Johnny Appleseed and Other American Legends

By Melody Warnick

Johnny Appleseed

Among the settlers whose log cabins lined the banks of the Ohio River, it was said that you could hear Johnny Appleseed coming long before you could see him. At dusk on a warm summer evening, a farmer bringing his cows in to milk might hear, off in the distance, a rhythmic rattle-bang, rattle-bang, rattle-bang; that was the clapping of John's cookpot and spoon nosing together. Then, beneath that, there'd be the shush-shush-shush of John's bare feet tramping through the grass. By all accounts John would be whistling, sometimes a merry song, like "Skip to My Lou," and sometimes a hymn he'd learned as a boy in church. And just before John stepped into view you'd hear the apple seeds rolling inside his leather pouch. It sounded a bit like the pitter-patter of a spring rainfall. To John, it was the best sound in the world.

Those appleseeds were a treasure to John. He'd gathered them himself from a cider press back in Pennsylvania, plucking them out of the apple mash left over from the cider-making. Then he cleaned and dried them so they'd be ready to plant. If you asked John, he'd say that planting apples was the reason God put him on this here green earth. It was what his life was about—had been ever since he was a boy of 12 or so, growing up in Massachusetts.

It was funny how it happened—such a simple thing, really. On a golden afternoon, after the farm chores were done, young John Chapman sat in the short spring grass with his sister, Elizabeth, eating apples. John bit his right down to the seeds, and Elizabeth said, “Better not eat that seed, Johnny, or it’ll grow into an apple tree in your stomach.”

John laughed, then stopped, suspicious. “That isn’t true, Lizzy, is it?”

Now it was Lizzy’s turn to laugh. “Well, not unless you ate plenty of dirt to go with it, and drank about a gallon of water every day. And even then you’d have to lie on your back outside with your mouth wide open to the sky so lots of sunshine could get in.” By now they were both giggling. But for the first time, John thought about how inside that little black nothing of a seed, no bigger than a mosquito, there was in actual fact a tree just waiting to grow. John stared at that little speck of an appleseed between his fingers and realized that this seed was waiting on him. If he didn’t plant it, it would never become what it was meant to be.

John said, “Lizzy, I won’t swallow it, but I am going to put this seed where it belongs—in the ground.” On his knees he plowed his hands into the dirt, made a nice hole to drop the seed into, then covered it back up.

John almost forgot about that seed. But one day, a tender green stalk poked through the ground. Soon white blossoms bloomed out on the branches. As the years passed, spring to summer to autumn to winter, then round again, John watched, proud as a papa, as the tree grew taller, then as it bore its first fruit—round, rosy-cheeked Gravenstein apples that sprayed white foam when you bit into them. Within a year after that, Lizzie made apple pies from his tree, and his pa pressed cider.

By then John was a man himself, 18 years old, and knew that just as surely as becoming a tree was the apple seed's destiny, planting apple trees was his. "Fine, then buy a little land and plant an orchard right here in Leominster," said his pa.

"Or sell fruits and vegetables at the market," suggested his ma.

"Or get a job at the cider press," said Lizzie.

John tossed their ideas around in his head, but finally said, "All these new settlers moving into the territories and making farms will want apples. Lots of them. And that means they'll need apple trees—not just seeds, but saplings that are strong enough to stand the journey." John's eyes opened wide, and his voice got a little louder. "That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to raise apple trees to supply the folks heading west. I'm going to spread apples around the new territories so thick that all you'll have to do is reach up for something good to eat. I'm going to blaze the trail with apples!"

"John," said Lizzie, "you look as if you've seen a vision."

"In a way, I have," said John thoughtfully. "A vision of my future."

A few weeks after that, John waved goodbye to his family, followed the trail into Ohio, and bought a little plot of land near Licking Creek. There he planted apple seeds in tidy rows, neat as a patchwork quilt. Walking among the saplings, John acted as if he were tending his own babies. He sometimes talked to them. "Oh, don't you look handsome today?" he'd say to one strong young tree, and to another that looked a might weary, "Perk up now, there, little girl, here's a sip of water."

Somehow, the trees always did what he asked them to, and with John around they grew up strong and healthy.

When the trees were knee-high and big enough for travel, John sold them to settlers to use to plant their own orchards and keep themselves in apple pies and cider for years to come. Soon folks knew to stop in at John Chapman's apple nursery. Some even started calling him Appleseed John, on account of the bag of seeds that was always slung around his shoulder.

One afternoon a wagon rolled past. It was full of furniture and family—five tow-headed kids, John counted. "Where you folks headed?" John called out, shading his eyes with his hand.

"Going to Knox County," said the farmer, "by Owl Creek. We've got a few acres over there we're going to plant." The farmer stuck out his hand. "Name is Ezra Pickins."

"Well, Mr. Pickins, I'm Appleseed John," he said, shaking hands, "and I'll suspect you'll be wanting apple trees. These are the best in Ohio. Winesaps. Gravensteins. Baldwins. Take your pick."

The farmer exchanged a glance with his wife, then slowly shook his head. "Money is tight," he said. "Sorry to say but we don't have any extra for an apple tree."

But John saw how the kids' ears perked up at the word "apples," and how the littlest girl looked longingly at his rows of green-leafed little trees. So John plucked one out of the ground, wrapped its bottom in burlap to keep its roots moist, and handed it over. “Take this,” he said. “No charge. It’s a gift from me to you.” John often gave trees to those who couldn’t pay. Even those who could, he told them just to pay him later. And if they didn’t, well, that was okay, too.

Still, the farmer’s jaw dropped a little as he cradled his new gift. Then he hopped down from his seat and grabbed a pair of boots that were tied to the wood slats of the wagon box. “Well, here then, take these boots in return. They’re a might too small for me. And I couldn’t help but notice you’re walking barefoot.”

