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# Return of the Native

By **Kathryn Moore**

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*Abstract:* Describes the challenges encountered by Ensign Nathaniel Pryor and his men in undertaking the task of returning a Mandan chief name Sheheke and his family to their home in Upper Missouri after the Corps of Discovery brought them to Washington, D.C. to visit U.S. President Thomas Jefferson. Details of how Meriwether Lewis and William Clark met Sheheke; Efforts made by the Corps of Discovery to make peace relations with the Indian tribes; Consequences of Sheheke's return.

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**Lewis and Clark persuaded** a Mandan chief named Sheheke to travel east with his family and visit President Thomas Jefferson in Washington, D.C. Taking him to the nation's capital was easy. Returning him home proved to be more difficult--and dangerous--than anyone had anticipated.

Early in the morning of September 9, 1807, Ensign Nathaniel Pryor watched from his boat as some 650 Arikara and Sioux warriors, "all of whom were armed with guns, and many of them with additional warlike weapons," gathered along the shore of the Missouri River. Pryor was deep in Indian country, where the Arikara and Sioux were once again at war with the Mandan. That meant serious trouble for Pryor, who was returning Sheheke, a Mandan chief, and his family to their home further up river at the request of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. The young ensign had only 37 men with him and hoped to avoid bloodshed, but he braced himself for the worst. First he directed Sheheke to barricade himself in the boat's cabin with a "breast work of trunks and boxes?" "My men were prepared for action, and the Indians about the picketed villages and breast works, appeared to be putting themselves in readiness to commence it," Pryor wrote. "They were observed checking their bullets and driving away their women and children." It wasn't quite the reception Pryor expected--or the homecoming that Sheheke had anticipated.

Captains Lewis and Clark had met Sheheke three years earlier as the Corps of Discovery made its historic cross-continent trek. By the fall of 1804 the expedition had traveled some 1,600 miles up the Missouri River to a point north of what is now Bismarck, North Dakota. With cold weather fast approaching, Lewis and Clark needed a place to spend the winter. They selected a site on the east side of the river near the Mandan village of Mitutanka. On November 3 the explorers began building the winter quarters they named Fort Mandan.

The captains studied their new hosts to determine who were the leaders. Sheheke, whose name in Mandan translates to "coyote," was the most prominent civil chief in Mitutanka. The

region's French traders called him Lè Gros Blanc or Big White because of his large size and comparatively light complexion. (President Thomas Jefferson even suspected that the Mandan were the descendants of a fabled band of Welshmen who supposedly traveled to North America in 1170.) Lewis and Clark ranked Sheheke as one of the most important chiefs and gave him their best gifts--a flag, a peace medal featuring Jefferson's likeness, and a uniform coat and hat.

Jefferson had asked the Corps of Discovery to promote peaceful relations among the various tribes it encountered along the upper Missouri, since warfare would impede trade with them. "In all your intercourse with the natives, treat them in the most friendly and conciliatory manner which their own conduct will admit," the president instructed Lewis. Accordingly, when Lewis and Clark learned that the Mandan and their neighbors the Hidatsa and been fighting with the Arikara, they were ready to act as mediators. An Arikara chief accompanied the captains to the Mandan village, and at the conclusion of a nearly five-hour council meeting with the Mandan and Hidatsa, Lewis and Clark had the participants smoke the peace pipe.

Establishing a lasting peace, however, would not be quite so simple. As Clark came to understand, "the power of the chief is rather the influence of character than the force of authority," and that power "is merely the acquiescence of the warriors in the superior merit of a chief." Individual warriors didn't feel bound to any agreements the leaders made, such as Sheheke's promise to "make a good peace." As a consequence, the difficult task of long-term peacemaking would prove beyond the captains' abilities.

Throughout the winter the Indians brought tools and weapons to the fort for the Corps' blacksmith to repair in exchange for bushels of corn and beans. The Indians often stayed for long visits, of which the captains sometimes grew weary. Lewis revealed his irritation in an entry after a February visit. "I smoked with them, after which they retired, a deportment not common, for they usually pester us with their good company the balance of the day after once being introduced to our apartment."

