

Chief Walkara: Leader of the Utes

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In the early 19th Century, European and American settlers began moving west into Utah Territory. Resulting in encounters between Europeans and Native American tribes, this movement produced obvious clashes between cultures and traditions. Chief Walkara of the Timpanogot Ute tribe spoke English and Spanish as well as several other native languages, which helped him launch important trading routes between American territories, southern countries, and even Mormon settlers. Chief Walkara's raiding party consisted of many different Native American tribes and cultures, a group that would inevitably find their differences and settle them through violence and prove difficult to manage. However, Chief Walkara used his intelligence, charisma, and authority to lead this coalition of native peoples in their quest to maintain their way of life.

Chief Colorow Ignacio Ouray Walkara was born in 1808 into the Timpanogot Ute tribe on the banks of what is now the Spanish Fork River in Utah. Walkara grew up in the regions throughout the Great Basin, a land which at the time was free of all European and American settlers, a territory ruled by Native American tribes where dominance was the key to respect and survival. From a young age Walkara realized what he had to do to be great in his world of provincial disorder, caused by the absence of any and all laws. Using and improving his skills in dealing with people, negotiations, and leadership which he developed during his youth became less of an option and more of an obligation as he grew older. Even at a young age, Walkara focused on the aspects of strategic warfare and combat mastery.

“Walkara's very name, Shoshone by origin, meant he would learn the skills of hunting, horsemanship, and leadership at a very young age” (Gottfredson 2). His name proved true and his efforts paid off as he entered adulthood. Walkara quickly became a master raider, horse

thief, and slave trader. He rode around the Great Basin pillaging tribes and quickly collecting his own little coalition, each member coming from different tribes and backgrounds, including Utes, Paiutes, and Shoshone. Walkara appealed to the wants of each of his federation members, using his wits and charm to control them rather than intimidation. However, if any of his followers broke Walkara's self-appointed laws, his retribution was severe.

Walkara was notorious enough that some tribes would seek assistance from him or barter for his protection. His occupation as a mercenary, as well as his hobbies of raiding and trading, made for a hefty revenue.

Walkara often dealt and traded with Spanish explorers, New Mexican smugglers or traders, and the occasional mountain man. His ability to speak English, Spanish, and several native languages enabled him to be a skilled negotiator, especially when it came to making a decent bargain while trading. Walkara often used a trading route that extended from the Columbian River to the Gulf of Mexico, a trail that had been established back in the early 1700s by Walkara's ancestors.

Using this course for travel made it quite simple for Walkara to trade with New Mexican and Spanish traders who also made expeditions into the Utah area, increasing his overall revenue, especially with gains from the slave trade. The Mexican merchants took their newly-purchased slaves back to Mexico to work in mines. Spanish explorers, however, would often return to Spain with their newly-acquired slaves, forcing them to work as servants in Spanish households.

Needless to say, Walkara was thriving with much of the Great Basin territory under his dominion. He had planted his authority and it could not be challenged, that is, until the first of the Mormon pioneers arrived on July 24, 1847.

Initially, Walkara strove to avoid any conflict between the Native Americans and the new settlers. He was determined that the two races live in peace, which was a noble effort. Using his linguistic skills, Walkara began dialogues that he hoped would spell out peace between the diverse cultures. At first, negotiations between Walkara and the Mormon leader Brigham Young went well and soon trading relations were established. After a while, Walkara viewed this association less as a tedious compromise and more as an opportunity for alliance and trade expansion.

As relations improved between the two parties, Walkara's respect for the Mormons increased and on March 13, 1850 he was baptized into their church. However, his reasons for baptism were not altogether simply based on belief in the religion but perhaps based on temporal and materialistic intentions, including better trade and certain religious entitlements.

“Membership in the LDS Church did not change Walkara's basic nature. He traded on the membership when it was convenient. His ties to the church, he concluded, entitled him to two things - priesthood ‘medicine’ and a white wife.” (Van Leer 12). However, in a show of good faith, he even began donating supplies for the Mormons to build their temple.

