

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO SACAGAWEA? THE DEBATE BETWEEN GRACE HEBARD (1861-1936) AND BLANCHE SCHROER (1907-1998)¹

by

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What happened to Sacagawea after the Lewis and Clark expedition? Did she die in 1812 at Fort Manuel in what is now South Dakota, or in 1884 at Fort Washakie, Wyoming? Was she 25 years old, or 97, when she died?²

Grace Hebard and Blanche Schroer dedicated much of their lives to researching Sacagawea's life. They were both born in Iowa and both lived for many decades in Wyoming. They were intelligent, independent, driven, articulate scholars. Both women believed in following their inclinations in lifestyle regardless of exterior conventions. Furthermore, each was certain she was right about what happened to Sacagawea, even though they held opposing positions on the subject.

Hebard believed that she could prove that Sacagawea died and was buried at Ft. Washakie as an old woman, while Schroer believed that she could prove that Sacagawea died and was buried at Ft. Manuel just a few years after the expedition.

Schroer and Hebard were not alone in this debate. Two centuries after the Lewis and Clark expedition, these two opposing positions continue to provide fodder for journal articles, books, and letters to the editor. What makes the debate between Schroer and Hebard interesting is their personal histories.

Between the two of them, Hebard and Schroer represent 137 years of United States history. The time and place in which each of these women lived played a key role in her choice of research topic and the interpretation of the data she collected.

Hebard was born in 1861, just as the Civil War was beginning. She

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died in 1936, shortly before World War II became a reality. Schroer was born in 1907, just as the Industrial Revolution was taking hold, and died in 1998 in a world of globalization and Internet connections. Through the years, our ideas about the meaning of the western territory and about Native Americans changed significantly. Hebard and Schroer's writings provide us with a window into those changes in our thinking as they took place.

Grace Hebard was born in Clinton, Iowa, where her father was a Congregationalist missionary. He died when Grace was a young girl. Her mother raised Grace and her three siblings alone. She did well in her home-schooled lessons and went on to the State University of Iowa, according to Scharff, "majoring in engineering and gaining a reputation on campus as an athlete, scholar, and ardent supporter of women's rights. She graduated with a B.S. in 1882, the first woman to earn a bachelor's in science at that institution"³. She moved to Cheyenne that same year with her mother, brothers and sister. Over the years she obtained both a Master's degree and a Ph.D., accomplishing this primarily through correspondence. Hebard moved to Laramie in 1891. She became a central figure in Wyoming politics and academics over the years.⁴

Blanche Schroer was born in Gilbertville, Iowa. Her father was a horse-and-buggy doctor until he joined the Indian Department in 1917. The family lived first on the Ute Reservation in Colorado, then on the Winnebago Sioux Reservation in Nebraska. In 1928 the family moved to Fort Washakie, Wyoming.

She attended one year of college at Wayne College. Then, she said, she "... entered that select college of self-education, limited to those who are so interested in so many things they become fanatical readers. I believe too much formal education may stifle creativity and, having no professors to ape, I was forced to do everything my way. I have been blessed-or cursed-with an intensely curious mind-and curiosity is what set me off on the Sacagawea search."⁵

Hebard and Schroer met in person briefly in Ft. Washakie sometime in the 1920s.⁶ Hebard was interviewing some Shoshone Indians about their knowledge of Sacagawea's existence on the reservation. Schroer took notes for some of Hebard's interviews. At the time, Schroer subscribed to Hebard's theory that Sacagawea had died right there on the

reservation. Later on, she came to a different conclusion and spent the next sixty years of her life searching for data to prove Hebard wrong. The disagreement could hardly be characterized as a personal one, since the women only had one or two face to face encounters. Much of what we know about the disagreement is recorded in letters Schroer wrote to historians, editors of journals and newspapers, and friends, along with a few published articles. These letters and articles were written after Hebard's death.

