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Article Summary: Meriwether Lewis, setting out in 1804 to win the allegiance of the western tribes, began with the Oto. Lewis's bargaining tools included an invitation for Chief Petit Voleur to visit President Jefferson in Washington.

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Photographs / Images: Lewis and Clark Council with the Oto and Missouri Indians (*Gass's Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, JK Hosner, ed.)

# LEWIS AND CLARK AMONG THE OTO

BY DONALD JACKSON

**T**O most of the men of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, all the region west of their starting point at St. Louis must have seemed like real Indian country. And yet they would have to push, tow, and sail their boats up the Missouri River for ten weeks before holding their first meeting with an Indian tribe, the Oto of the Platte River valley.

A document not previously published, written by Meriwether Lewis and addressed to the chiefs and warriors of the Oto tribe, provides some new data for an understanding of how Lewis and Clark carried out a vital assignment: winning the allegiance of the western tribes. They practiced first on the Oto.

When Thomas Jefferson began to dream of sending an expedition to the Pacific, our possession of the vast area west of the Mississippi was nowhere in sight. As early as 1783 he had approached George Rogers Clark with the plan; but Clark felt too oppressed by financial problems to

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undertake the trip.<sup>1</sup> American ownership of the region was still only a possibility when, in December, 1802, Jefferson asked the Spanish minister in Washington if his government would "take it badly" if the United States should send a group to explore the West.<sup>2</sup> It would happen, however, that before Jefferson could get congressional approval for the expedition, find a pair of men competent to conduct it, and set the whole scheme afoot, France would cede the immense Louisiana Territory to the United States. Overnight the expedition took on new diplomatic aspects, for now the American government had the ponderous responsibility of befriending, appeasing, and at times subduing the Indian population of the plains and mountains.<sup>3</sup>

Captain Meriwether Lewis began his dealings with the Indians even before he left St. Louis. Aided by his partner William Clark (younger brother of George Rogers Clark), he recruited a delegation of Osage chiefs to visit President Jefferson in Washington. Such junkets to the Capital were crucial to the government's plan for proselyting the western tribes. Bring their most influential men to me, Jefferson said, and we shall show them (1) that we want to be their friends; (2) that they have much to gain through commerce with us; (3) and that we are powerful enough to destroy them, should they not be inclined toward friendliness. Indeed, if the Indians were to observe the power of the United States, they *must* be enticed to the East. Even an Indian unfamiliar with European ways could tell that there was no strength to be observed in the scattering of white settlements along the Mississippi River frontier.

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<sup>1</sup> Jefferson to Clark, December 4, 1803, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and Clark to Jefferson, February 8, 1804, University of Virginia Library.

<sup>2</sup> Yrujo to Cevallos, December 2, 1802, in A. P. Nasatir, editor, *Before Lewis and Clark* (St. Louis, 1952), II, 712-14.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis and Clark were established in their preliminary camp, on the east bank of the Mississippi, while negotiations for the purchase of the Louisiana Territory were going on; but they did not begin to move west until the transaction had been completed.

Jefferson knew this. Speaking particularly of the Osage and Dakota tribes, he said, "With these two powerful nations we must stand well, because in their quarter we are miserably weak."<sup>4</sup> So weak that even a tribe as small as the Oto could hinder and harass westward expansion.

The record of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in its early stages is told mainly in a journal kept by Clark.<sup>5</sup> Lewis's daily journal for that period, if he kept one, has not been located. The expedition left its base camp on May 14, 1804, and "proceeded on under a jentle brease," wrote Clark. They would see many white men—French traders, mostly—as they struggled up the lower courses of the Missouri, but after passing a temporary camp of Kickapoo within the limits of the white settlements, they would pass near no Indian villages until late July.

