

York, One of the Northwest's First Black Pioneers

By **RON WEBER FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER**

A record from one of the journals of the famous Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Northwest talks about a very impor-

tant, yet little known explorer, guide and interpreter, who was also a slave owned by Clark. York is said to be the only member of the expedition who went all the way and yet was never paid even

one penny for his hard work and heroism. Many accounts showed his outstanding acts of bravery, especially when the group was

was very protective of her and Clark. Once during a storm with high winds and a torrential down-pour of rain, they were briefly

find the group to be safe. His compassion for his fellow travelers was noted by all in the group.

Local Native Americans were

said to be very fascinated with York, continually trying to wipe his black skin clean. Most Indians thought it was paint. York was said to have a great sense of humor, pretending to be a descendant of wild animals. To make local Indians laugh, he would jump around, growling and moaning, trying to imitate the



The Lewis and Clark Expedition crew at Three Forks with York and Sacajawea.

trying to cross raging rivers, engaged in steep climbs, or trying to forge their way through dense forests in severe storms. Sadly enough, York is hardly mentioned. York was also known to carry heavy loads for Sacajawea so she could tend to her baby. He

separated. York had gone to look for a buffalo. When he tried to find his way back to the group, they were not where he thought they would be. Accounts showed that he became "extremely agitated and worried." He showed much relief when he finally did

beasts he had allegedly descended from. He loved to put on shows and dances for the Indians who were surprised that such a large man, six feet tall and 200 pounds, could move with such speed and agility. York was said to have remarkable skills in terms of fishing, hunting and swimming. When the expedition was over with, York asked repeatedly for his freedom to be granted. Although Clark refused, never completely giving York his full freedom. He was said to have given York enough money to start a hauling business in Louisville, Kentucky. Although this story was never fully rumored that because of his immense physical skills, and overwhelming popularity with the Indians, he became a chief of one of the tribes. The land he had once helped guide Lewis and Clark through thus may have become his final home and resting place for this brave and little known early African American pioneer. Perhaps his desire to be with the Indians was because of the disregard shown to him by whites, after all he did for them. The Native Americans earned his loyalty and kinship by recognizing his many talents and rewarding him accordingly.

Whatever precise direction he took after the famous Lewis and Clark Expedition, York will always be remembered as one of America's first black pioneers, the first documented black explorer in the Northwest, and a credit to his race.

Geneva's Shear Perfection

Barber - Beauty Salon
NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED
Business Award of Excellence
Best of Portland (Williamette Week)

Celebrates
Black History Month
www.genevas.net
E-mail: paulsr@genevas.net

Hair - Nails • Pedicure
Facials • Shoe Shine

5601 NE ML King Blvd.
Hours: 9-6 Mon-Fri; 8-6 Sat
503-285-1159

"We Do All Type Hair"

RUNNING OUT OF GUEST ROOMS?



Put your relatives
in one of ours.



5736 NE 33rd • Portland, Oregon • (503) 249-3983
www.mcmenamins.com

Philly Cafe'

HONORS BLACK
HISTORY MONTH

445 NE Killingsworth •
503.288.9367

Saluting Black History Month

Linda and Lilian Sevier

R.D. Sevier & Son, Inc., 1101 NE Alberta
Garbage Service Portland OR 97211

287-0262

