



The Nez Perce

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How the entire expedition avoided a tragical death thanks to an old woman named Watkuweis.

An elder woman named Watkuweis (which means «returned from a far country») made the difference between life and death for Clark's small contingent. Watkuweis was living in Twisted Hair's camp when Clark arrived and he noted her in his journal as having «formerly been taken by the Minutaries of the North and seen white men». Watkuweis had once been captured by the Blackfeet and taken to what is now Canada. A white trader purchased her and she lived among whites for a number of years. The whites treated her well and after returning to her own people, she remembered their kindness.

Like the Shoshone, the Nez Perce desperately wanted to acquire guns to defend themselves against raiding Blackfeet and other tribes. Killing the weak, starving, and now sick explorers for their weapons would have been easy. But Watkuweis urged the Nez Perce to «do them no hurt». «The explorers were like the people who helped her, and she wanted to help them. The Nez Perce leaders also had an eye on the future trade and complied with their elder's request by welcoming the expedition with famous hospitality.

Sammye J. Meadows, Jana Prewitt, *Lewis and Clark for Dummies*, 2003.



Trouble on the Clearwater, Jim Carson