

CHRISTMASES IN CALIFORNIA

by Richard Amero

Christmases have always touched the heart. So it was during California's first Christmases; so it is today.

Father Juan Crespi wrote the earliest known descriptions of Christmases in Alta California. They can be found in the diary he kept while accompanying Governor Gaspar de Portola on his search in 1769 for Monterey. The December 24 entry reads:

"On this day before Christmas . . . we set out in the morning on the same road by which we came. . . . The march covered three leagues, and we halted on the same spot as on the 10th of September, which was in the valley of El Osito de San Buenaventura. It was God's will that we should celebrate the Nativity joyfully, which was done in this way: more than two hundred heathen of both sexes came to visit us in this place, bringing us Christmas gifts, for many of them came with good baskets of pinole and some fish, with which everybody supplied himself, so that we had something with which to celebrate Christmas Day. Blessed be the providence of God, who succors us more than we deserve! These gifts were returned with beads, which pleased them greatly." . . . Francisco Palou, *Historical Memoirs of New California*, V. 2, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1926, p. 245.

The entry, December 25, was not so joyful:

"On this day of the Nativity of Our Lord we could not celebrate in any other manner than by saying Mass. . . . The cold is so biting that it gives us good reason to meditate upon what the infant Jesus, who was born this day in Bethlehem, suffered for us. We made three leagues and a half, and went to stop a little farther to the south of the estuary of Santa Serafina, close to a small village of Indian fishermen, from whence a great deal of fish was obtained in exchange for beads, with which all provided themselves. So we celebrated Christmas with this dainty, which tasted better to everyone than capons and chickens had tasted in other places, because of the good sauce of San Bernardo hunger which all had in abundance." . . . Palou, p. 246.

In the winter of 1775-76, Captain Juan Bautista de Anza led 240 persons, including 30 soldiers, 29 soldiers' wives, four families of colonists, 115 children, 355 head of cattle, and 450 saddle horses and pack mules overland from Sonora,

Mexico to Monterey, California.

At the Christmas season, the de Anza caravan camped in Coyote Canyon in today's Riverside County. It was cold and foggy. Three children had been born between the presidio of Tubac in southern Arizona and Coyote Canyon, and one woman had died. On December 24, the soldiers drank brandy given to them by their commander. That afternoon, Father Pedro Font heard the confession of Gertrude Linares, a soldier's wife, who had been in labor since the day before.

She was afraid she was going to die. The priest consoled her; then returned to his tent. At half past eleven at night, she gave birth to a son. Father Font noted the event in his diary, December 25:

"Because a little before midnight, on this Holy Night of the Nativity, the wife of a soldier happily gave birth to a son, and because the day was raw and foggy, it was decided that we should remain here, and I solemnly baptized the boy, naming him Salvador Ygnacio. . . . "Font's Complete Diary," in *Anza's California Expeditions*, edited by Herbert Eugene Bolton, V. 4, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1930, p. 151.

Franciscan priests at the missions taught Indians to play the flute, violin, bass viol, trumpet, and metal triangle and to sing a plain chant or Gregorian Christ's Mass (Christmas) in Latin and villancicos or carols in Spanish.

During Spanish and Mexican periods, settlers and Indians enacted at Christmas time a church play known as *Los Pastores*, *La Pastorela*, and *El Diablo en la Pastorela*. The play derived from Spanish mystery plays of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Juan B. Rael has discovered 77 versions of *Los Pastores*. Of this number, 36 were from Mexico, 3 from Texas, 25 from New Mexico, 4 from Colorado, and 8 from California. In the early 1800's, Father Florencio Ibanez, of the Mission of Nuestra Senora de la Soledad, composed a musical setting for *El Diablo en la Pastorela*. In 1829, New England merchant Albert Robinson saw a performance of *Los Pastores* in the presidio church of San Diego.

