



Las Posadas y Las Pastorelas

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Most every New Mexican agrees that the Land of Enchantment is a special place to be for the holidays. Luminarias, posole, empañadas, Las Posadas processions and the Pastorela performances are centuries-old traditions that arrived with the early Spanish colonists and Franciscans. They are traditions that remain to this day.

This article looks at some of the history of these unique New Mexico traditions.

La Pastorela

Pastorela is a play or theatrical performance. Specific to Christmas, "La Pastorela" is a play centered around the pastores (shepherds) as they traveled to Bethlehem to find the baby Jesus. During Christmas, "Los Pastores," or La Pastorela, refers to this shepherds play. It is one of the oldest and most enduring Christmas traditions in New Mexico. You might be surprised at how old the pastorela really is.

Traveling back to the middle ages — long before television or movies — musical dramas and plays were fashionable. In these medieval times, singing minstrels brought news, stories and their political views to the villages in an entertaining manner. Of course, in the 11th

century, undue criticism of the King was highly frowned upon, resulting in a few minstrels losing their heads. In spite of being rather amateurish, (and for some, dangerous) these minstrels and traveling plays became a popular form of entertainment.

During this time, the early Roman Catholic church began to employ short plays — not for entertainment, but education. At a time when Mass was conferred primarily in Latin, which few parishioners understood, these short plays proved to be effective in teaching the bible stories and church doctrine to people of all languages. In the 1200s, these church plays, or pastorelas, had spread to the churches in Spain.

By the 1400s, theatrical performances had become an industry. William Shakespeare, for example, wrote his famous plays in the late 1500s. Certainly you remember his famous words — "Romeo, donde esta?" (Romeo, Romeo, where art thou?).

The popularity of these plays lured the church plays into the public arena, particularly for Christmas, Lent and Easter. However, these bible stories quickly became distorted in the name of entertainment and politics. The Christmas story, for example, dwelled on the expensive gifts brought to the Christ Child by the Three Kings. This was political propaganda of the time by the affluent and royalty to persuade others how they shared their wealth with the poor, common class.

Due to this corruption, the church banned the plays and pastorelas in the 1500s — just as the Spanish conquest of Mexico began.



Courtesy Comunidad Sepiensa
An early Mexican era painting depicting the annual Las Posadas



Order of Franciscans

A mural at the monastery in Puebla, Mexico depicts the 1500s Franciscans in the New World. The Franciscans were the principal missionary order in New Spain.

Pastorelas in the New World

As the Spanish began their conquest of the New World, they brought with them the traditions of the Old World. Along with the conquistadors came the Franciscans — the principal missionary order in Spain's vast colonial empire. These friars found in Mexico the Aztecs (Aztec Indians) with their own lively traditions of music, dance and public religious ceremonies (including human sacrifice). However, as the Franciscans attempted to Christianize the Aztecs, they had a problem: language. Very few Aztecs spoke Spanish.

The Franciscans quickly introduced the church plays — las pastorelas — to their evangelism. Just as the church plays bridged the language gap in Europe, the pastorelas bridged the language gap with the Aztecs.

It must be stressed, very little is recorded about these early pastorelas. While the Franciscans found the church plays to be an effective teaching tool, they were also officially banned by the church at this time. This must have placed the friars in a precarious position with the church. Perhaps this is why so little is recorded about these early pastorelas.

One surviving exception is by Fray Alonso Ponce who, in 1587, recorded how the Aztecs participated in the Christian theater performances with great zeal. By then, the dominant pastorela was Los Pastores — the shepherds play — the reenactment of the Christmas story.

As the Spanish Empire in the Americas grew, the

church grew as well. By the 1600s, these friars, missions, and Los Pastores, had spread to New Mexico along the Camino Real trail. The Franciscans used Las Pastorela to teach the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico the Christmas story, just as they had taught the Aztecs 50 years earlier.

