

Kirker, James

by Terry Clavin

Kirker, James (1793–1852/3), scalp-hunter and frontiersman, was born on 2 December 1793 in Kilcross, Co. Antrim, the son of Gilbert Kirker, a grocer of Carnaghlis, Co. Antrim, and his wife Rose (née Anderson). His paternal ancestors had fled Scotland for Antrim in the 1680s to escape persecution for their presbyterian faith. He inherited their animosity towards the established church and English rule without acquiring the anti-catholic or anti-Irish sentiments common among Ulster presbyterians. Growing up in Carnaghlis, he received a formal education and was trained in several trades, including merchandising.

To avoid likely conscription, he left in 1810 for New York City where he worked as a clerk in an Irish catholic-owned grocery store in Ferry Street. When the US and Britain went to war in 1812, he enlisted aboard an American sloop, the *Black Joke*, thereby gaining US citizenship. The *Black Joke* took several prizes along the coast of the US and in the Caribbean before being captured off Brazil. He was released in a prisoner exchange and reverted to civilian life in New York City. His former grocery store employer had died so he married his pregnant widow, an Irish woman named Catherine Dunigan, helping her to run the store. They later had a son, James, together.

In spring 1817 he abandoned his family to accompany four cousins en route from Ireland to St Louis, Missouri, a small trading station on the western frontier populated mainly by Irish and Scots-Irish. He worked in the regional mining operations before setting up a grocery store in St Louis. In April 1822 he joined a Rocky Mountain Fur Company trapping expedition that followed the Missouri River into what became North Dakota where they clashed with native tribes. After spending his first winter in the wilderness, he participated in an attack on natives who were blocking company boats further south.

Operating independently, he trapped fur illegally each winter for twelve years from 1824 in the Mexican territory of New Mexico, initially in the southern Rocky Mountains. From 1826 he poached around the Apache-dominated upper reaches of the Gila River, basing himself nearby by working for the American operated Santa Rita del Cobra copper mines. He organised and led armed escorts for the copper trains heading southwards through 400 miles of Apache and Comanche territory to the smelter in Chihuahua City. This facilitated his unlicensed trafficking of horses, burros and cattle. He also combined his seasonal trapping expeditions with prospecting and trading with Apaches. In 1831 he entered into a bigamous marriage with a Mexican woman, Rita Garcia. She reared their five children in their residence at Janos, in northern Chihuahua, though he was not there often. Known as Don

Santiago Querque, he became fluent in Spanish and could make himself understood in several indigenous American languages.

Following the outbreak of prolonged warfare between the Apaches and the Mexicans in 1831, Santa Rita was isolated in hostile territory, from where the Apaches raided Chihuahua and Sonora, the wealthier states south of New Mexico. Maintaining good relations with the Apaches, who left his copper trains alone, Kirker thrived off Santa Rita's emergence as the main market for plunder in Mexico's north-west. He bartered contraband firearms, gunpowder, lead, knives and liquor, which he secreted among incoming mine supplies, while using his nearby ranch to hold livestock stolen by the Apaches for onward sale.

The corrupt, militarily vulnerable New Mexican officials allowed him to operate with impunity until 1835 when the exasperated federal authorities installed an outsider as governor, Albino Pérez. Further pressured by the quartering of soldiers in Santa Rita and by stricter laws against poaching and gunrunning, Kirker sought protection in autumn 1835 by obtaining Mexican citizenship and a licence to trap beavers. In 1836 Pérez declared him an outlaw, having become convinced that he was not just supplying the Apaches, but training them also. Warned by the captain of the Santa Rita garrison, Kirker fled into the US.