Everyone stopped to stare at John’s feet, which were indeed barefoot. He’d got in the habit of kicking off his shoes so he could feel the dirt squishing up between his toes, and since he hadn’t worn his boots in so long, one day he up and gave them to someone he thought needed them more than he did. As the Pickins family watched, John merrily wiggled his muddy toes, which made the children laugh.

“Well, I don’t mind my bare feet, but if you’re offering, I’ll take them with a thank-ye-kindly and a praise-be-to-God,” said John. He slipped the boots onto his feet; they fit just right. As the Pickins family drove off, the children hugged their arms around their new little apple tree, and waved to John. John waved back. But don’t you know, the very next day he gave his new boots away to a teenage boy whose growing feet were wearing holes in his own.

That was how John was. He didn’t set much store by getting things; he mostly liked to give. That’s how come gave away most of his good clothes. “What do I need with these fancy duds?” he said. Instead, he made his own … after a manner of speaking. No linen shirt for John; he wore an old coffee sack, with holes snipped in it for his arms and neck to poke through. His cotton britches were worn to such a state that his knobby knees saw daylight with every step.

Even stranger, he sometimes wore a cooking pot as a hat, its tin handle pointing at the sky. John had started taking seeds and seedlings from town to town around the Ohio River Valley, so having a pot that doubled as a hat was handy. Of course, walking out of the woods, his legs and feet a mess of briar scratches and bramble itches, with his tin pot hat and his coffee sack shirt, John was a strange sight to behold. The good thing was he never needed an introduction.

Even though John's apple tree business was doing well, he preferred to sleep outside most nights and make the forest floor his featherbed. One chilly winter evening as John was overnighting in the forest, the wind started to howl, and a thick snow began falling. Cold to the bone, John thought he'd rustle up some warmer sleeping quarters. He found a great big hollow log and went to hunker down for the night. But just as he inched his hindquarters inside, he heard a low, breathy growl. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, John saw a big brown bear glaring at him, as if to say, "This is my house, Mister. And you're not invited."

Most people would be scared witless. They'd skedaddle out of there screaming and hollering, and scaring the bear half to death while they did it. Not John. He had such a gentle touch that animals weren't afraid of him, and he wasn't afraid of them either. Even the big ones were friendly-like to him. In the dark log, with a bear glowering at him, John just tipped his tin pot hat, said, "Pardon me, I didn't know this log was taken," and scurried backwards so as not to disturb the bear's sleep any longer.

Once John even adopted a wolf—a huge, fierce Eastern Timber wolf with blazing yellow eyes. John found it with its front paw caught in a trap, which made the wolf not only hurt but terribly irritable. Any other man wouldn't have dared come near, but when John saw that poor fellow in pain, his heart tripped up within him. He couldn't go on and leave him there without helping.

In his softest voice, John whispered sweet nothings to the wolf. "Easy now," he murmured. "You're alright. I'm going to fix you up in no time." Listening to John, the wolf calmed. He stopped pulling at his trapped leg and instead lay down and rested his white muzzle on his paws. John knelt down beside him and wrested his paw free from the trap. "There now, I'm just going to take some of these herbs and make a poultice," he explained to the wolf, who watched him with quizzical eyes. "I'll wrap it all up with this here cloth as a bandage. Don't worry, you should feel better right quick." When he was done, he patted the wolf on his bristly head, scratching him between the ears like you'd scratch a housecat.

You better believe that no one had ever scratched this wolf between the ears before. But strangely enough, the wolf found himself enjoying it. Like a cat, he rubbed his head against the back of John's legs. He was so big and powerful that he knocked John down. "Whoa there, fellow," John laughed. "I know you're just sayin' thanks, but if you say much more you're liable to break my leg. Here, though, have this apple." He held it out in the palm of his hand, and though wolves aren't partial to fruit, this wolf was so starved and grateful that he ate it out of John's hand like a horse would.

After that, the pair were fast friends. For two days, the wolf and John walked together through the wilderness. When John finally came to the road he was aiming for, he said, "I hate to part ways, Brother Wolf; it's been nice to have a traveling companion. But if you go out here where people don't know you, you might cause a ruckus. Best to stay here in the forest." The wolf seemed to understand. Nuzzling John once more, he walked slowly back toward where he came from.

Odd as it was for John to tramp over the hills and through the forests with trees in his hands, wearing his crazy coffee-sack get-up and chatting up bears and wolves, everyone loved Johnny Appleseed. No matter which way he headed, women baked him cinnamon-laced pies and crumb-topped cobblers with the apples from John's trees. Girls wore the ribbons he'd given them. Boys never made fun; they wanted their own tin-pot hats, just like his. He could count on folks to offer a meal or a bed in the worst weather, and on most occasions it was someone he'd helped in the past, just returning the favor.

That was what happened one autumn evening, when the apple trees were drooping with fruit. Here John came, stepping through someone's pasture, when the man of the house burst out of his cabin and cried, "If it ain't Appleseed John!" It was Ezra Pickins, the same farmer who'd given a pair of boots in exchange for an apple sapling years ago. "And you're barefoot again," he said, pointing to John's bootless feet.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Pickins," said John, a might embarrassed, "my feet just weren't made for shoes. Not two days after your wagon rolled away from my farm, I was walking round my orchard in my bare feet when I stepped on something cold and dry and scaly—a rattlesnake! Before I could say 'jack-in-the-pulpit' it reared up and bit right into my left foot. I thought I was a goner for sure. Then I saw that my feet had got so tough from walking bootless the rattlesnake couldn't sink his teeth in. It was like trying to bite through elephant skin. He just couldn't do it! After a while he gave up and slithered away." As Ezra Pickins laughed heartily, John added, "Thank heavens we were both fine. I would have been miserable if I'd a harmed that rattler. But from then till now, two bare feet, the way the good Lord made them, is how I'm happy to roam."

