



## A Latin American Christmas Terua Williams

Tegucigalpa, Honduras  
December 25

Dear Mother and Dad,

It was four o'clock this morning before we turned the covers down and crawled into bed. We have been celebrating Christmas as guests of our Guatemalan friends the Méridas, now residing here in Honduras. Christmas Eve, *Noche Buena*, rather than Christmas Day is the high point of this joyous occasion. At midnight the bells in all the church towers began to peal and the sky caught fire with flares and reverberated with rockets to remind us of the "Joy to the World" message that the Christ Child was born.

From the moment we arrived at the outskirts of town early yesterday evening we felt the festive mood. Children were already setting off fire crackers. Christmas and Easter are the two holidays of the year when families down here make a great effort to be together, and we were so happy to be invited to join our friends' family group for this *Noche Buena* when we ourselves were far from home. Coronel Mérida, doña Lola, Aida, Carmen Rosa, and Marco were all at the threshold to greet us with a *Feliz Navidad!*

We rather expected to have a traditional Guatemalan Christmas plus—because the Méridas had lived some years in New Orleans and so had adopted some of our northern Christmas customs. And so it was. A huge pine tree filling one corner of the living room was decorated with

ornaments. The tree has become a part of Christmas here only in recent years. *El nacimiento*, the traditional nativity scene, which is always present in Latin American homes on this holiday, was arranged on a table near the tree. The figures of this one were of finely carved wood. Sometimes they are made of porcelain, and sometimes they are crudely shaped of clay and painted bright colors. Always the scene includes the Holy Family, the Three Kings, the shepherds, and the animals. Over the years various family members usually add houses, trees, and other figures and objects until the *nacimiento* becomes a village. They use Spanish moss, tiny succulent plants, lichens, and pine needles for the landscaping. The bromeliads that come into bloom in December here, with shiny green leaves and bright red bracts, as well as the poinsettias that grow so luxuriantly, sometimes as hedges, are used to decorate homes and churches. And often the floors are sprinkled with long green pine needles.

The church we went to for midnight mass was perfumed with candles and pine needles and incense. The candle-lit mass is called *misa del gallo*, for the cock is supposed to crow at midnight. At the end of the service we were all given lighted candles to carry down the aisle and out into the night as the bells pealed and the fireworks rained starlets down above our heads. When we arrived home in this spirit of joy we knelt before the *nacimiento* to give thanks

for our well being and to bless the feast of which we were about to partake.

What a feast it was! You have had tamales made of cornmeal with meat inside. We had *nacatamales*—super tamales. The cooked cornmeal, called *masa*, has mixed into it lard, onion, garlic, green pepper, pimiento, salt, and the bright yellow *achiote* powder which gives color. This mixture is spread on pieces of banana leaf. Then chopped turkey meat, boiled rice, cooked chick peas, diced raw potato, green olives, capers, and even raisins are placed on top. The tamale is rolled up and wrapped in the banana leaf, tied, and placed in a big kettle to steam over boiling water. When the leaves are well cooked, so are the *nacatamales*. One alone is a meal, but that was just one course.

Then came the time to open the gifts piled under the tree. This custom is ours, not theirs, and Santa Claus was introduced to them by us. Before Santa Claus was imported children believed that the Three Kings were the bearers of gifts—and not on Christmas Day, but on the Twelfth Night. In many places children still put grass out to feed the animals the Three Kings ride. They awake next morning to find the grass gone and gifts left in its place.

Throughout the twelve days of Christmas the *paranda* custom leads to many an all-night party. During this period anyone or any group knocking at a door at any hour must be invited in and served refreshments, and the housewife must be prepared with cookies, drink, and music. The seasonal beverage is *rompope*, which requires a bottle of *aguardiente* (raw rum), ten egg yolks, a quart of milk, ten tablespoons of sugar, some cinnamon, and vanilla.

Since we couldn't share your Christmas this year, we want to share ours with you.

With love, *Rua*

*Terua Williams is a volunteer in the Department of Botany and the wife of Dr. Louis O. Williams, chairman of the Department of Botany, Field Museum. This letter recalls a Christmas she and her husband spent in Latin America. The illustration is from her own linoleum block cut.*





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