

# Celebrating Christmas around the world

## Mexico

The Mexican *posada* begins on December 6th and symbolizes the hardships experienced by Mary and Joseph when they attempted to find shelter in Bethlehem. The home is decorated with Spanish moss, evergreen branches and colored paper lanterns. On an altar of pine branches and moss is a representation of the Nativity scene, with Mary and Joseph and an empty cradle.

As guests arrive they are divided into two groups—the cruel innkeepers and the holy pilgrims. The procession of pilgrims, with burning candles, goes through the halls of the home, asking shelter:

"Who knocks at my door?"  
 "We are pilgrims. We only want a place to rest."  
 "Go somewhere else and don't bother me."  
 "It is cold and we've come a long way. We are very tired."  
 "Who are you? I don't know you."  
 "I am Joseph of Nazareth and this is my wife Mary who will be the mother of the Son of God."  
 "Then come into my humble house and be welcome. And may the Lord give shelter to my soul when I leave this world!"

The procession enters the living room, praying and singing carols. The prayers bring the religious portions of the evening to a close.

The guests then gather in the patio for the *pinata*. Originally, the pinatas were made of pottery and made in the shape of animals, birds or other objects. Now often made of paper mache the pinata is hung from the ceiling and children take turns trying to break the pinatas with a stick while blindfolded. Finally a lucky child breaks the pinata and the candy and fruit fall out on the floor.

The last *posada*, that on Christmas Eve, is the most solemn. At the end of the songs and prayers, a small image of the Baby Jesus is placed in the manger. The candles are lit around the altar and the people say, "Alleluia! Alleluia! Let us rejoice because the Lord has come to his people!" After the celebration the family goes to Midnight Mass. The children receive their gifts on Epiphany, January 6th.

## Venezuela

As in all of the Spanish speaking world, every home displays a *Nacimiento*, or crib. A more ambitious *Nacimiento* is the *pesebre* which represents the entire region of Bethlehem with its focal point the manger. Some *pesebres* are works of art, while others are a hodge podge of ancient and modern scenes.

In Venezuela the main celebration takes place on *Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve), when everyone goes home after Midnight Mass to have *halloca* and *dulce de lechoza*. *Halloca* is made of corn meal, with pork and chicken stuffing and other delicacies and wrapped in plantain leaves to make a type of pie. *Dulce de lechoza* is a dessert made of green papaya and brown sugar.



Mexican worshippers seek a resting place for the Holy Family.

## Nicaragua

Christmas in Nicaragua is sometimes called the Festival of Childhood. Before the end of November the children begin to carry fragrant bouquets to the altar of the Virgin and to sing carols to the Queen of Heaven. These pre-Christmas celebrations end on December 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

On December 16th the faithful begin their annual novena to the Christ Child, and on December 24th it ends with Midnight Mass.

The home is decorated with palm trees, green sawdust, tinsel, and colored lights. The empty manger receives the Christ Child on Christmas Eve.

A Christmas Eve feast of turkey, stuffed hen or tamali is common. Wine, coffee or chocolate is served with a plain cake made of corn meal or rice flour, covered with rum-flavored syrup.

## France

Christmas customs, originating in

the Orient, were introduced to France by the Romans. Rheims was the scene of the first French celebration when, in 496, Clovis and three thousand warriors were baptized.

Christmas became a religious and secular holiday. Today, Christmas is a family affair and a religious celebration, while New Years is reserved for merry making and gift giving.

Family celebrations begin with the decoration of the Christmas tree with candles and lights, tinsel and stars. On Christmas Eve, when the children are asleep, small gifts and candy are hung on the tree.

The manger scene—la creche—originated in 12th Century France as a liturgical drama. At first the manger resembled an altar and was placed inside the church. St. Francis of Assisi introduced the popular manger scene between 1316 of 1334.

Today the family arranges the manger scene in a prominent place in the home. Children find rocks and small branches for the manger. Clay figures represent the Holy Family, the wise men, the shep-

herds, the ox and donkey are close to the Baby Jesus.

At midnight everyone attends Christmas Mass in the cathedrals lit with candles, bells pealing. When the family returns home the feast, the "reveillon," is ready. The main dish varies in different parts of France—goose in Alsace, turkey and chestnuts in Burgundy, oysters in Paris.

In some places the *reveillon* is held in the snowy mountains, in others the entire village gathers to break bread.

The young children put their shoes in front of the fireplace so during the night *the pere Noel* or *le petit Jesus* will fill them with gifts. Formerly wooden shoes—*sabots*—were used, and today chocolate wooden shoes are filled with candy.

Carols and the creche combine to produce drama presented in the cathedral squares. Puppet shows are also popular at Christmas time.

One of France's familiar Christmas stories is the Little Matchgirl, who, sitting in the snow selling matches, struck all her matches to imagine Christmas in a house with a loving family. Striking her last match, the little girl was taken to Paradise by a host of angels.

## Carol of the Brown King

Of the three Wise Men  
 Who came to the King,  
 One was a brown man,  
 So they sing.

Of the three Wise Men  
 Who followed the Star,  
 One was a brown king  
 From afar.

They brought fine gifts  
 Of spices and gold  
 In jeweled boxes  
 Of beauty untold.

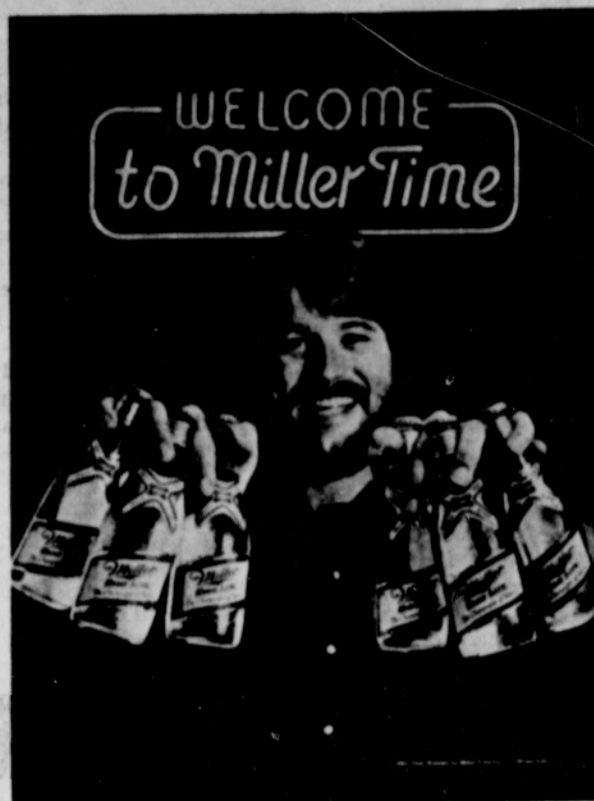
Unto his humble  
 Manger they came  
 And bowed their heads  
 In Jesus' name.

Three Wise Men  
 One dark like me—  
 Part of His  
 Nativity.

—Langston Hughes



A creche is found in most homes in Latin countries.



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