

Lewis & Clark in the Pacific Northwest

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Fort Mandan War Axes on the Clearwater River

by Norman Steadman
Idaho Chapter – Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation

19th-century war axe

Photo © 2013 Kris Townsend

On their return trip, the Lewis and Clark expedition camped on the North side of the Clearwater River, near Fir Island at mile post 21, on Highway 12.

On May 6, 1806, Sergt. Ordway wrote in his journal:

several of the natives gambled in the same way as those below had buff aloe robes war axes & C. staked up the war axes these Indians have they got from the Grousevountares on the Missourie & they got them from us at the Mandans.

Ordway was the only journalist that recorded seeing the war axes and implies that he was told the Chopunnish (Nez Perce) Indians got them from the Hidatsa Indians the previous year. If the Nez Perce did get the axes from the Hidatsas, they were in the Clearwater valley when Lewis and Clark passed through the region in 1805.

Did the Lewis and Clark party actually get information from the natives that they in fact did bring these war axes from the Great Plains in 1805, or did the expedition carry these axes from Fort Mandan and use them for trade items with the Nez Perce on the Clearwater River in 1805?

None of the journalists ever recorded carrying any war axes they made at Fort Mandan for trade items, however on August 24, 1805, when Lewis was camped with the Shoshone Indians at Camp Fortunate, near Dillon, Montana, he wrote:

As the Indians who were on their way down the Missouri had a number of spare hoses with them I thought it probable that I could obtain some of them and therefore desired the Cheif to speak to them and inform me whether they would trade. they gave no positive

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answer but requested to see the goods which I was willing to give in exchange. I now produced some battle axes which I had made at Fort Mandan with which they were much pleased. knives also seemed a great demand among them. I soon purchased three horses and a mule. for each horse I gave an ax a knife handkercheif and a little paint; & for the mule the addition of a knife a shirt handkercheif and a pair of legings

This was the only time any of the journalists recorded using war axes for trading purposes after they left the Fort Mandan. It is possible that they carried some more of these war axes for trade items.

On May 11, 1806, Lewis and Clark were camped with Chief Broken Arm, near the mouth of Suzie Creek, about four miles up Lawyers Creek from Kamiah, Idaho. They held a council with the Indians. They used a Shoshone boy, they first encountered on May 5, to interpret for them. The interpretation had to pass through five different languages, Choppunish, (Nez Perce) Shoshone, Hidatsa, French to English. This made the council very tedious and not very accurate. After the council Lewis wrote:

after this Council was over we amused ourselves with Shewing them the power of Magnetism, the Spye glass, compass, watch, air gun and Sundery other articles equally novel and incomprehensible to them. they informed us that after we left the Menetares last Spring that 3 of their people had visited that nation, and that they had informed them of us, and had told them that we had Such things in our possession but that they Could not place Confidence in the information untill they had now witnessed it themselves— .

Did these three men, or other men of the Chopunnish nation obtain the war axes from the Hidatsa and bring them to the Clearwater valley in !805? If Lewis and Clark would have used war axes for trade items with the Nez Perce in 1805, Ordway should have known and would have recorded it. I think it is fair to assume the Chopunnish or Nez Perce brought the war axes to the Clearwater valley.

Information from the *Journals of Lewis & Clark Expedition*, Gary E. Moulton, Editor, University of Nebraska Press.

The Canoe That Remained in Idaho

by Norman Steadman
Idaho Chapter – Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation

Nez Percé Canoe



*Photo by Edward S. Curtis c. December 8, 1910.
Originally published in: The North American Indian, 8:46.
From the [Library of Congress](#)
accessed on 2017 Dec 10.*

*Ed. note: The canoe pictured here was likely
not the canoe they left behind.*

In 1805, the Lewis and Clark expedition built five canoes while camped at Canoe Camp near the town of Orofino, Idaho. From September 26 to October 7, they built four large canoes and a smaller pilot canoe. None of the journalists recorded any dimensions, so we will never know the actual sizes of these canoes. We do know that the five canoes were capable of carrying 35 people, all of their supplies, the large dog "Seaman," and sometimes several dogs they purchased for food.

On the return trip in 1806, they left their last canoes just above the Celilo Falls on

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the Columbia River. From this point to where they had left their canoes near the headwaters of the Missouri River, they traveled by land. They crossed the Snake River below Clarkston, Washington, and the Clearwater River near Lenore, Idaho, and Kamiah, Idaho, using Indian canoes.

On May 14, they crossed the Clearwater River near the grain elevators at Kamiah, Idaho. After crossing the river, they proceeded to move their baggage approximately ½ mile downstream to a place they had previously selected for a permanent camp, to wait for the snow to melt enough for them to cross the mountains.

On this day, Lewis wrote:

This is a very eligible spot for defence it had been an ancient habitation of the indians; was sunk about 4 feet in the ground and raised around its outer edge about three ½ feet with a good wall of earth. The whole was a circle of about 30 feet in diameter. Around this we formed our tents of sticks and grass facing outwards and deposited our baggage within the sunken space under a shelter which we constructed for the purpose. Our situation was within 40 paces of the River in an extensive level bottom thinly timbered with long leafed pine. Here we are in the vicinity of the best hunting grounds from the indian information, are convenient to the salmon which we expect daily and have excellent pasture for our horses.

The salmon did not arrive during their stay at Camp Chopunnish, and by May 21, Lewis wrote:

we set five men at work to make a canoe for the purpose of fishing and crossing the river. The Indians have already promised us a horse for this canoe when we have no longer any use for her.

On May 22, Lewis sent Sergt. Pryor down to the entrance of Collins Creek (present Lolo Creek) to examine the country and to look for a good place to camp. They had determined to remove their camp below that creek if it remained high, as soon as they completed their canoe. They wanted to hunt near the Quamash Flats (present Weippe, Idaho). Sergt. Pryor returned late in the afternoon and said he had been down about 8 miles, and that the cliffs set in so abruptly that he could go no further.

On May 22, Ordway wrote,

"in the evening we made a fire on the canoe to bum it out"

On May 26, Lewis wrote,

"in the afternoon we finished the canoe and put her in the water. she appears to answer very well and will carry about 12 persons."

None of the journalists recorded any dimensions of this canoe.

On May 30, Lewis wrote:

Shannon and Collins were permitted to pass the river to trade with the natives and lay in a store of roots and bread for themselves with their proportion of the merchandize as the others had done: in landing on the opposite shore the canoe was driven broadside with the full force of a very strong current against some standing trees and instantly filled with water and sunk. Potts an indifferent swimmer, it was with much difficulty he made the land. They lost three blankets, a blanket coat and their pittance of merchandize. In our bear state of cloothing this was a serious loss. I sent Sergt. Pryor and a party over with the indian canoe in order to raise and secure ours but the depth of the water and the strength of the current baffled every effort. I fear that we have also lost our canoe which was sunk.

On June 8, Ordway wrote,

"a number of the natives joined and got our canoe which was sunk."

They left the canoe with the Indians when they left Camp Chopunnish on June 10, 1806. This was the only canoe they left in Idaho.

Information from the Journals of Lewis & Clark Expedition, Gary E. Moulton, Editor, University of Nebraska Press.

Oregon

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Interactive Map

Coming Soon!

Washington

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Heinsbergen Murals

In 2004, member Kim Fitzsimmons had photographs taken of the historic Lewis and Clark murals displayed in the Lewis and Clark theater in Tukwilla before it was demolished.

[View Murals](#)