By then the five kids, older now, were huddled behind their pa, peering shyly out at John. But John knew how to break the ice. From his knapsack he plucked some bright, shiny apples and offered them to the children. "Enjoy the fruits of the earth," he said.

"But enjoy them later," scolded Mrs. Pickins, "we're about to have supper. In fact, we'd be pleased, Mr. John, if you'd join us." Quickly another place was set at the table, and John said the grace, blessing just about everyone and everything on God's green earth. But as everyone dug in, John wouldn't eat a single bite. "Aren't you hungry, John, after a whole day's journey?" asked Mrs. Pickins.

"I like to make sure the children have their fill before I eat up all your extra vittles," said John. "But that sweet smell coming from that oven of yours, Mrs. Pickins, has my mouth watering. Couldn't be apple cobbler, could it?"

"Made from your own apples, Mr. John," said Mrs. Pickins happily. "And they're the sweetest you ever ate." When it was time to serve the cobbler, with its gold-brown crust steaming warm, she dished a heaping helping into a bowl and said, "First piece to you, Mr. John, for providing this bounty."

"Ma'am," said John, "God provided it. I just gave it the water and the dirt."

After supper, as Ma Pickins did the mending and Ezra Pickins whittled a knob of wood into a doll, Johnny Appleseed pulled a worn leather Bible from his knapsack, stretched out on the floor, and said, "Let me share some good news, fresh from heaven!" Then he read. Daniel in the lion's den. David besting Goliath. With each story, his voice rose to the roar of the waves, or lowered into a soothing sigh. Sitting by the fireplace, the Pickins children listened, mesmerized, until one by one, against their will, they each fell fast asleep.

Wherever Johnny went, telling his stories and spreading his kindnesses and sharing his seeds, apples grew. Farmers moved in, planted crops, built stores and churches and schools, and John's trees grew up in the middle of it all.

For 30 years, John wandered Ohio, watching how even as life changed, the apples never really did. Each season they gave fruit as crisp and juicy as the last, and the cobblers and ciders they made nourished the soul just as surely as they did the belly. To John, that was mighty satisfying to see.

Of course, just as in all stories, there came a time when John was too old to do much walking around anymore, too bent to plant. So finally he rested. Lying in the grass under his white-blossomed apple trees early in the spring, John said out loud to nobody in particular, “I know just how an appleseed must feel when it’s planted—that it’s about to grow into something a whole lot bigger than itself.” Then Johnny Appleseed closed his eyes, fell asleep, and dreamed of apples.

The Story of Sacagawea

“Sacagawea! Come, the sun is already high. We must find the gooseberries before the raccoons do.”

Sacagawea’s mother stood at the door of their family’s tepee, squinting out into the bright morning, her dark eyebrows knitted together. She looked worried, and Sacagawea understood why. For months the scrubby bushes and brown hills of the Lemhi Valley of Idaho, where Sacagawea and her family lived with their Shoshone tribe, had been all but barren. It was early summer, when deer and antelope should have been plentiful, making easy catches for the hunters in the tribe. Instead, the hunters rode out on horseback each morning, their bows and arrows at the ready, and returned home empty-handed every night. There was almost nothing to eat.

Just nine years old, Sacagawea sometimes was so hungry at night that she curled up on her blanket and clutched her stomach. But she did not cry. She didn’t want to worry her mother any more than she already was. “I’m coming, Mother,” she said now, ducking out of the tepee with a basket to gather berries. She knew they probably wouldn’t find anything, but it was important to look each day, if only to make themselves forget the emptiness gnawing at their bellies.

That evening, the chief of the tribe made a decision: “We will go down into the valleys to hunt buffalo,” he announced.

Sacagawea’s older brother, Cameahwait, offered a warning. “We’ll be in danger there. Our enemies, the Blackfeet and the Hidatsa, will not let us hunt buffalo in their territory without a fight.”

The chief nodded slowly. “It will be dangerous. But better to die quickly with a full belly than to starve to death slowly here in the mountains.”

Glad that she would finally have food to eat, Sacagawea nevertheless felt the familiar knot of worry tighten in her stomach. She whispered to her mother, “If we’re in the valley, how will we protect ourselves? The Hidatsa have guns as well as arrows, and there are so many of them.”

Her mother smiled, trying to be brave enough for both of them. “We’ll stay together, Daughter,” she said. “There is safety in numbers.”

The next morning, Sacagawea and the other members of her tribe saddled their horses and began the journey east toward the plains of Wyoming. After several days, they finally made camp near a river. That afternoon, the hunters dragged back a big buffalo, and Sacagawea practically wept for joy. Finally, there was enough to eat! When everyone had their fill of roasted meat, the rest was filleted into thin pieces to dry for jerky, and the tough hides were tanned for leather for clothing and tepees. The Shoshone let nothing go to waste, so each buffalo meant much work for Sacagawea, her mother, and the other women and girls. Still, Sacagawea found time to play, chasing other girls and boys through the stands of thin trees. Having a full belly made her cheerful.

After several days, the good fortune of Sacagawea's tribe ran out. Soon after the hunting parties rode out, one rider raced back into the camp, crying, "The enemy is coming! A war party! Quick, run!"

Sacagawea gasped and dropped the load of stones she was carrying. "Mother!" she cried. "Mother!" She dashed back to their family's lodge, but her mother and her older brother, Cameahwait, weren't there. Everywhere people were running, some into the bushes to hide with their children, others dashing right onto the trail that led back to the Shoshone's mountain home.

