

Rees Pioneer Day 2017

October 29, 2017

Dear Family,

Happy Rees Pioneer Day! On this day in 1855, our Rees ancestors—father William, mother Elizabeth, and children William, David, and Joseph—first entered the Salt Lake Valley, completing a 6 ½ month journey by ship, train, and ox-drawn wagon from their native Fishguard, Wales.

Last year’s letter focused on Joseph’s service with the Utah Territorial Militia (Nauvoo Legion) during the Utah War of 1857-58. This year’s letter will explore his service with the Nauvoo Legion in 1866, during the height of the Black Hawk War.

Political Backdrop #1 of the Black Hawk War¹: Mormon and Indian Relations

From the time of the Mormons’ arrival in Utah in 1847, they had, to an impressive degree, coexisted with the various Indian tribes in relative harmony. This was due largely to the steady influence of Brigham Young and his consistently conciliatory policy toward the Indians, perhaps best summarized by his well-known maxim that “it is better to feed them than to fight them.” This policy, far from being an empty aphorism, was deeply rooted in the Mormons’ belief that they had a special duty to care for the Indians. In a declaration that was characteristic of his many refrains to the Saints² to exercise patience and kindness toward the Indians, Brigham Young stated:

We could circumscribe their camps and kill every man, woman and child of them. This is what others have done, and if we were to do it, what better are we than the [gentiles]³? It is our duty to be better than them in our administrations of justice and our general conduct toward the Lamanites⁴. It is not our duty to kill them; but it is our duty to save their lives and the lives of their children . . . We should now use the Indians kindly, and deal with them so gently that we will win their hearts and affections to us more strongly than before; and the much good that has been done them, and the many kindnesses that have been shown them, will come up before them, and they will see that we are their friends⁵.

Unfortunately, despite this and similar exhortations, “Brigham Young was forced to concede that it was much easier to ‘gather the people’ to Zion through preaching the gospel than ‘to make Saints’ of them once



Brigham Young, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1847 until his death in 1877.

¹ This is a necessarily highly condensed and simplified summary of a complex war with various causes. For a more comprehensive analysis of the war, I highly recommend John Alton Peterson’s excellent “Utah’s Blackhawk War”.

² “Saints” is a shorthand reference to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

³ Gentiles in this context refers to non-Mormons.

⁴ Lamanites are one of the major peoples of which the Book of Mormon provides an account, and are believed by Mormons to be among the ancestors of the American Indians.

⁵ John Alton Peterson, Utah’s Black Hawk War (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999) 382-383.

they got there⁶.” Over time, some Saints who were themselves struggling to produce sufficient food in the harsh desert environment became frustrated with what they viewed as the burdensome demands of the Indians, who frequently begged for food, and in many cases resorted to killing the settlers’ livestock in order to survive. Such cases occasionally resulted in violence initiated either by Saints or Indians, which in turn developed into a cycle of violent reprisals. In such instances, Brigham Young continued to preach a measured response and a proper reflection of the Saints’ own role in the conflict. For example, Young communicated the following to church leader Orson Hyde:

You are aware that we are settled upon their lands, (which materially interrupts their success in hunting, fish, &c) that we are informed as to their origin . . . and the designs of the Almighty in their behalf; for these reasons it behooves us to exercise toward them all possible kindness, liberty, patience and forbearance . . . And inasmuch as we occupy their lands, . . . it is but right for us to give the well-behaved a horse or an ox now and again, and otherwise feed and help . . . [them, for] the Lord . . . has decreed the regeneration of that race.⁷

Young expressed similar sentiments in his communications with gentiles. In 1870, American artist and longtime observer and friend of Native Americans George Catlin wrote Brigham Young after learning that General Philip Sheridan had assumed command of a large swath of Indian frontier and was openly advocating for extermination of the Indians. In his letter, Catlin stated that he had learned in conversations with even “remote tribes” of the confidence that the Indians had in Young due to his “sympathies for, and kindness to” them. Catlin then suggested forming a “grand” pan-Indian-Mormon military alliance for protection against the invading military forces and general westward expansion that were then destroying Indian civilization, offering to use his own influence with the various Indian tribes to secure such an alliance.⁸

In his response, Brigham Young dismissed the proposed alliance but expounded on his views of Mormon versus US government relations with the Indians:

