

“The Teton Confrontation” **September 24-29, 1804**

Unit: Politics & Diplomacy (Elementary and Middle School)

Paraphrased from Ronda’s *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*
Chapter 2: pp. 27-41

To be read by the teacher:

Lewis and Clark were excited and maybe even a bit nervous on the Monday morning of September 24, 1804. Just the evening before, while the Corps was camped on the Missouri near the Bad River, three Sioux boys had swum across the river and come to the camp. The boys told the captains about Sioux villages just up the river, and Lewis and Clark directed the boys to invite their chiefs to a conference the next day. So on Monday, September 24, the captains were going through their bales of trade goods to pick out gifts for the Teton Sioux whom they hoped to meet that day, but they also kept their guns and powder horns handy in case the meeting turned out unfriendly.

Everyone, from President Jefferson to the traders they had met, warned the captains that the Sioux were powerful. A French trader named Jean Baptiste Truteau warned them that “all voyageurs who undertake to gain access to the nations of the Upper Missouri ought to avoid meeting this tribe as much for safety of their goods as for their lives....” Nevertheless, Lewis and Clark were hopeful that they could persuade the Sioux to become friends and allies of the new United States government.

The Corps’ best interpreter had stayed with the Yankton, so the captains did not have anyone with them who could fluently speak the Sioux language. They would have to communicate with sign language and the few words they knew. As it turned out, things did not go as well as Lewis and Clark had expected. About noon, the men reported to Captain Lewis that one of the horses had been stolen and that five Indians on the opposite shore were the thieves. The captains tried to talk to these Sioux, but the two groups couldn’t understand each other very well, and the Indians left.

Later that evening, things went a little better when Captain Lewis went to an island in the middle of the Bad River and had a “smoke” with the Sioux chiefs. The chiefs promised to return the missing horse and said they were ready to talk to the captains the next day. When the meeting ended, Lewis went back to camp and spent the night talking to Clark about what they would do the next day when they met the Sioux chiefs. The captains wanted to get the Sioux to agree to trade with the Americans and to recognize the United States as the true government in the area.

While Lewis and Clark were discussing their plans, the Sioux chiefs, named Black Buffalo, the Partisan, and Buffalo Medicine, thought about what they wanted from Lewis and Clark. The Sioux traded buffalo robes and other goods for food with the Arikara tribe, who were farmers further upriver. They were at war with the tribes farther upriver, the Mandan and Hidatsa. The Sioux wanted to blockade the river so that the American traders couldn't take goods to the Arikara, Mandan, or Hidatsa. If the Sioux couldn't block the Americans from trading with other upriver tribes, they wanted the Corps to at least pay them a toll for using the river.

On Tuesday morning, September 25, 1804, the captains set up a place to hold a council on a sandbar in the Bad River. After the two groups shared food with each other, Lewis gave a short speech telling the chiefs that the Americans were their new fathers and protectors. Then the captains gave out presents. They chose Black Buffalo to be the main chief and gave him special gifts. This made the other chiefs, especially the Partisan, angry. All the Indians began complaining that there were not enough gifts and that they were not very good gifts, either. Then the chiefs told Lewis and Clark that if the expedition wanted to continue upriver they would have to leave a whole pirogue (canoe) filled with trade goods for the Sioux.

Captain Lewis had no intention of leaving such a toll. He tried to change the subject and showed off with a demonstration of his air gun, but the chiefs were not impressed. Then Lewis and Clark offered to take some of the chiefs on board the keelboat for a look around. The Indians liked this idea, and several of the chiefs and warriors came on board. Then Lewis and Clark made another mistake! They offered each of the chiefs a glass of whiskey. After this, confusion broke out and the Partisan became "troublesome." Finally, Clark got the chiefs in a pirogue and back to shore, but, by this time, both sides were angry and a fight was threatening. Clark told the Indians that the expedition was going to leave. Then Black Buffalo made a speech saying that he was sorry the expedition was leaving. He said his women and children were without clothes and food and that he hoped he could get some goods from the captains.

Clark tried to shake hands with Black Buffalo after this speech, but Black Buffalo would not shake. Clark and his men paddled back to the keelboat, but before they reached the boat, Black Buffalo and two other men waded into the water and called after him, saying that they wanted to come back on the keelboat. Clark let Black Buffalo and two of the warriors come onto the boat and spend the night.

On Wednesday, September 26, Black Buffalo and his soldiers were still on the keelboat. The Sioux people were lined upon the riverbank, watching the boat as it sailed up the river. Acting more friendly than he had the day before, Black Buffalo asked the captains to stop the boat at his village. The captains decided to try once more to have a friendly meeting with the Teton Sioux. Captain Lewis went with Black Buffalo to the Sioux village while Clark remained on board to guard the boat.

Clark became anxious after about three hours when Captain Lewis did not return to the boat. He sent Gass to find out what was happening. Gass returned with word that Captain Lewis was fine and that the Sioux were planning a big feast and entertainment for the Corps for that evening. Black Buffalo asked the captains to spend one more night with the Sioux, and they agreed.

That Wednesday night, Black Buffalo and his tribe held a great feast and celebration ceremony for the Americans. Fires blazed, roasted buffalo meat was passed around, the chief made a speech, and, using a special pipe, conducted a solemn pipe ceremony. Sioux musicians and dancers performed around the fire while the Americans sat in the circle in awe. The captains were very tired by midnight and told the chiefs it was time for sleep. The chiefs returned with the captains to spend another night on the keelboat.

The next morning (Thursday, September 27, 1804), the captains and chiefs were up early. The captains again joined the chiefs in the Sioux village to talk, and that night they had another feast and dance. When the dancing ended, the chiefs again went with Lewis and Clark to spend the night on the keelboat. But as the men paddled in the pirogue to the keelboat there was a boat accident, which caused the Indians to become alarmed. The noise and confusion brought many warriors out to the riverbank. Although the captains and the chiefs made it safely to the keelboat, many warriors stayed on the riverbank all night to keep watch.

Lewis and Clark didn't like the idea of so many warriors standing by on the riverbank, because they thought the Sioux maybe intended to stop or rob them, so in the morning Lewis and Clark were determined to leave. Indians lined the shore. Black Buffalo and other chiefs appeared and came on board. They began to demand that the expedition remain with them longer, but Captain Lewis had made up his mind to leave and told the crew to make preparations to cast off. Several of the Partisan's warriors tried to stop them and took hold of the cable to keep the keelboat where it was. Clark saw what was happening and complained to Black Buffalo, who went forward to assure Lewis that the warriors simply wanted tobacco. Lewis was tired of giving gifts. He said, "All hands ready to depart," and he angrily ordered all Indians off the boat. Clark threw a carrot of tobacco on the bank and turned to Black Buffalo, who was now off the keelboat, and said, "You have told us you are a great man...have influence...take this tobacco and shew us your influence by taking the rope from your men and letting go without coming to hostilities."

By this time the warriors were hurrying the women and children away from the riverbank. Black Buffalo wanted to show his influence with the tribe over the Partisan, so as Clark threw the tobacco to the Indians, Black Buffalo seized the cable and then let it go, allowing the expedition to proceed up the Missouri.