However, there was one major difference. While the church plays in Europe were focused on the luxurious and expensive gifts of the three kings, the pastorela introduced in the New World was not. The Franciscans, whose order was based on living a simple life of poverty, focused instead on the simple life of the shepherds. It was the pastores, the shepherds, and their common gifts to the baby Jesus that were taught to be equally pleasing to God. This is why, even today, the three kings are conspicuously absent from most versions of Los Pastores.

Los Pastores in New Mexico

With the majority of native Pueblo Indians, and the Spanish colonists, being farmers and ranchers of simple means (many were sheep herders themselves), the Christmas story of the shepherds quest for the baby Jesus was firmly embraced by the people of New Mexico.

Los Pastores, a play about the trials and tribulations of the shepherds search for epiphany, and their stumbles along the way, became a representation for the human condition in New Mexico. By the 1700s, the people of New Mexico had made Los Pastores their own. And, it still is.



Courtesy Comunidad Sepiensa

An historic painting from the early days of the Franciscans depicts the battle between good and evil. The style of art clearly shows the Aztecan influence.



Photos by Paul Harden

Rehearsal for the children's presentation of Los Pastores at San Miguel Church in Socorro. The shepherds (left), the innkeepers (center), and director Sheri Armijo helping "Gila" and "Bartolo" with their lines.

The pastorelas have been extensively researched by Dr. Enrique Lamadrid at the University of New Mexico. Lamadrid says more versions of Las Pastorelas have been found in New Mexico than anywhere else, even in Mexico. By far, Los Pastores is the most popular. At least 70 versions are known to exist in New Mexico.

Los Pastores - The Story

Los Pastores is the Christmas story from the shepherds point of view. It is not, however, strictly a religious performance. It is filled with lessons about life, the imperfections of man, forgiveness and, in the end, a loving God. The story is presented with plenty of humor delivered in a sometimes comic prose.

The characters include shepherds with names like Bato, Tubero and Tubal. Bartolo is a lazy shepherd and Gila is a young, beautiful shepherdess. The cast also includes Joseph, Mary, baby Jesus, the archangel San Gabriel and Lucifer.

The shepherds are informed of the wondrous things that have happened and begin their travels to Belen (Bethlehem) in search of Santo Nino (baby Jesus) by following the star.

Shepherd Bato proposes they stop for rest and asks Bartolo to help Gila, a beautiful shepherdess, prepare supper. However, Bartolo, being the lazy one, says he wants to sleep. Demonio (the devil) appears and tries to discourage the shepherds from continuing their quest. Demonio says he wants to be their friend, but Gila warns that Demonio is really Lucifer.

Ermitaño (the Hermit) prays for guidance and archangel San Miguel appears and directs them to the pasado (manger) in Bethlehem to worship Santo Niño (Christ Child). Demonio denounces San Miguel in a long speech, proclaiming how he will wipe out the earth to reclaim his rightful kingdom.

Demonio urges the Hermit to abandon his spiritually disciplined life and enjoy earthly pleasures. He suggests the Hermit kidnap Gila to satisfy the temptations he has being an unmarried man. The Hermit follows Lucifer's advice, but when he seizes Gila, Lucifer awakens the shepherds and denounces his dishonorable intentions.

Bato, being very upset, beats the Hermit, who tries to explain that someone put him up to what he did. Even the lazy Bartolo wakes up long enough to admonish the Hermit. After the incident, the shepherds go back to sleep.

San Miguel appears to Velardo, the shepherd guarding the sheep, and invites the shepherds to adorn the baby Jesus. Velardo awakens the shepherds and gives them the good news. Bato asks San Miguel to guide them and to help them conquer Lucifer's temptations.

Demonio, seeing that his empire is slipping, tries to bar the way. San Miguel steps in and knocks Demonio sprawling in the name of God. Demonio acknowledges that he has been defeated.