Notwithstanding the efforts of the Military commanders and their subordinates, who in response to the clamor of the border settlers and political demigogues [*sic*] of the great West, . . . make the extermination of the Indian one of their watch cries, I have no idea that they will succeed in their bloodthirsty and iniquitous designs. The “Great Spirit” has a future for the Red men, and that not in their grave, . . . but how much they may suffer, or how much they may be despoiled and wasted, before the tide of His providence turns fully in their favor is not for me to say. But I do know, and that in sorrow, that our country must answer for their bad faith, broken treaties, and great crimes in Indian matters, that they have perpetrated in the name of Christianity, civilization and progress, . . . The course of the people of Utah have pursued [*sic*] towards the Indians can be recommended not only on the score of humanity, but of economy. We *have* found it cheaper to feed than to fight them, . . . Thus we shall gain their love, and by keeping our word with them hold their respect. By this means we hope, with the help of the Lord to accomplish much good for the original owners of the soil of this continent.⁹



Artist George Catlin, by William Fisk, 1849. Catlin specialized in portraits of Native Americans.

⁶ Peterson 375.

⁷ Peterson 111.

⁸ Peterson 109.

⁹ Peterson 110.

Political Backdrop #2 of the Black Hawk War: US Government Relations with Indians, Mormons



General Patrick A. Connor

In 1865 Utah, the immediate face of the federal government, both to Indians and Mormons, was the contingent of 750 California and Nevada volunteers sent to Utah in 1862 under the command of the rabidly anti-Mormon¹⁰ Colonel Patrick A. Connor¹¹. Connor had ostensibly been sent to guard the overland trails and telegraph lines from rebel attacks and Indian raids, but he established Camp Douglas (named for the likewise anti-Mormon US senator from Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas) on the bench overlooking Salt Lake City, with his howitzers trained on Brigham Young's mansions, consistent with his self-appointed mission to destroy the Mormon theocracy.¹² Needless to say, Connor's occupation of Salt Lake City did not cure Mormons of their resentment and distrust of the federal government, particularly in light of the recent Utah War of 1857-1858¹³, wherein President James Buchanan had sent troops into Utah to put down a supposed but non-existent "Mormon Rebellion."

Joseph Rees recounts his involvement with one particular episode in 1864 in which Connor and his troops attempted to capture Brigham Young.

In the early '60's General Connor, U.S.A. encamped at Fort Douglas attempted to over awe the Mormons by marching his troops down the East Bench towards the City. Among a number of others--being a minute man--I hurried to the defense. We rallied within the rock wall that enclosed the Des. News office, the tithing office and Pres. Young's mansions--the Bee Hive and the Lion House.

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The day was somewhat exciting. We thought our Prophet was in danger of capture and yet to all appearance he was entirely unruffled. The civil law was supreme at the time and was respected and honored by all. Why then should the military assume the prerogative of the civil law or menace the peace of an orderly, law abiding people? "It shall not" was seen in



1869 photo of Salt Lake City, looking east, showing the presence of Camp Douglas

¹⁰ Wild West. " Patrick Connor and the Battle of Bear River." *Historynet.com*. HistoryNet, 12 Jun 2006. Web. 4 Oct 2017. <<http://www.historynet.com/patrick-connor-and-the-battle-of-bear-river.htm>>.

¹¹ "In reporting to his superiors in Washington, Connor wrote that the Mormons were 'a community of traitors, murderers, fanatics . . . and whores.'" He also complained about Brigham Young and his 'absolute and tyrannical control of temporal and civil affairs.' Connor was relieved of his command in 1866.

¹² Peterson 32.

¹³ Colonel Connor had actually served under the command of Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston during the Mexican War of 1846-1848. It was Johnston who led US troops into Utah during the Utah War.

all our actions that day, and it was well for Connor and his men that he hesitated, turned right about face and marched back to military barracks. Wise Mr. Connor.

I am proud of my record that day, proud that my humble presence inside that wall mingled with other willing men to do what I could and all I could to oppose military tyranny conceived in malice and directed against "Brigham Young the Lion of the Lord."¹⁴

The Indians in Utah had reason to be even less favorably disposed toward the federal government than were the Mormons; in January 1863, Colonel Connor had led his troops from Camp Douglas to an area near present-day Preston, Idaho, where a group of Northern Shoshone were sheltered during a particularly harsh winter. Acting on an affidavit from a miner stating that several miners en route to Salt Lake City had recently been killed by a band of Indian raiders¹⁵ in two separate incidents in Montana, Connor directed the slaughter of an estimated 300-500¹⁶ Northern Shoshone men, women, and children in the bitter cold, then burned their dwellings and supplies, in what became known as the Bear River Massacre.¹⁷ For this campaign, he was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General. Although the bulk of the Indians in the portions of Utah settled by Mormons belonged to various Ute bands, they shared close ties with their Northern Shoshone brethren through inter-tribal marriages and through joint occupancy of the lands surrounding Salt Lake City. As such, the Bear River Massacre deepened the Ute Indians' fear and distrust of the federal government.

