

Oaxaca Times

Oaxaca's Original English Tourist Newspaper

November 1994

Free

No. 55

Day of the Dead

The Days of the Dead as they are celebrated in Oaxaca are not grim, nor are they morbid. They provide the opportunity for a warm family and neighborly celebration which includes the well-remembered deceased along with the living. The dead are considered to be part of the family, especially on this day. Those who feel that it is sacrilegious to have a picnic lunch among the ancestors in a flower-strewn graveyard, or to let little children play with sugar skulls and cardboard string-puppet skeletons, should visit Oaxaca on November 1 and 2 to understand the familiar and comforting spirit in which the celebration takes place. They should also remember Halloween in the United States with its skeletons, single-toothed witches, and ghosts which the children take such shiver-delight.

In Mexico the whole family takes part in preparing for the celebration. The woman of the household has the greatest responsibility, she must save money for holiday purchases before the awaited guests arrive. Little by little some of the scarce pesos (pennies) go to buy the new dishes which the family will need. They cannot honor the rejected deceased, nor the living guests, with the old "cofrecitos!"

As the end of October approaches, the carefully purchased plates and bowls of baked clay are stored under the altar at one end of the house, which is large enough. This altar is often



At the graveyard...

the same one that is kept clean and freshened with bright flowers before the family shrine or holy picture all year around. On the Days of the Dead it takes on a special, additional meaning.

The Zapotecs believe that the spirits of their dead relatives will come to visit their homes on these days once again, to celebrate with the living, and especially to enjoy what their earthly descendants have prepared for them.

For this reason, no haphazardness in the offering will suffice. Certain types of flowers, foods, and decorations are appropriate, and the conscientious family is aware of exactly what they must do. In the section on the market, the items needed for home,

guests, and cemetery will be discussed.

For some, the time before the Days of the Dead is especially busy because they are the artisans who make the delicate ornaments for the celebration which find eager buyers in the market place. Tiny home-made stands appear in the market at this time of year which are not seen again

■ Continued on Page 3

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The day of the Dead

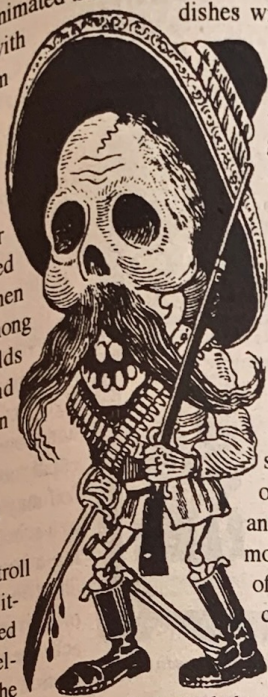
...from Page 1
 ...the pre-Days of the Dead
 ...more animated than
 ...glitter from
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 ...decorated
 ...of the Dead
 ...in another
 ...sharp-eyed
 ...and women
 ...Zapotec among
 ...marigolds
 ...and
 ...cocomb in
 ...stalls.
 The Market
 ...take a stroll
 ...the market it-
 ...these animated
 ...before the cel-
 ...begins on the
 ...first of October. In pottery
 ...are much the same as
 ...with vendors selling the
 ...glazed wares of Atzompa,

the famous black ware of Coyotepec, and the factory-produced semi-majolicas made in Oaxaca City. Yet many of these dishes will appear with the offerings later, and the Zapotec women are shrewdly bargaining for that last bowl or plate to complete the set for the altar.

A next stop is the herb stand which is replete with tied bunches of dried seasonings such as hierbita de olor (oregano, thyme and marjoram) for the mole (a traditional dish of chicken in a chile-chocolate sauce), cocoa, flower, ginger, coriander and fragrant whole nutmegs in tiny cardboard cartons. A glass jar holds the sweet anise that surrenders its distinctive flavor in the bread baked

for those days. Prominent at the rear of the stand, propped up by the bags of herbs and

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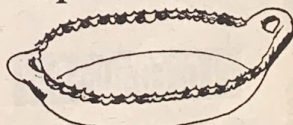
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The day of the Dead

Continued from Page 3

seeds, are the board games. They are the cardboard games, called El Ancla (the anchor) and La Oca (the goose), that are played by the children in the cemetery on the night of November 2. Some are commercial games and others are hand-painted. Minuscule dice are used to determine the moves around the board, explain the children standing near the small herb stand, and the prize for the winner is a handful of pecans (which are also used as players).

The mellow colors of hand-made wax candles, hanging in graceful rows by their wicks in the next stand, catches the eye. The virgin beeswax taper is the finest for the altar or cemetery, a lady tells us. They come from a small factory

and are decorated with a religious seal in gilt dust. Most of the candles are clothed in strips of colored or black crepe paper which are carefully fastened to the candle at each end with a black wax.

