

Los Pastores

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

San Antonio Missions
National Historical Park



Los Pastores (The Shepherds), or *La Pastorela* (The Shepherds' Story), is a Christmas pageant representing one of the oldest colonial traditions linked to San Antonio's missions. Originating in Spain in the 1500s, the play depicts the age-old conflict between good and evil. Lucifer and a band of masked devils devise wily schemes in order to prevent a group of shepherds from reaching Bethlehem. Protecting the shepherds on their journey is Michael the Archangel.



Origin of Los Pastores

The origin of *Los Pastores* probably comes out of a cycle of medieval mystery plays used by the church to explain the struggle between good and evil. Roughly based on the Christmas story as told in the biblical book of Luke, the play also drew upon the culture and experiences of the

participants. Over time, control of the play passed from the church to the common folk who added slapstick humor and irreverent characters.

Spanish Colonial Period

It is possible that Spanish Nativity plays, such as *Los Pastores*, were performed during the Spanish Colonial period. They most likely were a way to assist Franciscan missionaries in teaching Mission Indians the tenets of Christianity.

In addition to the nativity theme, *Los Pastores* contained lessons in Christian morality - the seven vices of pride, avarice, envy, gluttony, sloth, lust, and anger surface in the play's characters. Human frailties and shortcomings dramatized by the shepherds as the play unfolds generated anxiety, humor and merriment, enabling spectators (both then and now) to laugh and identify with mankind's fumbling struggle to reach out for the supernatural.



One Play, Many Versions

Part of the tradition behind *Los Pastores* allowed for modification of the play by the actors who inserted elements common to their own culture. The script was not

written down, also allowing for changes. While the basic core of the play is evident throughout the modern Hispanic Southwest United States, each area has its own version.

Local Traditions

Local modifications of *Los Pastores* make for some very interesting traditions. One of

the most common is the actors are not paid; instead they show money on their staffs and costumes to prove they do not need money. Many performances take place in backyards, with the actors receiving food and drink in lieu of payment. When the performance is longer, a break for meals is included in the script.



Actors are normally required to make their own costumes, using whatever they have on hand. As a result, the child portraying Michael the Archangel might wear comfortable tennis shoes decorated with sequins or glitter. This also makes for demons in grotesque Halloween-type masks wearing glittery silk capes, while shepherds don festive hats carrying elaborate staffs with bells.

The Story

When Lucifer hears of the shepherds' journey to Bethelhem, he and his devils set out do everything in their power to prevent them from completing their quest. Lucifer can be seen by the shepherds as a mortal man. His devils, however, are invisible to all except Hermit, whose role is to narrate both sides of the story. Poor Hermit is harassed by the devils who he constantly berates; thus the shepherds believe he is crazy.

Meanwhile Michael the Archangel, acts as guide and protector of the shepherds. He engages in a battle of wits and strength with Lucifer and his minions, eventually defeating them. This allows the shepherds to reach the stable safely to worship the Child.

Ultimately even Lucifer approaches the manger. At this point, the audience is invited to joim in and acknowledge the birth of God's Son.



Los Pastores Today

During the Christmas season, over 100 performances of *Los Pastores* may occur in San Antonio. Each year, the National Park Service, Los Compadres de San Antonio Missions, Mission Trails Rotary Club, and San José Church co-sponsor a performance by the parishioners of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. This version of the play is based on a script from the 1930's. It may have its roots in the play performed by Indian neophytes in the 18th century at any one of the five San Antonio missions. The park's web site, www.nps.gov/saan, will have have more information on performance dates and times.