According to Hebard, Sacagawea left her husband Toussaint Charbonneau after the expedition because he was abusive to her. She wandered, unknown, for some time and finally married a Comanche named Jerk Meat. She had five children with him. Later he died and she moved to the Wind River reservation with two of her sons, Bazil and Battez. There she was known as Porivo, or also simply as Bazil's mother. In 1883, Reverend John Roberts came to Wind River as a missionary for the Episcopal Church. When Porivo died the following year, he buried her in the cemetery with a marker inscribed "Bazil's mother." When Hebard visited the reservation some years later in search of Sacagawea, he remembered the old woman he had buried and wondered if perhaps she might have been Sacagawea. Hebard concluded that Battez, Porivo's son, was truly Baptiste, the son Sacagawea had with Toussaint Charbonneau.

She interviewed many Shoshone on the reservation about their memories of Porivo. She transcribed their testimonies and asked them to sign them as proof that they were telling the truth. These testimonies, along with many passages quoted from published accounts of travelers during Sacagawea's time, served as the core of Hebard's argument that Porivo was indeed Sacagawea. She published her findings in 1932 in a book titled *Sacajawea, Guide and Interpreter of Lewis and Clark*.⁷

Schroer believed that Hebard was patently mistaken. She describes the moment she realized this, in a passage in a letter to the editor of folio:

What qualifies me to speak up about Hebard's attempt to establish Porivo as Sacagawea during her many Wind River visits? I was there before they ended and I knew the old Shoshones who testified for her. For too long a time I **accepted**

her revisionist theory. In retrospect I shudder at my youthful gullibility.

Since 1928 when my father, Dr. D.A. Moore, was put in charge of the Fort Washakie hospital I have—except for brief intervals—lived on or near the Wind River reservation. As bookkeeper-clerk at the McGuire Post Trading I proudly directed tourists to what I firmly believed was “Sacajawea’s” burial place. Then, after years of feeling resentment when visitors sometimes accused me of spreading false history, I set out to prove them wrong. I began by asking old Shoshones how and when they first learned that Porivo was actually Sacajawea.

They invariably answered that they hadn’t known it until Hebard told them. Some added that Porivo had never mentioned it and had never been known by the name “Sacajawea” or anything close. This jolted me into checking further. The lightening bolt came when I learned that Rev. John Roberts, Episcopal missionary, and Grace Hebard, Wyoming University librarian, had, twenty years-plus after Porivo’s death, given her a new name: Sacajawea. Apparently this unwarrantable act was the bad seed that sprouted the first local assumption that old Porivo was the expedition heroine. The news spread like a noxious weed and only recently does the irradiation of this almost century-old blight on a great era of history seem imminent.⁸

Schroer followed this discovery with nearly sixty years of research. She wrote to libraries, archives, historians, descendants of informants, anyone she could think of who might have information with which to document her ideas. She came to the conclusion (supported by historians such as Irving Anderson, Donald Jackson, Gary Moulton and Ronald Taber) that Sacagawea had died on December 20, 1812, in Ft. Manuel in the territory now known as South Dakota. She based this on the journal entry made by John Luttig on December 20, 1812, which states “...this Evening the wife of Charbonneau, a Snake Squaw, died of a putrid fever she was a good and the best woman in the fort, age abt 25 years she left a fine infant girl...”⁹ and also on Clark’s entry in his account book for the

period 1825-1828. He wrote, "SE CAR JA WE AU DEAD."¹⁰ Therefore, the old Shoshone woman buried at Ft. Washakie could not possibly be Sacagawea. Hebard's theory was nothing more than a case of mistaken identity.¹¹

Schroer's particular contributions to the debate are twofold. First, she insisted on sticking to the facts, such as they were known. Gary Moulton placed her, along with Irving Anderson and E.G. Chuinard, in the category of historians who presented an "undramatized view of the woman [Sacagawea]."¹²

Schroer chafed over the glorification of Sacagawea. In a letter to her brother Charles Moore, dated July 10, 1995, she writes,

"Dear Charles,

Concerning the responsibilities I'm still struggling to keep my head above water but I'll risk drowning by writing an off-the-cuff note. Worse, you'll have to take the brunt of my having just read Editor Newton's eulogy at the dedication of the phony DAR Sac monument [quote], "... we are standing on the ground made sacred by her tiny feet." How most people love to worship an idol! Newton was totally ignorant of the facts. The old camp follower, Porivo, was more honest than Newton. She had never claimed to be Sac or to have traveled west of the Rockies.