Those who took part in the 1829 performance rehearsed night after night. Finally Christmas Eve arrived. At an early hour, people lit candles, fireworks, and bonfires. Later, attendants rang church bells, summoning the faithful to la *misa del gallo* (the mass of the rooster). At its conclusion, Father Vicente Oliva held an image of Infant Jesus for all to approach and kiss.

Upon the twanging of a guitar, the worshipers cleared a space. In a few minutes, six females, three men and a boy entered wearing costumes and bearing banners. The females represented shepherdesses; one of the men, Lucifer, the devil; one, Ermitano, a clownish hermit; and the third, Bartolo, a lazy vagabond. The boy

represented the angel Gabriel.

Gabriel began by telling the shepherdesses to go to the manger where Jesus had just been born. The shepherdesses set out; but Lucifer tried to convince them not to make the journey. He was about to succeed when Gabriel appeared. Lucifer, Gabriel, Ermitano, and Bartolo engaged in a long debate, at the end of which the devil submitted.

After the play, the congregation gathered at the church door and greeted one another with "Feliz Noche Buena" (Happy Christmas Eve) and "Felices Pascuas" (Happy Holidays).

Settlers and Indian acolytes presented Los Pastores in missions, chapels, plazas, and patios on Christmas Day and for several days thereafter. Performances inside the church were mostly verbal; those outside, physical. In many church versions, Lucifer, upon being expelled, sang a famous quatrain by Gongora:

Aprended flores de mi
lo que va de ayer a hoy
que ayer maravilla fui
y hoy sombra de mi no soy.
Learn flowers from me
how yesterday differs from today
yesterday I was a marvel
today I am not even a shadow.

In secular versions of Los Pastores, the devil attempted to seduce the wife of a shepherd; crossed swords with the angel; sallied after frightened little ones in the audience; and left for the infernal regions as fireworks tied to his tail exploded.

Children followed the players through the streets, taunting them, but keeping a safe distance from the Prince of Darkness. After each depiction, hosts gave performers and guests bunuelos --- sweetened cakes fried crisp in grease --- and handworked ornamental tokens.

Confusion exists as to the identity of the angel in Los Pastores. The play commemorates the Birth of Christ as told in the Gospel of Luke. In this account, Gabriel tells Mary that she is to bear a son and angels inform shepherds of the event. Because they knew Luke's version, American observers Alfred Robinson and the Reverend Walter Colton referred to the angel in the play as Gabriel. Juan B. Rael did not find a version of Los Pastores that corresponded to Robinson's and Colton's descriptions.

The main action of the play involved a battle between a devil and an angel. In Discovery of the Lost Art Treasures of California's First Mission (San Diego,

1978), James L. Nolan thought this conflict illustrated a vision in the Twelfth Book of Revelations of a battle in heaven between Michael, an angel, and a dragon, or devil, who tried to eat a child born of a woman. Michael threw the dragon down to earth. The dragon again attempted to harm the women, who had taken refuge in a desert, and her descendants. None of these astral actions occurred in Los Pastores which took from Luke's account the shepherds who received a message of divine birth and who gathered at a manger to adore the newborn Babe. The characters Lucifer, Bato, Bartolo, Ermitano, Gila and others and the comic and didactic business came from folklore and from literary invention.

Most versions studied by Juan B. Rael gave Michael the principal part. Some named Gabriel as messenger to the shepherds. In a version performed at Monterey and described in the December 19, 1885 edition of the Santa Barbara paper, The Daily Press, "one who would seem to be a priest" (possibly Ermitano) disputed with the devil.

Nolan's argument is partially correct. Michael, a warrior, was more popular than Gabriel, a musician. As a child usually took the angel's role and an adult the devil's, the comic contrast between the two was heightened. When Nolan described the Virgin as the "Church on Earth" and Michael as a stand-in for the military at the presidio of San Diego, he carried his argument too far. The occasion of the play is Christmas. Lucifer, bad angel, wants to destroy the Child and shepherds; Michael, good angel, prevents him.

