

Pride and Pestilence

How Disease Epidemics Changed Plains Indian Tribal Dynamics

By Gene Gade

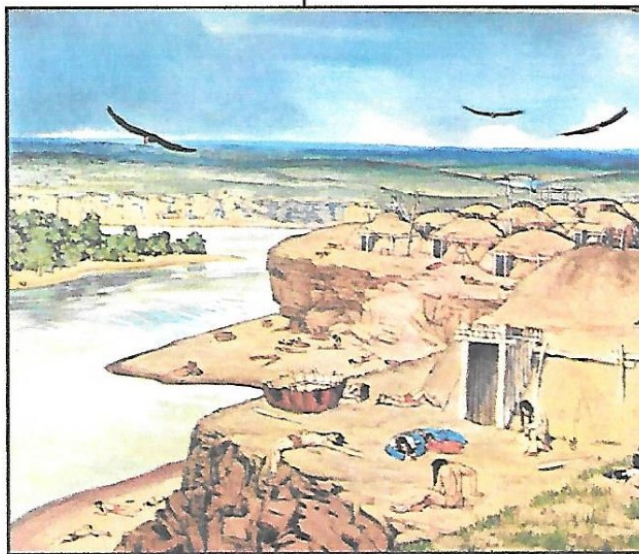
It's horrifying to even contemplate what life would be like for survivors if nine out of ten people in your nation's population died in agony over a period of weeks. Imagine further that they died from a disease that literally seemed to make their flesh rot and that even most who lived had been extremely sick and were physically scarred for life. An epidemic of that severity would devastate all age groups, but, especially, the elderly and the children. In a culture with no written language, the dead would include most of the respected persons who knew and were tasked with doing the day-to-day work and passing on the group's knowledge...the economy, history, plant/animal lore, political structure, religion, etc. Many of the people who hunted, planted and tended crops, built and defended the villages, knew and led the ceremonies, treated the sick, cared for and taught the young...most parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, friends and neighbors...would simply be gone. Consider the psychological impact of watching so many beloved people die *en masse*: extreme grief, shock, bewilderment, disbelief, despair, rage...name the emotion. How could you persevere and re-construct your society after such a terrible event? Would you ever fully recover?

As gruesome and depressing as the scenario is, it is a realistic description of what happened over and over as Native American tribes were infected by European diseases. Small pox was probably the most devastating of the plagues, but nearly all of the Eurasian infectious diseases were lethal to American Indians who encountered and had

little resistance to them. Measles, scarlet fever, typhoid, typhus, influenza, whooping cough, tuberculosis, cholera, diphtheria, chickenpox and sexually transmitted diseases all took a toll.

Percentages of death loss varied with conditions but were always staggering. Estimates are that there were twenty-five million Indians in Mexico when Hernando Cortez landed. A century later, two million remained. Ninety per cent of the Massachusetts Bay Indians died of disease in the first few years of English colonization there. Half of all Cherokees were killed by smallpox in 1738-1739. At least 30% of Northwest Coast Indians died soon after European ships brought trade goods (and diseases) to them. Some tribes that lived in smaller groups and moved frequently, such as the buffalo-hunting tribes of the Great Plains, were less susceptible to epidemics, but they were certainly not immune to them. Germs transmitted during trade, social interactions or warfare were a constant, incomprehensible threat. Wars, enslavement and other factors contributed to the unprecedented depopulation among Indians, but disease was, by far, the biggest cause.

The Tragedy of the Middle-Missouri Tribes

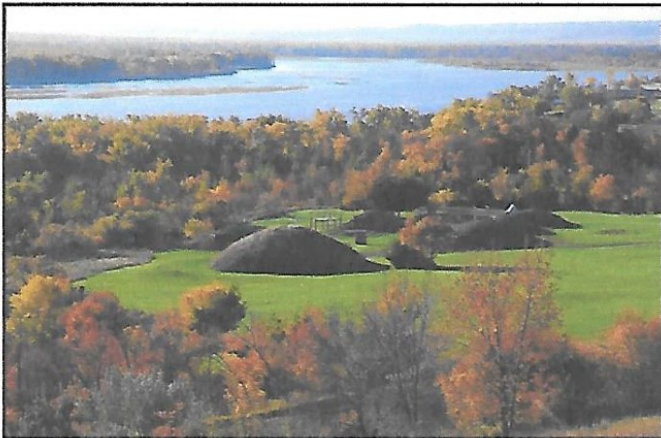


Ninety-three per cent of Mandans died of small pox in 1781. Other epidemics followed that nearly destroyed the once prosperous and proud tribe.

The tribes that settled along the Missouri and Platte River valleys beginning about 1300 A.D., based their economies on raising corn, beans, squash and other cultivated plants, supplemented by seasonal hunts for bison or other animals. They often lived in fortified villages composed of earthlodges. The tribes included the Mandans and Hidatsas, who dwelt mainly in current North Dakota; the Arikara, who had dozens of villages in South Dakota; their parent tribe, the Pawnees, who dominated the Platte and Loup Rivers in modern

Nebraska; and similar tribes farther south along the Missouri—Poncas, Omahas, Otoes and others. These were powerful tribes, quite capable of defending themselves and their territories. However, they lived close to each other in conditions that favored contagion, and they were also deeply involved in trade networks that followed the big rivers. Hence they were exceptionally vulnerable to smallpox and other diseases that seemed to inevitably follow trade with Euro-Americans.

When the French-Canadian Verendrye brothers visited the Mandans and Arikara in the winter of 1743-1744, there were dozens of their earthlodge villages all along the rivers. When Lewis and Clark came up the Missouri sixty-two years later, the Arikaras had abandoned nearly all of their settlements in South Dakota and moved north to join the Mandans and Hidatsas, who had also consolidated into just a few villages when formerly there had been many more.