Using his large accumulation of wealth, Walkara contributed a substantial sum of gold to the creation of a life-size golden statue of the angel Moroni, to be placed on the top of the temple. Even though some of his coalition began questioning his donations, Walkara knew he was helping institute a friendly alliance between the settlers and the Native Americans.

However, Walkara's slave trade business did create issues for the Mormons. New Mexican slave traders continued to trade with Walkara, using special licenses approved and signed by James S. Calhoun, Governor and Superintendent for the Bureau of Native American

Affairs for New Mexico. These warrants for Native American trade were confined strictly to the borders of New Mexico, with Utah being out of the New Mexican jurisdiction.¹

Overall, the Mormons did not support these New Mexican merchants, whether they were traders of either goods or slaves. Some suspected the traders of taking guns they had purchased from Utah traders and reselling them to Navajo Native Americans, who were at the time at war with the United States. (Whitney 241). Such suspicions generated the notion of outlawing these traders and the Utah government soon passed a law prohibiting any and all Spaniards from entering Utah territory, not just slave traders. This development nearly destroyed Walkara's business as slave trading was one of his main sources of profit. Although this angered Walkara, he refrained from declaring any type of conflict against the Mormons, realizing that it could very well hurt his interests.

Whereas Walkara had originally been keen on befriending the Mormons to avoid conflict, he had not anticipated the flood of LDS church members into Utah valley. This overflow of pioneers settling on the Native American territories and hunting grounds forced the Native Americans away from their traditional lands. It is commonly assumed that this rush of settlers caused the Native Americans to be starved out of their homes, as well as crowded out of their territories, but that was not the case. In fact, the Mormons were very considerate in trying

¹ It was common knowledge at the time that Utah was applying for statehood. The United States had just emerged victorious from the Mexican-American War only six years earlier. Knowing that Native Americans favored highly their traditional lands and were already upset due to the massive influx of settlers into the Utah Territory, it is considered possible that the New Mexican traders wished to cause some trouble for the United States by targeting settlers who had moved into the potentially new addition to the nation. The New Mexicans may have held a grudge against the nation due to their victory during the Mexican-American War, which would act as incentive for the traders to cause some trouble. (Whitney 243)

to feed and take care of the Native Americans. Walkara found himself conflicted over the loss of his native lands and territories because the Mormon settlers were trying to make amends by caring for the Native Americans in the area. Walkara accepted their good natured attempts at amends and chose to remain on peaceful terms with the Mormons.

Unfortunately, during a bargaining session near the house of a man named James Ivie, a fight broke out between a Native American man and the man's wife. The wife had forfeited a good amount on supplies, and her husband was undoubtedly going to punish her severely. Ivie, having heard the dispute, came running to defend the Native American woman and prevent the fight from coming too close to his home. In the process of protecting his family and the Native American woman, Ivie accidentally killed the Native American man, who turned out to be one of Walkara's relatives. ("Allred Family Organization" 6).

This death was too much for Walkara's already taut nerves. He had tried time and again to coax the Native Americans into peaceful relations with the new settlers, but to no avail. He demanded that James Ivie be brought before him to be punished for the murder of his relative. Brigham Young knew of the incident and he defended Ivie. He refused Walkara's demands for Ivie's death. Consequently, Walkara could no longer ignore the damage the settlers had caused. It was time to make them pay.

Walkara stated what was known as the Walker War in the June of 1853. It was less of an announcement and more of a declaration through actions. He gathered his coalition of Native American raiders and rode up Payson Canyon, where he fired on settlers' homes and stole about twenty head of cattle and six horses. During Walkara's assault, an associate chief named Arapeen led another group of Native Americans up to a Mormon fort in Payson where he killed a

guard named Alexander Keele.² Although Walkara recognized that Keele's death would bring with it the wrath of the Mormons, he also saw it as an opportunity to exact revenge for all of the troubles the settlers had caused the Native Americans.

As the message of war had spread, Chief Walkara's men attacked four settlements simultaneously: Springville, Pleasant Creek, Manti, and Nephi. The Native Americans were sure the attacks would be devastating, but the Mormons were ready for this sort of retaliation. The only victims that fell to the Native Americans were those living far from the forts or largely populated areas. Still, Chief Walkara stayed resilient and spurred his men on to battle.