Hubert Howe Bancroft reported that on Christmas night 1838 a pastorela was held in Juan Bandini's home at the foot of Presidio Hill in San Diego. Bandini, fomenter of a rebellion against Governor Juan B. Alvarado, was not present. While the celebration was going on, General Jose Castro and his troops surrounded the home.

Two Carillos, two Picos, and Joaquin Ortega were taken prisoners. Jose Antonio Estudillo, justice of the peace, who was wanted also, hid in a loft above the chapel of the Estudillo house. Dona Victoria, his wife, told Castro her husband was at La Playa, a tiny settlement miles distant. The General carried his prisoners north and later released them.

Pio Pico remembered playing the part of the devil on this occasion, but gave the date of Castro's arrival in San Diego as December 27, two days after the performance. Years later, Judge Benjamin Hayes declared a grand ball was going on at the Bandini house, but he did not give the date.

Lillian Whaley, daughter of a Yankee merchant, declared La Pastorela was acted in the Adobe Chapel in the 1860's and in homes in Old Town until the 1880's. She was a shepherdess in a performance held around 1872 in a ballroom of the Whaley House. The custom was revived by the Neighborhood House in Old

Town in 1922 and by the San Diego Historical Society on Presidio Hill in 1934. Performances have been given sporadically by different groups ever since, including slapstick versions replete with dancing and rock music.

From 1834 to 1843 California governors gave Mission land to Mexican rancheros. November for the rancheros was a month of hard work. Indians killed cattle and prepared hides and tallow for Yankee traders. As Christmas approached, the rancheros relaxed. They put on their best finery; came to town on horses and in ox-carts; participated in religious rites; and enjoyed music, dancing and song.

A few weeks before Christmas, colonists set up creches or nacimientos in their homes, to which they added figures in wax, clay or wood of angels, shepherds, Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus as the Nativity story unfolded. Daily they moved the Three Kings closer to Bethlehem, until, on January 6, the Kings arrived. People gave toys, baskets and incense to Baby Jesus and food and clothing to priests and Indians at Christmas; but did not give presents to one another until January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany of Three Kings.

December 28, the Day of the Holy Innocents, was celebrated in the same manner in which Americans celebrate April Fool's Day. Alcalde Walter Colton's description of festivities at Monterey conveys the zest of the occasion:

"This is the festival day of the Santos Inocentes, and is devoted by the lovers of fun to every kind of harmless imposition on the simplicity of others. The utmost ingenuity is exercised in borrowing, for every article lent has to be redeemed. Although aware of this, still in a moment of forgetfulness, one succeeded in borrowing my spurs. A gentleman, who has lived here since his boyhood, lent his cloak, another his saddle, and a third his guitar. Two ladies performed feats that would have been difficult on any day. One borrowed money of a broker, and the other a rosary of a priest."

Las Posadas, or The Lodgings, reenacts Mary and Joseph's search for a birthplace for the Christ Child. The custom goes back to an open-air *misa de aguinaldo* (mass of the gifts) which was authorized by Pope Sixtus V (1585-90) and recited, beginning in 1586, from December 16 to Christmas Eve, at the monastery of San Agustin in Acolman, Mexico. As part of the mass, priests and Indians, while making their way around the monastery's courtyard, stopped at *posas*, or small chapels, for songs and prayers. Aztec priests had held ceremonies during the winter solstice in pre-Cortesian times in which they carried an image of their war-god Huitzilopochtli, who was born in December, so it was fitting for Augustinian priests to carry images of Mary and Joseph at the head of processions. Inexpensive baubles were concealed in clay ollas or

pinatas that were broken at the end of the mass.

Las Posadas changed from a sixteenth-century liturgical ceremony conducted by priests to a nineteenth-century Christmas pageant conducted by friends and neighbors. From December 16 to Christmas Eve, celebrants in Mexico hold candles and walk in processions headed by bearers carrying images of Mary, Joseph and an angel. The creche or nacimiento is usually not carried in Las Posadas. Participants stop at different homes and ask in song for a place to rest. As the procession is admitted to only one home each evening, owners of the homes take turns so they will be able to entertain the celebrants.