Another Sac worshiper effused (if there is such a verb) by writing, "Bronzed, barefoot, yet patron saint. The keys of Empire in her hand." Suffragette Susan B. Anthony said she pitied the woman who was unable to worship at Sac's shrine. At the 1904 Portland fair a male poet published a long poem featuring this travesty:

Standing on that snowy hight,
The guide who led the men aright,
Was that barefoot Shoshone girl.

Hebard bragged of "following her tiny feet from birth to her

death at age one hundred.”

The fact is that the Indians were a wandering tribe long before they headed for this continent. Because of this and their long, hard trek from Asia to the northwest, nature accomodated them by increasing the size of their only conveyance – FEET. The callouses on Sac’s sole would probably have weighed more than the entire foot of a white woman of her time. Without question, the Sac Cult chose Tiny Feet as its logo. It seemed to make no difference whether they had in mind the authentic Sacagawea or Porivo.”¹³

Second, Schroer had direct access to information from Shoshone Indians on the Wind River reservation that seriously called into question the validity of Hebard’s data. In a transcription of an interview with Jennie Martinez in 1954, when Martinez was 92 years old, she writes:

“Me: Did you ever check Porivo being Sac when the white people said she was famous since, as you said, your mother’s visits continued with Porivo at the Fort though you saw little of her there?

Jennie: Why, I asked my mother if Porivo had ever discussed being Sac. with her any time and she said Sac never had mentioned it.

Blanche: When did you hear of it?

Jennie: I never heard the word Sac. or knew about the L + C trip till the white men talked about it long after P. died.”¹⁴

Blanche took this to mean that any testimonies collected by Hebard must be tainted by her own comments to the Shoshone. In other words, she believed there was no oral tradition of Sacagawea living on the Wind River reservation until after Grace Hebard or others suggested that possibility.

She argued that Hebard had constructed her theory about Sacagawea based on tenuous connections between data sources and testimony. As she related in an interview with Marie Webster Weisbrod, “My first interview was in 1929 when I talked to an ancient Shoshone who had known Hebard and the woman named Porivo whose grave was identified as Sacagawea’s. He said, “Hebard eeshump,” his word for liar.”¹⁵

In a letter she wrote to the Department of History, Jefferson City, Montana, Schroer described her experience as a stenographer for Hebard:

As a very young girl, visiting in Wyoming, I did some stenographic work for Hebard when she was taking the ridiculous testimony for her book SACAJAWEA in which she attempted to establish old Porivo as the heroine. The Shoshones just laughed and mumbled “Eeshump” (liar) when they signed the contrived tales. Many of the testimonial letters were created on the spot by an amused interpreter.¹⁶

When Blanche sifted through Hebard’s papers collected at the University of Wyoming, she found several documents that seem to prove that Hebard attempted to validate her theory in unethical ways. For example, this letter from Mrs. Albert Tweed¹⁷ to Grace Hebard, dated October 6th, 1926:

Dear Mrs. Hebard:

In thanking you for the paper you sent to me, I wish to speak of the article in regard to your writing a history of which you have been making a tour collecting material for the same, I truly hope you every success in you work, and I am only too glad to furnish you with any thing I can in regard to the same as I feel such an undertaking is something worthy of appreciation and hoping you will accept my very best thoughts, and wishes in respect to the same, and now in respect to the article I signed, which you wrote, I would like in the very best and kindest way refer in respect to statements you had written which were very positive statements in connection to what My Grandma was supposed to have made to me personally, and you