Brigham Young ordered that the Mormon militia be spread out among the settlements and forts to protect the people. Many times Governor Young sent letters to the recalcitrant chief stating the futility of the Walker War. He often encouraged a peace meeting, as is stated in the following letter from Brigham Young to Chief Walkara:

Great Salt Lake City, July 25, 1853. Capt. Walker:

I send you some tobacco for you to smoke in the mountains when you get lonesome.

You are a fool for fighting your best friends, for we are the best friends, and the only friends that you have in the world. Everybody else would kill you if they could get a chance. If you get hungry send- some friendly Native American down to the settlements and we will give you some beef-cattle and flour. If you are afraid of the tobacco which I send you, you can let some of your prisoners try it first and then you will know that it is good. When you get good-natured again, I would like to see you. Don't you think you would be ashamed? You know that I have always been your best friend.

² While more detailed information regarding Keele's death is unavailable, it is certain that his passing left in its wake Keele's widow and five fatherless children. (White 3)

Brigham Young. (Whitney 241)

After a long, pointless, and frustrating season of fruitless skirmishes, Walkara travelled east to live with other Native American tribes and clear his mind, away from conflict. As he considered the Walker War continuing in his homeland, he remembered a vision he had experienced when he was younger. “He said his spirit left his body for a day and a night. He stood in the presence of a God-figure, Shinob, and many angels. Shinob told him he must go back to earth to complete his work and that white friends would come to live with him.” (Van Leer, 15). Chief Walkara considered his vision and wondered whether the Mormon settlers were the white friends foretold to live with him. Realizing that the war could not go on, Chief Walkara returned to Utah Territory in 1854 and met with Brigham Young. The first night Walkara refused to speak or negotiate. The next day, however, Walkara confessed that he had no heart to continue a war with the Mormons. He knew the fighting would ruin him and his people. He realized what was best for them even though it could make him appear weak.

Brigham Young was openly relieved and all immediate significant hostilities ended. Although the main fighting was over, quite a few raids and small disputes were started and settled in the shadows. All told, about ten to twelve white settlers were killed, along with a similar number of Native Americans. After the war was finished, about 120 members of Walkara’s tribe were baptized into the Mormon Church on July 27, 1854, each one wanting to follow in their leader’s footsteps and join the Mormon’s powerful force (May 128).

These small quarrels did not officially end until January of 1855. Walkara traveled to Meadow Creek, where he lay on the verge of death for several days. Some historians believe he was poisoned by white settlers, as such an act was not uncommon at the time. Although this was a certain possibility, Chief Walkara reportedly held no grudges. And even when he had returned

to Utah a year prior, he had returned a sick man. Now he was dying of pneumonia, surrounded by his loyal Native American coalition, his family, and even a few white friends.

Chief Walkara's final wish was for the Native Americans to leave the Mormons and any future settlers at peace, a surprise to all. Honoring with all possible solemnity their Chief's desires, the small skirmishes ceased and the Native Americans and settlers began to live in peace.

The great Chief Walkara was given an honorable traditional burial. "Purportedly, at his funeral, fifteen horses, his two favorite wives, and two of his children were killed and buried along with him. In addition, two living slave children were sealed inside the tomb to keep "watch" over him and his treasures" ("Find a Grave" 8). Another source states, "His weapons and ammunition were placed beside him. All of his personal horses and two squaws were killed to keep him company on his journey. In his hand as the pit disappeared under a covering of pickets and stone was his last letter from Brigham Young. A live Paiute boy and girl were put in a cairn on top of the burial pit. Their assignment was to watch over Walkara until they, too, died" (Van Leer 23).

Even to the end of his life, Chief Walkara did only what he thought was best for his followers and family; he sought to protect, provide, and keep them as free from war as possible. He was an amazing leader: fearless, valiant, skilled, caring, devoted, and willing to face anything, even the loss of his pride, to keep his people from harm.