The shepherds prepare to continue their journey to Bethlehem, but are unable to awaken Bartolo. They tell Bartolo of the wine and chocolate awaiting them in Bethlehem, but Bartolo replies, "Go get it and bring it to me in bed ... I want to sleep until the final judgment."

Bartolo's excuses for not getting up are plentiful and designed to amuse the audience. In the end, Bartolo finally rises and joins the shepherds.

When the shepherds arrive in Bethlehem, they find Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus and begin to sing "A la ru, a la ru," roughly translated to "hush little baby," which was sung to lull a baby to sleep. This is the most famous and lyrical of New Mexican lullabies. It is customary for the audience to sing along with the play.

"Duermete, Nino lindo, en los brazos del amor, mientras que duermes, descansa la pena de mi dolor. No temas al rey Herodes, que nada te ha de hacer. Duermete, Nino lindo, no tienes que temer"

Sleep, beautiful child, in the arms of love, as you sleep, the pain of my suffering rests. Don't fear king Herod, he can do you no harm. Sleep, beautiful child, you need not fear.

The shepherds then present their gifts to the Christ Child: a blanket, a rooster, a gourd water vessel, a pillow and a clothes basket. Gila gives Mary some diapers and swaddling bands and the Hermit offers empañadas. The shepherds then offer their final gift, a dance of joy to the baby Jesus.

There is more to the story than the preceding short synopsis with many variations. Regardless, Los Pastores tells the same story: the birth of Jesus Christ and the eternal conflict between good and evil.

La Gran Pastorela, Belen

The pastorela tradition almost disappeared in the 1900s. In the dissertation "Reflections on Los Pastores," by Dr. Lamadrid explains: "The Pastorela had nearly vanished by the middle 20th century as a result of the Great Depression, World War II, and afterwards with the apparent diffusion of cultural identity. However, several revivals occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. The play was performed at Las Golondrinas and at the Our Lady of Belen Church to packed crowds."

The old, traditional Los Pastores might have been lost had it not been for the Chavez families of Las Nutrias in



Courtesy Jason Brooks, Valencia County News-Bulletin
Gran Pastorela de Belen rehearsing for the numerous presentations they perform throughout New Mexico during the Christmas season.

northern Socorro County. In the 1920s, Albert Chavez prepared an eloquent handwritten manuscript of the words and songs of Los Pastores. He was known for his beautiful cursive Spanish writing. Albert gave the manuscript to his brother, Epifanio Chavez, as a Christmas present. A few years later, in 1929, the last known pastorela was performed in Belen and La Joya. The centuries-old tradition almost died.

Decades later, in 1973, Filomena Baca of Belen wanted to revive the pastorela. She had heard about the handwritten script belonging to Epifanio Chavez, a distant relative. Indeed, Chavez still had the Christmas present manuscript from years ago, and loaned it to Mrs. Baca. She spent several evenings in front of an old typewriter making a copy. Through the hard work of Filomena Baca and dedicated parishioners of Nuestra Señora de Belén, the first traditional pastorela in decades was performed at Christmas 1973.



Courtesy Sheri Armijo

Gila, played by Sheri Armijo from Socorro, is telling the shepherds she thinks Demonio is Lucifer (left) in a performance by Gran Pastorela de Belen. After the journey, the shepherds finally find the Santa Nino (right).



The group is known as Las Gran Pastorela. Filomena Baca, her husband Ruperto, and dozens of others have performed the annual pastorela for the past 35 years — which has made it the longest running pastorela in the state. Actors are from the Belen and surrounding areas, including Sheri Armijo and her husband, Ricardo Berry, from Socorro.

Sheri Armijo also directs the children's production of La Pastorela in Socorro, at San Miguel Church. This group will give a performance on Sunday, Dec, 7, 2 p.m., at the San Miguel Parish Hall.

A Look Back in Time

The first documented pastorela in New Mexico was recorded by Miss De Busk in 1899. Her description of the pastorela she attended, printed in 1907, is an interesting look back in time.

