



THE NEZ PERCE

How the expedition avoided death thanks to an old woman



THE NEZ PERCE

1. In what health condition did the members of the expedition arrive at the Nez Perce village?
2. What was the Nez Perce's first intention about the white visitors? Explain.
3. Who saved them and why?
4. Explain Watkuweis' story

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Although they were a resourceful and hardy group of frontiers-men, on more than one occasion, the Corps of Discovery had to rely on Native American women for their survival. The most famous example is Sacagawea, who not only saved them from starvation by finding edible foodstuffs in the wild but also ensured their safety with her presence on the expedition; seeing her, the Indians they met knew that theirs was a peaceful mission and therefore did not attack them. However the story of Watkuweis demonstrates another instance when the corps owed their lives to an Indian woman.

- 10 In September 1805, after their perilous crossing of the Bitterroots Mountains, the corps arrived at Weippe Prairie, where they encountered the Nez Perce Indians. Weak with hunger and exhausted by their trek over the mountains, they were more vulnerable than at any other point on the expedition. (They would be more so later, after eating roots and dried fish and then coming down with dysentery.)
- 15 The Nez Perce, who had never before encountered white men, were now faced with a weak and bedraggled group of them. It would have been an easy matter to kill them and take possession of their guns, ammunition and trade goods, thus ensuring the Nez Perce's dominance over other nations, and several of the warriors advocated doing just that.

It was an old woman named Watkuweis who stopped them. Her name meant "Returned from a Faraway Country," and it was an apt description, given her history. As a girl she had been captured by a band of Indians (probably Blackfeet) and taken to Canada, where she was sold to a white trader, who showed her great kindness. She was, in fact, consistently treated well. And after she finally managed to return to her people, she retained nothing but good memories of her years among the whites. Thus, according to Nez Perce oral tradition, as the warriors were discussing the explorers' fate, Watkuweis stepped forward and said, "These are the people who helped me. Do them no hurt."

- 35 Neither Meriwether Lewis nor William Clark ever knew the important role Watkuweis played in their survival at that moment. James Ronda has noted that the warriors had other valid reasons for sparing the explorers' lives and lending them assistance, chiefly the recognition that cooperating with the white men would have greater advantages in trade and obtaining guns than killing them would do. All the same, Watkuweis surely made an impression, as a Nez Perce named Many Wounds later recalled: "She told history about the whites and every Nez Perce listened . . . told how the white people were good to her, treated her with kindness. That is why the Nez Perce never made harm to the Lewis and Clark people. . . . We ought to have a monument to her in this far West. She saved much for the white race."
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Encyclopedia of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

Elin Woodger and Brandon Toropov - 2004

