**Walkara – Old Spanish Trail**

National Trails Intermountain Region – Historical Vignette Project

**SAMPLE**

The Timpanogos band (Snake-Shoshone) have occupied the Great Basin alongside other Shoshone speaking people since time immemorial. They had bartered with one another and with outsiders across countless seasons by the time that Walkara's grandfather, Turunianchi, a Timpanogos chief, welcomed Franciscan friars Atanasio Domínguez and Silvestre Vélez de Escalante to their village in 1776. Within a few decades, fur traders and trappers had become a regular presence at Utah Lake, especially during the clans' annual fish festival where trading, gambling, feasting, and intermarriage strengthened relations between the newcomers and Natives. Walkara, born in 1808 near Spanish Fork, grew up on the back of a horse. His prowess for navigating mountainous landscapes may be attributed to the fact that the Shoshone trained certain horses as “buffalo runners,” which allowed them to move quickly and safely through uneven terrain. By the 1820s, however, bison herds at Utah Lake, the home of the Timpanogos had disappeared, and within a decade they were also extinct in the valleys of the Bear and Snake rivers.[[1]](#footnote-1) Besides the Shoshone language, Walkara learned Spanish and English, a necessity for his future as a leader expected to carry out successful political and trade negotiations. The fur trade created space for intimate contact between the Timpanogos and early trappers, each enjoying rather profitable relations during the height of the beaver trade. New Mexican traders based primarily in Santa Fe, Taos, and Abiquiú recorded their interactions and understood on whose lands they did business.[[2]](#footnote-2) Though Spain (and later Mexico) claimed the territory, indigenous power controlled the region. Nonetheless, an influx of foreign traders after Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821 destabilized relations among New Mexicans, independent traders and trappers, and the indigenous people of the Great Basin, and as a consequence of that, the newly independent Mexican state gradually lost its ability to gain control of its northern borderlands.

The reaction of Walkara’s nation, the Timpanogos, was, at first, an attempt to reestablish patterns of diplomacy that had successfully served their earlier alliances. When that failed, leaders like Chief Walkara searched for “new avenues of trade, alliance, and accumulation.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Travelers wanting to guarantee safe passage had to pay tribute for crossing the lands of the Ute, Southern Paiute, and Western Shoshone. Chief Walkara halted traders and, later, emigrants who crossed portions of the route between Utah and California. When the fur trade waned in importance and the more popular route bypassed their traditional trading territory, Chief Walkara’s early associations with fur trappers and mountain men proved significant to the survival of his people. All of them were skilled horseman and by the late 1830s, Chief Walkara and his partners had done enough business on the Old Spanish Trail, trading in stolen horses and captives (mostly Southern Paiute women and children), that he could provide for his clan in the way that a leader was expected to do. Walkara, in time, realized that the horses and mules that proliferated among the missions and ranches in California presented a more lucrative opportunity.

For nearly two decades, Chief Walkara led bands of raiders over the Old Spanish Trail and throughout a broad area that stretched from California’s central coast and Central Valley on the north to as far south as San Diego. A dynamic captive and livestock raiding economy challenged the power of newcomers, disrupted and facilitated the movement of animals, people, and trade goods, and contributed to Mexico’s difficulties in gaining control of its northern frontier region.[[4]](#footnote-4) Walkara’s story illuminates the ways in which indigenous peoples, New Mexicans, Americans, and Europeans found new ways to sustain themselves, and prosper in some cases, during the time of intense political tension and economic insecurity inaugurated by Mexican independence. Power, violence, and trade emanated from Native communities and pushed against foreign expansion and state power. Efforts to stabilize these economic movements failed during the Mexican period because indigenous knowledge and authority continued to dominate most of the space between New Mexico and California on the Old Spanish Trail. New Mexican landowners, those who had descended from the earliest Spanish settlers, counted, in part, on a steady supply of slaves, and the Mexican officials made futile attempts to curtail the lucrative, illicit trade.

Walkara’s story illuminates how the intersections of slavery, captivity, and livestock raiding shaped the cultural landscape of the Far Southwest during the era of the Old Spanish Trail, even though these practices predated the trail’s existence. Slavery and captivity diminished the economic power of Native women as they became tradable commodities. Native captives, most of them Southern Paiute women and children, sold at slave markets in Santa Fe, with young girls drawing the highest prices at two hundred dollars each.[[5]](#footnote-5) Despite the demographic influx and radical alterations in local agriculture and livestock production that made ranches and missions the exemplars of wealth at the California end of the Old Spanish Trail, indigenous power ruled in the open spaces between there and New Mexico.[[6]](#footnote-6) The raiding economy provided power and wealth for some Natives, but for others who had established themselves as farmers and *vaqueros*, the illicit trade threatened the ranches on which they depended for employment.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In 1840, Chief Walkara and a band of raiders, numbering about 150, pulled off one of the greatest horse thefts in the history of the Old Spanish Trail. The thieves, popularly known as “the Chaguanosos,” captured at least three thousand horses from the former mission complexes at San Juan Capistrano, San Gabriel, and San Luis Obispo. Their knowledge of less popular paths and their mastery of the rugged landscape on horseback made it possible for them to evade pursuit and deliver their spoils to the markets at Santa Fe. With the arrival of Mormon emigrants to the Great Basin in 1847, Walkara faced new challenges; these arrivants differed from the trappers in that they built fences, spread their people across the landscape, and only had interest in either changing or eliminating the Timpanogos. The arrival of Mormon settlers caused significant division among Chief Walkara and his brothers, especially with Sowiette, who argued that the best course of action was to accept Mormon dominance in their territory and to negotiate peaceable relations, as they had successfully done in the past. Walkara, however, recognized the arrival of Mormon settlers and the increased presence of the United States as a threat to his ability to support his community.

Though some accounts claim that Chief Walkara’s death in 1854 came after a bout of pneumonia, others have suggested that he was poisoned. Like many of the fur trappers and mountain men who turned to thievery during the era of the Old Spanish Trail, Chief Walkara became a legend in his own time – observers often placed him in several different places at the same time. There is little doubt that Chief Walkara’s notorious raids on livestock and his role in the capture and subsequent enslavement of numerous Southern Paiute women and children was exacerbated by the disruption of their trading relationships with the Spanish that followed Mexican independence and the opening of the Old Spanish Trail’s main (northern) route.

1. Van Hoak, Stephen P. “The Other Buffalo: Native Americans, Fur Trappers, and the Western Bison, 1600-1800,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2004), 9-11. For discussion of the disappearance of the bison herds in the larger context of the struggle for resources between Indigenous peoples and European Americans, as well as the ecological destruction that resulted from mass immigration to the North American West, see Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920.* New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For discussion of the relations between the Indigenous peoples of the Great Basin and New Mexican traders, explorers, and missionaries in prior to Mexican independence, see the first three chapters of Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 17-118. Also, Joseph P. Sanchez (and there may be another one or two worth mentioning) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Blackhawk, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier,* (103) and Zappia, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Figures provided in a pamphlet produced by Gerald A. Smith and Clifford J. Walker, *The Indian Slave Trade Along the Mojave Trail.* (San Bernardino: San Bernardino County Museum, 1965), 13-14. For a comprehensive study of captivity and exchange in this region see James Brooks. *Captives & Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*. Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, University of North Carolina Press, 2002. See also Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts;* Pekka Hamalainen’s *Comanche Empire;* James Brooks’ *Captives and Cousins;* Andrés Resendez *Changing National Identities.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zappia, 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)