Sacagawea didn't know what to do. Glancing behind her, she saw the Hidatsa war party ride into camp with their spears raised. They also had guns; as a girl, Sacagawea called them thunder sticks, because they blasted noise and fire like a thunderstorm. Breathlessly, Sacagawea turned and ran for the river, hoping to cross it and hide in the trees on the other side. But the river was too deep, and flowing too fast—there was nowhere to cross. Before she could find a shallow place, a Hidatsa rider came galloping her. Sacagawea felt herself being pulled by her arm onto the back of his horse.

There was no escape now.

As the riders turned and galloped back to the valley, Sacagawea saw that several people from her tribe had been killed. Her father was among them. So were a few of her friends. But she couldn't cry. Inside, she felt dry as a bone.

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From that time on, Sacagawea and another Shoshone captive, her friend Otter Woman, lived with a Hidatsa family on the plains of North Dakota. For weeks Sacagawea thought of nothing but escape. But she was so far from home. The journey would be so long. And there were so many awful things along the way—man-eating bears and blood-thirsty Native Americans. Finding her people again just didn't seem possible.

Sacagawea and Otter Woman were slaves now to Red Arrow, the man who had captured them. But life was not as hard as Sacagawea had feared it would be. Red Arrow treated the girls kindly and fairly. Though they had to work hard at gathering wood, tanning buffalo hides, planting and reaping corn and other vegetables, there was always enough to eat, and the man's wives treated the girls like their own children. The Hidatsa lived in houses made of mud and thatched with stick roofs that kept out even the strongest winter wind, so even during the frigid North Dakota winters Sacagawea felt warm and dry.

One night, Red Arrow invited a French fur trapper named Toussaint Charbonneau to his lodge to play a gambling game. Red Arrow was losing. He bet his gun, and lost it. He bet his favorite knife, and lost it. Sacagawea watched sleepily from the corner as Red Arrow's face turned grim and sour, and the two men began arguing over the bet for a new game. Charbonneau and Red Arrow didn't speak the same language, so they communicated through signs they made with their hands. Charbonneau signed, "You say you have nothing left to bet, but your spotted horse is a fast runner—not so fast as my black horse, though. I'll bet my black horse against your spotted one."

Red Arrow signed back, "I need the spotted horse to hunt food for my family. I will not risk my children's hunger in a game of hide-the-bone."

Anxious to keep winning, Charbonneau signed, "What about the Shoshone girls? I will bet my fast horse against your two Shoshone captives."

At that, Sacagawea and Otter Girl stared at each other with wide eyes, then jumped up, shouting, "No, no!" By then they had lived with Red Arrow and his family for several years. They didn't want to go with this French fur trapper, but if Red Arrow bet them and lost, they would have to. Sacagawea grabbed Red Arrow's arm and pleaded. "Oh great chief Red Arrow, please don't gamble us away! We'll work so hard it will be like there are four of us."

But Red Arrow wouldn't look at Sacagawea. He simply nodded his head and rolled the dice to continue the game. When the black bone appeared, Sacagawea and Otter Woman began crying. Red Arrow had lost. That very night, they packed their few things and followed Charbonneau to his lodge. Even though they were both just teenagers, Sacagawea and Otter Woman soon became Charbonneau's wives, as was the custom among many Native American tribes in the 1800s.

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A few years passed. One morning as Sacagawea sat with other women in the village, grinding corn into meal, someone whispered something interesting: "White traders have come, and they are building a fort near the Mandan village. Their chiefs are called Long Knife and Red Hair."

That was the first Sacagawea had heard of Meriweather Lewis and William Clark. What she didn't know then was that Lewis, whom the Hidatsa called Long Knife, and Clark, whom they called Red Hair, had left Washington, D.C., more than a year earlier on a great adventure. President Thomas Jefferson had made them leaders of a group of men called the Corps of Discovery. Their charge was to explore the great unknown stretches of the country west of the Mississippi River and to find a way to what Sacagawea's people called the Everywhere-Salt-Water, the Pacific Ocean. As they traveled, they were to keep journals about the strange and wonderful plants and animals they saw, make maps, and perhaps most importantly, make peace with the tribes of Native Americans they encountered.

Sacagawea felt curious, and even more curious still when one evening Charbonneau, her husband, attended a Great Council between Lewis and Clark and the Native American chiefs. When Charbonneau came home, he reported, "The Long Knife chiefs will spend the winter in their fort, and in the spring they'll travel west to the Shoshone people, to buy horses."

"The Shoshone!" cried Sacagawea. "My people!" For all the years she had lived away from her family, she had never stopped thinking of her family and her tribe, or given up hope that she would see them again. Now Lewis and Clark were making plans to go there themselves. "They'll need a guide," she said quickly. "And a translator to help them communicate. I can guide them. I know the land. I speak the

Snake language. If I'm with these men, they'll be successful. Otherwise my people might hide, or even attack."

"We'll see," said Charbonneau slowly. Sacagawea was eight months pregnant with their first child, and though he knew how determined Sacagawea was, he wasn't sure she was strong enough for the trip.

Sacagawea, however, knew she was strong enough. When Lewis and Clark agreed to have Charbonneau and Sacagawea as guides and interpreters, the pair moved to the fort where the Corps of Discovery waited out the bleak winter. That was where, in February 1805, Sacagawea had her baby. They named the little dark-haired boy Jean Baptiste, though Captain Clark and others in the expedition called him Pompy. Caring for Pompy, and anticipating the trip that might lead her to her family, for the first time in a long time Sacagawea was truly happy.

On a cool, foggy day in early April, when the chunks of blue ice in the river had finally broken up, Sacagawea strapped her newborn baby to her back and stepped surefootedly into one of several large flat-bottomed boats that the Corps of Discovery traveled in.