Our vendor informs us that the tapers in black are used only in the cemetery on the second of November, the true Day of the Souls. On November 1, which is dedicated to the angelitos (souls of little children) and all the saints, the candles with colored crepe paper are used. They are also placed on the altars in the homes.

Another interesting craft which

LA CALAVERA OAXAQUEÑA



La calavera valiente: Todos quisiere el sombrero. Hoy acaba de llegar: Que así la deben mirar.

<p>Parame ya ser del Oaxaca Y de hoy tambien para mi Tira a tirar me desahoga Luz de arbol de pino.</p>  <p>El color que me danitas, Nuestro color verde, Tira a tirar me desahoga Luz de arbol de pino.</p>	<p>A calavera la de hoy No me riego el sombrero, Y aunque me haga reír, Que a después al pascador.</p> <p>En el calor me al dolor, El calor de mi sombrero, Y a cuando me da golpe, Y a cuando me da golpe, Y a cuando me da golpe.</p> <p>Toda mi bravura por Luz de arbol de pino, Y a cuando me da golpe, Y a cuando me da golpe, Y a cuando me da golpe.</p> <p>Si me da en la cabeza, Si me da en la cabeza, Si me da en la cabeza, Si me da en la cabeza, Si me da en la cabeza.</p> <p>Si me da en la cabeza, Si me da en la cabeza, Si me da en la cabeza, Si me da en la cabeza, Si me da en la cabeza.</p>	<p>Añe sobrante estar Que me voy en el mundo Y que me voy en el mundo De la calavera de hoy.</p>  <p>Añe sobrante estar, Y a cuando me da golpe, Y a cuando me da golpe, Y a cuando me da golpe, Y a cuando me da golpe.</p>
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A Calavera made by José Guadalupe Posada

we see in the marketplace is confined almost strictly to individual family manufacture. This is the fashioning of cardboard and paper figures for the altars and cemeteries. Handmade skeleton puppets, manipulated with a string at the back, dance grotesquely in front of one stall. They are made of cardboard pasted with gold and silver flakes and a wad of cotton for hair. For the more affluent there are larger ones — almost three feet tall.

Tiny stationary figurines are made too. One type is called the padrecitos (little fathers) who solemnly carry cardboard and paste

coffins, they look as solemn as that is, as it is possible to do with a garbazo bean and ink-painted bean and children and adults. These figurines, and the ones passed down the generations. The artisans make the figures carefully by hand using only colored paper, garbanzos, glue or black ink.

Imagination is given free reign for the home-made figurines. A skeletal figure with cotton hair and full copal robes and mitre of foil may stand proudly next to a scholarly skeleton reading a book, and mother and child in a tender pose. Almost every conceivable activity is fair game for depiction in skeletal form, from riding bicycles to sitting down to dinner.

The skeletons are called calaveras, although the technical meaning of this term is just "skull." Satirical newspapers, using calaveras as cartoon media for lampooning politicians and bureaucrats, appear on the streets on these days. By extension...


Continued on

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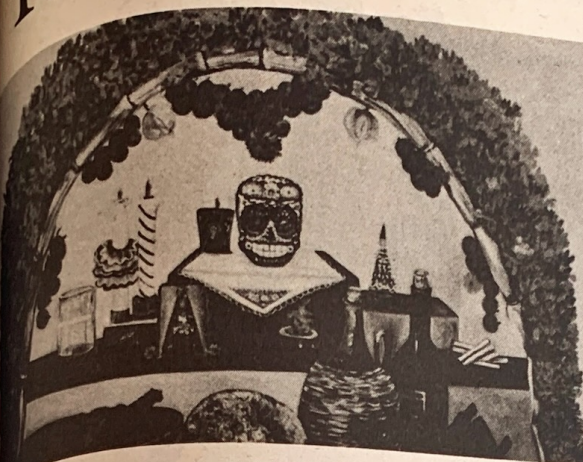
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The day of the Dead



"El altar de muertos". (The day of the dead altar)

Continued from Page 4

the mocking verses printed in these ephemeral papers are also called calaveras. This practice is an ancient one. At the beginning of this century Mexican political cartoonist Jose Guadalupe Posada photographed marvelous calaveras which are now collector's items. Some of his artwork is included in the edition of the Oaxaca Times).

Clay, plaster and beans are not the only materials used for making calaveras figures. Mexican children have a sweet tooth like children everywhere, and the tradition involved of making the skulls of candy as well. In Ejutla, Oaxaca, some of the most delicate and appealing molded candies are made. Exquisitely formed hearts, lyres, combs, and souls in purgatory made of the whitest sugar and water and embellished with colored confectionery decorations are sold by the street vendors. The hollow centers of the sweetmeats are filled with flavors like anisado (anisette).