At the last stop, the travelers ask for shelter. The man of the house denies them entrance; then, upon learning their Biblical identities, he opens his door. The guests enter rejoicing.

After singing and dancing, a pinata, or figure of a bird, animal, flower, or star, made of paper around a clay olla or wood frame holding sweets, is lowered from the ceiling. Children, who are blindfolded, try to break open the pinata with sticks as it swings to and fro.

The custom of breaking pinatas (pignattas in Italian) began during the Italian Renaissance. In Spain, people broke pinatas on "Pinata Sunday," or the next Sunday after Ash Wednesday. Andrade Labastida regarded the pinata as an allegorical symbol:

"The ollas, beautifully disguised, represent Satan, or the spirit of evil which with its beauty tempts the human race. The candles and food inside are the unknown pleasures which he holds out to attract people to his kingdom. The blindfolded person represents Christian faith which must be blind and is charged with destroying the malign spirit. The moral is that man, supported by his faith, must struggle to destroy evil passions." . . . Artes de Mexico, December 1965.

While Labastida's interpretation fits the situation, the children who sing excitedly as they take part in the ritual do not think they are taking the part of Michael, the devil's antipodal antagonist:

En las noches de posada
la pinata es lo mejor;
aun las ninas remilgadas
se animan con gran fervor.

Chorus:

!Dale, dale, dale!
No pierdas el tino.
Mide la distancia
que hay en el camino.
Que si no le das

!de un palo te empino!
Porque tienes cara
de puro pepino!
Con tus ojitos vendados,
y en las manos un baston,
la olla rompela a pedazos
!No te tengas compasion!
The best part of the Posadas
is the pinata;
Even the most delicate little girls,
Become terribly excited.

Chorus:
Hit it! Hit it! Hit it!
Don't lose your skill.
Measure the distance
That's in the way.
For if you don't hit it,
With a stick I'll knock you over,
because you are
Strictly a pickle-face!
With your little eyes bandaged.
And a cane in your hands,
Break the pot into pieces,
Have no pity for it!

. . . Cantos de Las Posadas, Folkway Records, Album No.
FC7745

Las Posadas may never have been presented in early California. Hubert Howe Bancroft, Alfred Robinson, Walter Colton, Arturo Bandini, Juan Ramon Pico, and Lillian Whaley do not mention them in their writings. Because the ceremony was originally performed for Indians and became in time a popular mestizo custom, it is doubtful it would have appealed to the caste-conscious pro-Spanish aristocracy who controlled the Presidio towns of Alta California. Whether of recent or remote origin, the custom is appropriate to Southern California, with its large Mexican-American population. It resembles the English custom of caroling; and it cuts through commercialism and sophistication to the basic Christmas message.

San Diego Old Town merchants have held Las Posadas intermittently at least since December 21, 1941 when Cliff Rock staged a posada-pinata party in the Machado House. In 1955, while a student in Ben Dixon's class in San Diego History, meeting in the Fremont Elementary School, Mrs. Virginia Lucas organized a performance of Las Posadas. In 1958, the San Diego History class, then taught by Mrs. Lucas, moved to Old Town's Mason Street Schoolhouse.

The Old Town class, organized as the San Diego Historical Days Association, has continued to sponsor Las Posadas. In 1997, the organization conducted the 42nd annual Las Posadas in Old Town.

Yankee traders, gold seekers and settlers, who came to California in large numbers following its admission to the Union as a State in 1850, brought with them Protestant and North European Christmas customs.

The Christmas tree, decorated with garlands of popcorn, ornaments, lights and reflectors, and with gifts for dear ones underneath its branches, shone with the radiance of evergreen trees in a land of Nordic snow at an American Christmas festival held at Government Barracks in New Town in 1868.

Today, as in the past, English and Spanish-speaking people still celebrate the birth of the Christ Child and respond hopefully to the angelic message:

Gloria a Dios en las alturas
y paz al hombre en la tierra.
Glory to God in the highest
and on earth Peace to men of good will.

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