

FOUR BEARS' SPEECH TO THE ARIKARAS AND MANDANS

By FOUR BEARS
War Chief of the Mandans
July 30, 1837

[The prelude and the conclusion were written by Colin G. Calloway in the book Our Hearts Fell to the Ground, printed in 1996. The painting of Four Bears at right was done by George Catlin in 1836.]



When George Catlin and Karl Bodmer met him, Four Bears was at the height of his powers. In his actions and character he exemplified the virtues esteemed in the warrior culture of his time and place: laden with honors, fearless in battle, merciless to his enemies, generous to his people.

Then, in the summer of 1837, Four Bear's world fell to pieces.

On the afternoon of June 19, 1837, an American Fur Company steamboat stopped at the Mandan villages. Some of the passengers had smallpox. Within a month, the first smallpox cases broke out among the Mandans. Confined to their densely populated earthen lodge villages by Sioux enemies out on the plains, the Mandans had no chance. By midsummer, their villages were a nightmare of rotting corpses, mourning relatives, and suicides. People were dying at such a rate that observers were unable to keep a record. Many Indians threatened the whites with death for bringing them the disease. Four Bears caught the disease and "watched every one of his family die about him, his wives and his little children" He "got crazy," disappeared from the village for a time, and starved himself. But on July 30 he made a speech to his people that was recorded by the American trader at Fort Clark, Frances Chardon.

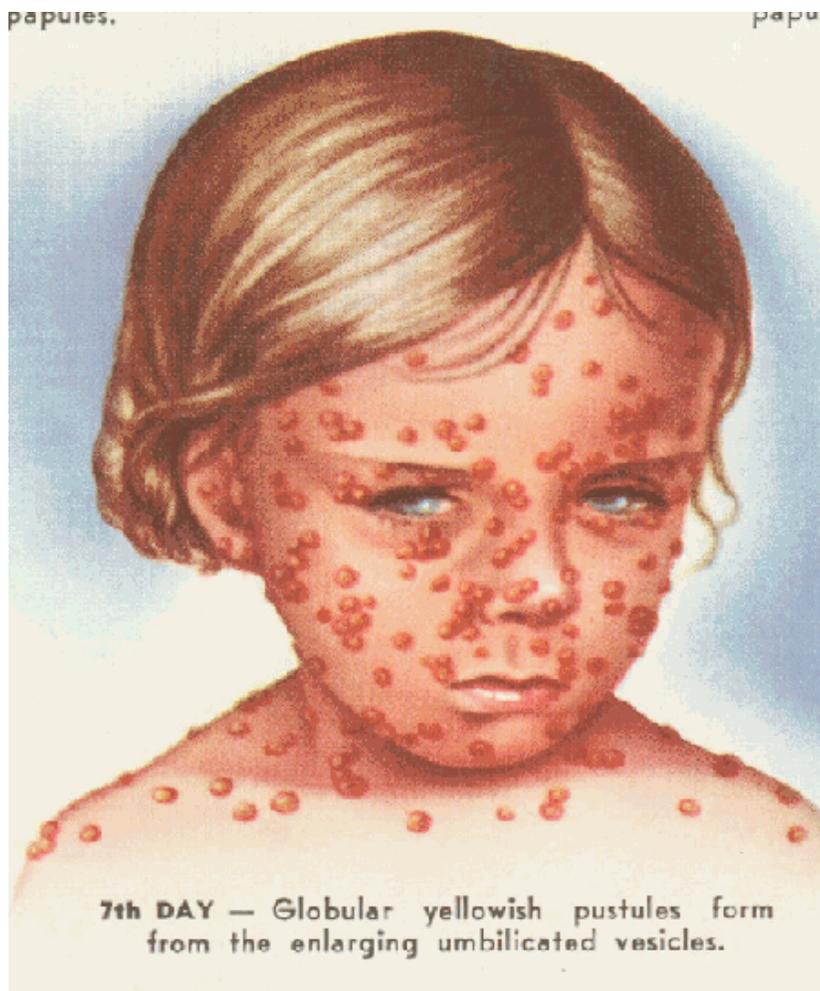
FOUR BEARS

Speech to the Arikaras and Mandans

July 30, 1837

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 a White Man, on the Contrary, I have always Protected them from the insults of Others, Which they cannot deny. The 4 Bears never saw a White Man hungry, but what he gave him to eat, Drink, and a Buffaloe skin to sleep on, in time of Need. I was always ready to die for them, Which they cannot deny. I have done every thing 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 to day, I do Pronounce them to be a set of Black harted Dogs, they have deceived Me, them that I always considered as Brothers, has turned out to be My Worst enemies. I have been in Many Battles, and often Wounded, but the Wounds of My enemies I exhalt in, but to day 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 seeing Me, and say to themselves, that is the 4 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 all together and Not leave one of them alive. The 4 Bears will act his Part...

Four Bears died later that same day.

The Mandans, who had numbered between 1,600 and 2,000 in June 1837, were reduced to about 138 by October of the same year. A handful of Mandan survivors joined other tribes, most of them moving eventually to the Fort Berthold reservation in North Dakota.

The drawing above shows a child in the 7th day of the disease progression.