

Pierre Cruzatte: Metis on Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Pierre was a Metis of French and Omaha Indian heritage. He was a descendant of the Cruzatte family who were early settlers of St. Louis. For a number of years he worked as a trader on the Missouri River for the Chouteau fur interests. He was fluent in French, Omaha and Indian sign languages. He enlisted as a private with the Lewis and Clark expedition on May 16, 1804 at St. Charles, Missouri. At the time he was hired he was an experienced voyageur and Indian trader. He was employed as both interpreter and bowman for the keelboat, given his knowledge of the Missouri up to the entry of the Platte River. He was nicknamed “St. Peter” by the other expedition members. He is described a small, wiry, one-eyed man.

Cruzatte was an excellent fiddle player, this along with his language skills, were instrumental in maintaining good relations with the Indians they encountered. Thus was born the descriptor–“Fiddle diplomacy.” In late July 1804, just north of the confluence of the Platte River with the Missouri, Cruzatte and George Drouillard were sent by the captains to scout out the villages of the Oto and the Missouri tribe, with whom Lewis and Clark sought to hold council. His skills were particularly useful in an 1804 encounter with the Bois Brule Teton Sioux, when the Sioux took the expedition’s pirogues (boats). Cruzatte was able to smooth over the situation and gain the expedition’s peaceful entry into the Upper Missouri region. Clark named Crusats River (now the Wind River) in honour of Pierre Cruzatte.

In early June 1805, Cruzatte was one of six men chosen to accompany Lewis on an exploration of the north fork of the Missouri River. The crew was to examine the course of the river in an attempt to learn if it was the main branch of the Missouri. Lewis, on June 6, 1805, after ascending the river 60 miles (97 km), wrote in his journal: “I now became well convinced that this branch of the Missouri had it’s direction too much to the North for our rout to the Pacific,” confirming that it was not the true Missouri or the correct path to follow westward.

Like the other enlisted men of the expedition, Pierre was awarded extra pay and a 320-acre (1.3 km²) land warrant after the expedition’s return.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute