide. He leads tours and presents at conferences on Lewis & Clark, and other topics pertaining to early American history, for the American History Education Association. For information about this series or one of AHEA's many history tours you can contact him at (800) 298-1861 or AHEA2004@yahoo.com

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