The exploring party was ten miles above the mouth of the Platte by July 22, stopping at a place they called Camp White Catfish because one of the men had caught such a fish there. It was here that Lewis and Clark decided to attempt their first contact with the Indians of the area. They sent two men "with some tobacco to invite the Otteaus if at their town and Panies [Pawnee] if they saw them, to come and talk with us at our Camp, &c. &c." They thought they would find the Oto village 18 miles due west, and perhaps the Pawnee village a bit farther west.<sup>6</sup>

On July 25 the men returned to say they could find no

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<sup>4</sup> Jefferson to Secretary of Navy Robert Smith, July 13, 1804, in the Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from Clark's journal are in *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-06*, edited by Reuben G. Thwaites, 8 vols. (New York, 1904-1905.)

<sup>6</sup> The permanent earthlodge village of the Oto and part of the Missouri tribe during this period was located on the west bank of the Platte River about a mile above the mouth of the Elkhorn in present day Saunders County. The earthlodge village of the Grand Pawnee band was on the south bank of the Platte near the town of Linwood in present day Butler County.

Indians.<sup>7</sup> So the expedition packed up again and, on July 27, "Set Sale under a gentle breeze from the South and proceeded on. . . ."

Their first contact with the Indians came next day when they met a man from the Missouri tribe—a small group, ethnically related to the Oto and now residing with them. Lewis and Clark sent this man, together with a member of their party, on toward the Oto with an invitation to meet in council higher up the river. Then the expedition pushed on until July 30, when it stopped at Council Bluff (above present Omaha, on the west bank of the river) to await any Indian delegation their messengers might have been able to produce.<sup>8</sup>

Clark wrote on August 2: "at Sunset Mr. Fairfong (*Ottoo interpreter resident with them*) and a pt. [party] of Ottooau & Missourie Nation Came to Camp, among those Indians 6 were Chiefs, (not the principal Chiefs) Capt. Lewis & myself met those Indians & informed them we were glad to see them, and would speak to them tomorrow, Sent them Some roasted meat, Pork flour & meal, in return they sent us Water *millions*. every man on his Guard & ready for any thing."

These were not the top men. Probably with some disappointment, Lewis and Clark made the most of it. On August 3, Clark wrote:

"Mad up a Small preasent for those people in perpotion to their Consiquence, also a package with a Meadle to accompany a Speech for the Grand Chief after Brackfast

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<sup>7</sup> During the winter of 1804-1805, Lewis compiled a statistical study of the Indian nations inhabiting the Territory of Louisiana, in which he estimated that about 300 Missouri and 500 Oto lived together "18 Leagues up the Platte River SE. Side." He said the Oto formerly had lived on the Missouri above the mouth of the Platte, and the Missouri on the Grand River further south. (Thwaites, ed., *Original Journals of Lewis and Clark Expedition* [New York, 1905] VI, 80-113).

<sup>8</sup> It was the custom of these tribes to leave the permanent village before July on one of the two seasonal buffalo hunts and not return until late summer to harvest crops.

we collected those Indians under an awning [awning] of our Main Sail, in presence of our Party paraded & Delivered a long Speech to them expressive of our journey the wishes of our Government, Some advice to them and Directions how they were to conduct themselves. The principal Chief for the Nation being absent, we Sent him the Speech flag Meadel & Some Cloathes."

And to the Little Thief, principal chief of the Oto, they sent the following message:<sup>9</sup>

To the Petit Voleur, or Wear-ruge-nor, the great Chief of the Ottoes, to the Chiefs and Warriors of the Ottoes, and the Chiefs and Warriors of the Missouri nation residing with the Ottoes—

*Children.* Convene from among you the old men of experience; the men, on the wisdom of whose judgement you are willing to risk the future happiness of your nations; and the warriors, to the strength of whose arms you have been taught to look for protection in the days of danger. When in Council tranquilly assembled, reflect on the time past, and that to come; do not deceive yourselves, nor suffer others to deceive you; but like men and warriors devoted to the real interests of their nation, seek those truths; which can alone perpetuate its happiness.

