

# The Chinook Observer

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## York, a great American, Begins to get his due on the Peninsula

Our nation's first African American explorer brought back to life

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ILWACO--He went from slavery to being touched by the hand of God, only to be treated as property after the rest of the Corps of Discovery had been commended and rewarded with gold and farmland. Nearly 200 years later, we are discovering who York really was.

The Hilltop School auditorium was near capacity Saturday night as the "Ocean in View" educational series presented documentary filmmaker Ron Craig and living history performer Hasan Davis, for a presentation and discussion on York, the only African American member of the Corps of Discovery.

Craig began the evening by explaining early representations of York and how they have changed over the years. In early works, York was described as almost comic relief for members of the Corps. Later, York was found to be a fearless and valuable member of the team.

Craig, who is working on two documentaries on the subject of York, showed slides of early representations of the Corps and York.

He explained how historians have realized over the years that York had a special role with the Corps, and by the end of the journey, he was allowed to vote with the rest of the men and was treated as an equal. Craig also explained how York had become instrumental in communicating with the American Indians, most of whom had never seen a black man.

Hasan Davis is an educator and living history performer who has traveled the country telling the story of York. He was dressed in buckskin and carried a walking stick, and for over an hour he captivated the audience with his first-person account of the exploration as York.

The room that had been quiet to begin with seemed to repel every noise except the sound of his boots and walking stick as he made his way to the stage. He introduced himself as York, and told the audience of his childhood as a slave, the adventures on the trail that gave him a very real sense of freedom and the subsequent return to the "civilized" world.

In a booming voice about the size of the Pacific Northwest itself, he told stories of the Indians along the trail and how they thought he had been touched by God because of his dark-colored skin.

He explained the elation he felt when the men in the Corps treated him as an equal and allowed him the vote "side-by-side with the white men." He also explained the



Hasan Davis, a living history performer, brought York of the Corps of Discovery back to life for a near-capacity audience at Hilltop School auditorium Saturday night. Separated from his family by the cruelties of slavery, some believe York eventually returned to the West and became a chief of the mighty Crow Nation. Ron Craig, right, explained evolving perceptions of York.

hypocrisy in the nation's values when he returned to St. Louis.

York was not freed after the expedition as many historians once reported. He remained the property of William Clark for 10 years, and while all the other members of the expedition were given presidential commendations, gold and 320 acres of farmland, York was given nothing. He was even forced to leave his wife and family, who were slaves in another household.

After the performance, Craig and Davis took the stage together to answer questions. Many were interested in the legend that

York had returned to the Rocky Mountains and become a chief among the Crow Indians. Davis said although he would like to believe it, and the Crow Nation believes it to be fact, it is still very hard to prove.

When someone asked if York and his wife were ever reunited later in their lives, Craig replied by saying slave owners "kept better records of livestock," and there was no way to find out where his wife and children had gone.