Sheheke was a frequent visitor and pledged, "If we eat you shall eat, if we Starve you must Starve also." Not long afterward, the Indian leader arrived with his wife and child, and true to his word, had "packed about 100 W. of fine meat on his Squaw for us." In return for toting such a load, she gratefully accepted a small ax. The Corps came to depend on Indian food, for game was scarce during the long, bitterly cold winters.

Early in December Sheheke went to the fort with the welcome news that buffalo had been sighted on the prairie. With subzero temperatures and snow 18 inches deep in some places, Captain Lewis and a party of Corps members set off with the Indians. Patrick Gass noted that the Indians killed 30 or 40 buffalo and the Corps members an additional 11.

On a frigid day in early January 1805, Sheheke dined with the captains and described the country "as far as the high mountains, and on the South Side of the [Yellowstone] River," and provided the news that "the Country is very hilly and the greater part covered with timber, great numbers of beaver." Clark incorporated this information into two maps, "Big White's Map" and his 1805 map of the West.

During the winter of 1804-05, Corps members routinely heard rumors of Sioux attacks and news of their skirmishes with the Mandan and Hidatsa. But before the Corps of Discovery broke camp and resumed its journey, the Arikara sent word that they desired peace with the Mandan. Clark recorded that the Arikara wanted to "settle near [the Mandan] and join them against their common Enemy the Sioux[.] we mentioned this to the Mandan, who observed they had always

wished to be at peace and good neighbors" with the Arikara. Confident that the upper Missouri region was on its way to tranquility, the expedition continued westward on April 7, 1805. The same day a return party of Corps members set off for Washington, D.C., with the captains' notes, journals, and the specimens they had collected. Jefferson had asked Lewis to arrange visits from prominent Indian leaders, so an Arikara war chief also went with the party returning down the-Missouri, on his way to visit the Great White Father.

When the Corps of Discover, returned to Mandan country on its homeward journey in August 1806, the men learned the fragile peace they had brokered had collapsed. Lewis and Clark had planned to return to Washington with Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara chiefs, but rancor among these nations and fear of Sioux attacks kept the Indians from going, despite Clark's repeated offers of presents from the "great father." At a loss, Clark turned to interpreter Rene Jessaume "and told him to use his influence to prevail on one of the chiefs to accompany us ... he informed us. soon after that the big white chief would go if we would take his wife and son and Jessaume's wife and two children." Wasting no time, on the following day, August 17, the Corps of Discovery said farewell to the Indians and resumed the journey to St. Louis. Sheheke and his family left with them. The Mandan believed they would never again see Sheheke, and "many of them cried out aloud" as he departed. The Mandan leader's brother came down from his camp to see his sibling one last time.

Four days later the captains met a French trading party coming up river. The Frenchmen told them that the Arikara chief who had gone east in 1805 had died in Washington. Later that day the expedition reached the Arikara villages. Clark and Sheheke sat down to a council with the Arikara leaders and their Cheyenne visitors. Still hoping to take Indians back with them, Clark kept the news of the chief's death to himself. He invited the Arikara and Cheyenne to send representatives to Washington to meet the Great White Father and receive more gifts. Clark recorded "that several of the chiefs wished to accompany us down to see their great father, but wished to see the chief who went down last summer return first."

Talk turned to the tense situation among the Indians, and Clark took the opportunity to chastise the Arikara chief Grey Eyes for allowing more warfare between his people and the Mandan instead of fighting the warlike Sioux. Tensions rose when another Arikara chief accosted Sheheke and spoke to him in a "loud and threatening tone which caused me to be some what alarmed," Clark wrote. He sternly informed the Arikara that Sheheke was under his protection, and should anyone attempt injury to him, "we Should all die to a man." Abashed, the Arikara leader invited Clark and Sheheke to dinner. Clark accepted but a nervous Sheheke "[s]tuck close to me," he wrote. During dinner, a "long conversation of explanations took place between the Arikara and Mandan chiefs which appeared to be satisfactory on both sides."

As the Corps continued its journey downriver, the Mandan grew bored. On September 6 Clark noted that the "Chief and the Squaws and children are weary of their journey. Children cry etc." They finally arrived at St. Louis on September 23, 1806. Lewis wasted no time in writing to Jefferson, informing the president of his return with the "great Chief of the Mandan nation" who was in "good health and spirits and very anxious to proceed." Jefferson enthusiastically responded, "Tell my friend of Mandan also that I have already opened my arms to receive him. Perhaps while in our neighborhood, it may be gratifying to him and not otherwise to yourself to take a ride to Monticello and see what manner I have arranged the tokens of friendship I have received from his country particularly as well as from other Indian friends: that I am in fact preparing a kind of Indian hall."

