

Selected passages of the Shoshone Encounter August 11–August 29, 1805

Unit: Politics & Diplomacy (Elementary and Middle School)

Paraphrased from Ronda's *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*
Chapter 6, pp. 139–154

To be read aloud by the teacher:

Lewis and Clark traveled for over two months after leaving the Mandan villages in the spring of 1805 before reaching the Great Falls of the Missouri. By the end of June 1805, the captains were becoming very anxious because they had not encountered the Shoshone, a tribe from whom they hoped to obtain horses for crossing the Bitterroot Mountains.

The first week of August 1805 must have seemed like an eternity to the men, who were tired and frustrated. Everything seemed to be going wrong for them—their canoes overturned, tow ropes broke, and Captain Clark developed an infection caused by prickly pear punctures. However, on August 8, 1805, Sacagawea recognized a landmark from her childhood and told the captains that they were nearing the place where they would find her tribe, the Shoshones. This news excited the explorers and made them happy because they were sure they would soon find Sacagawea's people. Captain Lewis decided to take a few men and go looking for the tribe while the rest of the group continued on more slowly with the boats.

Just as Lewis had hoped, he and his three men did come upon an Indian horse and rider and determined the Indian was a Shoshone. Lewis wanted to make a friendly gesture so he took his blanket and waved it three times in the air, thinking this was the way to let the Indian know he was a friend. In addition, Lewis took some beads, a mirror, and other trade items and began to walk alone toward the Indian, who was still mounted on his horse, but the Indian turned away. Then Lewis shouted out the word “Tab-ba-bone,” which he believed was the Shoshone way to say “white man.” That is when the Indian rode off on his horse and vanished into the trees.

Lewis was very upset and unhappy. He tried to blame the three men who were with him for scaring the Shoshone away. However, what Lewis didn't know was that the Shoshones were very wary of any strangers because they had recently suffered a punishing raid from another tribe. Also, “tab-ba-bone” may not have meant “white man,”

as Lewis thought. It may have meant “stranger” or “foreigner” and may not have been the thing to say to make a new friend.

Although that first sighting of a Shoshone didn't result in a meeting for Lewis, he soon did make contact with the tribe when, a few days later, he and his men met two Shoshone women, and a man. The Americans were able to communicate this time by giving the women some gifts and convincing them that the Americans meant to be friendly. Eventually these women led Lewis to the chief and more warriors.

Lewis told the chief (Cameahwait) that the rest of his party was coming along and that they had a woman with them. It was several days before Clark, Sacagawea, and the rest of the Corps caught up with Lewis and the Shoshones. When they did, Sacagawea recognized in the tribe another woman whom she had known as a child, as well as Cameahwait, the chief, who turned out to be Sacagawea's brother.

After the meeting of Sacagawea and her brother, Cameahwait, Lewis and Clark handed out medals to the chiefs and gave other gifts to the people. Then the captains began to plan how they would get horses and help from the Shoshone for crossing the Continental Divide. They decided that Lewis would spend the next six days at Camp Fortunate, taking notes for President Jefferson about the Shoshone culture. Meanwhile, Clark, Charbonneau, Sacagawea, other men of the Corps, and a few Shoshone would go ahead across the divide to another Shoshone camp at the Lemhi River.

The captains and Cameahwait set about to use diplomacy to negotiate “a deal.” Cameahwait let Captain Lewis know that the Shoshone did not have enough food and that the tribe had been attacked by their enemies the Hidatsas, the Atsina, and the Blackfeet. Cameahwait wanted American guns to use for hunting and for protecting his people from the enemy tribes, who had much better weapons. He told Lewis and Clark that if his people had guns, “We could then live in the country of the buffalo and eat as our enemies do and not be compelled to hide ourselves in these mountain and live on roots and berries as the bear do.”

Cameahwait promised to help the explorers cross the divide. In return, Clark promised that ‘whitemen would come to them with an abundance of guns and every other article necessary to their defense and comfort.’ Two days after this discussion, Lewis also made Cameahwait a promise of guns. In addition, Lewis gave the Shoshone corn, beans, and fish because they were so hungry. Promising to give guns to the Shoshones turned out not to be a very smart thing in the long run, because by doing so, the Americans made enemies of the Blackfeet and other tribes.

Although Cameahwait had promised to help the explorers cross the divide, he began to worry that his hunters would miss the buffalo if they spent too much time helping the explorers. Finally Cameahwait decided on August 24, after seven days with the explorers, that it was time for his warriors to leave Lewis and Clark to fend for themselves and go on a buffalo hunt. Captain Lewis was furious when he found out that Cameahwait planned to leave them alone and without horses.

Lewis met with Cameahwait and told him “ If [you] wish the whitemen to be [your] friends and to assist [you] against [your] enemies by furnishing [you] with arms and keeping [your] enemies from attacking [you], you must never promise us anything which [you] do not mean to perform.” According to Lewis’s journal, Cameahwait admitted that his decision had been wrong but explained that he had changed his mind when he saw how hungry his people were. Lewis knew Cameahwait’s reason for wanting to go, but he was not willing for Cameahwait to leave yet.

Finally, at the end of August, the explorers were ready to start on the path over the mountains. Before taking leave of the Shoshones, Lewis and Clark began to trade with Cameahwait for horses. Trading at the end of the Shoshone encounter was much different than it had been when Lewis first met them almost a month earlier. In the first days of their encounter, the Shoshone were so awestruck with Lewis and Clark and the goods they carried that they were willing to exchange a horse for an old shirt, a pair of worn-out leggings, and a knife. However, now that they had been with the Americans for several weeks, the Shoshone had learned how to get more and give less when trading.

At the end of the encounter with the Shoshones, Lewis had to give a battle-axe, a knife, a handkerchief, and some face paint for one horse. For a Spanish mule, the Americans had to give two knives and some clothing. Clark even had to give his own pistol, a knife and one hundred rounds of ammunition for another horse. The captains got a total of twenty-nine horses from the Shoshones but later when Lewis and Clark looked carefully at the horses they had gotten, they found nearly all [had] sore backs and were poor and young.” The Shoshone may have made the better deal in this last trade.