Black Hawk's Campaign Begins

It is against this backdrop that the extraordinary Ute leader Black Hawk determined to assemble a multi-tribal alliance to engage in daring raids of the Mormons' livestock, using the Old Spanish Trail system to ultimately transport thousands of heads of stolen livestock to various markets throughout the west. Although there were several complex motives for the raids, they can be characterized as being conducted at least partly out of necessity, as the establishment of Mormon settlements had disrupted the delicate balance of the Utes' hunter-gatherer food system, partly out of a desire to halt the white expansion that was threatening Indian society, and partly to replace the Indian slave trade that Brigham Young had outlawed in 1851.¹⁸

Black Hawk had shrewdly determined that he could safely engage in targeted raids of Mormon livestock without attracting reprisals from the army, knowing that Brigham Young would withhold any news from the government that might provide a pretext for sending even more troops to Utah to further intrude into Mormon life. Instead, Brigham Young was likely to mobilize the church-led Nauvoo Legion, or Utah Territorial Militia, to respond to Indian hostilities. And, Black Hawk also reasoned that if Brigham Young *did* ultimately request military assistance from the federal government, Connor was likely to ignore his pleas for help.

Acting under these strategic assumptions, Black Hawk commenced his series of stock raids in 1865. Although the primary object of the Black



Plaque commemorating the Given family massacre alongside Highway 89 near present-day Indianola, UT

¹⁴ Rees, Joseph A. Autobiography of Joseph Alexander Rees, (circa 1917) 53.

¹⁵ The actual tribe to which the Indian raiders belonged was never specified, nor did Connor investigate to find out.

¹⁶ Estimates of Indians killed vary widely in part due to the fact that an unknown number jumped into the icy river to escape the slaughter and drowned, infants were thrown into the river and drowned, etc.

¹⁷ "Patrick Connor and the Battle of Bear River." *HistoryNet*, 12 Jun 2006, <http://www.historynet.com/patrick-connor-and-the-battle-of-bear-river.htm>.

¹⁸ Peterson 64-65.

Hawk War was the stock raids, it was punctuated by several fierce battles and loss of lives. While Black Hawk and his raiders did not consider themselves to be at war with Mormons generally, they did feel particular animus for the Saints in Sanpete and Sevier counties, owing in part to the behavior of several whose failure to heed Brigham Young's repeated counsel of patience and kindness toward the Indians had provided the spark that began the multi-year cycle of violence and reprisals.

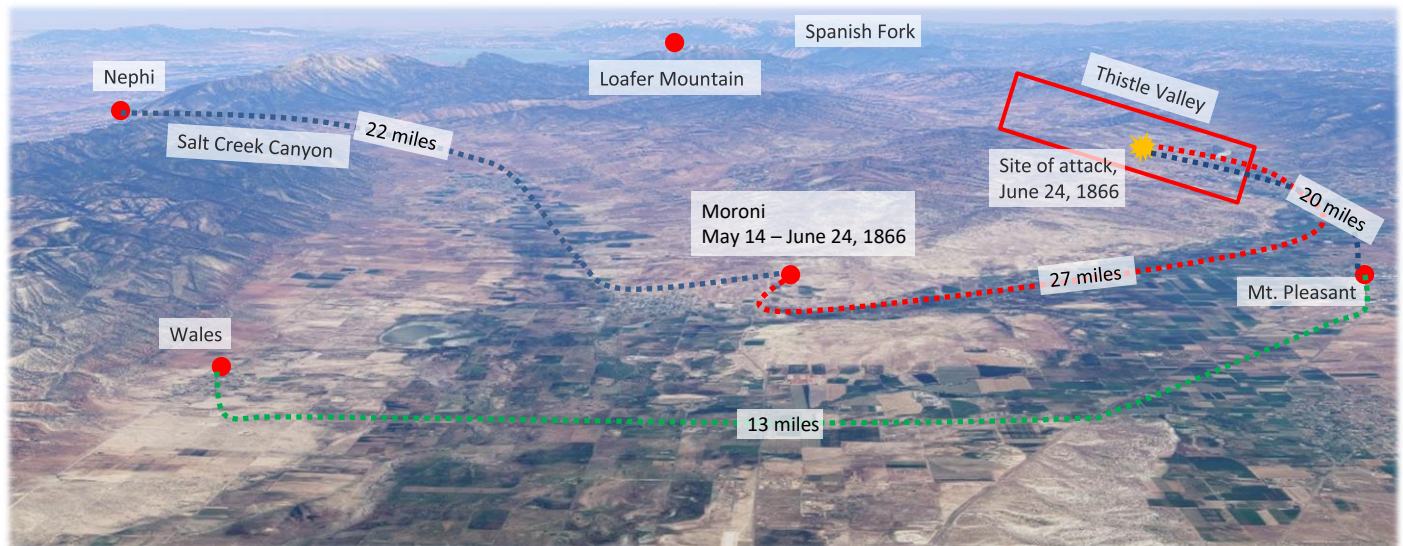
An early example of the animus directed at the Sanpete settlers was the brutal killing of the John Given family in Thistle Valley. The Given family had commenced dairy operations in the valley in May 1865, ignoring the warnings of local church leaders regarding the possibility of an Indian attack. On the morning of May 26, 1865, a group of 15 Indians surrounded the Givens' hut and killed John Given, his wife Eliza, and all four of their children.¹⁹