After a month of celebrating and organizing in St. Louis, Lewis took Sheheke and headed east.

They reached Washington on December 28 and entered into a whirl of receptions and public engagements, with the Mandan becoming exotic objects of curiosity. At one theatrical event, British diplomat Sir Augustus John Foster noted his observation of Sheheke's attempt to retain a regal bearing in public. During a contortionist's performance, Foster said, the Mandan chief "endeavored as much as he could to hide his laughter [by] pulling and pinching his cheeks and chin but all in vain. ..."

Jefferson had a great interest in Native Americans, believing them "in mind and body equal to the whiteman," as he wrote in 1785. He worked on a compilation of native dialects and met with countless Indian leaders during his presidency. Typically Jefferson greeted his native visitors with a standard welcoming speech, as he did Sheheke on December 30, 1806. The president took the opportunity to press his message of peace between Indian nations and promised that with peace "Your numbers will be increased instead of diminishing, and you will live in plenty and in quiet."

Lewis took the Mandan family with him when he left Washington at the end of March 1807 for Philadelphia, where C.B.J. Fevret de Saint Memin rendered crayon portraits of him and Sheheke. The novelty of visiting the East was ebbing, however, and Sheheke was ready to return to his home on the upper Missouri.

In the summer of 1807 Lewis and Clark assigned Nathaniel Pryor to lead an expedition of 14 soldiers and 23 traders to take the Mandan family home. The journey progressed well until the party arrived at the Arikara villages on September 9. The Arikara, outraged by the belated news of their chief's death in Washington the previous year, were ill-disposed towards the Americans and had again aligned themselves with the Sioux against the Mandan. Pryor reported to Clark that as soon as his party approached the Arikara village, the Indians "fired several guns, the shot of which came very near us."

Pryor succeeded in persuading the Indians to sit in council and managed to forestall an attack. They gave Pryor's party permission to proceed up river to the next Arikara village, but "[t]he Indians followed in a body, using threats and menaces." When they reached the second village, Pryor and his men found "all the Indians were collected on the beach" and "appeared in a violent rage." Some warriors grabbed the boat's mooring line and told the white men they could go no further. Then an Arikara chief boarded Pryor's vessel and communicated that he wanted Sheheke to go ashore with him. Pryor refused. "The Indians now raised a general Whoop" and began shooting. Pryor and his men retreated down river, returning fire with swivel guns, blunderbusses, and small arms. The running battle continued until sunset, when the death of a Sioux leader prompted the Indians to pull back. Nine members of Pryor's party lay wounded, including fellow Corps member George Shannon, who took a ball in the lower leg. Three traders were killed outright; another was mortally wounded. Disheartened, the small band returned to St. Louis.

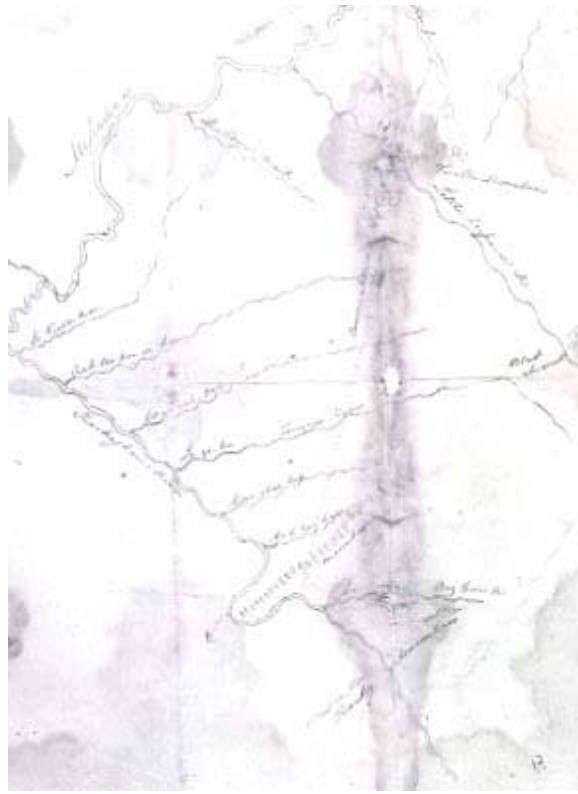
For two years no one made any further attempts to return the Mandan family, who spent most of that time in the St. Louis area. Finally, in 1809 Lewis contracted the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company to do the job for \$7,000. The company's partners included brothers Auguste and Pierre Chouteau, trader Manuel Lisa, Reuben Lewis (Meriwether's brother), and William Clark. In May the company sent a sizable expedition of at least 160 well-equipped mercenaries and traders on 13 keelboats and barges. Except for a minor exchange of threats with a large encampment of Sioux, the flotilla made an uneventful journey, and on September 22 Sheheke and family returned to their village.

