

Indian Sign Language

By Gene Hickman

Lewis & Clark hired George Drouillard, the Sign Talker, because of his "...knowledge of the common language of gesticulation, and his uncommon skill as a hunter and woodsman...." We know from the journals that without Drouillard's knowledge of Plains Indian Sign Language, any communications with the tribes they met would have been exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. We also know that Charbonneau, Sacajawea, and Labiche were sign talkers too. It is probable that all of the mixed blood engages (Metis), Cruzatte and LePage could sign and it is also probable that all the members of the expedition learned some sign before the expedition was over.

There are very few good authoritative books or papers on the Indian Sign Language. Major Stephen H. Long wrote the very first record I can find on sign language, in 1823 and he gave about 100 signs. In 1880 and 1881, LtCol. Garrick Mallery wrote two important books, *Gesture Signs and Signals of the North American Indians*, and *Sign Language Among the North American Indians*. He wrote these for the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institute. These were partly illustrated and have been long out of print. However, *Sign Language Among the North American Indians* has recently come back into print again.

The most authoritative work on Indian Sign Language was by Captain W.P. Clark, U. S. Second Cavalry. He was with the army in the Indian country from 1875 to 1880, and made a deep study of Indian signs. In 1880 he was directed by General Sheridan to produce a book on sign language for use by Army Officers assigned in the West. He worked steadily on its preparation until 1884, when he died. The work was published in 1885, and has now been reprinted by Bison Books through the University of Nebraska. It is the most complete book ever done on signs and their origin. Unfortunately it was not illustrated. I recommend it as the best reference book for signs and as a second or third book. Without the illustrations, you cannot learn to make sign from Clark's book. It runs about \$16.95.

In 1887, 1890 and 1893, three works on "Primary Gestures" were completed by Lewis F. Hadley, a missionary in the Indian Territory. Two of these were "Sign Talk" and "Indian Sign Talk." His last one was the more important but was produced in only about 75 copies. You would have to go to the Smithsonian Institute or the National Archives to see one of these. Next to the work by Clark, this is considered the foremost contribution to the study of Indian Sign Language, and it does contain several hundred illustrations. The only copy I know of is at the Smithsonian.

In 1918, Ernest Thompson Seton, the noted author of animal stories, compiled an impressive work, 282 pages and about 1700 signs, which is extensively illustrated. The book is called "Sign Talk", and it does not adhere to just Indian signs but includes many signs of the deaf and dumb, and other sources. However, it differentiates the Indian signs from the other signs. Luckily this book is in print again through Dover Publications. It is a valuable asset and I would recommend it as an additional source of sign information after Tomkins. This book runs about \$9.95.

The best book for learning sign language is the Dover republication of William Tomkins 5th (1931) edition, *Indian Sign Language*. Tomkins was a friend of Seton's and you will see many similarities between their two books. Tomkins' book is the one book you should own for learning sign language and should be the basis for all your signing as you branch out and then try

using Clark and Seton. DO NOT JUST LOOK AT THE PICTURES. You must also read the text for each sign. Many times you will need to incorporate several signs together. I would recommend that you start by studying Tomkins' list "Two Hundred Signs in Most General Use." Not only is this the best book, it is the cheapest retailing for \$4.95.

Another very good source, for learning Indian Sign Language, is a set of flash cards that you can obtain from Books and Crannies, 305 W. Moore Ave., Terrell, TX 75160 or e-mail them at: buckskin@airmail.net. However, these cards are just pictures and you will have to refer to Tomkins, Clark or Seton to insure that additional gestures are not needed. Last time I checked these cards were \$15. A very good investment for quickly learning signs but you'll still need Tomkins.

There are also two web sites that have Indian Sign Language that will help you. There is an interactive sign language site on the Hell's Hole Mountain Man's web page: <http://hhmm.virtualave.net/sign/sign-home.htm>. There is also a sign dictionary at: <http://www.inquiry.net/outdoor/native-sign/index.htm>, this is based on Tomkins book and seems to be another useful tool for learning sign. There are a number of other recent and minor books out and at least one commercial video covering sign language. However, I do not recommend you spend your time or money on any of them. They are not very complete, they do not seem well researched and/or they are not organized in a logical way.