"Ready?" Lewis called to Clark.

Yes, sir," replied Clark. Off they floated into the Missouri River. As the breeze tugged at the strands of her long braid, Sacagawea finally allowed herself to smile. She was going home.

The journey wasn't easy. The boats were loaded down with what seemed to Sacagawea strange things—books, mirrors, compasses, equipment for hunting and trapping, fine cloth, military dress, tools. There was even a chest full of small golden Peace medallions made especially for Lewis and Clarks' journey, with an image of Thomas Jefferson on one side and one of two men shaking hands on the other. Some of these things, like the Peace medallions, were meant to be given to Native Americans as a token of friendship. That Sacagawea could understand; such gifts were important to the safety of the journey. But so many books? "Why weigh the boats down with useless stuff?" she sometimes thought. "We'd get there quicker if we let it sink to the bottom of the Missouri River." After she saw Captain Clark write in one of the books about a new plant he had never seen before, Sacagawea understood. She had spent so many years thinking of her people. She knew it was important to remember things.

One afternoon, as Charbonneau steered the boat that Sacagawea and Pompey rode in, a sudden gust of wind tipped the boat, and it started to fill with water. "Overboard!" cried one man as he slipped into the cold water. Panicking, Charbonneau dropped the tiller that steered the boat. More water flowed in, and boxes of food, clothing, and equipment began to float away.

Even with her baby Pompy cradled against her, Sacagawea wasn't afraid. Calmly she grabbed the boxes, books and packets before they hit open water and floated downstream, tucking them into her arms and keeping them dry until the boat was righted and pulled ashore. When she handed them over to Captain Lewis, he raised his arms with joy. “You’re as brave as ten men, Sacagawea,” he said. “Thank you.” Seeing Captain Lewis’s gratitude, Sacagawea smiled shyly. She thought to herself, “I will do whatever I can to help Long Knife and Red Hair find the Everywhere-Salt-Water and complete their journey.”

When food supplies ran low, Sacagawea showed the white men how to forage for berries and roots to eat. When they caught an elk, she boiled out the marrow from inside the bones, making another meal for another day. Just by being in the boat from day to day, Sacagawea showed any watching Indians that the Corps of Discovery meant no harm. If they were a war party, they wouldn’t have a woman and child with them.

Lewis and Clark cared for Sacagawea, as well. When she became ill with a fever, Captain Clark found a sulfur spring and carried back a cup of mineral water for Sacagawea. “Here, drink this,” he said gently. “It will make you feel better.” Weak and pale, Sacagawea sipped from the cup before falling back on her blanket. Soon, however, her fever broke, and she felt well enough to travel again.

Another day, Sacagawea, Captain Clark, and Charbonneau were exploring a ravine when a cloudburst pelted them with heavy raindrops. Strapped into the papoose on her back, baby Pomp, usually so quiet, began to squawl. “I’ve never seen it rain this hard,” said Sacagawea. She could barely see her husband a few feet in front of her. Suddenly she heard a roaring in the distance. It sounded like a herd of horses galloping toward them, but in an awful instant, Sacagawea knew what it was: a flash flood coursing through the ravine. “Run!” she cried. Spying a ledge several feet above the streambed, she dashed toward it, with Charbonneau pulling her hand and Clark pushing her from behind. They scrambled to safety and watched as water swept over the spot where they had been standing just a few moments before.

Through it all, Sacagawea focused on what she wanted more than anything: to see her people, the Shoshone, again. And soon enough, they were in Shoshone land. Although seven years had passed since Sacagawea had last been here in the Lemhi Valley, she recognized it as easily as if it had been yesterday. There were the hills where her mother used to take her to gather gooseberries. There was the Beaverhead River, where her older brother taught her to fish.

On a hot August afternoon, Sacagawea saw four Shoshoni men on horseback ride toward them. Sacagawea spoke with them. “We are your friends,” she said. “I am of your people.” She who Lewis and Clark were and asked the Shoshone men to lead the group to their village to meet the Shoshone chief. They agreed.

At last, Sacagawea had returned. Walking into the village, she peered into the faces of the women and children who had gathered to gape open-mouthed at the white strangers. She was looking for her mother, but she did not see her. She overheard some women whispering behind their hands. “Who is she?” they wondered. “She looks so familiar.”

“No one recognizes me,” thought Sacagawea sadly. “It’s been too long. If only I could see my mother or my brother again.”

Finally they reached the buffalo hide tent that belonged to the chief of the tribe. The door flap was opened, and Sacagawea, Charbonneau, Captain Lewis, and Captain Clark ducked inside. Sacagawea blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dimness. Then she saw the chief, a strong man whose broad shoulders were draped with a fur-trimmed mantle. She blinked again. “Could it be?” she thought.

The chief, looking at her, gasped. “Sacagawea?” he whispered.

As soon as he spoke, Sacagawea knew for certain who it was. “Cameahwait!” she cried, throwing her arms around him. “My brother!” At long last, Sacagawea had come home to her family, and she couldn’t keep the tears from streaming like rivers down her face. She cried harder when Cameahwait told her that her mother had died several years earlier. But by the time she left the tepee, news had spread. “It’s Sacagawea, returned to us!” the people cried, and Sacagawea found herself surrounded by women and men and children who pressed against her and held her hands to welcome her back to the Shoshone.

The days she spent among her Shoshone tribe were joyous. But eventually the Corps of Discovery had to move on again. Sacagawea kissed Cameahwait. “I may not ever return, brother,” she said.

“Then stay with us here,” said Cameahwait. “These are your people. Raise your son here, among the Shoshone.”

