



San Antonio, founded in 1650, is one of the few villages of the colonial epoch. Honduras has been relatively free of the elsewhere in Central America. The church in San Antonio is the center of the villagers' Christmas celebration.

CHRISTMAS IN HONDURAS

by

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THE Christmas season in Honduras is a joyful time for all people. Especially in the smaller towns and villages of the interior, families still celebrate the holiday in traditional ways.

The religious theme is, of course, of primary significance in the festivities. Preparing and decorating the nativity scene, or creche, is an important activity. The creche is usually begun early in December. Much thought and care go into its assembling, whether it is simple enough to be set up on a table in the corner of the living room or so elaborate that it nearly fills that room. A small creche may contain perhaps a dozen figures. Larger re-creations of the stable at Bethlehem may be filled with a hundred or more figures, representing the Infant Jesus surrounded by the Virgin

Mary, St. Joseph, adoring shepherds and Magi, oxen, asses, and sheep. These figurines, which are sometimes simply made of clay, but are usually more elaborate objects of carved wood, porcelain, or plastic, are treasured from year to year for use in the creche.

The stage setting for the manger scene also includes much plant material. Mosses from the woods, especially those that grow into great, sheet-like mats, are used to represent grass. Animals carved or molded in El Salvador, in Guatemala, in Spain, in Czechoslovakia, or in Japan "graze" contentedly on fields of moss gathered from the forests of Honduras. Together, they form a tableau representing an event that took place almost two millenia ago not far from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

Greenery is also used in other ways to decorate the homes, the country people gathering materials that are close at hand, while city-dwellers buy what is available in the markets. In the highlands of Honduras, many bromeliads are at the height of their splendor as the short, year-end days draw near. Great basket-loads of blossoms are gathered and brought into the markets, which are like a flower garden during the Christmas season, full of mosses, orchids, bromeliads, ferns, and palms. Each year I visited the principal markets in Tegucigalpa to see what showy bromeliads the plant gatherers had found which I had not yet discovered in the country. Perhaps the most brilliant *Tillandsia* of Honduras is one that I knew for several years only from two plants "collected" in the market.

One small prostrate orchid with rather attractive flowers, *Epidendrum polybulbon*,

Central America that must still be very like those of
villages that have destroyed most colonial villages
possibly not more than 150 years old. It is

is also in flower at this season and is sought for use in decorating creches. Many mule loads of this little orchid come into the Tegucigalpa market each Christmas season.

In more recent years the use of Christmas trees has become more common in many homes, especially in the highlands where pines are abundant. The use of pine needles to cover the floor in dwellings where festivities are to be held is a very old custom in Central America, coming down from pre-Columbian, and therefore pre-Christian, times. The extension of this custom to the use of pine trees in the Christmas celebration is an importation and, as such, has often been resisted by the clergy.

On Christmas Eve, late in the evening or at midnight, everyone goes to church. After returning home, families exchange their gifts around the creche or Christmas tree. Then comes one of the great, traditional feasts of the Christmas season, at which tamales or nacatamales must be the main course. Nacatamales are made from corn meal ground very fine, turkey,



A dead pine tree in the mountains of Honduras bears a burden of bromeliads, orchids, and ferns. These epiphytes occur mostly on the side of the pine facing the direction from which the night mists and fogs come during the dry season, which is also the direction of the prevailing trade winds that blow from about the Christmas season until May.

Indian women in the market area of Tegucigalpa sell palm leaves, bromeliads, orchids, and ferns which they have gathered in the mountains.



vegetables, spices, and seasoning. This stuffing is wrapped in banana leaves, tied, and then boiled or steamed for several hours. Nacatamales are a typical Central American dish, which I have seen nowhere else in Latin America. Each nacatamale weighs about a pound and well-prepared ones are very good. The festive meal is seldom over until two or three o'clock in the morning.

In Honduras, as elsewhere in Central America, the setting off of fireworks to celebrate the birthday of Christ is traditional. Even when a son is born, the father announces the event to the world by shooting off the biggest firecrackers that he can find or afford. On Christmas Eve, especially, the fireworks continue throughout the night.



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