

LESSER KNOWN MEMBERS OF THE CORPS OF DISCOVERY: NATHANIEL HALE PRYOR

Submitted by Bruce Mihelish



On March 9, 1807, Henry Dearborn, Jefferson's Secretary of War, ordered William Clark to see that Mandan Chief, Sheheke and his family be safely escorted back to the Mandan Villages on the upper Missouri. They had been on a state visit to Washington City. Clark chose a former trusted member of the expedition, Sgt. Nathaniel Hale Pryor to be the escort. Pryor was still in the military and had been promoted to 2nd Lieutenant. Pryor escorted Sheheke's group up the Missouri from St. Louis with 14 soldiers and one interpreter. Auguste P. Choteau and a large fur trading contingent also accompanied them. The party of 90 was met on the river by 650 heavily armed Arikara and Sioux Indians. It was the hostile's intent to murder the Mandan chief and steal the trade merchandise. After hours of negotiations with Pryor and the Indians, a fight erupted with a hail of bullets. Many were killed or badly wounded on both sides. Pryor's former mate from the expedition, George Shannon lost a leg as a result of the battle. Sheheke hid in the keelboat and refused to go on further for the safety of himself and his family. The keelboat was turned around and returned to St. Louis. They were three days away from his Mandan home. Sheheke finally made it home two years later.

This was not the first unsuccessful mission by Pryor for William Clark, nor the last. Pryor, a Virginian born woodsman, somehow had earned the role as head wrangler while traveling through Montana with the Corps in 1806. Clark definitely liked and trusted Pryor. The Sargent was one of the first nine men enlisted by Clark in 1803. They called them "The 9 Young Men from Kentucky." The Captains chose Pryor as one of the three sergeants to lead at Camp Dubois during training. Pryor led First Squad with nine men. His first cousin, Charles Floyd was also promoted to sargeant and led Second Squad with seven men. Cousin Floyd was the only death casualty on the entire three year adventure. He died in 1804 of a presumed appendicitis attack.

In 1806, the Corps was moving over 70 horses across the Lolo Trail to Travelers Rest. Managing a large herd of half wild steeds would have been a big job for any experienced equestrian. The journals suggest Pryor was the man in charge of the mounts. Clark seemed to be particularly impressed with Pryor's abilities. He praised him as a man of "character and ability". Pryor was a good carpenter. He had helped build pack saddles and oars. In July

of 1806, Pryor was traveling with Clark and 12 other men down the Yellowstone. They had 50 mustangs that would be used at the Mandan Villages for trade. Lewis had gone north to the Great Falls with 17 other horses to portage cached supplies and canoes around the falls. These horses were valued cargo. Expedition trade goods were spent. The Corps needed horses to barter for more goods on the final leg. They needed gifts to help convince tribal leaders to come to Washington City to meet the President. The dangerous Teton Sioux might blockade river access on the return home if the Corps didn't have a hefty toll to pay in trade goods. Pryor's orders were to take all the horses to the Mandan Villages overland. Near today's Park City, MT, Crow Tribe rustlers snuck into Clark's camp and stole 24 horses. It was July 22nd. Pryor was sent off immediately with three other men to get the remaining 26 to Ft. Mandan safely. Off went Pryor, Shannon, Windsor and Hall. The mission didn't last long. The night of July 24th, the Crow thieves struck again as the men slept. All the horses were gone! They feverously searched for horse tracks, but soon gave up. The party went back to the river, and built buffalo hide boats. They caught up with Captain Clark's party on the Missouri a few weeks later. Quick wits and resourcefulness saved Pryor and his men, but their horse mission ended in disappointment.

Pryor was often given difficult and dangerous of assignments from Capt. Clark. This continued after the expedition was over when Clark became the head of Indian affairs in the west. Missions didn't always turn out as planned. But perhaps it says something to know Pryor was the highest paid member of the expedition other than Lewis and Clark themselves. He was certainly a valuable member for the Corps. Pryor died in June, 1831. He was probably 49 years old. There are plenty of namesakes left behind today. We have the town of Pryor, The Pryor Mountains, Pryor Creek, and the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Reserve in Montana. There is also a town of Pryor and Pryor Creek in Mayes County, Oklahoma.

To dig deeper into the life of Nathaniel Pryor, explore these resources:

Journals of Lewis and Clark. Gary Moulton: www.lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu (on line edition):

Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with related documents 1783-1854, edited by Donald Jackson

The Life and Times of Nathaniel Hale Pryor, Lawrence R. Reno

Discovering Lewis and Clark /Lewis-Clark.org, Joseph Muselman: Articles: Nathaniel Hale Pryor, Sheheke and His Wife.

PBS / pbs.org, Inside the Corps of Lewis and Clark, Article on Sgt. Nathaniel Pryor