Sacagawea slowly shook her head. “I will always love you, Cameahwait. But I belong with my husband now, and with Lewis and Clark. I’ve promised to help them get to the great Everywhere-Salt-Water, and I will keep my promise, no matter what."

Cameahwait understood. "You will always be welcome here, Sacagawea," he said, lifting his arm in farewell.

The Corps of Discovery continued their difficult journey. Through the treacherous Bitterroot Mountains they climbed. Men were injured when they careened down a steep slope. When food ran out high in the snow-covered passes, they were forced to eat a few of their own horses to survive.

But somewhere along the way they began to hear a mysterious sound, calling them with its echoing voice. It was the roaring waves of the Everywhere-Salt-Water. In November 1805, Sacagawea saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time and could hardly believe her eyes. It was more wondrous than anything she had ever seen before, as big, it seemed, as the sky itself. "For a little Shoshone girl to see this majesty," she said, "is a miracle." The Corps of Discovery had traveled for nineteen months and 4,100 miles, but Captain Lewis and Captain Clark had finally completed their journey.

Many months later, in 1806, Sacagawea and Charbonneau made it back to their home in the earthen lodge in the Mandan Village. For the rest of her life, men and women would gather around her to hear stories of her great adventure with the white explorers Lewis and Clark. In her Snake language, she told of rain, snow, and cold, of bears, sickness, and hunger. And she always described how the ocean looked glimmering in the sunlight, and how it made her feel—like she had come home.

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Much of the rest of Sacagawea's life is a mystery. Some say she died of a fever in 1812. But others think she eventually returned alone to live out her days among her Shoshone people in the Lemhi River Valley, and that she died there as an old woman in 1884. Whatever her end, Sacagawea is one of the original adventurers of our time and a true American heroine.

John Muir

John Muir set down his cup of tea, held up his hand, and said, “Listen. The wind is singing.”

John was sitting in a friend’s cabin near the Yuba River in northern California. He’d spent the night there, tucked into a cozy bed, which felt a little for John like being the princess and the pea—just not right. Normally, on an exploring trip, John camped outside and, before he fell asleep, he stared up at the millions of stars blinking above the jagged peaks of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Once he’d even slept on a rock in the middle of a stream. But since his friend’s cabin had been nearby, he’d spent the night indoors for once.

Now, it seemed, the outdoors was calling to him. Thirty-six-years-old, with a bushy brown beard that cascaded down to the middle of his chest, John listened as the wind howled and moaned beyond the cabin walls. Then, Plack! Crack!

“What’s that?” asked his alarmed friend.

“It’s the wind,” he said, “making the pinecones and branches fly like birds.”

“Well, they’re flying right into my windows,” grumped his friend.

“Oh, now, don’t complain about the wind,” said John happily. “The wind is truly charitable. It loves everyone the same.”

“What do you mean?” asked his friend.

“Think of the snow,” said John. “It bends only the topmost branches of the trees. The lightning strikes only a tree here, a tree there. But the winds touch every tree, first whispering and cooing through the branches like a sleepy child, then roaring like the ocean. Everyone and everything feels its caress.”

Grinning now beneath his long beard, John hopped up, slipped into his coat, and said, “I can’t stay inside while it’s calling out there. I want to see the wind storm up close.”

His friend had known John for too long to try to persuade him to stay inside. But he did say, “Are you sure you’ll be safe?”

“In a windstorm, nature always has something to show us,” said John. “Besides, going outside will hardly be more dangerous than crouching here beneath a roof.” With a wink he was gone, striking off toward the highest bluff he could find.

It was a beautiful, pure-blue December day in 1874—one of those bits of California winter that are warm and full of white sparkling sunshine. Yet even while the damp earth hinted at spring, the wind was fierce enough to knock down a tree every two or three minutes. For hours as he walked through the morning sunshine, John heard the resounding CRACK of a tree trunk snapping, then a loud BOOM as the tree crashed to the ground.

Hearing the trees fall didn't make John nervous. He was too absorbed watching the trees themselves dance in the winds. There were the young sugar pines, light and feathery as squirrel-tails, that bowed almost to the ground; meanwhile, the old pines, who had already weathered a hundred storms, waved solemnly above them, their needles shining like diamonds. The madrona trees, with their red bark and large glossy leaves, reflected the sunshine like the surface of a lake. But the silver pines were the most beautiful of all. Enormous trees 200 feet tall, they were rocked to the roots by the wind so that even the biggest looked like they were trembling with excitement. To John, each tree was wonderfully different. Each tree sang its own song, and John loved to be among them, to hear their music.

By the middle of the day, John had scrambled to the top of the highest peak around and admired the view into the valley. Looking up at the Douglas spruce trees that towered above him, however, gave him an idea. "If I could climb one of those trees," he thought, "I'd get the best view there is, and I could hear all this wonderful wind music up close." He carefully chose the tallest Douglas spruce, about 100 feet tall. He was used to climbing trees in his study of nature, so without a second thought he flung his arms around the spruce and shimmied into the very highest branches.

At the top, John clung on tightly. The treetop was swaying so much that he felt a bit like a bird being bobbed about on a blade of grass. But when he had caught his breath—and reminded himself that trees like these could bend almost to the ground without breaking—he looked around. John gasped in amazement at the shining leaves fluttering and flapping in the winds. Even though it was winter, the colors were beautiful:

brown and purple flowers, yellow-tinged leaves, pale gray laurels. And the sounds: it was like a symphony! The branches boomed like waterfalls; the pine-needles whistled and murmured; the leaves clicked. John loved to hear it.

