

Book review

# RIDING BEHIND THE PADRE:

## HORSEBACK VIEWS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER

by Kathleen Vandervoet

Cattle rancher Richard C. Collins was drawn to learning more about the environment along the U.S.-Mexico border, so he joined others who make an annual horseback trip of about a week's length called a cabalgata.

He enjoyed it so much that he ended up participating for four years, from 2008 to 2011.

A fascinating nonfiction book resulted, "Riding Behind the Padre." In the title, Collins refers to Padre Eusebio Francisco Kino, who, also on horseback, explored the same area from 1687 to 1711. Kino, a Jesuit priest, was a missionary and notable explorer.

The cabalgatas have been described as a veneration of Father Kino by retracing his journeys, showing respect for his accomplishments, and continuing their devotion to the cause of his sainthood.

Collins felt a certain kinship with Kino and wrote: "His enthusiasm for geography and exploration made me rather suspect that Kino's true calling was not that of a mission priest, but that the trail was his real home, and his life was one long horseback journey into the unknown."

Kino rode thousands of miles over the land that he labeled the Pimeria Alta. That now includes Southern Arizona and northern Sonora, Mexico. Collins explains that the cabalgatas, which began in 1984, were the inspiration of a Hermosillo resident, Jesús Enrique Salgado Bojórquez.

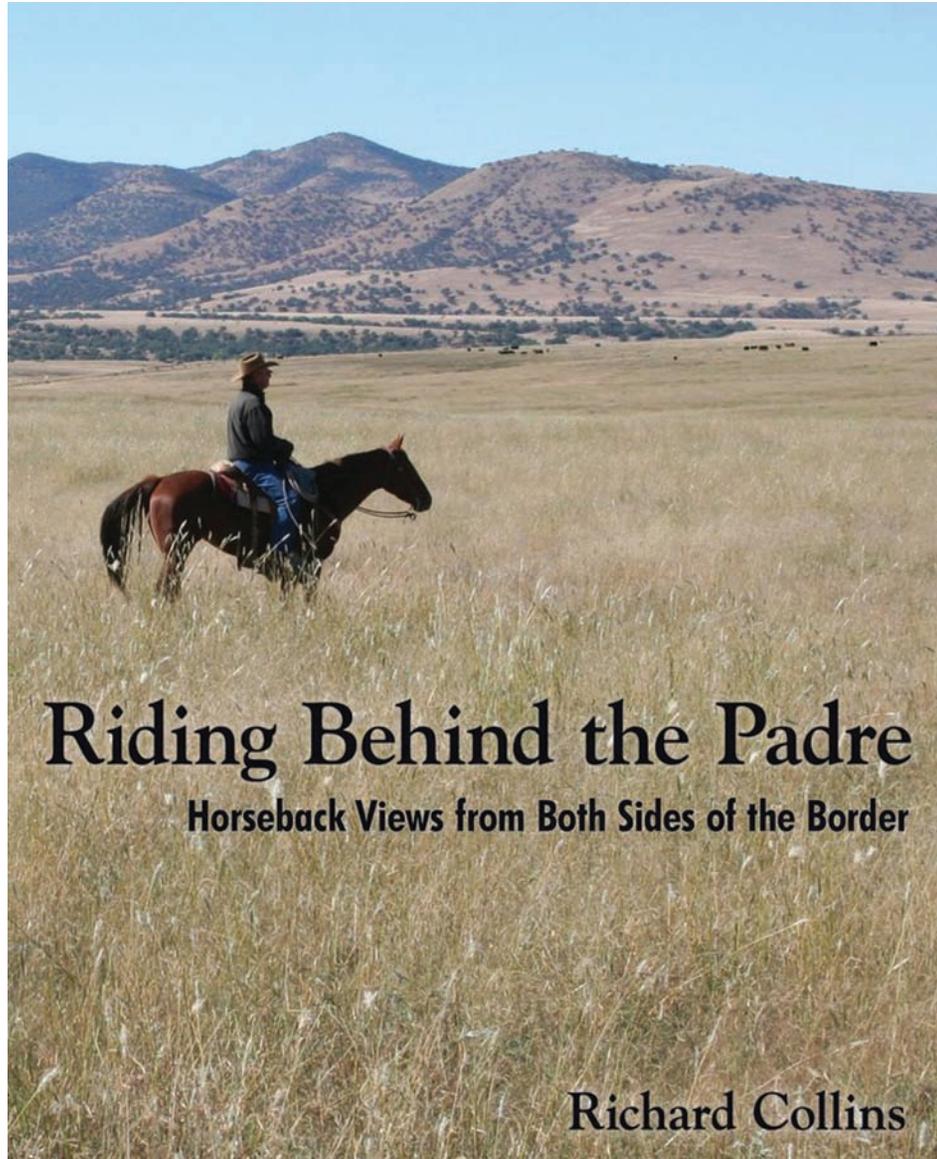
Much as Kino did, Collins enjoys focusing on the land, the vast variety of plants and the animals that live there. He takes every opportunity to talk with locals and find out their opinions, learning about economic realities along the way.