Joseph Rees and the Blackhawk War

The following spring, Joseph Rees's Nauvoo Legion unit was mobilized and sent to protect the settlers in still-volatile Sanpete county. He recounts:

In 1866 the Indians were very troublesome in Sanpete County. I was appointed captain of a company to go to the aid of the settlers. My company consisted of John Wixey (dead), John Balsler, James Ure (dead) William (Bill) Bess (dead), Robert Granger (dead), John Jones surnamed Sligo (living), Thos. J. Williams (living), Richard Keep[?], Wm. D. Johnson, John Smith, Ole Olson, and two others.

In May, probably the 11th, of that year we started on our journey arriving safely at Moroni in about 4 days. The most important event of our campaign was a sudden call while we were attending Sabbath services at Moroni June 24th to at once start for Thistle Valley to aid Major Dewy and his company who were then besieged by the Indians. You bet we hurried. Towards sun down we reached the camp June 24, 1866. The Indians seeing a strong reinforcement of infantry, and cavalry commanded by John Ivy of Mt. Pleasant withdrew to the hillside covered with cedar and pine.



That morning (Sunday) two of Dewy's command went up a ravine close by to pick chewing gum. They fell into an Indian ambush. Charles Brown, one of the boys was instantly killed. Dave Jones escaped unhurt. The following day, Monday June 25th I was appointed by the officers in command to take the body of poor Brown

¹⁹ Peterson 142.

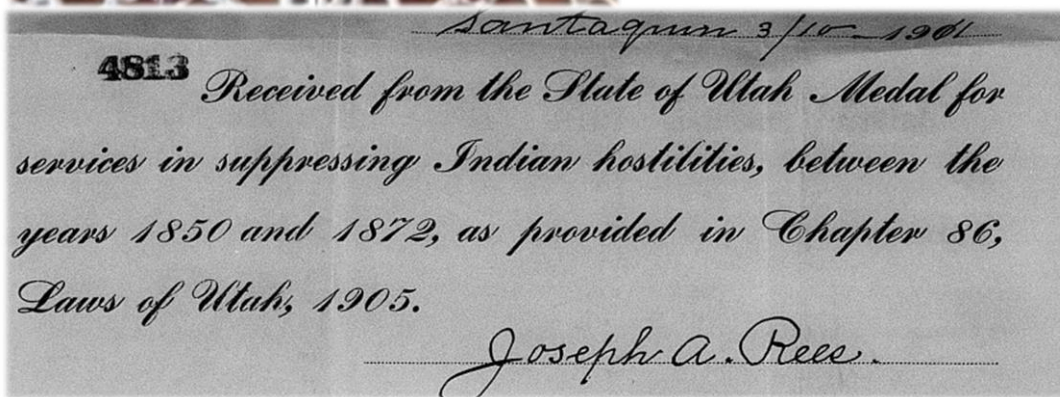
to Mt. Pleasant for burial²⁰ and Thomas Snarr to receive surgical aid. During the Sunday battle Thomas was shot through the upper part of one leg. The Indians by a clever ruse captured nearly all the horses and mules including a \$500 span of large mules belonging to Mr. Dinwoody a furniture dealer of Salt Lake City. I assure you that we were on the watch on our journey. For miles thick cedar bordered the road--a most convenient battle ground for the lurking Redman.²¹

Joseph's account of the battle is consistent with the recollection of Captain Albert Dewy, who reports that the reinforcements arrived an hour before sundown, just as his soldiers were preparing for the worst—a nighttime assault by the roughly 70 Indians, one which they knew they (comprising 54 troops) could not repel.²²

After Joseph's journey to Mt. Pleasant to transport the body of Charles Brown for burial, and to obtain surgical aid for Thomas Snarr, he was assigned to Wales, also in Sanpete county. He continues his account:



After this I was assigned to Wales, a straggling village on the west of Sanpete valley and about 6 miles from Moroni. We were away from home about 4 months for which I recently received the munificent sum of \$23.00 from the State of Utah "for service faithfully rendered".²³



Medal and certificate presented to Joseph A. Rees for service faithfully rendered in the Black Hawk War. Special thanks to Suzanne Lowell (great-granddaughter of Joseph and Catherine Blixt Olson Rees) for the photos.