On-A-Slant Village, a partially restored Mandan settlement in a State Park across the Missouri River from Bismarck, North Dakota, was a thriving town when the Verendrye brothers visited in 1743-1744. Because of smallpox epidemics it had been abandoned and was in ruin when Lewis and Clark came through in 1805.

The devastation that smallpox had on the Missouri River tribes served to create a void that other tribes soon exploited. Specifically, the Sioux expanded to the west out of their population center along the Minnesota River in the early 1700's. They acquired guns and other manufactured goods they desired at annual trade fairs, which also moved west accommodate the Sioux migration.

encountered a barrier in the form of the then-powerful Arikara. The Lakota occasionally crossed to the west of the Missouri, but they could not stay there and still return to the trade fairs each year if the Arikaras were positioned between them and their source of trade items.

Smallpox dramatically affected that dynamic by essentially destroying the power of the Arikaras. Where there had formerly been many fortified Arikara villages along the Missouri in South Dakota, after smallpox, there were none! The few remaining Arikaras moved 200+ miles to the north and consolidated with the Mandans and Hidatsa, who had also been decimated by the epidemic. The Arikara shared many features of material culture (agricultural economy, earthlodges, etc.) with the Mandan and Hidatsa, but they were much different in other customs and language. (The Mandan and Hidatsa languages are of the Siouan family, while the Pawnee and Arikara speak a Caddoan dialect they probably brought from east Texas.)

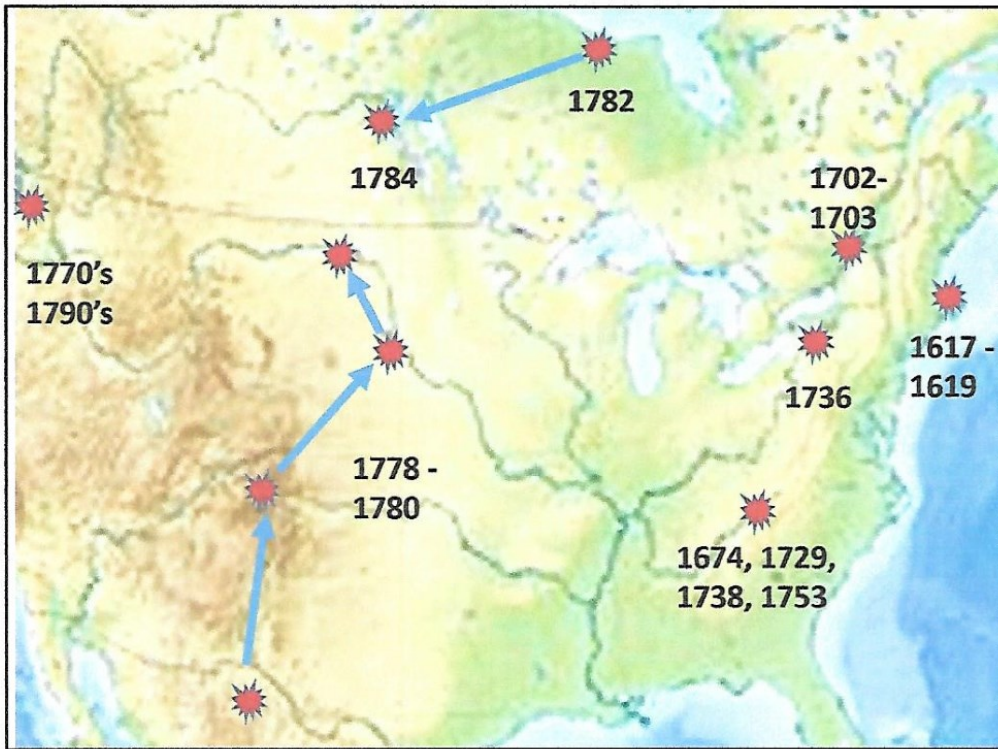
Small Pox and the Expansion of the Sioux

With the decline of the Arikara and with their acquisition of guns and horses, the door to the west was wide open to the Lakota. The Lakota moved rapidly westward to dominate the Black Hills by 1800 and continued beyond with their Cheyenne and Arapaho allies to conquer much of the Crow and Shoshone country east of the Bighorn River by 1860. By the time the Lakota controlled the Black Hills, activity at the Vore Site was essentially over.

Mato'Tope (Four Bears) was a strong leader of the remaining Mandans when George Catlin painted this portrait of him in 1832. Another small pox episode a few years later reduced the tribe to 125 individuals. After the epidemic killed his wife and children, he contracted the disease. In his final speech the proud Chief

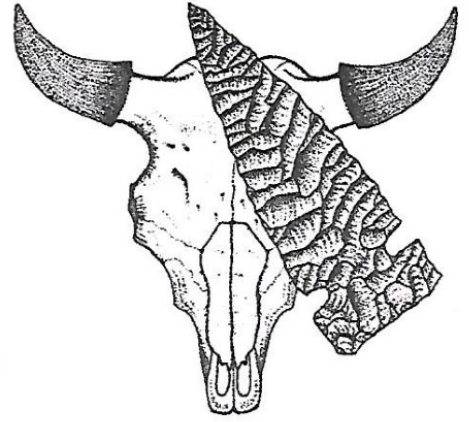


bitterly denounced the whites, with whom he had always been friends, for bringing the horrible disease. He lamented that, when he died, his scarred face would be so ugly that even the wolves would turn away from him.



Major Smallpox Epidemics Known To Have Occurred During Vore Site Use

Smallpox and other diseases had devastating impacts on Native Americans, including those who used the Vore Site. The epidemic of 1778-1780, which originated in Mexico, had especially profound affects on the Plains tribes. Learn some of the details in the "Pride and Pestilence" article in this issue.



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