He spent most of the next nineteen months hunting, trapping and prospecting in US territory in the Rocky Mountains where he formed important friendships with English speaking Delaware and Shawnee tribesmen migrating westwards. Amid a rebellion in New Mexico that lasted until January 1838, Kirker returned there in autumn 1837, shortly after his enemy Pérez was killed in the fighting. The beaver trade was in steep decline and the Apaches would soon force the closure of the Santa Rita mine so he concentrated on gunrunning, and was suspected of assisting Apache raids into Chihuahua and Sonora. By then, his most important Apache ally Juan José (also known as El Compá) had been killed by Americans, causing the Apaches to become more belligerent and less trustful of the American traders and trappers in their midst.

The beleaguered governor of New Mexico, Manuel Armijo, ignored orders to apprehend Kirker, instead empowering him in 1838 to conduct private warfare against the Apaches with the right to keep any plunder. A praetorian guard of white Americans, Shawnees and Delawares formed the nucleus around which Kirker recruited a series of war bands, some fifty to 200-strong, composed of white and native Americans, escaped black slaves, Mexicans and Europeans. Continuing to barter with certain tribes while targeting others, he achieved a notable victory early in the summer when his band surprised an Apache camp in southern New Mexico, killing fifty-five warriors. His ability to keep his men well armed and mounted and his knowledge of the Apaches, particularly their camping grounds, made him far more effective than the Mexican army.

These efforts impressed the long-suffering citizens of Chihuahua state, most critically its mining magnates. This powerful lobby formed the Society for Making War Upon the Barbarians, which raised 100,000 pesos and gained the backing of the state government for contracting Kirker to fight the Apaches in April 1839. But he ignored the Mescalero and Chiricahua Apaches that were raiding Chihuahua from further south to prey on the weaker Jicarilla Apaches in northern New Mexico. His men started battles at the slightest pretext, often with pacified Apaches, and were also accused of stealing from Mexican settlers. Regularly drunk, they brawled with locals in saloons. Armijo was helpless, seeing his militia dispersed by Kirker's men in Santa Fe.

In late 1839 Kirker signed a new contract, this time with the Chihuahua state government, stipulating he would be paid mainly in bounties for scalps, prisoners and livestock. He scoured the often-rugged terrain surrounding Chihuahua City for Mescaleros and Chiricahuas, now attacking tribes that had long been his allies. Abetted by the expertise of his Shawnee deputy Spybuck, he tracked Apache bands by day before ambushing them at night or just after dawn. Although a jealous Mexican military complained that his indiscriminate attacks prolonged the war, his campaigns pressured the Apaches, earning him folk hero status in Chihuahua.

The newly appointed military governor of Chihuahua, Francisco García Conde cancelled Kirker's contract in May 1840 before rehiring him on lower rates, as the raids intensified that November. Rumours that Kirker was using Mexican scalps to claim bounties soon led Conde to offer him a wage instead. Unwilling to accept such terms, Kirker disbanded his private army and worked in mine security, first in Guadalupe y Calvo in southern Chihuahua and then from late 1842 in the state's north-west. The region was quiet, Mexico being more or less at peace with the Apaches from July 1842.

Following the resumption of large-scale Apache raids into Chihuahua in summer 1845, he was authorised that December to raise a war band to assist Mexican army forces. After he ambushed an Apache camp in Namiquipa, Chihuahua, the Chihuahua authorities agreed a new bounty contract with him in May 1846 and he pursued Apaches in north west Chihuahua for the rest of the summer. On 7 July he and his men, in conjunction with local Mexicans, massacred some 130 Chiricahua Apaches (women and children included) in the town of Galeana, Chihuahua. Apparently the Chiricahuas, having been invited to trade and feast there, were slaughtered after drinking themselves into a stupor. Seen as the worst instance of treachery in the Mexican–Apache wars, this massacre inflamed the Chiricahuas against Mexicans and Americans. Kirker later claimed responsibility for scalping 487 Apaches (for the loss of only three men) throughout his years serving the state of Chihuahua. He seems to have drunk most of the proceeds.