remember I scratched them out with a pen in the Noble Hotel Lobby, you making the remark to me, "Scratch ahead I have no Feeling" I said at that time "I could not sign such positive statements as that for it would be a false statement on my side to do so, as My Grandmother did not say those things to me," I then remodeled that article leaving the history of my Grandmother but telling you again just what I had told you while sitting at my home, which was this "As a child I recalled my Grandmother speaking the name of the Bird Woman, also I could recall her going to some squaws teepee and talking to her, this squaw seemed to be quite elderly if I could remember correctly; and after growing larger and studying history I studied of course about the woman who led the Lewis and Clark Expedition; then these late years after the hunt started with you people to locate this Indian woman called Sacajawae and you tried connecting the name of the Bird woman to her, trying to prove if they one and the same, I then have often wondered if the Shoshoni Indian woman Grandma visited in the teepee could have been the same, but remember this is only my imagination when grown to womanhood connected with the little I remembered as a child of under Twelve, being Twelve years of age at the time My Grandmother died.¹⁸

Apparently Hebard persisted in trying to convince Mrs. Tweed to revise her story, because Mrs. Tweed then has this to say to her in a letter dated July 17th 1929:

Dear Dr. Hebard:

I received your letter in which you told me of the Batism of some Indians, and asking me if that was my grandparents. Yes it is, and my Grandmothers name was Sarah Matilda Trumbull Irwin, and my sister was named for my Grandmother. Now Dr. Hebard I can not recall any such statement from me that I could revise anything at all, and though I am not wanting to act rude in the least, but I am absoulutely firm in my

statement, I will not make any statements in any regard in the least concerning Sacajawea, as I was a mere child at the time of her history with my Grandmother, am sorry you cannot get the information desired to complete your history, but I know nothing, and as for Sunday interviews I absolutely will not have them, I with my husband work all week at the Court House and we are entitled to Sunday for ourselves and I will not interfere with my plans for any one on those days, we make our plans and are seldom at home on Sunday, so kindly do not bother us at that time.

Yours respectfully,
Mrs. Albert Tweed¹⁹

In view of these documents, one wonders why Grace Hebard was so convinced that she needed to prove Sacagawea had died at an old age in Wyoming. Part of the answer may reside in Hebard's long-time involvement with the woman suffrage movement.

In 1902, a writer by the name of Eva Emory Dye published a book titled "The Conquest", which was her story about Sacagawea. She and Hebard were contemporaries and shared an interest in Sacajawea, as they called the Shoshone girl.

As Ronald Taber wrote in 1967, "The suffragettes had a penchant for seeking out strong women of the past to whom they could point with pride. Pocahontas, Molly Pitcher, and Susan B. Anthony... were the objects of worshipful adulation, but Sacagawea was to exceed them all as an image of perfect womanhood."²⁰

Here's how Mrs. Dye describes how she came to write about Sacagawea:

I struggled along as best I could with the information I could get, trying to find a heroine... I traced down every old book and scrap of paper, but still was without a real heroine. Finally, I came upon the name of Sacajawea and I screamed, "I have found my heroine!"

I then hunted up every fact I could find about Sacajawea. Out of a few dry bones I found in the old tales of the trip I created Sacajawea and made her a real living entity. For months I dug and scraped for accurate information about this wonderful Indian maid...

The world snatched at my heroine, Sacajawea... The beauty of that faithful Indian woman with her baby on her back, leading those stalwart mountaineers and explorers through the strange land, appealed to the world.²¹

Sacagawea became an icon for the suffragist movement. Members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) erected statues of her, raised funds through pledges in memory of her, and many speeches for the cause alluded to her as the heroic woman guide of the male expedition.