*Children.* Commissioned and sent by the great Chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, we have come to inform you, as we go also to inform all the nations of red men who inhabit the borders of the Missouri, that a great council was lately held between this great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, and your old fathers the French and Spaniards; and that in this great council it was agreed that all the white men of Louisiana, inhabiting the waters of the Missouri and Mississippi should obey the commands of this great chief; he has accordingly adopted them as his children and they now form one common family with us: your old traders are of this description; they are no longer the subjects of France or Spain, but have become the Citizens of the Seventeen great na-

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<sup>9</sup> This document exists only as a transcript sent by General James Wilkinson to the Secretary of War in August, 1805. It is filed in the National Archives, Record Group 107, Letters Received, W-491 (2). Although it is signed by both explorers, the literary style is clearly that of Meriwether Lewis.

tions of America, and are bound to obey the commands of their great Chief the President who is now your only great father.

*Children.* This council being concluded between your old fathers the French and Spaniards, and your great father the Chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, your old fathers the French and Spaniards in compliance with their engagements made in that council, have withdrawn all their troops from all their military posts on the waters of the Mississippi and Missouri, and have Surrendered to our great chief all their fortifications and lands in this country; together with the mouths of all the rivers through which the traders bring goods to the red men on the troubled waters. These arrangements being made, your old fathers the French and Spaniards have gone beyond the great lake towards the rising Sun, from whence they never intend returning to visit their former red-children in this quarter; nor will they, or any other nation of white men, ever again display their flag on the troubled waters; because the mouths of all those rivers are in the possession of the great Chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, who will command his war chiefs to suffer no vessel to pass—but those which sail under the protection of his flag, and who acknowledge his Supreme authority.

*Children.* From what has been said, you will readily perceive, that the great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, has become your only father; he is the only father; he is the only friend to whom you can now look for protection, or from whom you can ask favours, or receive good councils, and he will take care that you shall have no just cause to regret this change; he will serve you, & not deceive you.

*Children.* The great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, impelled by his parental regard for his newly adapted children on the troubled waters, has sent us out to clear the road, remove every obstruction, and to make it the road of peace between himself and his red children residing there; to enquire into the Nature of their wants, and on our return to inform Him of them, in order that he may make the necessary arrangements for their relief, he has sent by us, one of his flags, a medal and some cloathes, such as he dresses his war chiefs with, which he directed should be given to the great chief of the Ottoe nation, to be kept by him, as a pledge of the sincerity with which he now offers you the hand of friendship.

*Children.* Know that the great chief who has thus offered you the hand of unalterable friendship, is the great Chief of the Seventeen great Nations of America, whose cities are as numerous as the stars of the heavens, and whose people like the grass of your plains, cover with their Cultivated fields and wigwams, the wide Extended country, reaching from the western borders of the Mississippi, to the great lakes of the East, where the land ends and the Sun rises from the face of the great waters.

*Children.* Know that this great chief, as powerfull as he is just, and as beneficent as he is wise, always entertaining a sincere and friendly disposition towards the red people of America, has commanded us his war chiefs to undertake this long journey, which we have so far accomplished with great labour & much expence, in order to council with yourselves and his other red-children on the troubled waters, to give you his good advice; to point out to you the road in which you must walk to obtain happiness. He has further commanded us to tell you that when you accept his flag and medal, you accept therewith his hand of friendship, which will never be withdrawn from your nation as long as you continue to follow the councils which he may command his chiefs to give you, and shut your ears to the councils of Bad birds.

*Children.* The road in which your great father and friend, has commanded us to tell you and your nation that you must walk in order to enjoy the benefit of his friendship, is, that you are to live in peace with all the *white men*, for they are his children; neither wage war against the *red men* your neighbours, for they are equally his children and he is bound to protect them. Injure not the persons of any traders who may come among you, neither destroy nor take their property from them by force; more particularly those traders who visit you under the protection of your great fathers flag. Do not obstruct the passage of any boat, pirogue, or other vessel, which may be ascending or decending the Missouri River, more especially such as may be under cover of your great fathers flag neither injure any red or white man on board such vessels as may possess the flag, for by that signal you may know them to be good men, and that they do not intend to injure you; they are therefore to be treated as friends, and as the common children of one great father, (the great chief of the Seventeen grat nations of America.