Families from Oaxaca city make other types of home-made sweets such as those of squash seeds. The squash seeds are peeled, washed, ground and cooked with sugar. Then the sweet dough is worked with the hands and pressed into a clay mold. The features on the candies are much more attenuated than the detailed Ejutla ones, and they are solid rather than hol-

The renowned sugar skulls set out in twinkling rows in the winter sun at the market place attract our attention. They are molded sugar and water confections traditional in this celebration for decades. Some are made in factories in Mexico City and taken to Oaxaca at this time of year; others are made in Oaxaca by local families. They are often ornamented with colored foil and bear a name across the top of the skull. Over one hundred years ago, it was a common practice in parts of Mexico to expose the actual skulls of the dead on the Day of All Souls.

We see that the part of the market devoted to flowers is also humming with activity. Great bundles of crimson coxcomb (Borla de Santa Teresa), brilliant sun-yellow marigolds (semposuchil), often called the flower of the dead, and wild flowers (flores del monte, stevia) are heaped up on every side. Any or all of these can be used on the altar in the homes, but the semposuchil is the most prominent.

In the market also, we find the ingredients for fiesta food. Turkey for the mole, home-made tablets of handground chocolate, herbs and spices, squash for conserva de calabaza (a dessert sweet) and many other comestibles are seen in the market baskets and string bags of

Continued on Page 6



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The day of the Dead

Continued from Page 5
the villagers and town dwellers.

These will find their way to the altars in Indian homes in the form of succulent dishes prepared for the spirits of the dead.

The barrio of Xochimilco is a ward of the city of Oaxaca, where many Zapotec Indians live. Most houses are of adobe, and the streets are unpaved and stony like those in the villages. On October 31, most of the people stay up all night. They prepare tamales for the next days; and it is a long, complicated, and delicate process. The masa (corn dough) must be very, very light so that a bit of it will float in a cup of water instead of sinking to the bottom. Without the convenience of electric mixers this means long and hard hand beating, and many tamales must be made for all the guests, living and dead, who will come. The feather-light corn dough is wrapped in individual packages made of corn husks and tied at the ends with a small strip of the husk. Other foods are cooked on that night too, such as the rich, near-black Oaxacan mole, red moles, and chiles.

The altar must be prepared on this night as well. All the relatives in the household help to set up the display to honor the beloved spirits.

It is worthwhile to digress a moment to describe the appearance of the altar itself in this household. A large wooden table had been placed at one end of the room. On the clean white wall behind the table, someone had arched two long canes to form an arc framing the many holy pictures hanging there. Cherished prints of the Sacred Heart, the Virgin of Guadalupe (Mexico's patroness), Our Lady and the Child Jesus and other indistinguishable pictures were enshrined. Some had small bunches of yellow semposuchils attached to the frames. Sprays of cultivated *semposuchil* and coxcomb festooned the table, and a huge bouquet of wild



Great day of the dead party

marigolds stood in front of it on the floor. As well as flowers, large white tapers, small, fat vigil candles, incense, and a large cardboard calavera, or skull, sat on the altar.

Fragrant fruits such as limes, oranges and bananas were piled here and there; and loaves of bread of the dead and tablets of chocolate gave evidence of the work of the evening.

All the tasks had to be done through the night, said our Zapotec informant, for at about 4:00 a.m. the spirits of the children would appear. At the present time they put up the children's miniature things on the same altar that would be used to honor adults, but formerly, in a large house, they had a separate altar in a corner for the children. Each

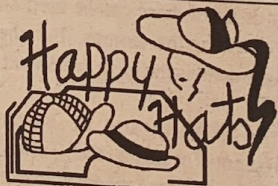
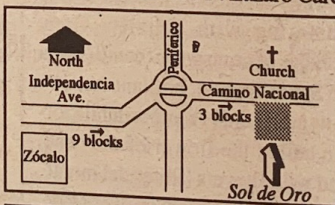
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The day of the Dead

When the little spirits arrive the evidence may be a fluttering of candle flames or a bit of fruit dropping from the pile, our informant confided. After they leave at 8:00 a.m., the morning of November 2, the same morning they arrived), the family snuffs out the tiny candles and takes them off the altar.

The adult spirits then arrive at 8:00 p.m. The family has carefully placed large candles in normally used holders for them. Everyone expects that they will be pleased with the gifts of food and drink set out before them. They may go away if nothing is offered.

Evil fortune falls on humans who dare to eat the food on the altar before the spirits come to take its place, for they feel that the angry spirits may come and tie their feet up before they wake.

In the evening, about 8:00 p.m., the family prays the rosary in front of the altar in honor of the deceased. On this night visitors and relatives come by to pray, talk, and offer a gift to the "souls". The visitors, too, receive food from their hosts. As people come by to visit and offer prayers, the talk often turns to the dead ones being honored that evening.

By the flickering lights of the altar in an otherwise dark house, the perfect setting is created for ghostly stories. Children gather around, shivering with fear and delight to hear their elders tell them. Many tales concern the revenge wreaked by the ghosts on living relatives who forget them on the Days of the Dead.

On the morning of the second of November, All Souls' Day in the Catholic calendar, there are three masses for those in Xochimilco barrio — one at 6:30 a.m., one at 7:00



The entire family visits the graveyard

a.m., and one at 8:00 a.m., Promptly at 8:00 a.m., the adult spirits leave for their own world, and the family again snuffs out the candles. Prayers for the dead may go on all day, however.

Since the dead are officially gone, people may remove food from the altar and take it around to friends. Before this no one dares take the food that belongs to the spirits.

In the evening some cemeteries slowly fill with people. They carry flowers and candles to decorate the graves of the dead. At the little cemetery of San Felipe del Agua near Oaxaca City, there is a painted wooden altar in the center of the graveyard.

It is filled with flowers and candles, offered by the faithful on the night of All Souls'. A tiny old Zapotec woman lights copal incense in a three-legged clay burner in front of one flower-decked grave.

The most ornamented graves are those of little children. Everything there is in miniature. Among the flowers are tiny ollas, toys, minuscule candles in little holders, and cardboard tombs (tumbitas).

At the few unattended gravestones small children play the traditional board games—El Ancla and La Oca, by the waning light of a single vigil

candle. As we went on to Santiago Ixtaltepec on the night of November 2, we found all behavior most solemn and decorous. While clusters of people spoke in quiet tones, and children played El Ancla on the empty

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There groups of heavily costumed townspeople rove and dance accompanied of local musicians.

They stop in front of the homes of prominent people and proceed very loudly detail the latest dark secrets and of the family within. This is done in flawless verse much to the embarrassment on those inside.

The groups well wishers and on-hangers are periodically fortified with the local fire water called mezcal.

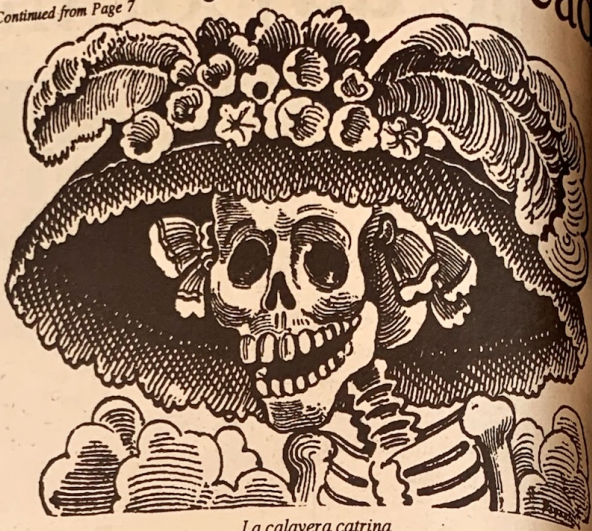
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The day of the Dead

Continued from Page 7



La calavera catrina

stones, others waited patiently near the tomb of a "soul". Close to midnight the musicians gathered in the middle of the panteon to play "Las Golondrinas" (The Swallows) and "Dios Nunca Muere" (God Never Dies). Then slowly the families collected their baskets and candles and left the little cemetery. By the next day, November 3, the Days of the Dead and All Saints' is officially over. At Xochimilco barrio, the altar is not dismantled until the fourth, however. Fruits and candies can be enjoyed by everyone since the spirits have left the earthly part they can no longer enjoy. The cardboard games, coffin bearers, and calaveras of paper are stored away for the next year. The grave decorations at Xochimilco cemetery remain until the thirtieth of November. Customs for the Days of the Dead differ in detail in various villages. In San Antonino Castillo de Velasco, Oaxaca, the graves bear gorgeous decorations of flowers and large painted wooden crosses made by an artisan in Ocotlan. The plots are not usually strewn with wild flowers and candles as in the tiny cem-

eteries of Santo Domingo Ixtaltepec and San Felipe. In the afternoon of November 3 at San Antonino people came to the graveyard to hear the responses or prayers for the dead that the priest from Ocotlan had come to say. Outside the cemetery, food stands selling cooked *tamales*, *empanadas* (a kind of turnover), and fresh fruit of the region appeared, and on the other side of the street refreshing beer or *mezcal* was offered.

On these special day it is advisable to eat frugally and control oneself, or else on these nights of mystery "One can be bound by the dead."

-Excerpt taken from a book by Judith Strupp Green *Days of the Dead in Oaxaca.* ☺

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