For hours, John stayed at the top of the tree, which rolled like a ship in stormy seas, first twenty feet this way—WOOOSH—then twenty feet the other way. He never felt motion sick, or scared of heights. Out in the wildest of places was where John felt most at home in the world. He even thought that the movement of the trees was a bit like the lives of people. “It never occurred to me until this storm-day,” he said later, “that trees are travelers. They make many journeys—not long ones, it is true. But our own little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than tree-wavings.”

At last the windstorm died down. John shimmied down the tree and slowly walked through the calm forest toward his friend’s cabin, to tell about his adventure. Now everything that had been in an uproar was quiet. The sun was setting, and all the snapped trees and downed branches were hidden in the dim light. “Never before,” thought John, “have these noble woods appeared so fresh and joyous.”

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From the time John Muir was a boy, growing up in the small town of Dunbar, Scotland, he loved being outdoors. Perhaps you do too. John loved playing games with his friends in the streets, clambering up the sides of an abandoned castle, racing across the moors, and taking walks into the countryside with his grandfather. He pored over the books of naturalist John James Audobon, with their pictures and stories of North American birds and forests. He longed to see America for himself one day.

When he was 11, John got his wish. In 1849, the Muir family moved to America and began to farm 80 acres of land in Wisconsin. For John, it was heaven. There were blue jay's nests and woodpecker's nests to study; frogs, snakes, turtles, and insects to admire; animal tracks and burrows to discover. Since John and his six brothers and sisters didn't go to school, since their dad wanted them to help with the farm, they spent all day out of doors. "Here without knowing it we still were at school," he said later, "every wild lesson a love lesson. This sudden splash into pure wilderness—how utterly happy it made us!"

It would have been perfect, except for John's father. Daniel Muir was terribly strict, and from the time their farmhouse was built, he made sure that John and his brothers did nothing all day but work on the farm. By day John plowed the fields for planting; in the evening he chopped firewood and fed the animals. If John even tried to get a drink of water, his father might whip him for not working. The rules extended into the house too. No singing. No dancing. No talking at the dinner table. For a while the family ate only one meal a day. Just to have time away from his cruel father, John started waking up in the middle of the night and sneaking down into the basement to read.

At age 21, John finally got away to college in Madison, Wisconsin. Studying science—rocks, plants, animals—that was pure fun for John. He still escaped outside whenever he could, finding a perch in a tree where he could read, or swimming in

Lake Mendota after classes. He also lined the shelves above his bed with plants and flowers.

Still, there was no escaping the itch John felt to get outside and wander. After a lifetime of living with his strict father, who didn't let him see anything, John wanted to see everything! When he was 25, John left school for good and became a vagabond, traveling all over the United States and beyond. He walked all the way to Florida, where he got malaria, a terrible fever disease. Locals found him collapsed, unconscious, on a trail he was exploring, and they took care of him for months till he was better. From Florida John sailed to Cuba, a tropical island in the Caribbean ocean, then on to New York. Running out of money and still not feeling quite well, John decided that next on his list was exploring California. He hopped on a steamer ship and made the trip just before his 30th birthday. It turned out that California was where John Muir found what he was looking for.

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It was Yosemite Valley, a wilderness area north of San Francisco, that left John awestruck. It was so different from anything he had ever seen before. The towering mountains. The magnificent, thundering waterfalls. The trees that towered higher than the buildings he had seen in New York. Walking through the valleys and climbing up the peaks, John felt so happy that he sometimes burst out singing. Once he even scared a brown bear from a berry bush with his musical interlude.

John didn't just admire the beauty of Yosemite. He studied it. With his sharp eye, he noticed changes in the rock that indicated the presence of long-ago glaciers. He lied on his stomach to study rocks with his magnifying glass.

One afternoon, John decided he wanted to see Yosemite Falls. The highest waterfall in North America, it winds through Eagle Creek Meadow before plunging 2,425 feet—almost half a mile—down the side of a gray granite cliff. But John didn't just want to admire the falls from below; he'd done that already. He wanted to know what it was like to look right down the falls—to be the water, in a certain sense.

Although the spray from the falls turns the rocks anywhere near it slippery with cold water, that didn't stop John. First, he carefully removed his shoes; he'd need his toes to help him grip the wet stone. Then he walked as close as he could get to the icy water. A tiny ledge extended out another twenty or thirty feet, right to where the water roared past. Most people would think it was far too dangerous. But not John. "I want to see what the water sees," he thought. Slowly, carefully, he inched on his bare feet out to the tip of the ledge. Water dripped down his face and ran like tiny rivers through his beard. With one step, one wobble, John could fall to his death. But he didn't think about that. He just closed his eyes and absorbed it all—how cold the water was, and how loud it sounded. After a while he crept back, dried off, put his shoes back on, and walked home.

As much as he he loved Yosemite, John Muir wanted to explore other parts of the world—the wilder the better. He couldn't resist a chance to sail to Alaska with a friend and see icy glaciers up close. One day, John set out to study a large glacier.

Stickeen, his friend's little black dog, followed him out of camp. "Shoo, Stickeen," John said. "This adventure will be too long and hard for you. Besides, I only have this little crust of bread to eat—not enough for both of us."

But Stickeen wouldn't shoo, and soon John gave up. They shared the crust of bread for a late breakfast. When John noticed that the sharp ice was cutting Stickeen's paws and making them bleed, he shredded a bit of cloth to tie around each of the dog's paws. Stickeen licked his hand in gratitude. "He's a bit of work," thought John, "but a good traveling companion."

