

Epidemics

After European contact, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Sahnish were subjected to several devastating smallpox epidemics that nearly destroyed them. They had no immunity and were trusting. Unprotected from these diseases, they became infected. Whole families, clans, specific bands, chiefs, spiritual leaders, and medicine men died quickly, taking with them many of their social and spiritual ceremonies and clan rites.

The great plague of smallpox struck the Three Tribes in June of 1837, and this horrible epidemic brought disaster to these Indians. Francis A. Chardon's journals state that on July 14, a young Mandan died of smallpox and several more had caught it. The plague spread with terrible rapidity and raged with a violence unknown before. Death followed in a few hours after the victim was seized with pain in the head; a very few who caught the disease survived. The Hidatsa scattered out along the Little Missouri to escape the disease and the Arikara hovered around Fort Clark. But the Mandan remained in their villages and were afflicted worst; they were afraid of being attacked by Sioux if they ventured out of their villages. By September 30, Chardon estimated that seven-eighths of the Mandan and one-half of the Arikara and Hidatsa were dead. Many committed suicide because they felt they had no chance to survive. Nobody thought of burying the dead, death was too fast and everyone still living was in despair. The scene of desolation was appalling beyond the conception of the imagination. The Mandan were reduced from 1800 in June to 23 men, 40 women, and 60 to 70 young people by fall. Their Chief Four Bears, had died. (Shane, 1959, p. 199).

On July 28, 1837, Chardon wrote: "the second chief of the Mandan was the brave and remarkable Four Bears, life-long friend of the whites, recipient of the praises of Catlin and Maximilian, and beloved by all that knew him. "

Now, as his people were dying all about him, he spoke: My friends one and all, listen to what I have to say- Ever since I can remember, I have loved the whites. I have lived with them ever since I was a boy, and to the best of my knowledge, I have never wronged the white man, on the contrary, I have a/ways protected them from the insults of others, which they cannot deny. The Four Bears never saw a white man hungry, but what he gave him to eat, drink, and a Buffalo skin to sleep on in time of need. I was a/ways ready to die for them, which they cannot deny. I have done everything that a red skin could do for them, and how have they repaid it? With ingratitude! I have never called a white man a Dog, but today, I do pronounce them to be a set of black-hearted Dogs, they have deceived me, them

that I always considered brother, has turned out to be my worst enemies. I have been in many battles, and often wounded, but the wounds of my enemies I exalt in, but today I am wounded, and by whom, by those same white Dogs that I have always considered, and treated as Brothers. I do not fear Death my friends. You know it, but to die with my face rotten, that even the Wolves will shrink with horror at meeting me, and say to themselves, that is the Four Bears, the friend of the Whites -listen well what I have to say, as it will be the last time you will hear me. Think of your wives, children, brothers, sisters, friends, and in fact all that you hold dear, are all dead, or dying, with their faces all rotten caused by those dogs the whites, think of all that my friends, and rise up all together and not leave one of them alive: The Four Bears will act his part. (Abel, p.124, 1932).

After the devastation of the smallpox epidemic of 1837, the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Sahnish combined forces for protection, economic and social survival. They still maintained separate ceremonies, clan systems, and bands and maintained their cultural identity.