"On Christmas Eve, 1899, I saw Los Pastores at San Rafael, a New Mexican village a hundred miles west of Albuquerque. The people were accustomed to give this play often at Christmas time, but not every year, as it was so much work. There was no resident priest at San Rafael, so they were obliged to get up to play themselves, without the advice or instruction of any one in authority.

"It was a purely voluntary Christmas celebration. Rehearsals were held nightly for some weeks in advance, and were attended by all the people. Usually the play was given out of doors, but as the weather was severe that year, it was performed in a dancing-hall. The audience was largely Mexican, with many Navajo and Pueblo Indians, and but two English-speaking Americans.

"(The shepherds wore) their ordinary clothes, but instead, stiffly starched and elaborately ruffled white pantaloons, while the upper part of the body was covered with streamers of gaily colored ribbons and a fantastic headdress. Their long crooks were also decked with ribbon streamers.

"The Hermit, however, was represented very pleasingly by a venerable looking old man, with long white beard, in ordinary ragged attire. He carried a cross made of corncobs, and when molested by evil spirits would hold up this cross, and they would flee.

"Bartolo, the lazy shepherd, acted his part with great spirit, and provoked roars of laughters. At the other end of the hall was a sort of booth where the Holy Family

The earliest known photos of a pastorela presentation, taken in 1893, and published in the 1907 book "Los Pastores" by W. C. Cole.



The performers of Las Pastorela, 1893. The performance was at either San Antonio, Texas or San Gabriel, New Mexico.



Three shepherds trying to wake Bartolo.



Two devils confronting the Hermit.



Photos by Paul Harden

La Asociacion de la Guadalupana de Socorro sings Las Posadas for visitors at El Camino Real International Heritage Center – going door-to-door and asking for a place to stay for the Virgin Mary.

was grouped. Above, a clothes-line was stretched the length of the hall. From it was suspended a smoky kerosene lantern, the Star of Bethlehem, which the stage manager jerked along just in advance of the shepherds by means of a long wire.

"Lucifer was dressed in black, with a black mask, and his head-dress was covered with peacock feathers and tinsel and mirrors. He wore the conventional horns and tail, his belt carried daggers, sword, and pistols. (The pistol was fired to fill the hall with a smell of sulphur to represent the "brimstone and sulphur" of hell)."

The story has changed little over the years. The costumes have changed and actors seldom wear masks as in the 1700-1800s.

Las Posadas

Las Posadas (the inns or lodging places) are popular musical celebrations dating back to the early colonial period. They commemorate the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

In the biblical account, Mary and Joseph traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register with the Romans. Arriving in Bethlehem, Joseph and the pregnant Mary found great difficulty finding an inn to spend the night. Their requests for a place to stay were refused until finally allowed to lodge in a barn, or manger, meant for the animals. It was here that Jesus was born.

In the Spanish culture, Las Posadas is an annual religious procession of peregrinos (pilgrims) led by Mary and Joseph looking for shelter. The peregrinos are men, women, and children traveling with Joseph and

Mary to Bethlehem. Some Las Posadas includes the angel Gabriel. It is a reenactment of the Virgin Mary's quest for lodging.

As they arrive at various inns and houses, they sing a song requesting shelter away from the cold night air. In return, they hear a song of rejection by those inside. Cold and frustrated, they travel to the next house to sing their song, and again, they are rejected.

Eventually, their appeal for lodging is accepted. They are invited inside where the baby Jesus is born. Great rejoicing and a feast follows.

Las Posadas processions goes back to the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards in the early 1500s. Some



Photo by Paul Harden

During Las Posadas, Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds are usually portrayed by children.