Glaciers are riddled with crevasses—big cracks in the ice that sometimes drop down hundreds of feet. Fall in one and you may never get back out, John knew. As brave as he was, John was very careful when it came to crevasses, especially a large one like the eight-foot gap that stretched before him and Stickeen now. "Come on, Stickeen, jump!" John called as he leapt over. Stickeen barked and leaped after him. They made it! Because the far side was lower than the side they'd come from, John knew that they wouldn't be able to leap back the other way, even with a running start. They'd have to press forward—and they'd have to hurry. With so many crevasses, walking on the glacier in the dark was too dangerous, and spending the night on the glacier, without any sort of shelter, more dangerous still. They had to make it back to camp before nightfall.

John picked up the pace. So did Stickeen. With the help of his compass, John could tell they had almost made a full circle on the glacier and should be headed back the direction they had come, back toward the camp. That's when John saw it: a giant crevasse at least fifty feet wide, cutting right across their path. “Uh oh,” John said. “How will we get across this one?” Stickeen, sensing John’s worry, whimpered.

“Don’t worry, Stickeen, I see a way. There’s an ice bridge. It’s thin as a razor, yes, but it’ll do. Now we just have to get down there.” Using his ice ax, John made small pockets for his feet so he could climb down the ice wall to get to the bridge. Then he started walking ever so slowly across. Step by step, inch by inch. When he glanced down, he saw only darkness. Who knew how deep the crevasse was, or how long he would fall if he took a wrong step? “Can’t think about that now,” John muttered, and shaking off his nervousness, he kept on walking. At last he made it to the other side and carved another ice ladder to climb to the top of the glacier.

The only problem was, Stickeen was still on the other side. By then the dog was desperately worried, pacing back and forth, whimpering, howling. “Come on, Stickeen, here boy,” John called, but Stickeen only laid down and buried his nose in the snow. “You can do it,” cried John. “You have to!” The sun was starting to fall in the sky, and they couldn’t stay out here much longer.

Finally, Stickeen made a run for it. With his bandaged front paws, Stickeen crambled down the side of the crevasse and made his way across the ice bridge. John was trying to figure out how he’d lift him back up the other side when Stickeen made a running start and leaped up the ice pockets John had carved, straight past John to safety on the glacier. “Good boy, Stickeen, you did it,” John said as he patted Stickeen’s soft head. With the dog trotting at his side, John walked quickly back to camp and warmed up by the fire.

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John Muir had so much fun exploring the wilderness that it was hard for him to want to stay in one place. But at last he fell in love with Louie Strentzel, the daughter of a wealthy rancher. At age 42 John and Louie married, and the pair settled down on a house on Louie's parents' ranch, where John grew pears, grapes and cherries to sell. Soon they had two pretty dark-haired daughters, Wanda and Helen. John became a doting father. At bedtime he made up wonderful stories about a kid named Paddy Grogan, an Irish boy who rode a kangaroo. He took the girls into the fields and told them the names of the flowers. On one long walk, John said, "You see that hill over there? The one with the silver pine on top?"

"Yes," said Wanda.

"I'm naming it Mount Wanda. And that other one, over there—you see it?—that's Mount Helen."

Helen and Wanda giggled. "Can you do that, Father?"

John puffed up his chest and fluffed out his grizzled gray beard. "I just did."

As much as he loved his wife and daughters, being a farmer was wearing on him, and over time he grew thinner and crankier. Finally his wife, Louie, grabbed his arm and said, "John, you need to get back to the woods for a little while. It suits you."

John looked down. "But the family, and the farm…," he said.

Louie kissed him on the cheek. “John, I know that you love me and the girls. But the wilderness is always calling you, isn’t it, even when you’re here on the ranch. Go back to Yosemite, and return to us when you get your wilderness health back. You’ll be happier, and so will we.”

Grateful for his understanding wife, John set out again for Yosemite, the place he had visited over and over again and spent so many years as a young man. It had been several years since his last visit. This time, in 1889, John immediately noticed all the ways Yosemite had changed—and not for the better. Stands of tall trees had been cut down for lumber. Cattle and sheep had overgrazed the meadows so that many of the grasses and plants were completely gone. People were dumping things into the water above Yosemite. All of it made John sick to his stomach. “We’ve got to do something to protect Yosemite,” John complained to his friend, the editor of a magazine. “We need to turn Yosemite into a national park, so that no one will be able to log or farm here anymore. It will stay wild for our grandchildren and their grandchildren to enjoy.”

“Why don’t you write about it, and my magazine will publish your words?” suggested his editor friend. “We’ll work together to change things. John’s magazine articles about the destruction in Yosemite appeared a short while later, and soon everyone was talking about Yosemite. Not everyone agreed about what should be done. Some people thought it was only right that ranchers, farmers and lumberman had access to the great resources of the Yosemite valley. But a few important government officials recognized that it was important to preserve places of natural wonder in the United States. In October 1890 Congress passed a bill that made Yosemite a national park. John had won!

John had already spent much of his life exploring and writing about the wilderness. Now he saw that he could use his knowledge to save the wilderness he loved from people who could damage it. To gather with people who loved nature as much as he did and who believed it was important to protect it, John started a club. He called it the Sierra Club. The day the club was organized, there were 27 members, who elected John the Sierra Club president. Now the Sierra Club is one of the biggest environmental organizations in the world, with more than a million members who work to protect plants, animals and other wild things.

For the rest of his life, before his death in 1914 at age 76, John fought to save the natural wonders of America. He didn't always win. Despite a long battle to protect it, the beautiful Hetch Hetchy Valley near Yosemite was flooded when a dam was built there. Still, by sharing his passionate love for nature, John taught others that our world is a gift that we need to protect and take care of. He once said, "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread," which means that seeing the beautiful things outside is practically as important as eating.

But you don't have to go Yosemite, or Alaska, or anyplace else to do it. Just look outside your window. What do you see? Trees? Grass? A bird's nest? Enjoy it. Keep it clean. Like John Muir, help keep America's natural places beautiful.