

## Indian fighter switched sides from U.S., Mexico

James Kirker was called Don Santiago and King of New Mexico, but the most gruesome title he became known as was "Lord of the Scalp Hunters." If you were an Indian in the state Chihuahua, Mexico, you feared no other man more. He gathered hundreds of scalps for the bounty put there by Governor Don Angel Trais.

His life was also a series of switching sides — from his Irish roots to fighting with the U.S. Cavalry, from trading with Indians to collecting their scalps, from a Mexican warlord to fighting again with the U.S. in the Mexican-American War.

Kirker was born in 1793 on the outskirts of Belfast, Ireland; he found his way to the Americas by 1810. He was a large, agile young man who sailed to New York to get away from being conscripted into the British Navy. Two years later he fought as a privateer in the War of 1812, captured by the British and released in a prisoner exchange. He returned to New York and joined some of his countrymen for further adventures West.

Arriving in St. Louis, Missouri, he worked for a mercantile company until hiring out to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in 1822. He spent that winter at a post on the Yellowstone River. The next summer he joined in a battle that became known as the Arickara War in what is now South Dakota — Indians had killed 15 trappers, and the 6th Infantry responded with a combined force of 230 soldiers, 750 Sioux and 50 trappers.

Kirker then entered into the Santa Fe trade trapping along the southern Rockies and Gila River. He married a Mexican woman and made El Paso del Norte (what is now Juárez) the center of his home life. They had two children, Joseph and Petra.

In 1826 he went to work for the Santa Rita copper mine, escorting wagon trains filled with copper to Chihuahua City, fighting off a number of attacks by Apaches.

He was a superb horseman who managed to un-Irish himself as far as appearance, dressing in a Mexican shirt and breeches fringed in leather. He wore a wide-brimmed sombrero, with huge spurs jingling at his heels. He carried a Jake Hawkins rifle with silver inlay decorat-

## Taking a Look Back

by John McVey Middagh

ing its stock, and daggers showing from the tops of his boots. He rode a spirited horse that had no problem carrying his 175 pounds. In 1835 he became a Mexican citizen.

Kirker continued trapping but started trading with the Apaches, exchanging weapons for livestock. The authorities charged him with dealing in contraband and declared him an outlaw. But, as things went in Mexico back then, he signed a contract in 1839 with the Governor of Chihuahua to hunt Apaches, Comanches and Navajo Indians.

He formed his own private army becoming very skillful and successful killing Indians — he had a group of about 25 men, which included Anglos, Mexicans, black escaped slaves, and Shawnee, Delaware, and Creek Indians. He was promised pay for the number of captives and scalps he brought in. Kirker operated in and around the Sierra Madre, becoming a border lord. While fighting and trading with the Apaches and the Mexicans he fast became known as the "King of New Mexico."

The time approached when the bankrupt government of Chihuahua could no longer pay Kirker and offered him a commission in their army. He turned them down and became an enemy of the state with a \$10,000 bounty on his head. Leaving Mexico he joined Col. Doniphan's First Missouri Volunteers, the regiment that captured El Paso in 1846 during the Mexican-American War. Doniphan had him foraging, guiding, interpreting, and scouting as they campaigned toward Chihuahua. Kirker and his men were invaluable to the advancing force. His knowledge of the country and his understanding of Mexican culture paid off handsomely.

In 1849 Kirker led a wagon train of Forty-Niners across New Mexico reaching California a year later, settling with his family in Contra Costa County, near what is now called Kirker Pass. He died of natural causes in 1853.

*John McVey Middagh is a former saddle shop owner. You can reach him at [jmiddagh@yahoo.com](mailto:jmiddagh@yahoo.com).*

## Advertiser Index

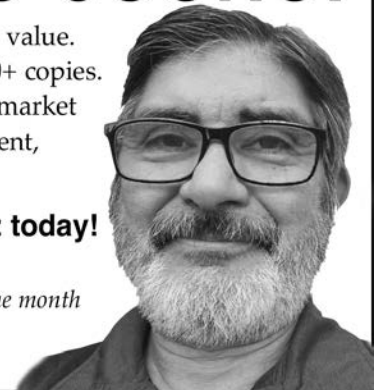
Alma Calderon	11	Fountain Theatre	31	Perma Floors	25
Ar dovino's Desert Cross'g	15	Furrs Family Dining	33	PhiDev Inc	30
Ar dovino's Pizza	10	Hacienda de Mesilla	26	Pranic Healing	7
Around and About Tours	8	Hal Marcus Gallery	27	Precision Prosthetics	14
ATMAS Healing	33	Hans Martial Arts	14	PTEP	10
Azar Nut Shop	13	Inni Heart Eatery	8	Reiki & Crystals	8
Baskin Robbins	6	International Coin Club	3	Romans Art Design	25
Bert Saldana Art Gallery	7	KTEP	32	Salon Selah	13
Books Are Gems	15	Las Cruces Art Fair	35	Silver City MainStreet	20
Bruce's Air	9	Las Cruces Museums	9	Star City Studio	26
Cattleman's	33	Leo's Mexican Food	34	Sunland Park Racetrack	18
Ceci Burgos Counseling	25	Magoffin Hall	22	Texas Star Beverage	11
Chuck's Bicycle Repair	31	Magoffin Home SHS	6	The Cleaners	24
Collectibles	14	Marie Otero	15	Townhouse for Rent	14
El Paso Art Association	27	The Marketplace	5	Unity Bookstore	28
EPCC	8	Mesilla Book Center	28	UTEP Athletics	16
El Paso Live	21	Mission Del Rey	17	UTEP Theatre & Dance	36
El Paso Playhouse	29	Monkey Mayhem	33	Vanities	2
EPSMF	15	Moto El Paso	11	Village Inn	24
El Paso Symphony	23	Nayda's Gems	24	Walgreens	13
Escamilla Gallery	12	NM Farm & Ranch Mus.	35	Western Traders	10
For the Love of Art Month	3	Paseo Christian Church	21	Wyler Aerial Tramway	13
Forum Ballroom	7	Perkins Jewelry Supply	7		

## Be Seen in the Scene!

El Paso Scene is El Paso's premier advertising value. One ad brings you month-long exposure in 40,000+ copies. El Paso Scene readers are the area's most active market — on the go, looking for the best entertainment, shopping and dining.

**Call Advertising Director Albert Martinez today!**  
**(915) 920-7244**

Ad reservations for each issue are due by the 10th of the month  
Check our advertising rates at  
[www.epscene.com/adrates.html](http://www.epscene.com/adrates.html)



## SUBSCRIBE TO EL PASO SCENE

Why bother hunting down a copy of El Paso Scene when you can get it delivered by mail for only \$10 year? Send check (payable to Cristo Rey Communications) with this coupon to:

**El Paso Scene, P.O. Box 13615, El Paso, Texas 79913**

\$10 for one year     \$18 for two years     \$25 for three years

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY, STATE, ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

*Subscriptions are sent by Third Class (Bulk) Mail. Delivery may be delayed.*

Specializing in Mexican Food Since 1946

**LUNCH SPECIALS** 11AM-4PM with Sopaipillas!

**BREAKFAST BUFFET & MORE!** SAT. & SUN. 9AM-2PM

**Westside** 7520 Remcon 915-833-1189

FULL SERVICE BAR

THE ORIGINAL

# Leo's