



This map from the mid 1800's shows the former extent of the range of the Nakota

There's a burial site on Turtle Mountain, just uphill from where Wasawa School used to be. Bill Moncur, local historian, identified the site on his early settlement map as "Indian Cemetery". There're no markings. But some locals know to protect the site from disturbance. The people buried there, were of the Nakota/Assiniboiné Nation. They died of smallpox as the epidemic raged across the Great Plains in the 1770s and 80s.

By that time, La Verendrye had been through these parts, and trading posts were being established. Beaver pelts were becoming big business. The Nakota were known to be particularly trade savvy. Keen to engage with explorers and traders from both Upper and Lower Canada. Little did they know of the European diseases that would soon devastate their people and drive survivors away from home, into the Northwest.

Smallpox came out of close contact between domestic animals and their human caretakers. Over time the disease became endemic on the Euro-Asian and African continents. Residents there carried the disease but were immune to its effects. As the Spanish, Portugese, French and British built up naval fleets and traveled the seas for trade and plunder, they carried their diseases with them. On Turtle Island, First Nations had few animals to domesticate. The dog and the llama were the two usable pack animals. First Nations had little or no experience with diseases that came from close animal contact. Their immune systems were unprepared for the onslaught that befell, when Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

In his ground-breaking book, "1491", Charles C. Mann researches life on Turtle Island before Columbus arrived in 1492. Mann explains, that what he was taught in school about pre-contact America, was not accurate or adequate. His teachers knew literally nothing about this hemisphere pre-Columbus. He set out to learn.

It's estimated there were 90 million people living in the Americas, or, Turtle Island, in 1491. Because of well established trade routes between Nations across Turtle Island and because of unwitting explorers moving across its expanse, diseases like smallpox and measles spread quickly. As many as 60 million, 2/3 of the people, died in what Mann calls "the greatest population calamity in human history". The First Nation societies early settlers encountered were fundamentally altered by European diseases. Smallpox literally handed control over the Americas to the Spanish, French and British.

There are reports of unscrupulous colonialists using disease infected blankets to further the devastation. As troubling as this is, there are also records of compassion. William Tomison, in charge of the Hudson's Bay Company's Cumberland House, practiced isolation and compassion. He and his men gave infected neighbours quarters, and provided food, shelter and 24 hour care. For us, to care for a grave site, is the least we can do.

Smallpox is based on a story in Vantage Points 5.

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