Here is one quotation from a speech given by Dr. Anna Howard Shaw in 1905, in her presidential address to the NAWSA:

Others will speak of that brave band of immortals whose achievements your great Exposition commemorates, while we pay our tribute of honor and gratitude to the modest, unselfish, enduring little Shoshone squaw, who uncomplainingly traileed, canoed, climbed, slaved and starved with the men of the party, enduring all that they endured, with the addition of a helpless baby on her back. At a time in the weary march when the hearts of the leaders had well nigh fainted within them, when success or failure hung a mere chance in the balance, this woman came to their deliverance and pointed out to the captain the great Pass which led from the forks of the Three Rivers over the Mountains.²²

Grace Hebard surely must have felt, along with her political sisters, that Sacagawea was a fitting symbol for their cause. The Lewis and Clark journals record the first known vote by a black man—York—and by an Indian woman—Sacagawea—when the expedition members voted to decide

where to camp at the mouth of the Columbia River in the winter of 1805-1806.

Furthermore, Wyoming had been the first state in the Union to grant women the vote in 1869. It is possible that Hebard felt that Sacagawea, the first woman to cast a vote in the United States, was a fitting symbol for that state. It must have been a compelling goal, to be able to establish that Sacagawea was buried there.

The two positions about Sacagawea's fate cannot be reconciled. The individual who takes one position over another accepts not just a sequence of facts; he or she also accepts a set of assumptions that provide the context for interpreting the data currently available to us. The question really is, why should it be so important for some to prove that Sacagawea died young, while for others it is critical to prove that she died an old woman? Why do we care so much about this young Shoshone girl?

For surely she was not the only young Native American woman who endured hardship, bore children, showed courage and resourcefulness. As Virginia Scharff notes, "Women's traces have often faded through neglect, and sometimes been deliberately obscured, obliterated, or falsified. Women have added to the difficulty of the search by insisting, all too often and sometimes for good reasons, on covering their tracks. Tracing indigenous women in the nineteenth century means, moreover, coping with white writers' racial and gender stereotyping, cultural blindnesses, and desires to imagine the country they desired not as peopled but as empty. Thus pursuing the search means thinking hard about how to read the signs."²³

The debate over Sacagawea's fate has ebbed and waned over the last one hundred years, when Eva Emory Dye again brought her story to light. Now, at the bicentennial anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition, we once again chafe at the paucity of documentation about Sacagawea in the expedition's journals. We still want to know – what did she look like? What role did she really play in the expedition? What did she think about Lewis, and Clark, and her husband Charbonneau? What happened to her baby daughter, Lisette, who disappears from the historical record a few years after Clark adopted her and her brother?

We probably will come up with answers that reflect our own times. We still wish for heroes and heroines to inspire us.

1. This paper is based primarily on the Blanche Schroer Papers, 1812-1998, Accession Number 10535, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
2. Another source of debate is the spelling of her name. Hebard spelled it "Sacajawea", while Schroer originally spelled it with a "j" and later changed it to "Sacagawea". Scholars have found 14 different spellings of her name in the original Lewis and Clark journals and another variation on it in Sergeant John Ordway's journal. In every case, however, the young girl's name was spelled with a "g" in the third syllable. The Bureau of American Ethnology standardized the Sacagawea spelling in 1910. Others who adopt the "g" in the third syllable include Lewis and Clark scholars; the U.S. Geographic Names Board; the U.S. National Park Service; the National Geographic Society; Encyclopedia Americana; and the World Book Encyclopedia. Part of the source of the controversy comes from the fact that although Sacagawea was born into a Shoshone tribe, her name as we know it comes from the Hidatsa, who captured her at an early age. Her name in Hidatsa means "Bird Woman", or sacaga – bird and wea – woman. The spelling of her name with a "j" stems from a narrative of the journey edited by Nicholas Biddle in 1814. Biddle changed the spelling of her name from Sacagawea to Sacajawea. We have no existing explanation for why he changed it, even though neither Lewis nor Clark ever used the "j" in any of their spellings. This spelling of her name appears to mean "boat launcher" or "boat pusher" in Shoshone. However, in Lewis' journal entry of May 20, 1805, he writes, "...a handsome river of about fifty yards in width discharged itself into the shell...river.. this stream we called Sah-ca-gah-we-ah or bird woman's River, after our interpreter the Snake woman." There is also a third spelling of her name; some North Dakota Hidatsa spell it "Sakakawea". Although this spelling is never found in primary documentation, it was constructed by Dr. Washington Matthews in a dictionary published by the Government Printing Office in 1877. The words he uses are "tsa-ka-ka" (noun meaning bird) and "mia" [wia, bia] (noun meaning woman). He says "In my dictionary I give the Hidatsa word for bird as "Tsakaa". T is often changed to S, and K to G, in this and other Indian Languages, so 'Sacaca' would not be a bad spelling... but never 'Sacaja' [for bird]." He also notes that in the Hidatsa alphabet there is no "j" and that "g" is pronounced as a "hard g". (See Irving Anderson, "Sacajawea?- Sakakawea?- Sacagawea?", in *We Proceeded On*. Summer 1974:10-11.)
3. Virginia Scharff, *Twenty Thousand Roads; Women, Movement and the West*. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 95.
4. See Scharff 2003, op. cit. for a biography of Hebard.
5. Marie Webster Weisbrod, "One Remarkable Lady; an interview with Blanche Schroer" in *We Proceeded On*, February 1998:8.
6. At the time of this writing, the author does not have the precise date confirmed.
7. Irving Anderson, "Probing the Riddle of the Bird Woman," *Montana* (Fall 1973): 3-17.

