

Sacagawea

Stolen!

by Karla Akins

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To my precious granddaughters, Abbey, Lauren, Trinity, Avery and Maggie, who are privileged to call themselves Native Americans: Choctaw, Cherokee, Miami and more. You have inherited a part of this nation's history I wish I could. How very proud I am to call you my girls.

And to my children, Melissa, Jesse, Noah, Isaiah and Isaac—Native Americans because I married your very handsome, wise and loving, Native American father.

*“May the Warm Winds of Heaven
Blow softly upon your house.
May the Great Spirit
Bless all who enter there.
May your Mocassins
Make happy tracks
in many snows,
and may the Rainbow
Always touch your shoulder.”
--Cherokee Blessing*

Chapter 1

AD 1809

“Mama, tell me again about [Man-With-Red-Hair](#).”

Sacagawea bathed her young son’s brown shoulders in the sparkling waters of the Missouri River and fought back tears.

“Man-With-Red-Hair is good, strong and kind. He will take good care of you, Pompey, and teach you the ways of the white man.”

“*Tatis* is a white man.”

“Yes, your Papa is a white man. And so are you.”

Pompey held out his golden brown arms and looked at each of them. “My skin is not like *Tatis*’ skin.”

“It is your blood that is white, Pompey. It is half white and half Hidatsa. That makes your blood very special.”

“But when I bleed, my blood is red.”

“When you are older, you will understand more.” Sacagawea sprinkled his face with river water to distract her inquisitive son from his questions.

Six-year-old Pompey splashed his mother and threw hands full of water to the sky. He did not understand that he would soon leave this homeland to live far away in St. Louis. He had never seen a city, a building, or a school. Here in the village, his days were filled with running free, sliding down hills with [river otters](#), chasing [prairie dogs](#), and pretending to be a Hidatsa warrior. Soon, he would say good-bye to forests of [cottonwoods](#), wild prairies of [buffalo grass](#) and bushes of wild grapes and berries to start a new way of life with Man-With-Red-Hair. He would go to school, learn to speak and read English, and dress in white man’s clothes. Sacagawea knew that Pompey would

need to know the white man's ways to be a successful warrior. She wanted him to know the things in the books that Man-With-Red-Hair knew, and draw the marks that made his name.

Sacagawea chased her naked son, laughing and teasing, up the bank and toward the Hidatsa village where she lived with her sister, Otter Woman, and their French-speaking husband, Toussaint Charbonneau. From the top of the hill, Sacagawea spotted thin lines of smoke dancing in graceful rings from the old [Fort Mandan](#) built by the [Corps of Discovery](#). Abandoned by the explorers after their [Great Journey](#), she now shared its rooms with Charbonneau, Pompey and Otter Woman. Sacagawea's husband had adopted the ways of the Hidatsa and acted very little like Man-With-Red-Hair. He liked sleeping on the ground, wearing Hidatsa clothes and living the Hidatsa ways.

Pompey rushed into the cabin and scrambled onto a bunk along the wall where his mother's [basket](#) of special things was kept. He rifled through the little vessel and pulled out a paper with scratches on it that only his father could read. But Sacagawea knew the contents, and had pretended to read it to her son many times. She didn't want Pompey to know how little she could do with papers and books compared to his father.

“Read me the letter, *Igá*.”

Sacagawea smiled and took the ragged note from Pompey's hand. “Mama. Say ‘Mama,’ Pompey. I'm your Mama when we go to St. Louis, remember?”

“Mama, read me the letter.” Pompey bounced on the top bunk.

“When you put on your [ihoisi](#), and you are completely dressed, I will read it to you.”

Pompey jumped off the bunk and ran to his fresh set of clothes atop the pallet of [buffalo blankets](#) where he slept. He dressed hurriedly while his mother fingered the letter tenderly with her long brown fingers. She held it to her nose and tried to catch the scent of Man-With-Red-Hair, but five years of time and humidity had erased that trace of her kind friend.

Pompey hopped across the room to where his mother sat on a pallet of furs by the fireplace. Living in the fort was different than living in the [earth lodges](#) she'd grown up in as a Hidatsa

maiden. There, the fire was in the middle of the room. She never understood why the white men put their [fire in the corner](#).

Otter Woman ran into the cabin carrying a basket of [wild blueberries](#). Her teeth and mouth were dark blue with stains and Sacagawea put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. Otter Woman must have been hungry.

“Where is *Tatis*?” Pompey hugged Otter Woman’s legs.

Otter Woman cleared her throat to catch Sacagawea’s attention and shook her head. “He is busy. Leave him alone now.”

Sacagawea understood and motioned for Pompey to come. “Sit here, Pompey, and I will read the letter.”

Pompey bounced back to his mother and leaned against her while she pretended to read the letter Man-With-Red-Hair had written to her husband:

“Dear Charbonneau,

You spent a long time with me on my journey and your woman who accompanied you that long, dangerous, and fatiguing route to the Pacific Ocean and back deserved a greater reward for her attention and services on that route than we had in our power to give her...