CANTO DE TULLIO SOLO



From the book "Los Pastores" (1907) by W.C. Cole
The old music, some of the words being archaic Spanish, is an important part of the Pastorela and Los Posados traditions.

historians cite the tradition was begun by a Franciscan friar named San Ignacio de Loyola. The musical reenactment of searching for lodging proved effective in teaching this part of the Christmas story to the Aztecs.

The repeated rejection in finding shelter was also used to teach the Aztecs that choosing to be a Christian may mean rejection by non-believers. Thus, Las Posadas not only taught the Christmas story, but other Christian principles as well.

The early Posadas were sung on nine consecutive nights, beginning on Dec. 16th and ending on Dec. 24th. On un día antes de Navidad (Christmas Eve), the peregrinos end their quest when they travel to the iglesia (church), where the Virgin Mary receives lodging. The priest then offers Mass, coinciding with the tradition of the Christmas Midnight Mass.

Although the annual Las Posadas started in Mexico City, it quickly spread throughout Mexico and along the Camino Real.

The Franciscans sent to the missions in New Mexico found Las Posadas, like the pastorelas, to be as effective in teaching the Christmas story to the Pueblo Indians as it was for the Aztecs.

Today in the Southwest, Las Posadas is seldom sung for nine consecutive days, but rather only on Christmas Eve or selected evenings prior to Christmas. This is the case throughout much of New Mexico today. In Socorro, the Posadas tradition is kept alive by La Asociación de la Guadalupeana de Socorro.

Luminarias

Out-of-state visitors to New Mexico during the holidays are always struck by the solemn beauty of luminarias lining the streets, sidewalks, roofs and plazas throughout the state. For most, it is something they have never seen before. Yet, the tradition of the luminarias has been here for centuries — although the candles set inside paper bags was a 19th century improvement.

The tradition began in the early 1700s in the Spanish villages along the Rio Grande. By then, nearly every village had a mission. At first, these luminarias were small bonfires built along the roads leading to the church. The fires were lit on Christmas Eve to safely guide the Posada procession, and others, to the Midnight Mass.

By the early 1800s, kerosene lanterns, and Chinese lamps made of colorful paper, made their way into New Mexico by the supply wagons from Chihuahua and



Photo by Paul Harden
The tradition of the luminarias began in the 1700s to light the way to the mission church on Christmas Eve. The tradition continues to this day, as seen here with the San Miguel parish church in Socorro.



Photo by Paul Harden
Traditional luminarias lighting the way to the San Miguel church in Socorro.

Mexico City. During Christmas, these were often collected from the townspeople who had them and used by the churches for the first luminarias.

However, these lamps and the fuel were expensive, such that their early use remained limited. Rather than lining the roads leading to the church, the lanterns were often carried by Las Posadas peregrinos to light their way as they traveled from house to house, and eventually into the church.

In the 1880s, with the arrival of the railroad, the availability of paper products, including paper sacks, became plentiful and cheap. The tradition of luminarias, placing a slow burning candle inside a small paper sack, was born, replacing the expensive kerosene lamps. This is the form that persists to this day - illuminating homes, plazas, and churches from Las Cruces to the small villages in the northern portion of the state.



Photo by Paul Harden
Luminarias on the Socorro plaza.



Photo by Paul Harden
Luminarias on the Socorro plaza.

Though the tradition covers the entire state of New Mexico, they are not always called luminarias. In the northern portion of the state, generally north of La Bajada, they are called *farolitos*. It is not known exactly why

Some of the references used in this article: "Los Pastores (1907)," by M. R. Cole; "Reflections on Los Pastores," by Professor Enrique Lamadrid, UNM; *Enchantment Magazine*; *New Mexico Magazine*; Clara Garcia and Jason Brooks, *Valencia County News-Bulletin (Belen)*; interviews with Sheri Armijo, Della and Pilar Padilla, Sally Baca and Carlos Tafoya. A very special thanks to Sheri Armijo and Filomena Baca, not only for their help with this article, but for the dedication and love they have for preserving the traditions of La Pastorela.