8. Letter to *folio* Editor dated 4/10/96, The Patrice Press. Box 5 accretion number 2, folder titled "Andy." Blanche Schroer Papers, 1812-1998, Accession Number 10535, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
9. John Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, edited by Stella M. Drumm, *Missouri Historical Society* (1920): 138.
10. Anderson 1973 op.cit., 16.
11. Other problems existed with Hebard's theory. For example, Porivo's son, Battez, was an ill-mannered, illiterate man. Baptiste, son of Sacagawea and Charbonneau, had been raised and educated by William Clark. He had traveled for several years in Europe with a German prince and had learned several languages. When he returned to the United States, he was known as an educated and cultured "half-breed." Hebard explained the discrepancy between this educated Baptiste and the illiterate Battez by speculating that he had returned to his "Indian ways."
12. Gary Moulton, "On Reading Lewis and Clark: The Last Twenty Years," *Montana* 38:3 (Summer 1988):34.
13. Letter from Blanche Schroer to Charles Moore, July 10, 1995. Box 3, accretion number 1, folder titled "Sac Guide – No!." Blanche Schroer Papers, 1812-1998, Accession Number 10535, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
14. Handwritten note in Blanche Schroer's hand, titled "From Short Hand Notes when Record Ran Out," Box 5, Folder 2, titled "Blanche Schroer 1931-1955, Martinez, Jennie." Blanche Schroer Papers, 1812-1998, Accession Number 10535, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
15. Weisbrod 1998, op.cit., 9.
16. Letter from Blanche Schroer to Department of History, Jefferson City, Montana, July 9, 1963. Box 5, folder 5 titled "Montana." Blanche Schroer Papers, 1812-1998, Accession Number 10535, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
17. Mrs. (Mary) Albert Tweed was the granddaughter of Sara Trumbull Irwin and James Irwin. James Irwin was the Indian Agent at Ft. Washakie in 1871. Sara Trumbull reportedly interviewed Sacagawea (Porivo?) while she was at the reservation. The documents were lost in a fire.
18. Letter from Mrs. Albert Tweed to Dr. Grace Hebard, October 6, 1926. Box 6, accretion number 2, folder titled "Mrs Albert Tweed." Blanche Schroer Papers, 1812-1998, Accession Number 10535, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
19. Letter from Mrs. Albert Tweed to Dr. Grace Hebard, July 17th, 1929. Box 6, accretion number 2, folder titled "Mrs Albert Tweed." Blanche Schroer Papers, 1812-1998, Accession Number 10535, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
20. Ronald W. Taber, "Sacagawea and the Suffragettes," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 58:1 (January 1967): 8.
21. Taber 1967 op.cit., 8.
22. Taber 1967 op.cit., 9.
23. Scharff 2003, op. cit. 12-13