The US–Mexican war (1846–8) was underway, and as a 1,000-strong volunteer army led by Alexander Doniphan prepared to invade Chihuahua in December 1846,

the Mexicans offered Kirker a colonelship in their army. Without replying, he fled with a \$10,000 price on his head towards US-occupied New Mexico, meeting Doniphan's forces on the Rio Grande. Doniphan accepted his services, but told his men to watch Kirker closely and shoot him at the first hint of treachery. The soldiers were won over by his anecdotes, daring horsemanship and capacity for liquor. A mix of mountain man and caballero, he sported wild, long hair, a fringed buckskin hunting shirt, breeches, a sombrero and huge, ornamented spurs.

Kirker and his accompanying Shawnees and Delawares proved invaluable guides, foragers, interpreters and scouts, also distinguishing themselves in capturing the fort at Carrizal and in skirmishes with Mexicans, Apaches and Comanches. His assurances that the local Mexican forces were incapable of serious resistance encouraged Doniphan to continue his march on Chihuahua City. He led a reckless cavalry charge at the battle of Sacramento River (27 February 1847), as the Americans routed a much larger Mexican army. After the occupation of Chihuahua City, Kirker then helped Doniphan's forces reach the Gulf of Mexico across 675 miles of plateau country, embarking with them for New Orleans.

Hailed as a heroic soldier and frontiersman on his overland progress back west, he was photographed at St Louis in July 1847 looking suitably grizzled and demon-eyed. His appearance contrasted with an intelligence that impressed many contemporaries and is borne out by his surviving, immaculately rendered, correspondence. He spent most of 1848 serving as a guide for the third regiment of the Missouri Mounted Volunteers, which contended with Apaches along the borders of Colorado and New Mexico. Complaining that he was denied his full pay and had not received anything for his earlier services in Doniphan's army, he quit late in the year and fruitlessly sought redress by going to Washington DC.

In 1849 he guided a group of pioneers westwards from St Louis, but instead of bringing them to California as promised, he abandoned them (in relative safety) near Santa Fe, New Mexico. He was reunited with his daughter at Santa Fe and tried unavailingly to arrange for the rendition of the rest of his family from Mexico. The passing of laws by several north Mexican states normalising the scalp bounty system developed by Kirker attracted hordes of scalp-hunters to the US–Mexican borderlands during 1849–50. With many New Mexican settlers blaming Kirker for the retaliatory Apache attacks, he left for California in 1850, settling in Oak Springs, Contra Costa County, about twenty miles from San Francisco. There he hunted game and perhaps worked as a rancher.

His last years were uneventful, with the exception of an incident on 29 October 1850 when a boiler exploded on the steamship he had boarded, killing fifty people. He was flung high in the air, landing unhurt. His fellow Ulster presbyterian Thomas Mayne Reid (qv) fictionalised him as a minor villain in the best-selling novel, *The scalp hunters* (1851). The Kirker character urges the slaughter of women and children for their scalps before eventually being killed and scalped by Navajos. In reality he died

in Contra Costa County of natural causes in late 1852 or early 1853. The nearby Kirker Pass and Kirker Creek were named after him.

Thomas Mayne Reid, *The scalp hunters: a romance of northern Mexico* (1860 ed), 119, 213, 217, 227–8; William Cochran McGaw, *Savage scene: the life and times of James Kirker, frontier king* (1972); Roger D. Launis, *Alexander William Doniphan: portrait of a Missouri moderate* (1997); Ralph Adam Smith, *Borderlander: the life of James Kirker, 1793–1852* (1999); Kathleen P. Chamberlain, *Victorio: Apache warrior and chief* (2012); Edwin R. Sweeney, *Cochise, Chiricahua Apache chief* (2012); Spencer Tucker et al. (eds), *The encyclopaedia of the Mexican–American war: a political, social and military history, volume 1* (2013), 339; William E. Mero, 'Myths, legends and facts, the final days of James Kirker', www.cocohistory.org/essays-kirker.html (accessed 15 August 2019)