*Children.* Do these things which your great father advises and be happy. Avoid the councils of bad birds; turn on your heel from them as you would from the precipice of an high rock, whose summit reached the Clouds, and whose base was washed by the gulph of human woes; lest by one false step you should bring upon your nation the displeasure of your great father, the great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, who could consume you as the fire consumes the grass of the plains. The mouths of all the rivers through which the traders bring goods to you are in his possession, and if you displease him he could at pleasure shut them up and prevent his traders from coming among you; and this would of course bring all the Calamities of want upon you; but it is not the wish of your great father to injure you, on the contrary he is now pursuing the measures best Calculated to insure your happiness.

*Children.* If you open your ears to the councils of your great father, the great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, & strictly pursue the advice which he has now given you through us, he will as soon as possible after our return, send a store of goods to the mouth of the river Platte<sup>10</sup> to trade with you for your pelteries and furs; these goods will be furnished you annually in a regular manner, and in such quantities as will be equal to your necessities. You will then obtain goods on much better terms than you have ever received them heretofore.

*Children.* As it will necessarily take some time before we can return, and your great father send and establish this store of goods; he will permit your old traders who reside among you, or who annually visit you, to continue to trade with you, provided they give you good Council.

*Children.* We are now on a long journey to the head of the Missouri; the length of this journey compelled us to load our boat and perogues with provisions, we have therefore brought but very few goods as presents for yourselves or any other nations which we may meet on our way. We

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<sup>10</sup> At this time, the government was engaged in a program of trade with the eastern Indians, having established "factories" or trading houses in several key locations. These factories, controlled by the Secretary of War through an establishment called the Office of Indian Trade, never extended further west than Fort Osage near present Kansas City, Missouri. None was built at the mouth of the Platte, and by the 1820's the whole program collapsed under pressure from private trading interests.



Lewis and Clark Council with the Oto and Missouri Indians  
(From a facsimile drawing of an original illustration, as published in  
J. K. Hosner, editor, **Gass's Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition**)

are no traders, but have come to consult you on the subject of your trade; to open the road and prepare the way, in order that your nation may hereafter receive a regular and plentiful supply of goods.

*Children.* We are sorry that your absence from your town prevented our seeing your great chief and yourselves; it would have given us much pleasure to have spoken to you personally; but as the cold season is fast advancing, and we have a long distance to travel, we could not wait your return.

*Children.* If your great Chief wishes to see your great father and speak with him, he can readily do so. Let your chief engage some trader who may reside with you the ensuing winter, to take him and four of his principal chiefs or warriors with him to St. Louis when he returns thither on the ensuing spring; your great chief may take with him also an interpreter of his own choice, who shall be well paid for his services by your great father's Chiefs; the trader will also be well paid for his services by the Commandant at St. Louis. The commandant at St. Louis will furnish you with the necessary number of horses, and all other means to make your journey from thence to your great father's town Comfortable and safe.

*Children.* In order that the Commandant at St. Louis, as well as your great father, and all his chiefs may know you, you must take with you, the flag, the medal and this parole which we now send you. When your great father and his chiefs see those things, they will know that you have opened your ears to your great father's voice, and have come to hear his good Councils.

*Our oldest son the Wear-ruge-nor.* If the situation of your nation is such that you cannot with propriety leave them, you may send some of your principal men not exceeding five, to see your great father and hear his words. You must give them authority to act for you and your Nation. Your great father will receive them as his children, give them his good councils, and send them back loaded with presents for their nation; your nation would then see that all we have told you is true, and that the great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America never sends his red children from him to return with empty hands to their village.

*Our oldest son the Wear-ruge-nor.* Whomsoever you send to your great father must carry the flag and this pa-

role, in order that your great father and his chiefs may know that they have come to see them by our invitation. Send by them also all the flags and medals which you may have received from your old fathers the French and Spaniards, or from any other nation whatever, your father will give you new flags and new medals of his own in exchange for those which you send him. It is not proper since you have become the children of the great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America, that you should wear or keep those emblems of attachment to any other great father but himself, nor will it be pleasing to him if you continue to do so.

*Children.* We hope that the great Spirit will open your ears to our councils, and dispose your minds to their observance. Follow these councils and you will have nothing to fear, because the great Spirit will smile upon your nation, and in future ages will make you to outnumber the trees of the forest.

