

Speaking in Sign

Lewis wrote that Drouillard “understood perfectly the language of signs, which seems to be universally understood by all nations we have yet seen.” This sign language common to the Plains tribes goes back hundreds of years. You can learn some of the signs Drouillard used to speak to the Shoshone!

BUFFALO: Make fists with both hands, leaving the index fingers pointing out and slightly curved. Bring your hands to either side of your forehead and tip your curved fingers forward like the buffalo’s horns.

BEAR: Place your hands near your ears, palms facing forward and curve your fingers down so they look like round ears.

TIP: Hold your hands in front of your chest facing each other. Touch your fingertips together and hold your palms far apart, making an angle shaped like a tipi.

SUN: With your left hand, make a semicircle with your thumb and index finger. Move your left hand in a curve from east to west.

MOON: Make a semicircle with the thumb and index finger of your left hand. Then make the sign for night by holding both hands, open and palms down, about one foot apart in front of you with the right hand higher than the left. Then cross your wrists, right over left.

MOUNTAIN: Make your hands into fists and raise them above your head. Then bring them down, one to each side of your chest, and move them forward very slowly (to demonstrate the great effort needed to climb a mountain).

HORSE: Hold your left hand in front of your chest with the palm facing the chest and the fingers straight. Straddle it with the index and middle fingers of your right hand.

THANK YOU: Hold both of your hands in front of you with palms down, then lower them down toward the ground.

FRIEND: Hold your right hand, palm facing forward, next to your right shoulder, with the index finger and middle finger straight up and together, and the other fingers closed.