According to expedition surgeon Dr. William H. Thomas, the Mandan were pleased to see Sheheke and his family again, and Sheheke's brother hosted a celebratory feast. "An elegant horse was presented to their traveled chief," and his white companions were very amused at Sheheke's conduct. "His splendid uniform and horse furniture, his fine figure, his anxiety to appear to advantage with the contrast when compared with his brother chiefs, who appeared impatient for the presents which they expected to receive from him, were very striking objects," observed Dr. Thomas. Sheheke, however, "was as anxious to retain his property, as they were to receive it. Murmurs took the place of mirth, and on our departure from the village, his popularity was on the decline."

Sheheke's reputation failed to improve over time. Henry Brackenridge, a writer and "curiosity seeker" who ventured up the Missouri with Manuel Lisa in 1811, wrote, "She-he-ke is a fat man, not much distinguished as a warrior, and extremely talkative, a fault much despised amongst the Indians." Talk as he might, his people refused to believe tall tales of his exploits in the East. Other white visitors to the Mandan recorded that Sheheke wanted to return to the white world. Within two years of Brackenridge's visit, reports surfaced that Sheheke had been killed in a battle with Hidatsa. But fur trader F.A. Chardon, operating from Fort Clark, placed the date of Sheheke's death as January 7, 1832, and noted his passing was "regretted by all who knew him."

Sheheke's return had unforeseen, fatal, consequences for Meriwether Lewis. When the federal government refused to reimburse him for the expenses incurred in returning the Mandan family to the upper Missouri, Lewis set off for Washington, D.C., to argue his case in person. He died on the way, under still-mysterious circumstances (see "The Meriwether Lewis Murder Mystery," page 46).

The Lewis and Clark expedition had even graver repercussions for the Indian nations of the west. By opening a pathway to the Pacific Ocean, the Corps of Discovery initiated the beginning of the end for a way of life for Native Americans. Like Sheheke, Indian nations soon found themselves caught between two worlds--and the bitter struggle between them resulted in the near total eclipse of one culture.



*Clark created "Big White's Map" based on information provided by the Mandan chief, who told him the terrain further west was hilly and had plenty of beaver for trapping. By the end of the journey, Clark had produced an astounding collection of maps, one he continued to expand in the years after the expedition.*



*Lewis and Clark gave peace medals featuring a likeness of President Thomas Jefferson to the Indians as gifts.*



*French traders nicknamed the Mandan chief Sheheke "Big White" because of his large size and light complexion.*



*George Catlin's Bird's Eye View of a Mandan Village 1837-39 illustrates the village's center plaza that was used for religious dances and ceremonies. On the periphery by the Medicine Lodge stand four poles with sacrifices of expensive cloth.*



*Among the items Lewis and Clark sent back east in 1805 was a buffalo hide on which a Mandan had depicted the Mandan and Hidatsa battling the Sioux and Arikara.*



**Top:** In 1832 George Catlin painted the O-kee-pa ceremony, an annual four-day event that the Mandan observed to prevent their destruction. Five years later a smallpox epidemic devastated the Indian nations along the upper Missouri River. **Bottom:** That same year Catlin depicted a

*party of Mandan attacking Arikara warriors. Nearly three decades after Lewis and Clark had departed the region, peace between the Indians of the Upper Missouri remained elusive.*

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