Signed and sealed this 4th day of August 1804 at the council Bluff, by us, the friends of all the red-men, and the war chiefs of the great chief of the Seventeen great nations of America.

Meriwether Lewis Captn.  
1st U.S. Regt. Infantry.

William Clark  
Capt. on the Missouri Expedition<sup>11</sup>

Lewis might have saved himself the trouble of writing down this speech. Little Thief, principal chief of the Oto, lost no time in setting out to find the exploring party when he had returned to his village and heard the significance of the message as explained to him by "Mr. Fairfong." He and seven other high-ranking men of the Oto and Missouri tribes overtook Lewis and Clark on August 18, hoping to enlist the explorers' aid in bringing about a truce with the Omaha. Lewis "explained the Speech Sent to the Nation," but was unable to mediate a peace with the Omaha because they were away from their village at the time. Clark reported, however, that he had his men set fire to the prairie

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<sup>11</sup> This line is in the handwriting of Wilkinson.

grass as a signal "to bring the Mahars & Soues if any were near, this being the useal Signal." None appeared, so the Oto went home.

In the spring of 1805, Little Thief went down to St. Louis with two other Oto, a Missouri, and three Republican Pawnee,<sup>12</sup> intent on accepting the invitation to visit Washington. Here they ran afoul of army red tape; permission for their journey had to be obtained from Washington and the mails were agonizingly slow. Finally, James Wilkinson, commanding general of the army and governor of the new Louisiana Territory, wrote to his superior, the Secretary of War: "The Chiefs of three Nations sent hither by Capt. Lewis last spring, are still here waiting *patiently* for permission to visit the President, & I expect will set out about the 5th of October, should you not oppose it. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

The longer they waited, the larger the delegation grew. Government men in St. Louis thought it wise to send along some of the belligerent Indians from the Mississippi Valley as well as the western ones. When the party eventually set out for Washington in October, 1805, it contained twenty-seven chiefs and warriors representing the Sauk and Fox, Ioway, Osage, Oto, Missouri, Miami, Potawatomi, Kansas, Sioux, Kickapoo, and the Republican band of the Pawnee.

Little Thief was unfortunately not among the group. He had become very ill, along with the principal chief of the Arikara. In Wilkinson's words: "In the Month of September these Men fell sick & were so sorely afflicted, that

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<sup>12</sup> The Republican band, at one time part of the Grand band, of the Pawnee were one of the four bands making up the Pawnee tribe. One of the earliest references to the Republican band was in 1777 when they were listed as one of the tribes receiving presents at the Spanish post at St. Louis. (Louis Houck, *Spanish Regime in Missouri* [Chicago, 1909], I, 143.)

In the summer of 1806 Lt. Zebulon M. Pike visited the village of the Republican Pawnee on the south bank of the Republican River in present day Webster County, Nebraska.

<sup>13</sup> All of Gov. James Wilkinson's letters dealing with the deputation to Washington are in *Territorial Papers of the United States*, edited and compiled by Clarence Edwin Carter (Washington, 1934- ). This quotation is from Vol. XIII, p. 183.

their Lives were despaired of—They had acquired a state of feeble convalescence when the deputation . . . was preparing to March, yet they were not only too weak to sit on Horseback, but yielding to the prejudices of superstition, they charged their afflictions to their abandonment of their Country, and clamoured loudly & incessantly to be sent back agreeably to the promise of Capt. Lewis made to them. . .”<sup>14</sup>

General Wilkinson started a detachment up the Missouri with the two ailing chiefs. Later the Arikara recovered and eventually visited President Jefferson in Washington,<sup>15</sup> but the ministrations of American physicians in St. Louis had proved of no aid to Little Thief of the Oto. A few miles up the river, he died.

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<sup>14</sup> Wilkinson to Secretary of War, October 29, 1805. *Territorial Papers*, XIII, 355.

<sup>15</sup> The Arikara chief died before he could return home from the East coast.

For the death of the Oto chief, see *Territorial Papers*, XIII, 247.