As to your little Son (my boy Pomp) you well know my fondness of him and my anxiety to take him and raise him as my own child. If you accept either of my offers, bring down your Son and your woman, Janey, to take care of the boy until I get him. Wishing you and your family great success & with anxious expectations of seeing my little dancing boy, Baptiste, I shall remain your Friend, William Clark”

Pompey asked the same questions he’d always asked when his mother read the letter. “Who is Janey?”

Sacagawea smiled. “That is what Man-With-Red-Hair called me. It was his white man name for me.”

“Who is the dancing boy?” Pompey teased his mother, knowing full-well the answer.

Sacagawea kissed Pompey on the nose. “Man-With-Red-Hair always called you Pompey because of the way you bounced and danced on my back when I carried you. Your Christian name from your papa is Jean-Baptiste. But we’ve always called you Pompey.”

“Man-With-Red-Hair likes me?”

Sacagawea nodded. “His heart is full of *kidesi*—much love for you.”

A shadow filled the doorway and Sacagawea jumped up to hide the letter.

“Are you reading that blasted letter to my boy again?” Charbonneau staggered across the room in three strides and slapped the basket off the bunk. “What have I told you about reading that letter? I ought to burn it right now.”

Before Charbonneau could pick up the little scrap of paper, Otter Woman quickly scooped it up and hid it in her dress. She knew it was one of her sister’s most valuable treasures. Unable to find it, Charbonneau turned to vent his rage toward Pompey. Sacagawea picked Pompey up to shield him.

Otter Woman stood between Charbonneau and her sister. “You are sick again with *midiaui*.”

Charbonneau lifted his fist but Otter Woman ducked, and he stumbled across the room and fell in the doorway. Otter Woman stood over him with her hands on her hips. “Get out of here until you are empty of the spirit drink. I’ll not have you hitting that boy. It is bad medicine to hit your own flesh.”

Hidatsa women owned the homes they lived in. They were taught to be strong caretakers and defenders of tribe’s children, and Otter Woman was as much a mother to Pompey as Sacagawea.

“A mother’s sister is your mother,” Sacagawea told Pompey many times. It was the Hidatsa way.

Charbonneau let out a loud snore.

He was asleep in the doorway.

Otter Woman shook her head and mumbled in her native Shoshone tongue. “I don’t like that white man drink that makes men mean and sleepy. Now there will be no meat for supper.”

It was the Hidatsa man’s job to care for the horses and bring home meat.

Sacagawea hugged Otter Woman. “Thank you for saving us.” She spoke in low, Shoshone tones that Pompey could not understand. “We do not need meat when we have each other, my sister.”

Sacagawea didn’t want her son to be afraid of his father’s sleeping body in the doorway. “Oh look, Pompey. Papa is playing a sleeping game because it’s very hot outside. Would you like to play a different kind of sleeping game with me until the sky is cool again?” Sacagawea tried to make her voice sound happy as she carried her son past his father and out of the room. She looked back at Otter Woman who motioned for them to go. Sacagawea challenged Pompey to a race to the grove of cottonwood trees by the river.

“I can beat you to the trees, Pompey, want to see?”

“No you can’t!” Pompey ran with his little chest out and his arms and legs pumping. Sacagawea ran behind and let Pompey reach the grove before she did. Sacagawea collapsed into the cool grass under the trees.

“I won! I won!” Pompey cheered.

“You are a great warrior, my son.” Sacagawea tried to catch her breath.

Pompey sat beside his mother and leaned against a giant tree. For a silent moment they looked across the glistening waters of the Missouri River and listened to the song of the trees dancing in the wind. Sacagawea gained peace from their gentle whispers.

Pompey, who couldn’t stay silent for long, broke through the solitude with a pleading voice. “Mama, tell me again the story of your journey with Man-With-Red-Hair.”

Sacagawea kissed Pompey on the forehead. “Oh, Pompey, how many times must I tell it? You know it so well, you can tell it to me now.”

“But I like it better when you tell it. Please? I will be a quiet child if you tell it.”

Sacagawea looked down at her handsome boy whose pleading eyes always made her catch her breath. Every time she looked at him her heart jumped with an aching kind of love she couldn’t understand. Her son was her world. And she had a difficult time resisting his requests.

She sat Pompey on her lap and rocked him side to side in her arms. “If you close your eyes I will tell you. Will you close your eyes now?”

A delicate summer breeze wafted across the river and made the trees whisper. Its languid caress brushed against Pompey’s eyelashes and he closed his eyes as his mother told the story of Man-With-Red-Hair and the Big Dog.

“I was your age when Otter Woman and I were stolen from our Shoshone parents while gathering food among the berries. I screamed for my mother. I screamed for my father. But when I screamed for my brothers and no one came, I knew that they could not hear me. And I was so very afraid...”