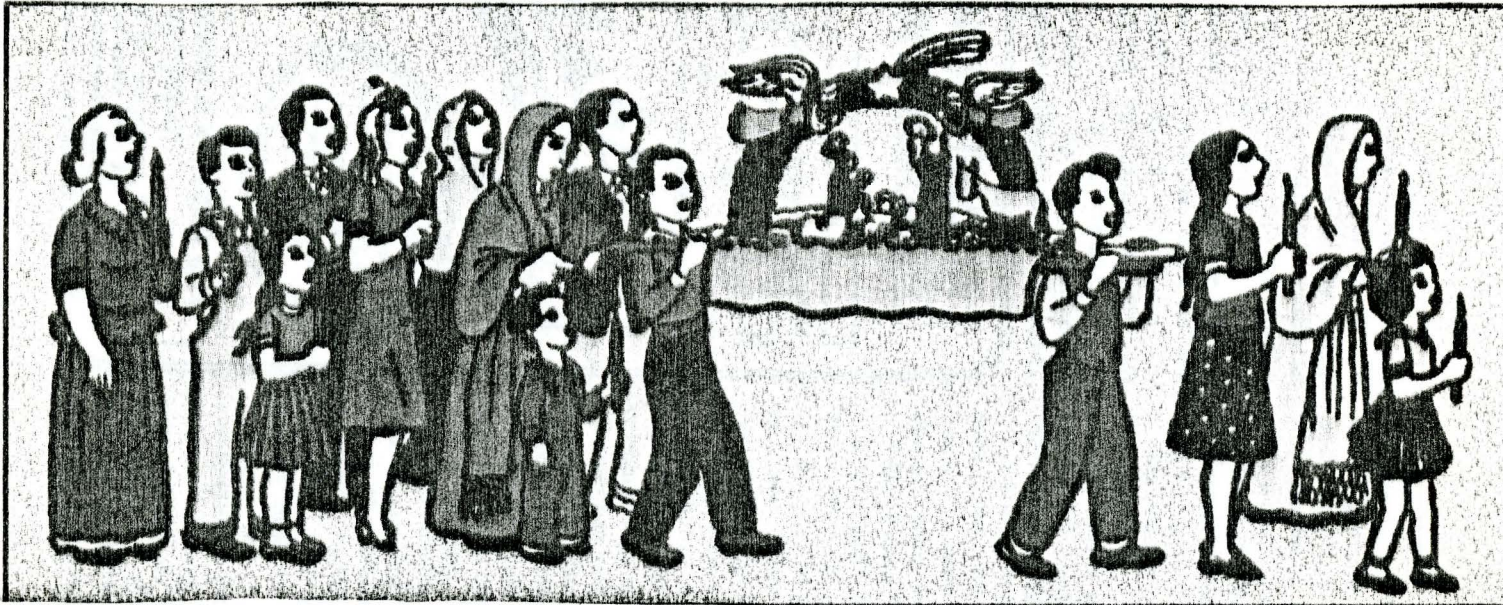


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LATINO VERTICAL FILE -

POSADAS

Old 'posadas' tradition takes on new meaning

BY MARGARITA MILLAR

Christmas time brings for many people childhood memories of rituals celebrated by their families and communities. But not all of these memories have to do with snow, shining trees overflowed with presents, and a white-bearded Santa Claus.

For example, one of the most popular celebrations in Latino communities in the United States is *Las Posadas*, a traditional Mexican Christmas ritual that commemorates Mary and Joseph's search for shelter in Bethlehem.

Las Posadas, which means "the Inns", although a unique Mexican celebration, shares the same motives of merriment, warmth, color and song of the holidays of other Latin American countries.

During *Las Posadas*, in the

nine nights before Christmas Day, neighbors, family and friends walk in processions, carrying candles; they go from home to home imploring for shelter. Each night they gather at a different house where they sing, pray and share maybe hot chocolate and sweet bread. The children receive small bags with candy and nuts.

The ritual is repeated until Christmas Eve and is followed by *El Nacimiento*, the Birth, when the pilgrims finally find a place to stay during the birth of the Child.

In Bay Area neighborhoods like Fruitvale in Oakland, and the Mission District in San Francisco, the celebration of *Las Posadas* is not only gaining renewed interest, but it is also becoming a reaffirmation of Latino culture and values.

"For us Christmas has a more spiritual meaning than what we

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Posadas

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see here in the United States," said Ingrid Zimmerman a native of Ecuador and psychologist at the Instituto Familiar de La Raza, a mental health institution located in the Mission District.

She explained that for many Latin Americans or

persons whose ancestry is Latino, Christmas is a religious holiday, and it has little to do with the gift-giving philosophy prevalent in North American culture. "In our culture the values stressed during this time are spirituality, family and sharing," she said.

To acknowledge the difference of values and

validate them is important for the Instituto Familiar, and celebrating *Las Posadas* for at least ten years with the community and families who receive services there, can attest to that, Zimmerman said.

According to Zimmerman, Latino culture is rich in strong values, yet Latinos don't see themselves reflected in mainstream society. To take back the rituals familiar to many of these persons means to reclaim a sense of identity, and to foment respect for one's own culture, she said.

"To celebrate the holidays with rituals known to the individual is a very empowering experience. In our organization we see these celebrations as a healing," Zimmerman said that for many of her clients, being in the United States means the denial of their culture, which has a damaging effect because, "not to have the smells, colors and sounds that for you bring the memory of comfort warmth and happiness is to lose the primary sense of roots."

For the Latino community in Fruitvale, where among other organizations the Spanish Speaking Citizen's Foundation, SSCF, and the Spanish Speaking Unity

Council, SSUC, have come together to host *Las Posadas* for the first time in a few years. The celebration is gaining importance as it seeks to teach younger generations about Latino traditions.

"We want our young to

"Not to have the smells, colors and sounds that for you bring the memory of comfort warmth and happiness is to lose the primary sense of roots."

know about these celebrations," said Josie de la Cruz, from SSCF, and one of the organizers of this year's events. "Las Posadas are part of our history, and we want to pass them on to our children. It is a way to preserve this custom."

To adapt to the U.S. way of life *Las Posadas* evolved to accommodate the urban setting. Instead of taking place during nine consecutive days before Christmas, *Las Posadas* are usually limited to a one-day

celebration.

They start with a candlelight procession, and is headed by two persons representing Mary and Joseph. The pilgrims make various stops where they sing and ask for shelter until they arrive at their final destination. There they are accepted and given refuge. At the end, there is a gathering to share food, music, and games for the children. Some communities arrange to have presents for the youngsters.

"We are very excited about our celebration, since it's going to be the first one in a few years," said de la Cruz. One of the main attractions of the Fruitvale procession, which will take place on Dec. 21, will be the miniature horses which will carry Mary and Joseph in their search for shelter. At the end the participants will gather at the gymnasium of St. Elizabeth's School, and share the typical Mexican Christmas dishes and beverages, such as tamales, buñuelos, atole and ponche.

Zimmerman said the Instituto Familiar will hold its Posadas on Dec. 17. They also will have a candlelight procession, which will conclude at the offices of Real

Alternatives Program, Inc., RAP, in the Sunshine School, where the participants will gather for refreshments, and the children will have a piñata and will receive Christmas presents.

"To have *Las Posadas*, is an opportunity, not perfect but, at least it's a chance for many of us to celebrate in a more meaningful way," Zimmerman said.

For more information about these two celebrations, please see our CALENDAR section. ■

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