"I see with the eyes of a rancher who has also been trained in biology. In that respect, I'm unique," he said in an interview.

Collins, whose Canelo ranch was in eastern Santa Cruz County and who now lives in Sonoita, offers vivid details on four horseback rides, each about a week long, he took with a group, one per year. The journeys, three into Mexico and one in southern Arizona along the San Pedro River, were to view the lands that Kino traveled, as well as to learn from current residents.

The author skillfully intertwines the many small and seeming insignificant activities during the horseback rides along with detailed research, both of the past and present, about the area. It's clear he's a wide-ranging reader, and he cites nearly 50 publications in the bibliography.

His purpose for joining the ride that started northeast of Hermosillo, in Huepac, was, "To see the Sierra Madre and feel the culture and traditions of Sonora rising up out of its history, the land, and its people... The river trails and villages had been a peaceful diorama of Sonora's past and present." He said he liked the fellowship of the cabalgantes as well as the friendly locals.



The U.S.-Mexico border has a bad reputation due to TV and other news stories but Collins points out that, "We're not living in a war zone down here." Collins said the book, released earlier this year, has been well received and some people buy extra copies to send to relatives out of state to show them a more balanced picture of the borderlands.

Collins isn't reticent in his criticisms of U.S. actions that are detrimental to the environment and disrespectful to people who have lived there for generations. He's had numerous unpleasant interactions with certain Border Patrol agents and feels that it would be better if there was "a competent horse cavalry" instead of a border fence that doesn't work.

When asked about the process of writing the 200-page book, Collins replied with a laugh, "It was all difficult." It was a challenge "to get fresh impressions of people and that landscape that would resonate with me."

Immersed in writing, he said, "I found that I got distracted. It was difficult weeding out the digressions and staying on track" so the book would be cohesive and that readers would follow the narrative without trouble.

The less-demanding part, he remembers fondly, was "riding and getting to know the people. That was easy and fun."

Collins made a point of giving credit to Lea Ward and her late husband, Oscar. He said the first invitations to join the cabalgatas came from Oscar, a neighbor of his and a retired biologist. Lea had led bus or van trips for years that followed the path of Kino for years in conjunction with the Southwestern Mission Research Center. When Oscar died, Lea remained enthusiastic and continued to help with the cabalgatas.

This book is a great resource to take along when traveling south of the border. It enhances cultural understanding about residents of Mexico and of the many civilizations that have contributed to that culture.

I've been in several of the small communities he visited and found it pleasurable to read his upbeat impressions. For those who are armchair tourists, the book brims with details about the land, trees, plants, rivers, streams and much more.

The book can be purchased at the Tubac Presidio State Historic Park, Tubac Center of the Arts and Hozhoni, a Tubac gallery. It's available at the Tumacacori National Historical Park. It can be found at Antigone Books in Tucson and at the gift shop of Mission San Xavier del Bac.

The author's website is [www.richardcollins.com](http://www.richardcollins.com).