²⁰ Charles Brown, of Draper, was buried in Mt. Pleasant but reinterred in Salt Lake City in 1966. ("Charles Brown." *FindaGrave*, 3 Jun 2007, <https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=19692425>.)

²¹ Rees 53.

²² Peterson 304.

²³ Rees 54.



One of the original cabins in Wales, Utah. This cabin likely existed at the time Joseph Rees was stationed in Wales.



Here I am in Wales, Utah, with my trusty family history partner, Hannah Rees, and two very nice Rees brothers that we met. They are descendants of some of the original Reeses (different line than ours) who settled Wales. Most of these Reeses came from Merthyr Tydfil, which is the city of coal and iron works where Joseph's father worked prior to his marriage. True to our new Rees friends' Welsh roots, they are both coal miners (the one on the left works near Salina, the one on the right works near Price).

End of the Black Hawk War, and Death of Black Hawk

In response to the loss of lives and livestock from the war, Brigham Young determined to deprive Black Hawk of the fruits of the raids by instituting a program of vigilance which required the abandonment of scores of smaller outlying settlements and consolidation into larger towns, the construction of defensive forts around other settlements, and the active, continual guarding of all livestock. This program, once fully implemented, quickly bore fruit; Black Hawk ceased hostilities in 1867.

Between July and December of 1869, an ailing Black Hawk, provided with protective security detail by Brigham Young, visited every major settlement from St. George to Spanish Fork, on a "peace mission." At the same time, Brigham Young and other church leaders were aggressively preaching reconciliation to the Saints. Black Hawk was warmly received in some cities by martial bands, received unanimous votes of forgiveness from several congregations, and in some cases endured the caustic insults of still-bitter settlers. Throughout, Black Hawk reportedly "personified



Ashley and Hannah Rees at the gravesite of Ute Indian Chief Antonga, or Black Hawk, at Spring Lake, Utah. It was here that Black Hawk was born, from here that he began the hostilities that became the Black Hawk War, and here that he returned to die in 1870.

dignity in every movement and gesture.”²⁴ Following these visits of reconciliation, Black Hawk returned home to Spring Lake, where in September 1870 he died and was buried.

Why Does All of This Matter?

The Black Hawk War was ultimately a tragedy for all involved. Still, there are positive lessons to be learned from the key players in the [Rees version of the] war. From Black Hawk, we see leadership at every turn, first rallying the various Indian tribes to battle in defense of their lands and culture, and then preaching peace and reconciliation among all parties when the war was over. From Brigham Young, we see the virtue of public and private consistency in pursuit of a worthy goal—in this case, his efforts to ensure peace by dealing kindly and fairly with “the original owners of the soil of this continent.” From Joseph Rees, we see more examples of a character trait that is a recurring theme in his autobiography—devotion to duty, a trait whose origins he would no doubt ascribe to his mother, Elizabeth. Whether in his service as a Minuteman with the Nauvoo Legion, or his service in the most dangerous parts of Sanpete County during the height of the Black Hawk War, Joseph fulfilled his duty by readily answering each call to serve.

For those of you who may feel that one of your defining characteristics is a keen sense of duty, recognize that its origin lies at least in part with Joseph Rees and his mother Elizabeth, both of whom exemplified devotion to duty throughout their lives. Furthermore, that trait is among those things Joseph clearly wanted his descendants to know and understand, so that we “may become acquainted—though briefly—with the source from which [we] sprang.”²⁵ He concludes the foreword of his autobiography thus:

Among Latter Day Saints especially do I consider it almost if not an entire duty to connect past lives with present lives historically and make their genealogy as complete as possible. I wish I knew more about my ancestors than I do but must be content at present with the little I have, and that little, I want my posterity to know.²⁶

So, hopefully you now feel a little more connected with past lives, and more acquainted with the noble source from which you (we) sprang. Happy Rees Pioneer Day!



Joseph A. Rees.

Love,

²⁴ Peterson 356-357.

²⁵ Rees 2.

²⁶ Rees 2.